

A Country Fit for Princes

The Iowa that Caleb Atwater saw from the deck of a Mississippi River steamboat in the summer of 1829 was as wild as it was picturesque. At every bend of the river the wooded hills gave prospect of future mansions and estates of country squires. A portion of his "Remarks Made on a Tour to Prairie du Chien" is here adapted for The Palimpsest. — The Editor.

Above the Missouri, on the western side of the Mississippi, the streams putting into the "great water," were quite small ones, and only valuable for mill streams, until we arrived at Fort Edwards, on the eastern shore, and opposite the Des Moines River. This river is a large one, compared with any we have passed above the Missouri. It may not be longer than the Illinois River, but I should think it carries in its current more water, though perhaps it is not more than three hundred miles in length.

Fort Edwards is three miles below the foot of the rapids, on the east side of the river, and the buildings being painted white, located on a high bluff that juts out into the river, it looks beautiful from Keokuck village. The rapids are twelve miles long, and in a

common stage of the water, present no impediment to steamboat navigation; but low as the river was when we arrived there, it was impossible for any loaded steamboat to ascend them. The river is from half a mile to a mile in width here, without any island in the river, in the distance of twelve miles, an uncommon feature in the Upper Mississippi, which is full of islands and sandbars, in a low stage of water.

Keokuck is in latitude about forty degrees twenty north, and belongs to the half breeds, whose capital it is, on the western side of the Mississippi. The northern line of the State of Missouri, in running from its northwest corner eastwardly, is a straight line, until it strikes the Des Moines River; thence following that river to its mouth. A triangle containing one hundred and thirty-six thousand acres of land, north of and adjoining the lower end of the Des Moines River, by treaty, has been given to the half breeds, and is owned by about forty-two persons. Congress have passed an act to divide it into shares for them, and at their own request they are to belong to the State of Missouri. From the mouth of the Des Moines, along the Mississippi, following the sinuosities of the river, their front on the river may be thirty miles. It is a very fine tract of land, generally well timbered, except on the bottoms of the Des Moines, which is valuable prairie land.

The village is a small one, containing twenty families

perhaps. The American Fur Company have a store here, and there is a tavern. Many Indians were fishing, and their lights on the rapids in a dark night, were darting about, appearing and disappearing like so many fire flies. The constant roaring of the waters on the rapids, the occasional Indian yell, the lights of their fires on the shore, and the boisterous mirth of the people at the *doggery*, attracted my attention occasionally while we were lying here. Fish were caught here in abundance.

On the eastern side of the river the lands are all occupied by white people, from Fort Edwards upwards, for many miles above the rapids. Farms are opening, and log houses appear almost every half mile on that shore. On the west side only a few places are opened by half breeds.

The beach on the western shore is narrow, and the hills of moderate elevation come quite down to the high water mark. Large blocks of coarse sandstone have been floated down on the ice at different times, from the St. Peters River, and lodged on the beach. The rocks in place are limestone, though great numbers of geodes of quartz cover the beach.

After making every arrangement for conveying the public property over these rapids, and seeing every thing done here that could be done by the commissioners, I started on foot to walk over the rough hills skirting the western shore. Our provisions, though started

nearly one month before from St. Louis, were scattered along these rapids, and I found a considerable part of them as I ascended the river's edge, lying on the beach and exposed to the hot sun.

After a tiresome walk of several miles, I reached Philip Blondeau's farm. Him I found sick, lying under a shade, out of doors. He was a sub-agent formerly, and his family are owners to a considerable extent of this fine tract of land. His wife is an Indian woman, and his daughters are well educated, well read, and accomplished young ladies.

His farm is a fine fertile one, and his dwelling house is on the bank of the river, within a few rods of the water's edge. His corn on the side hill covered a great space, and looked finely. Here I ate as good a dinner as any one ever did, of venison just killed, and of fish just caught as I arrived there.

Highly gratified with the treatment I received from this interesting family, I moved forward again on foot, and reached an island in the river just above the head of the rapids, and opposite an Indian town, where I found a steamboat lying, and went on board it.

This vessel was occupied by its owner, who had his wife and children with him. The boat was as poor an one as ever was navigated; it had been up the river and was detained here by the rapids. During the night it rained hard, and in addition to getting as wet in my berth as water could make me, a drunken set of fellows,

who, in addition to boisterous mirth, gambling, and blasphemous oaths, finally added quarreling to the turbulent scene.

