

Epic of the Towns

Farmers came to Iowa singly and in caravans, by scores and even colonies. Meanwhile business flourished: villages outgrew themselves, the river cities thrived on keen commercial rivalry, and steamboats served the ports on great and lesser streams. Mansions fit for noblemen were built, wherein the culture of the East gained currency. And then the railroad came to raise a brood of inland towns. — The Editor.

LITTLE CAPITALS

The eighteen fifties saw Iowa's settlements on the Mississippi become towns — "little capitals". In 1840 these towns ranked in population in this order: Keokuk, about 150; Montrose, 200; Fort Madison, 700; Burlington, 1300; Bloomington (Muscatine), 600; Iowa City, 700; Davenport, 817; and Dubuque, 1300. By the mid-fifties the count differed. Keokuk had advanced to 5044; Fort Madison, to 1500 or more; Burlington, to 7310; Muscatine, to 3693; Iowa City, to 2570; Davenport, to 5203; Dubuque, to 6634. Then, too, on the Mississippi, there had risen Lyons with 163 souls; Bellevue was flourishing; while north of Dubuque there were stirrings at McGregor. As for

the Missouri (bare of towns in 1840) it, in 1855, could boast of Council Bluffs with a population of nearly a thousand, and of Sioux City with a population of perhaps five hundred.

Of Dubuque, *Harper's Magazine* wrote in 1853: "It is charmingly situated", an opinion echoed in 1856 by the *Des Moines Valley Whig*. "The bluffs", said the *Whig*, "are the most magnificent we have observed. Dubuque bluff [burial spot of Julien Dubuque] is very high, perhaps 300 feet or more". Charm, too, attached to Davenport. "There are more fine mansions and beautiful grounds upon the Davenport bluffs", said a visitor of 1856, "than I have yet observed anywhere West". With regard to Burlington, Fort Madison, and Keokuk — they mirrored the South.

But Keokuk! Keokuk!

"Away off west", the *Rochester Daily Democrat* (New York) wrote in 1856, "where the twinkling of the Star of Empire can be seen by any far-reaching eye, perched upon the farther bluff of the graceful Mississippi two hundred miles above St. Louis, is one of the most attractive and progressive little cities this wonderful age has reared. . . . The levee with twelve steamers at the same time loading or unloading; wharf literally piled with freight of all descriptions — wheat, corn, oats, potatoes; and intermediate spaces crowded with steam engines, boilers, plows, threshing machines. . . . Scores of drays and wagons; streets in front of

business houses lined with wagons in still greater number than on Main Street, loading out pork and produce and loading in groceries, salt, iron, etc, etc."

Business and gayety! Yea, and cholera!

Houses! houses! was the cry. A plan of a house "to cost \$275, ready made in Cincinnati", was exhibited, which "could be shipped in one week and put up in a few days".

Meanwhile Burlington, with a population of about 6000, led Keokuk by 2000. "Figures", said the *Burlington Gazette*, "can't lie". "If", retorted Keokuk, "figures can't lie, the editor of the Gazette can". Burlington — ex-capital of Wisconsin Territory; ex-capital of Iowa Territory; home of the Dodge Dynasty (Governor Henry Dodge and his son, Augustus Caesar Dodge) — Burlington, crowned with apple blooms, garnished with the rose, was undeniably smug. "Ere Keokuk was, I am", said Burlington.

And Davenport! The town in Iowa, which by 1856 was the town of the future, was Davenport. Its population was 5203. The populations of Burlington and Dubuque were greater; but by 1860 Burlington had fallen behind Davenport and so had clamorous Keokuk. Davenport was confident. It stood squarely between the East and the setting sun, and knew the fact. "Davenport", it said of itself in 1855, "being directly in the line of the great backbone railroad of America connecting the Atlantic with the Pacific, and at the

only point where for many years the Mississippi will be spanned, greater inducements are held out by Davenport than by any city in the State".

Grimacing, each at other, the towns of Iowa fell a-laughing. "Burlington", laughed the *Hawk-Eye*, "is the greatest city in ancient or modern times — it will be the geographical center of the world. Strangers who buy lots are warranted to double their money every thirty days or no sale. It is very probable that the National Capital will be removed here by the next Congress". "Muscatine", laughed the *Journal*, "is a much greater city than Burlington and, of course, eclipses New York, London, or Davenport. It is situated on the Great Trunk Railroad reaching from San Francisco round the world both ways. The tunnelling of the Atlantic and the Pacific has already been contracted. [Meantime] from the Pacific coast our manufactures will be towed across the oceans by vessels of peculiar construction and with amazing velocity by whales in harness and returning will bring to our market the rich products of India".

A HOUSE OF USHER

"A man from Maine" wrote of Muscatine in 1853: "There is a surplus of two things here which you find in most places — dry goods and lawyers". Among the lawyers was "General" John C. B. Warde. Warde was "tall, of good form, well educated and well

dressed". Withal he was "singular"; "the most singular man", says a pioneer, "that ever visited our city". The "General" bought Muscatine town lots, two of which topped a headland overlooking the Mississippi — a site, Warde said, "mete for a mansion".

