

## Iowaland

*A country of mystery and beauty lay between the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. Zealous Frenchmen, "agonizing" toward the Western Sea, passed far to the north or, following the river, detoured southward. The region in between was little known, though the Indians bore them tales of sunny slopes and pleasant streams, of mighty herds and far horizons. A few bold traders ventured far in quest of beaver pelts, but a century or more elapsed before the soldiers and explorers defined the boundaries of Iowaland.—The Editor.*

### NEW YET OLD

Ioway in 1673 was new — new topographically — all but a fraction of an eighth of it. This fraction lay wholly in the northeast and was old: old by hundreds of thousands of years — pre-glacial in fact. So old was it that its face like many old faces was wrinkled and seamed, scarred and gashed. The gashes, some of them, drove deep — six or seven hundred feet. They broke the region into shapes fantastic and picturesque — escarpments, buttresses, columns, towers, castles.

Old as Ioway was in the northeast, in the west it was new again. Here the Missouri (Pekitanoui or



Muddy Water) writhed through a wide floodplain; and here Nature had reared structures in Beauty's counterfeit — "peaks and knobs of wind-drift".

But the glory of Ioway lay neither in its east nor in its west: it lay in the Great Between, in its Mesopotamia, its Prairies.

To the north, from basin and bowl, flamed lake and lakelet: Spirit Lake and the Okobojis; Clear Lake; Swan Lake; Twin Lakes; Silver Lake; Storm Lake; Wall Lake; what lake not? Deer stole to these lakes; and into them swept migrating fowl — wild swans, wild geese, wild ducks.

Then there were Ioway's three watersheds. Eastward into the Mississippi flowed the streams Des Moines, Skunk, Iowa, Wapsipinicon, Upper Iowa, and Turkey; while westward into the Missouri, or into the Big Sioux, flooded the Nishnabotna, Boyer River, the Little Sioux, Floyd River, and Rock River. As for the third watershed, it lay to the south and southwest, and gave rise to the rivers Chariton, Grand River, little Platte, and Nodaway.

A compelling feature of the new Ioway was grasses, flowers, and birds. Everywhere grasses! Everywhere flowers! Everywhere birds! Birds golden and in whirlwinds; or lone and in mid-air balanced; or unseen, yet making the welkin ring from up amid the sunshine. Midsummer stilled the birds, but the grasses and the flowers it flung in riot to the horizon's rim.



The prairies knew beauty. They knew also mystery and terror. The mirage they knew; and fire; and the whirlstorm; and the cold. Loneliness stalked upon them as it stalks upon the desert and the sea.

Of the streams of Ioway the chief were the Iowa and the Des Moines. Loitering for long stretches at the prairie level, they sought on a sudden canyon depths. Matted and tangled on their edges, their uplands were as open to the sunlight as a park — uplands that bore oaks lordly enough to have sheltered Robin Hood.

#### THE BISON

The prairies confessed a monarch — the Bison. Before him other wild life — deer, elk, bear, cat — cowered and withdrew. Bulk, shagginess, horns — these served the bison's state; these joined to render him redoubted.

Beyond dispute the bison or buffalo roamed Ioway. But was Ioway a land of the bison? "They are scattered about the prairie in herds", wrote Father Marquette. "I have seen one of 400". When attacked, "they catch a man on their Horns, if they can, toss Him in the air, and then throw him on the ground, after which they trample him underfoot, and kill him". Charlevoix writes that, "the river *Moingona* issues from the midst of an immense meadow, which swarms with Buffaloes and other wild beasts". Moreover, by



1728, or before, the Iowa River had come to bear the name Rivière aux Boeufs (Bison or Buffalo River). But aside from the foregoing nowhere seemingly is there to be found mention of the buffalo as in numbers exceeding a few score at any one time or place. In 1835 a leader of the United States Dragoons, Lieutenant Colonel Stephen W. Kearny, crossed Ioway from the Des Moines River into southeastern Minnesota; but he saw buffalo only once, and of these his troopers killed but five or six.

In short, it was not uncommon in frontier Iowa to find elk; deer were well-nigh universal; bear, panther, and the lynx might be met; but nowhere were there to be found to any extent bison.

Why?

Ioway like Wisconsin and Illinois was a prairie land. Unlike western Minnesota, the Dakotas, and Nebraska, it was not a plains land. It differed from the latter in its grasses. The prime grass for the buffalo, the grass of the plains, was the "buffalo grass", which in some slight measure grew also in Iowa's northwest. This grass (*buchloe dactyloides*), when obtainable, formed "the *pièce de résistance* of the bison's bill of fare". It was "good all the year round". It was unexcelled for fat-producing, and "enabled the bison to exist in such absolutely countless numbers as characterized his occupancy of the great Plains".

