

Iowa in the World

Twenty-eight hours from Pittsburgh to Muscatine in the dirty day coaches of the year 1860! It was a relief when the Chicago and Rock Island train finally jerked to a stop, and the Iowa correspondent for the New York *World* swung off to begin a temporary residence in the Hawkeye State. His job was to supply "early, regular and authentic" information to one of the metropolitan newspapers. For over a year this anonymous reporter roamed Iowa, seeking news of interest to the East. He sent his stories to New York weekly, and each one usually found its way into the columns of the *World* after about five days. All in all, during his Iowa sojourn, he filed almost twenty-four thousand words.

Iowans welcomed representatives of the press and were gratified when their State appeared in a favorable light in the news. Frequently, self-appointed correspondents sent stories to Eastern newspapers. On August 24, 1858, for example, "Getheo" blew the horn of publicity from Burlington when he wrote to the editor of *Porter's Spirit of the Times*. "By reading your paper," said he morosely, "I see you have no correspondent from

Iowa: or, if any, but very seldom. Why is it? Iowa is the 'land of game', and the resort of many of our best huntsmen: our broad prairies are abounding with all kinds of game this season, particularly when the overflow of the rivers have not driven the mothers from their nests. I am surprised to see that there is no one versed in hunting to give you something for your paper from these parts."

About the same time, volunteer newsmen, hiding under such *nom de plumes* as "Hawkeye" and "Pioneer", were lavishly describing regattas at Keokuk and racing in Davenport. "Don't imagine," said "Pioneer" pointedly, "because Davenport is what you would consider in the neighborhood of the setting sun, because it is not as big as 'York', and because we don't possess a first-class sporting-paper of our own, like Porter's Spirit, that we are behind the times. Not a bit of it."

Then, after narrating the organization of the Scott County Park Association and bowing to the County Agricultural Society and doffing his hat to the State Fair, "Pioneer" made his bid for space in one of the nation's better journals devoted to sports. "We are flourishing here in every possible way; have some good roads, and are making more; enjoy convenient rail-road privileges, and the magnificent Mississippi runs past our very

doors; can boast of unrivaled hotel accommodation, and, in short, are spreading all round, and feeling expansive, individually and collectively, every one for himself, and all for our tip-top little city. We've no end of game outside. More quail in a day's run than would have kept the chosen people in the wilderness for a year."

The *World* correspondent, time after time, confirmed Iowa's agricultural abundance, and by so doing undoubtedly piqued the interest of many an Easterner who already was looking toward this fertile back-of-beyond. A cautious note was also sounded. "Let us hope", wrote the newspaperman solemnly, "that we may continue to practise the economy we have learned, and be satisfied with the slow, yet sure gains of patient and untiring industry." Even after such an admonition, he could not describe the Iowa grain crop of 1860 without enthusiasm. On July 7th, he wrote from Iowa City that, "Never, according to the unanimous admission even of farmers, have all kinds of grain given such rich promise in Iowa of a full harvest, as the wheat, rye, corn, oats, and the whole cereal tribe now present." Wheat heads, he continued, "are filled to the top with sound, plump kernels with each cell containing three, and, very often, four grains." Ten days later, so great was his enthusiasm, that he italicized a sentence in his

copy. "It is considered a poor crop that does not, this season, yield twenty bushels to an acre."

Such optimism was confirmed early in August when the Tipton *Democrat* gleefully stated that the average yield in Cedar County was between twenty-five and thirty bushels an acre, and the Iowa City *Republican* placed the estimated average of Johnson County at about twenty bushels. At seventy-five cents a bushel, said the *World* writer, this was "far better than the wild goose chase to Pike's Peak, in which too many of our farmers have embarked during the last three years of gloom and discouragement, and whence so many are now returning, with empty purses and blasted hopes, to gaze with deep regret at the fruitful yields and well-filled garners upon which a short time since they turned their backs in childish petulance."

The longer this anonymous roving reporter lived in the Hawkeye State, the more laudatory became his descriptions of the land, the people, and even the lowly hog. There is money in the hog, he wrote. "Though neither the hog *couchant*, the hog *saliant*, the hog *rampant*, nor the hog in any of his postures defensive, or postures offensive, has hitherto been emblazoned upon the escutcheons of our States (I think I am not mistaken as to Ohio), or adopted as the coat of arms

of any of our first families, yet everywhere throughout the northwest the hog is regarded with peculiar interest."

