

## High Water in Western Iowa

The life of a frontiersman can not be fully appreciated by any one who has not experienced some of the many hardships, disadvantages, and perplexities incident to living in a new country. Want often confronts the pioneer with its grim look and schools him to the most rigid economy. Everything must conform to his limited circumstances, while exposure to biting frosts, pelting storms, scanty food and clothing, and toilsome journeys over almost trackless roads and swelling streams are but few of the difficulties that go with pioneering the way for civilization. Apparently the American pioneer is not content with any other environment, for when the settled ways of civilization overtake him, and the shrill voice of the iron horse supersedes that of the howling wild tenants of the forest, he shoulders his ready rifle and, followed by his faithful wife and ruddy children, pushes farther westward to reenact former scenes of his life, and point the way for others who follow in his track. Though he has accomplished much for the world, making possible the spread of science, literature, and the gospel, yet how

[This narrative of the experiences of two land seekers on a trip from Toledo to Sioux City in May, 1856, is adapted for THE PALIMPSEST from an article by N. Levering published in the *Iowa Historical Record*, Vol. II, pp. 274-279, April, 1886. — THE EDITOR]

soon he fades away in the memories of those that come after him and begin where he has left off.

About the first of May, 1856, the writer, in company with John Barber, left Toledo, in Tama County, on a prospecting tour to Sioux City, in the north-western part of the State. Much rain had fallen; the roads were exceedingly bad; the streams much swollen. No bridges; no ferry boats; no anything in the way of public accommodations. In travelling such a distance at that time it was necessary to go prepared for every emergency. Anticipating what lay before us, we equipped ourselves with all the necessary requisites for such a trip — a good span of horses and a well-covered wagon, bedding, provisions, ropes, chains, and tools.

Graded roads and bridges were heard of, but seldom seen. During our trip frequent rains kept the roads in a precarious condition, and our progress was very slow. Some days the entire progress did not exceed five or six miles, and at night, when we crawled into our wagon to sleep, we somewhat resembled mud turtles crawling under their shells, the day having been spent in floundering through sloughs, traversing bottomless roads, and swimming streams, as our jaded team and tired limbs fully attested. It was not an infrequent occurrence to eat our dinner on the opposite side of a slough from where we had breakfasted, the time having been spent in crossing or heading the marsh. Nor was it unusual for the wagon to mire down midway in a

wide slough. Then the load would have to be packed out upon our backs through water knee deep. With a rope attached to the end of the tongue and the horses on firm ground, the wagon was rolled out and repacked. The frequent repetitions of these trials gave credence for the reflection that we might turn web-footers and take to water like some aquatic fowls.

After several days we came to Webster City. This embryo city was just beginning to assume a municipal appearance. Two stores, a hotel, and a blacksmith shop constituted its business houses. There were not, I think, to exceed a dozen houses in the place, though it was the business center for some miles around. Its citizens were go-a-head, energetic people, anticipating much for their youthful city in the near future, which they have since fully realized.

Our wanderings from Webster City to Fort Dodge were exceedingly wearisome and monotonous. There were no bridges where bridges ought to have been. Many miles of travel were necessary to go a short distance.

Arriving at Fort Dodge we found the river considerably swollen from recent rains and rather unsafe to ford for those unacquainted with the stream. Fortunately for us, we here met Father Tracy, a Catholic priest, with an Irish colony from Dubuque, on their way to eastern Nebraska. They had crossed the river and camped at the ford. When we drove up to the ford, Father Tracy made his appearance

on the opposite bank and shouted to us which way to cross, that we might avoid deep water and some large boulders. Fearing that we might not follow his directions, he mounted one of his men on a horse and sent him over to pilot us across.

Sticks were laid across the top of our wagon box and our goods placed upon them, in order to keep dry. Our guide was very careful in leading the way, frequently looking back and giving us a word of caution, while Father Tracy, quite solicitous for our safe arrival, occasionally gave directions and words of encouragement. We were soon on dry land, right side up in a warm-hearted Irish camp, greeting Father Tracy with a hearty tourniquet shake for his kindness in our behalf. Tents had been pitched, fires were burning brightly, the women were preparing the evening meal while their liege lords were enjoying their pipes and a social chat, and a score or more of young "paddies" were making the woods reverberate with their childish sports. As the day was not yet spent, we took leave of the kind Father and his flock and reached the banks of the Lizard River where we camped for the night.