But whatever in the way of resistance to cold may



have been true of the "buffalo grass" of Iowa's northwest (the little there was of it) the other and far more abundant grasses of that region could not endure frost: indeed, they became practically worthless upon its advent. "The grass", notes Captain Allen in September, 1844, when crossing what are now Lyon and Plymouth counties, "has been so much deadened by the many frosts, that it no longer gives the horses a good subsistence".

Buffalo on the plains? Buffalo by the tens of thousands! Buffalo in mad and charging armies! Buffalo in furious individual combats! Lusty bulls each at other, heads down, tails on high, pawing up the ground, and tossing it on their horns! All amid a bellowing, a roaring, that rocked the land!

But in Ioway?

Threading the tall green grass they go,  
To and fro, to and fro.  
And painted Indians in a row,  
With arrow and bow, arrow and bow,  
Truly they made a gallant show  
Across the prairie's bright green flow,  
Warriors painted indigo,  
black buffalo

Long ago.



*THE EMERGENCE OF IOWALAND*

Between the years 1803 and 1833 Ioway, though yet a wilderness, felt stirrings toward white supremacy. West of the Mississippi in 1804 there was erected the District of Louisiana, and in 1805 this District became Louisiana Territory. Then in 1812 Louisiana Territory became the Territory of Missouri, from which in 1819 there fell away the Territory of Arkansas, leaving a truncated Missouri Territory whence in 1821 there fell away the State of Missouri, leaving instead a No-Man's Land fraught with Ioway.

In 1804 Lewis and Clark, mounting the Missouri in keel boats, passed the Iowa stream Nodaway and the Nishnabotna and by July 21st were at the mouth of the great river Platte. Opposite the mouth of the Platte lay Ioway, and on the 22nd the party (fifty in all) pitched in Ioway their camp. Here they raised the "American collours". They pitched in Ioway some ten or eleven successive camps, and took note among other things of the Little Sioux or Stone River which their guide ("Old Dorion") told them passed through a lake called D'Esprits — Lake of Spirits. Sergeant Floyd of the expedition died on August 20th and was buried at a spot now within the limits of Sioux City. At a bluff in Nebraska the explorers held a council with members of the Otoe tribe to make known to the Indians the "Change of Government" due to the purchase of Louisiana, and to express "the wishes



of our government to Cultivate friendship with them".

Following Lewis and Clark there came up the Missouri in 1811 the Astor expedition carrying two men of mark — John Bradbury, English naturalist, and Henry M. Brackenridge, American literateur. Major Stephen H. Long of the Topographical Engineers ascended the river in 1819. He was followed in 1825 by General Henry Atkinson, and in 1833 by Maximilian, Prince of Wied. These explorers, one and all, found the great Missouri Valley delightful. Bradbury pronounced the view over Ioway "magnificent".

While Lewis and Clark defined Ioway on the west, definition took place on the east.

Starting from St. Louis on August 9, 1805, Lieutenant Pike essayed the Mississippi in a keel boat with twenty men. Near the future Montrose he unfolded to the Sauks the news that "their great father, the president of the United States", in celebration of his acquisition of Louisiana, "had ordered the General [James H. Wilkinson] to send a number of his young warriors [the Pike party] in different directions, to take them by the hand". Stopping at the sites of Fort Madison and Burlington and at Grand Prairie (Muscatine Island), the expedition reached the site of Davenport on August 27th. Thereafter came Dubuque's lead mines, the heights of McGregor, and Yellow River with its "painted rocks".

It was Pike's principal errand to choose points on



the Mississippi suitable for military establishments, and he chose two — the hills of Burlington and the McGregor Heights. Neither was ever occupied.

Ioway on the south achieved definition in 1816 when the north boundary of what in 1821 resolved itself into the State of Missouri was established. But our present concern is with Ioway on the north. Here arose a situation fraught with the incalculable — a situation due to the St. Peter's River. In July, 1820, Captain Stephen W. Kearny left "the Council Bluff" (Nebraska) to discover a route across the country to the outlet of the St. Peter's. Passing by way of the Ioway streams Boyer, Soldier, Little Sioux, and Raccoon, the party reached a point southeast of Spirit Lake and thence passed to the Little Blue Earth River near what to-day is the Iowa-Minnesota line. Captain Kearny's expedition (and therein its point) tended to make the St. Peter's River the north boundary of Ioway. It was so regarded in the first constitution proposed in 1844 for the State of Iowa.