

On the Highway

To-day the California Limited whisks Iowans west for the winter, and flap-curtained Fords or luxurious limousines speed comfortably along the straight Iowa roads. But a trip in pioneer days often meant dislocated bones, wind-broke horses, frozen ears and fingers, stolen money, and the terrible heart-sick feeling of lost trails.

With all the hardships, however, which now seem unbearable, our "Ioway" grandparents and great grandparents travelled, and travelled often. Knowing nothing of macadamized roads, they did not stay at home and wait for them. There were friends to be visited, sermons to be preached, courts to be held, grist to be ground, fever cases to be bled, and land to be bought and sold or squatted upon.

The first Iowa travellers, the hunters and the homeseekers, had for roads only the trails of the padding Indian or the hoof-marked tracks of the buffalo, which threaded in and out through dense woods and underbrush or wound snake-like through the interminable whispering seas of prairie grass. They went not as the crow flies but as the wind bloweth, and it was an intrepid, adventurous traveller who pushed on a little farther than his tired companions and found a field more fertile, a grove more kind, and a land more nearly Utopian.

But twelve-inch Indian paths were not wide enough for a yoke of oxen, so the backwoods pioneer widened the trails. Nor did he long delay before besieging the Territorial legislature with petitions for roads. The legislature responded. By 1846 when Iowa had become a State, two hundred road acts were on the statute books. Even Congress took a hand and authorized, in 1839, the well known "Military Road", stretching from Dubuque through Iowa City to the northern boundary of Missouri. So year by year, as the surveyors blazed trees and drove stakes into the prairie, as the ox teams slowly cut the matted sod, Iowa became crossed and criss-crossed with a network of highways.

But the roads were built of Iowa soil which, combined with water, invariably forms mud, deep and sticky. Transportation in the early spring or during the fall rains was next to impossible. Those who had to travel often exhausted their horses by long pulls through heavy gumbo, often had to plank themselves onto higher ground with rails carried for the purpose or pad the deep ruts with willow twigs and grass, and usually arrived at their destination after supper was over and the best half of the bed had been preëmpted by another guest. The first hard-surface highways, of corduroy or plank, were the wonder of those who saw and the torment of those who used them.

Another cause of delay was swollen streams. There were of course few bridges, and fording was

hazardous. At times it was accomplished by calking the wagon boxes so that they would float better when pulled by the swimming horses. How like boats the prairie schooners must have looked with their puffing canvas tops! At the larger towns, ferries transported the traffic across the deeper rivers. In the dead of winter when the streams were frozen, crossing was made easy by the ice. Then the rivers became highways in themselves, forming wide unobstructed paths from town to town.

The means of transportation in itself was peculiar to the times. Groups of white-topped prairie schooners, drawn by slow horses or slower oxen, plowed up the thick dust of the road. Springless wagons jolted along with corn to be ground or cord wood to be traded for a bolt of cloth. Horseback riders wound in and out among the slower traffic, often with the mail in saddle bags. And if at any time there was the loud sound of a horn around the bend, the whole company would spread out along the edge of the road, deferentially and for the safety of their lives. The women looked out from the front of the wagons, the men chewed a little harder and spat with a grandiose air. A stage was passing! Drawn by four spanking horses, the oval black body swinging on its thorough braces and glistening in the sun, a burly, whip-cracking driver sitting aloft on the high seat, and the luggage jolting inside the little railing behind him or securely fastened in the triangular, leather-covered "boot" at the rear, the

stagecoach made a spectacular appearance. The passengers waved as they went rolling by. And after the stage had passed from sight and the dust had settled again in the road, the ox teams resumed their plodding gait while the women in the heavy wagons exclaimed over the bright scenes painted on the stagecoach doors and the richness of the upholstery, and the men discussed the mail routes which the stages were steadily taking away from the postriders and the network of Western Stage Company lines that were spreading over Iowa.

When a traveller came to the larger towns he probably put up at a tavern such as fat Bob Kinney's house at Muscatine, built two stories high, of split logs, and with sawed lumber doors and window casings. The typical tavern, however, was smaller and more rude. There were several beds in a room, and they were not considered full unless occupied by two or three people. The near-by creek often served as the lavatory and the open air as the towel.

And so it seems that pioneer travel was a procession of hardships. But there were long, pleasant days on the road, good company in the motley crowd who travelled it, and sound slumber at the end of the day in somebody's close-walled, beef-smelling tavern. And mayhap the hearts of those pioneers were lightened by some dim sense of the history they were living, of the homes and fortunes and future satisfaction toward which they were travelling.

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