

## The Prairie

*Out of the shadow of the crowding forest emerged the pioneer upon the boundless prairie. He blinked his eyes, and stretched his arms, and took a full deep breath. Before him lay the challenge of a new domain. Beautiful beyond description, Iowa would inspire his noblest motives; untamed and formidable, defying plow and dwelling place, terrible in storm and flame, it would test his highest courage; yet fertile of soil and genial in climate, it would yield to him abundantly; and more than all, it would expand his vision. — The Editor.*

### IOWA AS LIGHT AND LIFE

On the west bank of the Mississippi, what in reality was it that the pioneer saw? Was it what from the accounts of explorers he had been given to expect? Not in the least. He saw — and this practically for the first time — *Light*. “Born and bred amid the forests of Kentucky, Ohio, and the seaboard, his horizon had extended no farther than the tops of the trees which bounded his plantation. . . . Upwards he had seen the sun, sky, and stars; but around him an eternal forest from which he could never fully emerge”. A Westerner on a first visit to the East is said to have

remarked that the Easterner possessed a good country — if only it were not almost completely hid from view by a strange growth called trees.

It was on the prairie that the pioneer awoke to gayety. The prairie *was* gay. "The gayety of the prairie, its embellishments, and the absence of the gloom and savage wildness of the forest, all contribute to dispel the feeling of lonesomeness, which usually creeps over the mind of the solitary traveler in the wilderness". By light it was that the prairie was gay. Gay over the prairie romped the dawn; gay above it rode the noon; gay from it flared away the sunset. I remember Iowa at Muscatine "for its summer sunsets", wrote Mark Twain. "I have never seen any, on either side of the ocean, that equaled them. They used the broad, smooth river as a canvas, and painted on it every imaginable dream of color".

The prairie was *Light* and it was also *Space*. It was grove and garden; it was avenue and park; it was sward and stream. The grove was giant oaks; the garden was bending grasses, the avenue marched between copses; the sward sloped to the stream. The park? One saw the deer; heard the bobwhite and the whip-poorwill. "We could hardly persuade ourselves, many times", notes Caleb Atwater in 1829, "when we first saw any 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 one expected to see some princely mansion, erected on the rising ground”.

“I apprehend”, says a traveler, writing in 1838, “that the intense astonishment, with which the American pioneers first beheld a prairie . . . is the result of association. . . . Our immediate ancestors came from lands covered with wood”. So it was under the forest tradition that “suddenly the glories of the prairie burst upon their enraptured gaze. . . . Europeans are often reminded of the resemblance of this scenery to that of the extensive parks of noblemen. . . . The lawn, the avenue, the grove, the copse, which are there produced by art, are here prepared by nature”.

Amid Light, amid Space — the sense of Life, how inescapable!

#### THE BLIZZARD

The blizzard was stealth. “It had been bright all day”, writes a pioneer. “There were no clouds of any kind to be seen. Everything was still . . . but there was something in the air that made one look at the sky”.

The blizzard was snow. “Young people of to-day”, says our pioneer, “never saw a real snowstorm. . . . There came unexpectedly a heavy snow. About ten inches fell. All the next day the snow lay still; there was no wind blowing. It was not cold. . . . Late in the

afternoon a light wind sprang up. . . . The weeds on the prairie were as big as a man's arm with snow. Many of the branches on the trees were broken short off by the weight of the snow. The next morning about six o'clock it was blowing almost a hurricane. Loose snow was blown so hard and fast that when I put my hand up a foot from my face I could not see it. . . . The morning after when I woke I found an inch of snow on the bed clothes. Shivering I struggled into my cold and clammy clothes. I had to wallow through six inches of snow to the head of the stairs. The stairs looked like a long white drift. . . . I found things worse in the kitchen below. . . . The wind had been so furious it had driven snow through under the door and the kitchen was about knee deep. . . . I found a shovel, opened a window, and shoveled the snow out".

And the blizzard was cold. A Dubuque County settler says : "The snow drifted in through the cracks and covered everything. Mornings the thermometer registered between thirty and forty below".

