

A WOLVERINE AMONG THE HAWKEYES

EXCERPTS FROM THE RORER LETTERS

Editor's note: Intended to establish "Hawkeye" as the nickname of the new Iowa Territory, David Rorer's Wolverine letters serve as an entertaining frontier travelogue, thick with poetic grace and acerbic wit. The lawyer's letters appeared anonymously in a few 1839 territorial newspapers (see previous article) and are reprinted in the October 1924 *Annals of Iowa*. Some spelling and punctuation have been changed.

T WAS ON THE EVENING of the day that ushered in the New Year, (1839,) that, with no ordinary sensations, I hove in sight of the Father of Waters, opposite the thrifty town of Du Buque, in the justly famed Territory of Iowa. I hastily crossed over, and spent the night and succeeding day, among the hospitable Hawkeyes of that leaden region.

This interesting place, which, with its numerous advantages, must soon attain to a state of City-Hood, is situated on the west bank of the great Mississippi. . . .

I was forcibly struck with the mixed mass of Germans, French, English, Irish Americans, etc., intermingling with each other, in that cheerful manner, which is the true indication of happy hearts and smiling prospects. Theirs is a happy life of romance and excitement. . . .

The day-laboring miner of yesterday by a sudden discovery, becomes the owner of a rich lead himself to-day, and is transformed from a humble digger to a wealthy proprietor, before he has time to change his clothes.

This emporium of the lead trade is handsomely laid out on a slight eminence girt around on the north, south, and west by lofty and romantic hills, (better known here as mineral knobs,) graciously designed by Providence as well for enriching the place with their mineral treasure as for the protection of the young

Hawkeyes, from the withering blasts of winter's bleak winds. . . .

. . . Having resumed my journey, I had a pleasant day's ride to the village of Bellview [Bellevue]. The intervening country bears a striking resemblance to the Scottish highlands — a succession of lofty hills and deep ravines, little timber, and now and then an isolated cabin, with turf chimney and lowly roof, overlaid with soil to keep out the cold. . . .

The village of Bellview is a promising young town, beautifully situated in a spacious valley, between two parallel mountains, extending back at right angles from the Mississippi, and is said to be quite a money making place. Here is a quarry of choice building stone, an excellent saw mill, and two hotels, whose smoking doings and comfortable fixings are not to be grinned at by a Wolverine on a fasting stomach. In truth, this place, like the villages of the early French voyageurs, is famous for good eating, drinking, hilarity, and the social dance. . . .

The next place of importance below is the town of Davenport, seat of justice for Scott county. . . . It is perhaps the most lovely place in the west. Here is a population principally from the Keystone state enlightened, enterprising, and interesting and distinguished for their hospitality and courteous attention to strangers — a chapel of brick, and many private dwellings and business houses, have gone up here the past year. . . .

We find [Rockingham] four miles from Davenport, and opposite the mouth of Rock River, on a pleasant site, in a pretty little prairie. With its commercial advantages, it will at some time, become an important addition to the city of Davenport, for they are certainly destined to be one — both together are but the germ of a mighty city that is ere long to be; and

while they are disputing about their local bickerings, they will come together by the mutual advances of enterprise, if not by an advance of mutual good feeling.

Their only real cause of disputation, is as to which of the two shall perpetuate its name at this family Union. They should cultivate reciprocal good feelings and advise their people to intermarry, and in a short time these young Hawkeyes would be found billing & cooing like young doves in the spring of the year. . . .

From Pine River, I made my way in due speed to the much talked of Town of Bloomington [Muscatine], (better known in real life, I am told, as the Town of Pinch 'em Silly) situated at the western extreme of the great bend of the Mississippi. . . .

This famous town of Pinch 'em Silly is tastefully gotten up on a gentle acclivity bound in by lofty projections from the south, and a stagnant pool and inundated swamp on the north, and encompassed upon the west by some tilable lands of a genial soil, but for the most part consisting of broken fragments of hills and precipices, that look as if formed for pasturage and shaken to pieces by a fit of the ague before it got dry. . . .

