

A Journey of a Journalist

After he "hustled on" his clothes, paid a quarter for his lodging, and "crammed" himself into a stage with eight other passengers, "Ezel", a *Missouri Republican* correspondent, was on his way from Keokuk to Fort Clark at the Lizard Fork of the Des Moines River, the present site of Fort Dodge. He had departed from St. Louis aboard the *Monongahela* on November 24, 1850, and arrived in Keokuk at eleven the next evening. Thereupon, he went directly to the Stage Tavern to secure lodging and book passage on Frink & Walker's morning stage to Fort Des Moines.

Ezel was in ill humor that Tuesday morning. He had hardly gone to sleep, for his bed was only "a little . . . softer than an oak plank," before his slumbers were disturbed by the announcement that the stage was waiting. It was three A. M. when they started and "dark as Erebus" along the Des Moines River Valley. Frequent bumps were sustained in the jolting coach as it was dragged "through a muddy lane."

Arriving for breakfast at eight A. M. at Whortleberry Tavern, twelve miles from Keokuk, Ezel was soon of better cheer. The first sight that met

his eyes as he alighted from the coach was a "sparkling goblet of red stained corn juice, of which a hungry and dry fellow might drink a barrel." This was balm for many a woe. After hastily washing and combing themselves the passengers were regaled with a hearty breakfast of fried meat, doughnuts, bread, biscuits, country pies, mashed potatoes, turnip sauce, pumpkin butter, coffee, sugar, and cream. The charge was twenty-five cents for "sufficient to feed a regiment of dragoons."

Their feasting was interrupted by the sound of the driver's horn and call for the passengers. Again seated, the whip cracked and the horses were off at a trot, but soon came to "a snail's gait" and the next twelve miles were negotiated in seven hours. They passed through Boston, a town where fifty families "huddled together" in small one-story buildings. A little groggery was doing the most thriving business in town.

The stage plodded onward to Charleston, a town of one or two hundred families, three miles beyond. Many of the small cabins in Charleston were connected, "forming a sort of barracks, with a little porch in front and railing to keep the children from falling in and going head and ears out of sight in the mud." Ezel counted eight dwellings connected by one common porch, which

would make "a fine bowling alley or ropewalk." The town had a post office, groceries, and mechanical shops, but was built on low ground and people waded in mud "up to their eyes, as though it was a great luxury."

Ezel observed that the Half-Breed Tract was well settled by industrious and enterprising farmers, whose well-cultivated corn and grain fields stretched beyond sight in every direction. He saw several thousand head of "the finest hogs" en route to Keokuk, a "pork-packing city of 3100 inhabitants." Two men were driving 1300 head of Irish Graziers and big Chinas, crossed with Berkshires, which weighed from 300 to 500 pounds each. Hogs were selling at \$3.25 per hundred and corn at fifteen cents a bushel.

Eventually the stage arrived in Farmington, which sprawled over an area large enough for a city of ten thousand people. There Ezel noted many large and fashionable residences, fine stores, several hotels, and doctor's and lawyer's offices. Dinner over, the passengers walked three miles along the Des Moines River, where they were met by the stage which had detoured five miles to avoid a bad slough.

Bonaparte, with a large five-story grist mill and slack-water dam and culverts to facilitate steamboat navigation on the Des Moines River, was

next on the itinerary. There Ezel was informed that \$250,000 had been spent on several such dams, while \$300,000 additional was believed to be necessary to complete slack-water navigation from Keokuk to Fort Des Moines. But Ezel found the thoughtful men of Iowa entertaining doubts as to the wisdom of the project. He believed, however, that if the river was made navigable its "fine and fertile" valley would be capable of sustaining a large population and would become "one of the richest countries west of the Mississippi." Thriving towns were already scattered throughout the valley which was being settled rapidly by people from Ohio and Indiana.