Apparently, the man of the *World* made his headquarters in Muscatine. From there he wandered into the back country and along the tier of counties adjacent to the Mississippi River. Thriving villages and cities, such as Oskaloosa, Dubuque, Keokuk, Des Moines, and Iowa City, attracted him, and he found leisure to chat with storekeepers, farmers, liverymen, and cattle drivers during his crisscross tours of the State.

Iowa City, in particular, attracted his interest. When he visited there in July, 1860, he found a population of some 5000 persons living upon the eastern bank of the Iowa River, "a navigable stream, when there is water enough in it." Early in October, he again came to the university town to attend the seventh annual exhibitions of the Iowa State Agricultural Society. Hotels, he found, were full and landlords happy. Streets were lined with vehicles and sidewalks crowded. Great swirls of dust drifted lazily in the air. By the time the reporter reached the fairgrounds he was weary of the "raw, uneven" prairie.

Once inside the gate, however, he noted about five hundred stalls for cattle and horses and a like number of pens for hogs and sheep. A trotting

track, which he said was neither well-constructed nor in good condition, elicited comment. Yet he saw racing which equalled, if it did not excel, that of the East.

As he wandered along the rows of orderly stock pens, he counted thirty-three entries of Devon cattle, and over seventy head of Durhams, then coming into favor as cattle which fattened well. The Devons, he noted with interest, were valued by Iowa farmers for their superhardiness and milking qualities. Later he witnessed a plowing contest in which fourteen competitors raced to see which could turn the straightest furrow in the shortest time. It was this observer's belief that the fair would cause the people of Iowa to go home to do better things in 1861.

Land, of course, was the subject of principal interest in the eyes of the *World's* representative. He believed that the federal government should not have sold an acre of land in Iowa, but should have given to every actual settler a piece of ground large enough for a moderate farm. Had this been done, "Iowa could be rich and prosperous with treble her present population." He noticed the great inflow of pioneers sinking their roots into the State's rich prairie, and he urged these immigrants to settle in the back country and not crowd the already well populated river com-

munities. To Easterners he sent the urgent message: "Move West, lands are cheaper now than they ever can be again."

In the same breath, he cursed the fever of speculation which up to 1857 had sent land values as high as five to ten dollars an acre, but he looked forward to a new type of immigration rolling into Iowa and spreading over its green prairies and purchasing land at from two dollars and a half an acre to five or seven dollars an acre. He made known to all who read the *World* the impending sale of one quarter of a million acres in the vicinity of Fort Dodge, Sioux City, and on the headwaters of the Des Moines River. Here, he wrote glowingly, is an opportunity to secure cheap homes for the millions.

Less significant observations than land, crops, and markets also drew the attention of this observant roving reporter. His eye caught the flight of the "blithe and noisy" swallow, observed the fine stands of trees, and carefully searched for the silent creatures of the prairie. His pen anticipated a popular song of to-day when he described the songs of the birds and said that "to their sweet music the woodpecker beats time, and the joyous leaves wave their silent but unmistakable applause."

Easterners, as they unfolded the pages of their

World, could read of open-air preaching in Iowa on the campus of the State University, follow the development of the secession controversy, read that Iowans had "tenfold more confidence in God than in Congress", and even catch a glimpse of the Galena lead mines.

It would have been pleasant, indeed, had these regular news letters from Iowa continued during the decade of the sixties, but they suddenly ceased after December 27, 1860. Perhaps the gathering clouds of the Civil War forced interesting commonplaces from the columns of the *World*, perhaps the correspondent was recalled to devote himself to political affairs, perhaps he eventually found his way into the army. But of one thing we are certain. His pen portrait of the Hawkeye State, although not picturesque, nevertheless revealed ideas and social patterns in the language of the day, and, as such, contributed to an understanding of the State. In their day these stories of the *World's* now nameless correspondent must have made Iowa the cynosure of many an Easterner's eyes and emphasized the fact that Iowa was, indeed, in the world!

PHILIP D. JORDAN