The mansion grew. Skilled masons and carpenters (western towns in the fifties abounded in them) laid the solid walls, wrought the shapely windows, shaped the stately chambers. The mistress of such a house (was there to be a mistress?) would be, could but be, *noblesse*. She would put up guests, hold assemblies, give balls. Down the first floor extended a hall and on the right there opened a reception room and a dining room. But the great room was on the left — a drawing room (it could be cleared for dancing) nearly forty feet long and over eighteen feet wide.

The house had features that were special. The roof was surmounted by a cupola whence might be scanned not only the Mississippi River but Muscatine Island flat and far lying, proving ground for prairie fires. And there was a portico. The front door gave upon a porch reached by flowing steps, and above this rose four tall columns, columns crowned by voluptuous capitals and supporting a brow-like pediment.

Just as the house was finished so as to be under roof, its builder and owner, the "General", disappeared. He had incurred debt. Whither he was gone, no one knew — no one unless it were his partner Woodward; and

Woodward did not tell. To this day in Muscatine it is asked what befell the man who built the mansion on the hill. And who was to have been mistress there?

Perchance a moneyed widow?

Perchance a moneyed maid?

Mistress of the true House of Usher was the Lady Madeline. Would the mistress of the Warde mansion have been a Lady Madeline? Years fled. The mansion had as master a worthy man ("General", too, by the way), but for mistress no Lady Madeline. Then the eighteen seventies! Weary of waiting the "House" asserted itself. To it there came its Lady Madeline. And the Lady having come to the House, the House came to the Lady. The basement stirred; the dining room flashed; the long drawing room gave audience. Audience to votaries: votaries of the voice; of the romance tongues; of the bow and strings; of the pipe; of the footlights. Audience, too, the room gave to public characters: elderly barons of predaceous wealth; governors of western States; deputies to European capitals; authors (Iowan) who did valiantly their own stuff: *Girdle Round the Earth*; *The Bishop's Vagabond*; *Sherman's March to the Sea*.

Muscatiners there have been (votaries of the Occult) bold to say that the Madeline of the seventies was in truth none other than the Madeline of the fifties — the Lady Warde reincarnate to possess her own.

IOWA GOES TO MARKET

By 1840 there was beginning to be a food surplus in Iowa. Of corn that year the total product was 1,406,000 bushels; of wheat, 154,700 bushels; of cattle, the total was about 38,000 head; and of swine, about 105,000 head. "Numerous covered flat boats", the Burlington *Hawk-Eye* announced, "are going down stream daily laden with all kinds of produce. About one hundred . . . from Iowa alone have already passed here. Several have been built, laden, and sent off from Burlington".

Hogs were winning mention by 1840, and by 1856 it was observed that "Iowa would bear the palm for hogs". The roads were alive with them on their way to market. In fact, there was "one universal squeal all along the Mississippi". Wheat to be profitable required mills; corn required merely hogs. What, anyway, was a hog but "fifteen or twenty bushels of corn on four legs"?

How much of corn and wheat and hogs was "surplus" we do not know, but it was this surplus that paid for the goods from St. Louis, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, and New Orleans. "Satins, cassimeres, canton flannels, pink-plaid gingham, fancy prints, French and English merinos, tambered Swiss capes and pelerines, bombazetts, Fairmount ticking and cotton carpeting, Mackinaw colored blankets, gray 'bang-up' coats, cloth, hunting frocks, blue and brown dress coats,

brown, blue and satinette striped pantaloons, buckskin pantaloons, brown and green cloth vests, men's camblet coats, fancy stocks and shirt collars, fur capes and caps, besides steel, brass and polished snuffers, brass and iron candlesticks, Britannia tea and coffee pots, straw-knives, spades, shovels and pot metals".

By the end of the forties the corn crop was 8,600,000 bushels, and hogs had mounted to 323,000 head. Wheat, it may be noted, had (quantitatively) fallen distinctly below corn, reaching but 1,500,000 bushels. Wheat none the less was important. But why dwell on wheat? Corn was king! Corn in terms of hogs! And such luscious hogs! A survey of the whole United States was said to show only three towns ahead of Keokuk as Porkopolis.

St. Louis swayed an empire. This empire in growing measure was Iowa, and the *entrée* was by Keokuk and the Des Moines River. On the Des Moines, throughout the eighteen fifties, there were in operation to the advantage of Keokuk and St. Louis not less than forty steamboats. These boats were sternwheelers, mostly of light draft.

Tiny as the Des Moines steamers were, they bore much freight. In the late thirties they carried to Iowa's interior flour (\$18 a bushel), pork (\$18 to \$20 a hundred), corn meal (\$2 a bushel), besides groceries, dry goods, and whiskey. From Iowa they took corn and pork. The market was St. Louis.

At the end of May, 1855, there was in Iowa "not a mile of railroad in operation, scarcely a rail laid". But April 21, 1856, and with it the cry: "We're over! We've crossed the Mississippi in a railroad car!" Cars from Chicago had crossed from Illinois into Iowa at Davenport. The contest between St. Louis and Chicago — a contest between river and rail — was over. The railroad had won.

The epic of the Iowa towns celebrates not all the towns; only those of the Great River. When by reason of railroads the river lost its primacy, a group of inland towns gained prominence — communities which, flanking the river towns, did business eastward (with Chicago) over their heads and behind their backs.