#### PRAIRIE FIRES

Just how terrible in Iowa was the prairie fire? Some Iowa pioneers (not many) never saw a prairie fire. Others saw fires season after season, but, though harassed by them, did not find them terrible. Still others found them so terrible as to be themselves almost set ablaze in trying to describe them.

The prairie fire came logically in the autumn, but it might come in the spring. In the autumn the grasses and the weeds, crisped by Iowa summer heat, were dry to the point of jubilant explosion. "Back over the prairie sprang up a round cloud, and fire rose out of the heart of the grass. The reds and yellows of the flowers exploded into flame. . . . Winds charged the fire, lashing it with long thongs . . . and the fire screamed and danced and blew blood whistles. . . . Animals ran — ran — ran — and were overtaken, shaken grass glittered up with a roar and spilled its birds like burnt paper into the red air. . . . The people in the village ran — ran — and the fire shot them down with its red and gold arrows and whirled on, crumpling the tepees so that the skins of them popped like corn". Does this paint the burning of an Iowa prairie?

Infernal geysers gushed and sudden streams  
Of rainbow flux went roaring up the skies

There broke a scarlet hurricane of light  
Inverted seas of color rolled and broke

The valley was a-flood with elk and deer  
And buffalo and wolves and antelope

They heard the burning breakers boom and beat  
Their gaping mouths pressed hard against the clay  
They fought for very breath.

Does this paint any better the burning of an Iowa prairie? Why antelope? Why buffalo?

In 1873 a Hollander wrote : "I fancy that anyone who has read a brilliantly poetical account of a prairie fire and seen it likened to 'a rolling sea of fire, miles in extent, sweeping forward on its destructive course, driving before it whole herds of wild buffaloes, deer, and antelopes, dashing along helter-skelter in desperate terror,' shall feel disappointed when he gets to see nothing more than low-lying flames, advancing slowly. . . . The sight does not impress one much, at least near by, and I am not surprised that a certain traveler avenged the disenchantment of his high-strained expectations with the disdainful exclamation : 'A spectacle to be hissed at!'"

In early Iowa there were, it is evident, prairie fires and prairie fires. To the east and south, where the timber was greatest and the prairie least, the fires were commonly of the order sketched by the Hollander. They progressed leisurely and might be checked or diverted by turning up ground, or by back firing (burning away the surrounding grass).

But prairie fires at times had to be met head on. Then came into play the gunny sack, the mop, the broom. "Old sacks or pieces of clothing plunged in water and wielded by the brawny arm" helped greatly, it is said, in "averting serious loss".

One of the least inflated descriptions of a *great* prairie fire comes from the pen of a Methodist circuit rider who traversed northwestern Illinois and north-

eastern Iowa in October, 1835. "The last 12 miles", he writes, "we travelled after sundown, & by fire light over Prairie, it being on fire. This was the grandest scene I ever saw, the wind blew a gale all day, the grass was dry . . . some men were kindling fire to burn it away from their fences & then let it run — no odds who it burnt up. As the dark came on, the fire shone more brilliant. A cloud of smoke arose on which the fire below shone, & the reflection could be seen for miles — in some instances 40. . . . We had in view at one time from one to 5 miles of fire in a streak, burning from 2 to 6 feet high. In *high* grass it sometimes burns 30 feet high, if driven by fierce winds. By the light of this fire we could read fine print for  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile or more. And the light reflected from the cloud of smoke, enlightened our road for miles after the blaze of the fire was out of sight".

Iowa sunsets often gave the effect of prairie fires, and prairie fires the effect of sunsets. "Because of the burning prairies", says the *Muscatine Journal* in 1855, "the horizon circling the view from Muscatine has in every direction for the last few nights presented all the dazzling splendors of an Italian sunset". The aptness of this may be realized before certain of the canvases of George Inness. The canvases are sunsets, yet no less are they prairie fires — prairie fire sunsets, seen of Mark Twain.