Knowing that one man, by his example, had produced the whole wicked and disgraceful conduct that so much annoyed us, on the arrival of Colonel Pierre Menard next day, I arranged everything to stop any thing of the kind in future. On learning our determination, the author of all this disturbance, just about dark, inquired of me as to the intended opposition, and I frankly told him that no more such conduct would be permitted either now or hereafter, while I was with him. He told me I might leave the expedition and go home; but I informed him that I would neither go home, nor would I permit him to act as he had done constantly for some time past. Ascertaining my determination, and that every other person on board united with me, he was compelled to acquiesce, and behave himself better in future. He never ventured again so to conduct himself in my presence, though the effects of similar conduct afterwards were but too visible on many occasions.

In company with John W. Johnson, formerly an Indian trader, under the old factory system, I visited Quasquawma's village of Fox Indians. This town was exactly opposite our island, on the west bank of the river, and consists of perhaps forty or fifty persons. Landing from our canoe, we went to Quasquawma's

wigwam, and found him and several of his wives and children at home. These Indians had joined the United States during the last war. The wigwam we visited was a fair sample of all that we saw afterwards in the Indian country, and was covered with white elm bark, fastened on the outside of upright posts fixed in the ground, by ropes made of barks, passed through the covering and tied on the inside around the posts.

I should suppose that this dwelling was forty feet long and twenty wide — that six feet on each of the sides, within doors, was occupied by the place where the family slept. Their beds consisted of a platform raised four feet from the earth, resting on poles, tied at that height to posts standing upright in the ground, opposite each other, and touching the roof. On these poles, so fastened to the posts, were laid barks of trees, and upon these barks were laid blankets and the skins of deer, bears, bisons, &c. These were the beds. Between these beds was an open space, perhaps six or eight feet in width, running the whole length of the wigwam. In this space fires were kindled in cold and wet weather, and here, at such times, the cooking was carried on, and the family warmed themselves, ate their food, &c. There was no chimney, and the smoke either passed through the roof, or out at the doors, at the ends of the wigwam. On all the waters of the upper Mississippi, no better dwelling is to be found among the Indians. Quasquawma was reposing

himself on his bed of state when we went into his palace, and the only person at work was one of his wives, at the door, dressing a deer skin. He appeared to be about sixty-five years of age, perhaps he was even older.

He appeared very friendly to Mr. Johnson, whom he well knew; and we held a long and interesting talk with him. We told him all our business, asked his advice and aid, which he cheerfully promised; and he was of great use to us, from that time forward, until the treaties were concluded. His son-in-law, one of the principal civil chiefs of the Foxes, was not at home then, and we did not see him until we arrived at Rock Island.

Quasquawma showed us where he had cut out on a bark, a representation of a steamboat, with every thing belonging to it. This bark formed a part of his dwelling, and was cut on the inner side. It appears, that he had made three attempts before he succeeded to his wishes. He finally succeeded so perfectly, that the cannon was going off, a dog was represented as sitting down near an officer of our army, with his chapeau de bras on, his epauletts were on his shoulders, and several privates were seen standing on the boat. Nothing could be more natural than this representation, of which he evidently felt quite proud. We praised it greatly, which did not displease him. A few small patches of corn were growing near by, but poorly

fenced and badly tilled, among which the weeds were standing between the hills of corn.

The chief went around his village and showed us whatever we wished to see, until we requested him to take us back to our island in his canoe, ours having returned, which he politely did. Not long afterwards, the chief at the head of all his band, old and young, waited on us, at our steamboat, beside this island. They were dressed in their best manner, and Quasquawma introduced them one and all to Mr. Johnson and myself. One woman gaily painted, the one whom we had seen at work, remained by herself some ten rods off, and would come no nearer to us. On my inquiring the cause of her not approaching us any nearer, after having solemnly assured him and all of them of none but the most kind and friendly treatment from our whole company, I was informed by Quasquawma that her appearance indicated that the woman so painted and dressed, "was for sale." Not understanding him at first, he explained himself so fully by words and by signs, that there was no mistaking his meaning. Any one determined to believe our Indians to be "the lost tribes of Israel," would have found proof positive, in favor of such an idea, in this custom of sitting by the wayside, painted and dressed as this woman was on this occasion. Parallel instances in the old testament times and manners, are not wanting.