Our next point was Twin Lakes—two small lakes of nearly the same size connected by a small channel of water. Fish appeared to be plentiful. We were able to scoop a good supply out of the channel with our hands as they were passing from one lake to the other. They were quite an accession to our table, as our stock of provisions was getting low. Only

one family lived at Twin Lakes, and they kept the stage station.

Twenty miles more and we were in Sac City, the county town of Sac County. About four houses, and big hopes for the future, constituted the city.

Our meanderings next led us to Ida Grove, in Ida County. Here we found a Smith and his wife, sole occupants of the grove. The exterior of their little cabin bristled with buck horns and coon skins, the interior with skins of wild animals and other trophies of the chase common to the country. Home-made furniture of the most economical character furnished the room, while real estate scooped from the bosom of mother earth furnished roof and floor. The surroundings had the appearance of the abode of a formidable Nimrod.

As night was about to unroll her sable curtains, we halted for needed rest. Our host gave us a cordial invitation to share his cabin with him, which we accepted. When the time for retiring arrived, we were shown some clapboards (or shakes) lying on some poles in one corner of the room, and were told to sleep there. Having spread our blankets on the rustic bedstead we turned in for the night. Barber, who was used to old-fashioned Pennsylvania feather beds, complained in the night of the boards being hard on bones. Our host, who slept near-by, being awake, roared out, "Turn the boards and try the other side." Barber declined the advice, however.

When gray-eyed morn peeped through the open-

ings in the cabin walls, we had lost all desire to snatch a few final winks of sleep, and suddenly acquired a very ardent propensity for early rising. We were soon up and stretching our aching limbs. Breakfast over, we moved forward toward our destination.

On arriving at the west fork of Little Sioux River, we found it high and running over. To ford the stream seemed impossible. We were not prepared for pontooning, but to cross we were determined. Near-by we discovered an Indian canoe tied to a tree. Having taken possession of the frail craft, the work of transporting our goods began at once. Soon everything but horses and wagon were on the opposite side.

The horses were next, and swim over they must. One of them being higher than the other, we concluded to send the smaller one first. A long rope was tied around his neck, the other end was carried over in the canoe by Barber, and I forced the animal into the water, while Barber pulled on the rope, so as to guide him to a good landing. It was a complete success.

The same method was used with the larger horse, but not with so much success, for when he attempted to climb the opposite bank where the first horse had gone, his fore feet sank in the soft earth so that he was unable to get out of the water. After a short rest he was turned loose, whereupon he swam to the shore from whence he had come. Another brief rest

and he was again urged into the water, but when midway over the rope became untied, and the animal, finding that he was free, started up stream, making slow progress against the strong current.

We had begun to think that he would surely drown, when Ira Price, of Smithland, came up and at a glance took in the situation. Disrobing, he plunged into the turbulent stream, swam out to the horse, grasped the halter, and made for the ford, pulling the horse after him. Another effort was made to get him ashore, but with no better success than before. The horse, being completely exhausted, turned upon his side as if disposed to make river crossing a side issue, and refused to exert himself any more.

Nevertheless, I concluded to make one more effort to save him. Taking a long rope, I threw it around my shoulder and plunged into the stream. Swimming up to his side, I tied the rope around his body close to his fore legs, then climbing out, I hastily harnessed the other horse, and hitching him to the rope, directed Barber to pull on the halter. I started my horse, when, to our surprise, out came the horse onto dry land as slick as Jonah from the whale's belly. He was soon on his feet nipping grass, as if nothing unusual had occurred. The wagon was towed across the stream with the rope and the team hauled it out on the bank.

While engaged in reloading preparatory to starting on, Thomas Macon, of Oskaloosa, and Mr. Greer, of Mount Vernon, Iowa, drove up on their way home

from Sioux City. Macon crossed the river safely but Greer, in floating his buggy across, had tied his lines to the end of the tongue. They gave way when the vehicle was in mid-stream, and the last seen of the buggy was one corner of the top as it rolled over in the turbid water. Thus Mr. Greer was left with horses, trunk, and other baggage, several miles from any house. After some deliberation he requested me to take his baggage to Sioux City and forward it to him by stage, which I did. He rode to a settler's house on the Maple River that evening, and the next morning he returned in search of his buggy, which he found some distance below the ford caught in the top of a tree that projected out into the stream. He got it out, found it but slightly damaged, hitched on, and went his way rejoicing.

The following day we arrived in Sioux City with team much jaded and ourselves worn out. Some of the disadvantages of pioneer life we know from hard experience.

N. LEVERING