After being seated a short time [in a tavern], by a rusty old stove, well besmeared with the juice of the weed, completely laden in front with the half smoked remains of long nines and Kentucky cock tails, I was graciously saluted with a "how do you navigate, stranger?" from behind me, by a sour looking, ill featured fellow, with a blue streak in the form of an inverted crescent under one eye, and the other pushed out of place by gouging, so as to diverge from his nose at an angle of about forty five degrees. "Thank you sir, very well," I replied, as he advanced to the bar with a twist of pig tail in one hand and an empty bottle in the other, and demanded to have it filled with old rye.

"Come stranger," said he, "let's take a little of the water of life while it runs freely;" I thanked him again, and begging to be excused, told him I was a member of the Temperance Society, and seldom drank. "Sorry for that, stranger," he proceeded, "I took you to be a sorter down-right clever fellow at first sight, no two ways about it, cepting them ar fineries of

yours, — I go for that ar society in particular, if it wasn't for our kind of folks, stranger, Temperance preachers would have but little to do. I temper my liquor with water, and my water with good liquor, and so you see I manage to keep steam up, pretty gingerly, to about two hundred pounds to the square inch.

"Now I say that is pretty fair travelling, stranger, and if and if any man dare dispute it, I am a Hawkeye-singer kinder next a'kin, as the lawyers call it to the great Black Hawk himself. I lived in this neck of timber when there warn't a civilized critter in it tamer than a wild cat, and followed watching the way side and catching young suckers for a livin' — and so I say agin, stranger if any man dare dispute it, be he Buckeye, Hoosier, Puke, Wolverine, or Sucker, I'll knock him so far into futurity, that it will take him a life time to look back."

The aged are for the most part left behind, and the young have exchanged the scenes of their childhood for this border paradise.

To attempt an enumeration of the improvements of the Bloomingtonians, would be rather an idle business, — therefore, as I dislike idleness, I will tell you, *not* what they *have*, but what they have *not* — They have no *Church*, no *Prison*, no *Court-House*. . . . The absence of the first is justified on the ground of *no religion* — the latter on that of *no law*, which, in all these *sun-down* countries, means *no will to enforce it*. They have no printing establishment — no school house, or seminary — and no manufactories, save one for converting brick-dust and molasses into "Sappington's pills," an improvement invaluable in all ague countries. — So far are they superior to the genuine *Sappingtonians*, that it is seriously asserted, they may be used with impunity, and will not injure the patient more than ninety-nine times out of an hundred. . . .

I called at the office of a Hawkeye Lawyer, and found him domiciled in a four-square log house — the interstices between the logs filled with mud, which had frozen and thawed with

the changes of the weather, until it had nearly all fallen out, — clapboards nailed over the windows instead of glass, and an enormous wooden chimney, with a fire-place, like the jaws of Moloch, in which whole rails were used [as] fuel. . . . The poetical bump of the inmate, was strongly developed by the following inscription, and other similar ones, in pencil on the door,

“As early as I saw this town, I take it,
That even then I had the sense to hate it.”

From Black Hawk [Toolesboro], crossing the Iowa on the ice, I proceed to Florence, on the north bank of that River, at the spot occupied by *Black Hawk*, as a residence, and head quarters during the late war with Sacs and Foxes. The *Wigwam* of the departed chief is still standing — it is a huge fabric of posts, poles, and bark — the roof is also of bark, so constructed that the top course, or layer, bends over the comb each way. Passing down the Iowa, a few miles from this place, I fell into the intended route of the Burlington and Iowa River Turnpike, and followed the source, finding it well adapted to turnpiking, and bordered by a lovely country, to the flourishing young city of Burlington, the present seat of government of the *Hawkeyes*, at which place I arrived on the evening of the memorable eighth of January, just in time to witness its celebration by a ball at the Hotel where I stopped.