The visit was continued for some hours, until we

had made our guests many presents of flour, meat, and goods; when they returned to their village, highly gratified with the treatment they received from us on this island.

We were employed seven days in getting the public property over this rapid, when just before sundown, on the seventh day, we went on board another steamer, the *Red Rover*, and passed up the river a few miles where we lay by for the night. Next morning we raised the steam and moved forward slowly, being often detained by low water, and sand bars, so that we did not arrive at Rock Island until the third day about noon.

About thirty-five miles below Rock Island, the beautiful country on the west side of the river opened to view, and from the first moment we saw it, all eyes were turned towards it. At every turn of the river, as we moved along, new bursts of wonder and admiration were poured out by all the passengers. The ladies were enraptured at the numerous and beautiful situations for dwelling houses, where they wished one day to live in rural bliss. Sometimes the east side of the river offered as beautiful situations as the west, though, as a whole, the west was preferable.

Nature had done all — man nothing — and not a human being was seen upon either shore, nor a human habitation. That such a beautiful country was intended by its Author to be forever in the possession

and occupancy of serpents, wild fowls, wild beasts, and savages, who derive little benefit from it, no reasonable man can for one moment believe, who sees it. The river here may well compare with the Connecticut, at Northampton in Massachusetts; and take away the buildings and fences from the lovely country about the place just named, and you have the country below Rock Island, with this exception — the bottom lands on the Mississippi are wider, they rise more regularly from the river, and the hills are not so high, nor so irregular as those at Northampton. They are as fertile as the bottoms, and as well covered with grasses as those on the Connecticut, without one weed intermixed, until you reach the very summits, when the woods, thick, lofty, green and delightful, begin and extend back, west of the hills, to a considerable distance from the river. Adjoining the river is grass, on the western slope of the hills are thick woods.

The bottoms covered with tall grasses begin on the very brink of the river, above high water mark, and they gradually ascend from one to three miles back, intersected every mile or two, by never failing rivulets, originating in the hills; and the ground between the springs is rounded, as if by art, and fitted for a mansion house and all its attendant buildings. Princes might dwell here, within a mile or two of each other, fronting the Mississippi and along it, and possess handsomer seats than any one of them can boast of in the

old world. We could hardly persuade ourselves, many times, when we first saw any one of these beautiful spots, that all the art that man possessed, and wealth could employ, had not been used to fit the place for some gentleman's country seat; and every moment, as we passed along, we expected to see some princely mansion, erected on the rising ground. Vain illusion! Nature had done all to adorn and beautify the scenery before our eyes.

Setting down a pair of compasses large enough to extend thirty-five miles around the lower end of Rock Island, and taking a sweep around it, you would have within the circle the handsomest and most delightful spot on the whole globe, so far as nature can produce any thing called beautiful. The island is in latitude forty-one degrees thirty minutes, is two miles in length, containing about two thousand acres of land. The extreme lower end is occupied by Fort Armstrong and the village of Rock Island.

After passing through several feet of rich alluvial soil in perforating the earth, you come to limestone rock, which forms the foundation of this island. Passing around this island, which is long and narrow, you every where see the rock on which the fort and village stand. The lower end of the island is high and dry above the river, whereas the upper end is overflowed in high waters, and all the upper end of the island is covered with a forest of excellent timber trees. The

main channel of the river is on the western side of the island and that part of the Mississippi is half a mile in width; whereas, in a low stage of the water, as when we saw it, the eastern branch of the river is not more than twenty rods wide perhaps, though so deep that it is ferried constantly from the island to the main land. When we were there, the ground where the fort stood was twenty feet or more above the surface of the river, ten or more feet of it were limestone rock, from the water upwards.

The officers have adjoining the fort a most beautiful garden, regularly laid out with graveled walks, in which are cultivated beets, carrots, onions, potatoes, corn, and every vegetable growing in this climate. Nothing could exceed this garden, in fruitfulness, and every leaf appeared to shine in luxuriance. The gourd-seed corn was fit to roast, the beets had attained a good size, and so had the potatoes, beans, and carrots.