From Bonaparte the stage jolted onward through Bentonsport, Utica, and Winchester. The latter two were "very flourishing little towns" with good houses, stores, and industrious people who were "full of life and animation". Fairfield, a large country town with courthouse, land office, public square, spacious hotels, fine buildings and stores, was reached at one-thirty A. M., after a sixty-mile journey. There the passengers barely had time to devour "raw potatoes, slish-slosh coffee, and most miserable, sticky, half-cooked biscuits" before starting on another pre-day excursion. The stage arrived at Ashland in time for breakfast and thence continued

through Agency, to Ottumwa, where the passengers dined again.

The "flourishing, rising, and interesting village" of Eddyville was next on the itinerary. The Female Academy there impressed Ezel favorably. Moreover, Miss S. Brand, the teacher, was "an interesting, intelligent, and accomplished scholar" from western New York. Beyond Eddyville the stage route crossed hill and dale, through a flourishing farming region.

In Oskaloosa, Ezel got a little sleep, but at "cock-crowing" was moving eighteen miles for breakfast with Widow Post in "Pellatown". She operated "the best eating house" between Keokuk and Fort Des Moines. Pellatown also had "the handsomest place and situation on the road", yet Ezel believed the Hollanders were "certainly some fifty years behind the age." He noted that they "live in turf houses — hogs, dogs, cattle, horses, hens and chickens, men, women and children, all live under the same roof; and with their thin breeches, short waisted coats, the tails of which never reach lower than the middle of their backs, with their antique shape, and wee little bits of caps on the top of their craniums, makes them look ridiculous in the extreme." In justice to them Ezel added that they were "sober and industrious" people who minded their business and

cultivated their soil "to perfection". Their farms were the best on the route.

Leaving this community, Ezel saw "nothing worthy of notice", except prairies, hills, hollows and "rather poor lands" until reaching Fort Des Moines at nine A. M. on the third day. American troops had evacuated the place just prior to the Mexican War and Ezel found it settled by a large population of various nationalities. It had a large two-story brick courthouse, "plenty of lawyers, doctors of law, physic and divinity," as well as mills and machine shops "in full blast". People seemed healthy and happy and two printing presses heralded the news from "this glorious happy land of freedom, religion, law and liberty." The correspondent also noted "wandering tribes of pilgrim travelers" moving west.

After resting and reconnoitering at Fort Des Moines, Ezel secured a horse for the hundred-mile trip northward to Lizard Fork. At night he partook of frugal fare at a Swede cottage and slept in a "down bed". During the next day's travel he saw only an occasional cottage peering from some point of timber. In one of these he was served corn dodgers and coffee at noon. That evening he drowned all care in a soft bed in "Boonville", after feasting on black perch, venison, and coffee. He had breakfast at daybreak

and was on his way once more, arriving at Lizard Fork in the afternoon. There he was greeted by his friend, Major L. A. Armistead, and regaled with soup, cheese, and dainties. Ezel was "treated as a prince of price and money" and introduced to numerous people, each of whom related the mode of life on the frontier.

Fort Clark was located at the junction of Lizard Creek and the Des Moines River. The high bluffs on the southwest side of the river were timbered in 1850. To the north was a deep ravine with a growth of scrubby trees. To the east lay an open prairie without anything to obstruct the sight. The St. Louis journalist could see no reason for maintaining a fort at that point. The Indians appeared friendly and Ezel believed a company of riflemen or dragoons passing back and forth between Fort Snelling and Fort Kearny, after the old ranging manner, would give adequate protection and be more economical. These were also the sentiments of all persons with whom he conversed, "except, those few who intend to 'make their jack' . . . by means of furnishing supplies and hauling goods . . . by gouging and swindling." The fort was 300 miles from Keokuk, from which point goods were hauled at three cents a pound, though it was difficult to get it done at that rate. Corn brought seventy-five

cents a bushel at the fort instead of the customary fifteen.

The soil in the vicinity of the fort was "nothing to boast of, being only second-rate" in Ezel's estimation. He believed a few spots along the Skunk and Boone rivers would make good farms, but "the residue is scarcely susceptible of profit," he wrote. Yet the settlers could make a living, for there was sufficient coal for fuel and abundant deer, elk, grouse, turkeys, and small game.