There were present some forty or fifty couple of gentlemen and ladies, besides a number, who, like myself, participated only as lookers on. You do not here, as in the old settled countries down toward sun-rise, find the young and the aged treading time to the same cotillon, and mingling together in the mazy intricacies of the giddy dance, for the aged are for the most part, left behind, and the young, the gay, the enterprising, and romantic, have exchanged the scenes of their childhood for this border paradise, and them alone you find figuring in the pulpit, the forum, the bar, the ball-room, the parlor, and in almost every relation of life. . . . The enjoyments of the evening were closed in a manner calculated to awaken all the nobler feelings of our nature — the national banner, which, during the dance, had waved

incessantly at one end of the long hall, was hastily snatched from its place, by a gentleman, who bearing this glorious trophy on one arm and his fair partner on the other, marched off with quick and joyful steps, to the soft tones of the violins and clarionet, as they struck up in an animated strata, “*Hail Columbia, happy land*” — instantly couple after couple formed in the rear of the happy procession, until the whole assembly were included in the promenade, when the inebriating sounds of the music suddenly ceased to fall upon the ear, the beloved insignia of liberty, which, in addition to the usual device, bore the impress “*Iowa Farmers*,” in large characters, was then carefully disposed of, and the parting salutations of the evening being reciprocated, the assembly dispersed in harmony, order and good feeling; and I retired from the scene confirmed in the belief, that refinement and taste are not confined to *place*, but may be found, as well upon our frontier borders. . . .

The growing prospects of Burlington, are unparalleled, in the history of frontier towns — though scarcely more than four years old, she already numbers some fifteen hundred inhabitants. . . . A large and commodious two-story brick church, for the Methodist denomination, has been erected — a market-house, of brick, begun, and more than one hundred private buildings and business houses completed — and a substantial wharf is now being made — Here are two printing establishments, a

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number of professional gentlemen, some of whom have extensive libraries, amounting to several hundred volumes — and the whole place is literally alive with workshops of every description. . . .

By an act of the Assembly, this place is to remain the seat of government, for three years, at the end of which time it is to go to “Iowa City,” Johnson county. I witnessed the debates in the assembly on the bill establishing the seat of the government, & was greatly amused by

the ebullitions of a certain *Payneful* speaker in the Council, who opposed it with great warmth: — “Mr. President,” said he, “where is Johnson county, sir? the friends of the bill may answer the question, for I can’t, sir. There is no such county known to our laws, sir. What are its boundaries, sir? It has none, sir. Shall we place the great Sanhedrim of the Territory, and his Excellency, and the bevy of boys who pay court to his greatness, in the midst of savages and wild beasts? I tell you sir, they would

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as soon think of creeping into a live hornet’s nest, sir? Johnson county! a trackless wild, *beyond the setting sun*. — Yes, sir, *beyond the setting sun*. . . .

There is a great hubbub kicked up here between their Buckeye Governor [Robert Lucas], and the representatives of the Hawkeye people — as soon as the old hero of Toledo found there were a majority of democrats in the assembly, he forthwith commenced ruling with an iron rod, supposing no doubt, that they would sustain him through political feelings, right or wrong — he assumed such attitudes towards them as would never be tolerated in the Governor General of a British Province, or the Satrap of a despotic State — vainly insisting that independent of him they had no power — that all bills should be submitted to his Excellency by a committee, before introduced into the assembly. — and various other positions, as tyrannical as ridiculous, and as ridiculous as revolting to the feelings of a people free as air, and who cherish the maxim that “*the world is governed too much*.” . . .

In looking over their proceedings, I discover that the late assembly passed at least *some* very important acts — *one* regulating proceedings in criminal cases, which provides, that if you fail to prove the defendant guilty of the charge alleged, you may alter (or amend, as they call it,) the indictment to *fit* the *proof*, and convict and punish him without previous notice, for whatever offence you may happen to prove

against him. . . . They also passed, or attempted to pass, an act to improve the *blood of unblooded horses* — which is about on a par with the old act of the Legislature of the Keystone State, spoken of by my learned Judge Breckinridge, which makes it *penal* to *alter* the *mark* of an *unmarked hog*. . . .

The evening before my departure from Burlington I attended a temperance meeting at the Methodist church, the use of which was generously tendered by the society. There were present an immense throng — not a seat remained unoccupied, and every avenue and aisle were crowded — a lecture was delivered by a transient gentleman from the *Buckeye State*. I had truly hoped from the deep interest shewn in the cause, that much good would have resulted from the delivery of an able and truthful address, but the orator misjudged either the character of his audience or his own abilities, and when he boldly declared, *on the authority too* of Dr. Rush, that thirty years since there was not a female of sobriety in the whole city of *Brotherly-Love*, not even excepting the *broad-brim* descendants of its venerable founder, the *good* William Penn. The crowd gave evident signs of disapprobation, and some of them done him the justice to abruptly leave the house. . . .