The village adjoins the fort on the north, and a few families live here, George Davenport, who keeps a store for the American Fur Company, being a principal man among them. The sutler has a store here in addition to the company's store. Mr. Davenport is an Englishman, and formerly lived at Cincinnati, where I became acquainted with him. His son-in-law, and a few others, live on the island. With such persons I was happy to meet in the "Far West," and they were of use to us.

General John McNeil went to the fort as soon as

we landed, and Colonel Menard and myself went to the Indian agent's, Mr. Thomas Forsyth, where we were met by the Winnebago prophet and about two hundred Indians of that nation. Seating ourselves in the porch of the agency house, we were addressed by five orators in succession, who complained bitterly of neglect, as they had been here sometime awaiting our arrival, without having been fed as they expected by us. "They wanted flour, hog meat, and whisky."

We explained to them the cause of our not appearing there sooner. They then complained of the change of place to Prairie du Chien, from this place, where they had come, but would not go to the latter place. We explained the reason why the place was changed; because Nawkaw had requested the change, and he was the principal chief, whose wishes governed the Secretary of War, in this matter. We immediately purchased eleven barrels of flour, and gave them, with a suitable number of barrels of pork; and we gave them also two hundred pipes, and a plenty of tobacco which we procured of Mr. Davenport, our stores not having yet reached us here.

Giving orders to Mr. Forsyth, the agent, to follow us in four or five days, with the prophet, and certain chiefs and warriors, whom we named, we went to rest, not very late in the night. As soon as General McNeil made his appearance in the morning, we moved up the rapids, which begin at the lower end of this island,

and extend upwards eighteen miles. We had lightened our frail vessel, so that by traveling on foot ourselves, along the shore, in the sand and over the pebbles, slipping back at every step, we made our way up the river very slowly. Colonel Menard, myself, and every man who could walk, and not needed to navigate the vessel, went on foot — General McNeil and the ladies continuing on board. Sometimes we turned out into the prairie, but the high grass, weeds, marsh, and mud soon compelled us to return to the sandy beach. Sometimes the woods approached quite to the river, on the east side, where we traveled, especially towards the upper end of the rapids.

Before sunset the vessel had passed the rapids, and we encamped for the night. The next day we moved on again, without any unusual accident, encamped again at night, and next day reached Fever River, ascended it seven miles, and landed at Galena, five hundred miles above St. Louis.

Ascending the Mississippi, the country appeared to rise up out of the river at Fort Edwards, and the hills assume a greater elevation still at Du Buque's mine and tomb, not far from Galena. From thence upwards, the bottom lands are narrow, the river turns towards the northwest, and becomes very crooked, bounded by high hills.

The principal town of the Foxes is on the brink of the river near Du Buque's mine, and in sight of his

tomb, which is erected on a high hill, where the cross on his grave can be seen from the river, to a considerable distance from it. Du Buque was an Indian trader, and lived and died here. The Fox town contains twenty wigwams, or upwards, and I presume some two hundred Indians. I saw but a few acres of poorly cultivated corn near the town, and the wigwams looked shabby enough. Morgan is the principal warrior of this village, as Keokuk is of the Rock River town.

Cassville, thirty miles below Prairie du Chien, stands on a narrow bottom, where an opening into the mineral country, in the direction of Mineral Point, presents itself. This easy passage down to the river, has located a town here, of a few houses, consisting of a tavern, a store-house for the lead belonging to the United States; and here a government sub-agent, to collect and receive the government's share of lead, resides, Captain Bell.

Opposite to the mouth of the Wisconsin, stands Pike's hill, lofty and abrupt; and just above this place, on the eastern bank of the river, begins the low prairie ground on which Fort Crawford and the village of Prairie du Chien stand. The town begins to show itself three miles above the Wisconsin, and extends upwards, about nine miles, where it ends. The river is full of islands, and when at its highest altitude in a freshet is three miles in width, from hill to hill. Originally settled by the French, it was once a place of

some importance, as the remains of old cellars and chimneys show. That importance is no more, and probably never will be again. Overflowed by high waters, with but little good land near it, and without water power, I see little inducement to build up a town here. On the north side of the Wisconsin, there is no land on which a town can be located near the Wisconsin, but the south side is preferable for it, where one will, one day, rise up.

CALEB ATWATER