Ezel enjoyed fair weather on his upward journey but a northwester brought sleet and snow on December 1st. Accordingly, he decided to make the return trip one of "romance and fun" and to that end engaged a driver with team and "carry-all". They traveled twenty miles the first day and at eight P. M. arrived at a little cabin, "cold, hungry and dry". But Ezel regaled his hospitable hosts and himself "with a little of the 'Oh, be joyful!'" Thereupon, rich venison steaks, hot cakes, and coffee were served to the travelers. In the meantime, the correspondent's new friends consumed his frontier elixer, "scarcely leaving the bottle". He had to travel the next eighty miles "through Greenland's icy frost and shivering blast, without one drop" to warm himself.

The next morning he and his driver were up at sunrise. After breakfast they wrapped their

blankets and robes about themselves "to keep body and soul together." That morning they traveled twenty miles over "cheerless, dreary prairies" without a house in sight. At one P. M. they reached "a miserable cabin," where they were served fried cakes, pumpkin sauce, and more "slish-slosh coffee". While the "old lady" fried her cakes, the "bare-foot urchins" took them out of the skillet as fast as she could put them in.

Resuming their journey the pilgrims traveled fifteen miles farther and came upon "another little six by nine cabin," with two beds, where nine men, three women and "a little squalling young one" presumably were to "roost, eat, sleep and be merry." Most of them slept on the floor using robes and coats for covers. To Ezel it was a "delightful situation — on a cold night, and the wind, snow and hail singing psalm tunes through the big cracks, and round the cabin corners." Meanwhile, the chickens, geese, hogs, cats, and dogs huddled together under the floor and "kept up a delightful concert" with a variety of discordant notes. "Such another pow-wow, grunting, cawwaling, cackling and squalling, is not often met with by a traveler," Ezel commented.

Next morning the travelers struck out early but had not gone far before the carryall upset and crumbled "into a perfect mash". Ezel found him-

self practicing "the art of ground and lofty tumbling, turning somersets, heels over head, two or three rods down the hill," finally landing in a hazel thicket. He regained his feet and went to the aid of the driver who was all scratched up and tangled in the reins. After relieving him, the two men improvised "a sort of go-cart" and rode on a plank the rest of the day.

Having procured transportation in another "two-horse fixing", the exploring journalist rode sixty miles in the next two days while "nearly frozen to death". Next he secured a ride in a four-horse wagon. Its box had no end boards, but Ezel crawled under the straw with which it was filled. Thus he traveled ten miles in four hours in comparative comfort. Suddenly this conveyance broke down. Thereupon, the harassed traveler was compelled to lay by at a cabin for a day. Three Irishmen, a native of Ohio, and Ezel bargained with a Hoosier to convey them sixty miles in a two-horse wagon. This outfit proved adequate, but was "remarkably slow". The party had dinner at "a California widow's". Five other women, whose "old men" had left their farms, "forsaking wives, children and friends . . . to take a year's jubilee", had congregated there. The travelers listened sympathetically to their lamentations and Ezel thought to himself

that the women were "better off without such husbands, and it would be a blessing if they never returned."

It was nine P. M. on December 7th when they reached Bentonsport. The tavern proprietor was a doctor who had forsaken pills to dispense more eagerly sought tonics of conviviality. "I thought the Sons of Temperance had not found this place," Ezel wrote. Bonaparte was reached in time for breakfast the next morning, whence the journalist secured passage to Keokuk in "a neat and comfortable carriage". Fellow passengers conversed with him about the Grahamites, a colony of vegetarians near Farmington. A gentleman, who had visited them, declared beets, coarse wheat bread, and water constituted their diet. In cases of ague or fever the Grahamites merely rolled up "in a blanket wet with cold water and became cured in a short time."

The Missouri journalist's Iowa travels terminated at Keokuk. Despite the inconveniences endured he felt amply rewarded for his fortnight of exploration in the Des Moines Valley. Both in going and returning he met many "well informed" and hospitable people. Moreover, "I obtained considerable . . . information relative to the country, people, habits, manners and customs," he concluded.

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