The hotel where I took comfort stands within the limits of the old Fort. The burnt remains of the picketing around it are yet plainly perceptible.

. . . I have already told you that in [Burlington?] there are two printing establishments. The one engaged in *job work*, and the other in the *filthy job* of publishing a *weakly* thing, called by way of courtesy a newspaper. The one is suspected, unjustly I hope, of fanaticism — the other is not suspected for *any thing* in *particular*, but *any thing* to *suit* the *occasion*, or *nothing* as *interest* and the “*occasion may require*” — retires to rest and rises — dresses and undresses, walks to food and returns at the tap of the bell, as any other animal would, always taking especial care to be

seated at meal time in the most approved attitude of the place, and at just *such* distance from the Executive as strictly accords with the established order of *Hawkeye* precedence at the COURT of his *Buckeye Excellency*. . . .

At [Mount Pleasant] I obtained a late Burlington Gazette containing a stricture on my two first numbers, under the signature of a "Citizen of Musquitine County," whom, from the language as well as other circumstances, I soon recognised as a certain member of the *Hawkeye* Assembly. . . . I had the *honor* of a slight acquaintance with him during last winter's session, and we recently met again at the boat landing, on his return from Cincinnati, at which time he took special care to *intimate* to me in plain language, his unalterable determination to totally use up "A Wolverine among the Hawk-eyes," little thinking that he was then so near being *swallowed* by the *beast himself* — I had a mind, Ben, to *roll him up* and take him for *Puke*. . . .

The hotel [in Fort Madison] where I [next] took comfort, stands within the limits of the old Fort. The burnt remains of the picketing around it, are yet plainly perceptible. The identical well, constructed by the American troops, is now in use, and supplies the hotel with a most excellent and wholesome beverage, which many of the inhabitants adulterate by a strange practice of mixing whiskey and other deleterious drinks with it previous to its use. In this respect some of them are not surpassed even by the worthy toppers of the renowned "*Pinch 'em Slyly*" — cards and liquor are the engrossing topics of the hotel circle. Their nocturnal revellings are at times carried to such an extent that sleep is utterly out of the question.

. . . Salem is also an inland place, and a Quaker village — is situated in Henry county, near the junction of Cedar creek and Skunk river, and about four miles south of the latter. It contains some dozen of homely buildings and a sober sort of people, who fear the Lord and eschew the Devil, as all good Christians should. Here may be seen romping groups of smiling cherry-cheeked Hawk-eye Quakeresses, with their tidy little aprons as white as a Norwegian snow-bank, eyes as soft as their own native wild-flowers of the prairies, looks as placid and lovely as a rainbow in a

southern sky, and voices as sweet as the mellifluent whisperings of zephyrs from a fairy land. . . .

On my route hither I fell in at the court of a Hawk-eye Squire, surrounded with all the parade and consequence of a Court-Baron, — that ancient and important personage the constable, and a half dozen of suitors, and twice as

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many more adherents, favorers, and champions of the respective *parties-litigant*, with voices like a Stentor's and fists like the club of Hercules. I expected to witness a tilt, a tournament, or a trial by battle, but all passed off peaceably. They were sitting in judgment on an alleged *interloper* for *jumping* a settler's claim; he was found guilty and ousted, or in the Hawk-eye language, "*whipped and cleared*," as a matter of course, according to previous determination, as all *supposed claim jumpers* are, by a jury of claim holders and speculators who sit not so much to inquire into *facts*, as to give their action the *color of law*. . . .

His honor, the Squire, is about thirty years of age, yellow haired and white eyed, carries himself with an affected air of importance, wears an old pair of iron spectacles, with green glasses, a red blanket coat, (*slide runner cut*), and a coonskin cap, and is spoken of favorably by the friends of his Excellency here, as a candidate at the coming election for a seat in the lower House of the Hawk-eye Assembly. I met with the same *non-descript* being here the other day, it being court week. He was walking down one of the principal streets, in earnest conversation with the *Payne*-full gentleman spoken of in one of my last, with a *quarter section of Hoosier bread* under his arm, and a *sanctimonious scowl* on his countenance, huzzaing for the Governor and heaping *pious maledictions* on

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