

The White Tide

Long before the Indian title to Iowaland had been extinguished, traders, miners, and shop keepers had crossed the river and built their homes at vantage points — Dubuque, Keokuk, and other places in between. By 1838, when Ioway became Iowa, these frontier towns were flourishing communities. And yet, the tide of settlement was only then beginning. — The Editor.

Up to 1840 there had entered Iowa by ferryboat and other Mississippi River craft, but by ferryboat chiefly, some 43,000 people. Of these, 10,531 had come as early as 1836. In that year the influx was called a "tide". Iowa's earliest newspaper, the *Dubuque Visitor*, declared in its first number, on May 11th, that "the tide of emigration is pouring in upon us an immense number of families this spring". On the 9th of March, 1837, an immigrant writes that we "arrived [opposite] Fort Madison. A number of families were there . . . all having waited over night to be ferried across. . . . Our wagon was driven on to a flat boat. . . . Each family would be numbered and when that number was called would be put aboard as quickly as possible. . . . Each man who crossed helped to row. . . . At

last we were over. 'Gwine to the Ioway settlement?' we would be asked".

Between 1837 and 1840-1841 the onset grew. Public prints now proclaimed the white tide a "torrent". Said John Plumbe of Dubuque in 1839, quoting a Burlington correspondent, "the unparalleled rapidity with which the torrent of immigration has since [June 1, 1833] poured into this Western Paradise, may be inferred from the official returns of the census taken in May, 1838; according to which . . . the population has increased, within less than five years from nothing, to 22,859". And again: "The floodgates of emigration seem to have but recently been let loose, and population is pouring in upon us like a torrent."

But the 43,000 settlers who by 1840 had entered Iowa — just why had they come? What had impelled them? An immigrant of the eighteen thirties divides the pioneers of Iowa into three classes : men with families seeking to ameliorate fortune; men with families seeking to retrieve fortune; and young men tempting fortune.

Of these settlers, those who had come by steamboat had very generally settled in the towns — some 4500 souls. At this time Mississippi River boats above Keokuk were rather meagrely equipped. One, *The Warrior*, was "without cabin" but "towed a barge for the accommodation of travelers". In general, the cabin, if one there were, was described as on the main deck

at the stern. When the first upper-cabin steamers were built they were advertised as the "splendid upper cabin steamers". "The ladies' cabin", writes an old boatman, was "in the hold of the boat . . . the gentlemen occupied a cabin overhead, located nearer forward, — state-rooms were not thought of".

Immigrants who by 1840 had come to Iowa by wagon rather than by steamboat numbered about 38,000; and they were farmers. The purpose of the farmer was to acquire land; and to do this two things were essential — occupancy and a living. The living he could in no wise defer. He must have it at once. He must break, plant, and cultivate; and to break, plant, and cultivate he must use animals — oxen. Oxen, or even horses or mules, he could not as a rule afford to bring by boat. He must bring them the cheapest way, that is, he must drive them. To do this he must hitch them to his wain, his wagon; make them, in a Taurian sense, his "star".

The vehicle by which the farmer pioneer did gain Iowa varied. Any vehicle, so long as it was a wagon, and covered, and not too absolutely a Conestoga, served. It might be — perhaps usually was — straight, long-coupled, low-boxed, and provided with a seat from which the driver, often a woman or a girl, guided an ox team.

The farmer did not fall upon Iowa with shouting and with tumult. He was neither Magyar nor Scyth-

ian. His steeds were oxen, mild-eyed, soft-toed, and slow; and with him were his women and children. With him, too, were his flocks (for he not seldom brought sheep); his herds (for he brought cows and sometimes horses); his droves (for he brought hogs); and his pets (for attending him were his dogs, and curled up in his children's laps were his cats).

His journey was to be long — weeks and weeks long. He brought chairs (cane-seated rocker); a table upside down on the feed box; the family books (if any); and even pictures. “Women, guns, rifles, babies, and other nicknacks” are named in *Niles' Register* as the ordinary contents of the mover's wagon, with “numerous pots and kettles” dangling beneath. If a New Englander or an up-country Southerner, the mover might be counted on to have brought with him a family Bible.

The white tide, the torrent inundating Ioway in 1836, was heavily overland. At a “single ferry on the Mississippi river, it was found that from the 1st of April to the 1st of October, 1837, more than 1,800 families [some nine thousand souls] had been carried over”.

Whence did the farmer torrent come? From beneath just what horizons? Horizons much the same as those of the urbanites and farmers who had come by steamboat: southern Illinois, Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, western Virginia, Missouri, southern Indiana, Ohio, and southwestern Pennsylvania. The

tide came both from above and from below the Ohio, and, filling the National Road in Indiana and Illinois, branched toward the Mississippi. There the Iowa part of it sought the up-river ferries — the ferry for Keokuk, for Burlington, for Fort Madison, for Buffalo, for Davenport.

Convergent indeed upon Iowa was the chariot tide. Soft-footed under the constellation Taurus, and soft-wheeled under the constellation Charles Wain — so it came.