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A Guide for Englishmen

The influence of emigrants' handbooks upon the settlement of the Mississippi Valley a hundred years ago is difficult to assess, but they offered interesting pictures of the way the newly opened Territories appeared to contemporary writers who were interested in the development of the natural resources and the expansion of trade. Among these guides, published in 1844 in London, was a pamphlet by John B. Newhall whose frank intention was to encourage Englishmen to migrate to the upper Mississippi Valley.

Little information is available concerning Newhall's life. He was a native of Massachusetts, and writing in 1846 he stated that "ten years ago, I beheld the western shore of the Mississippi a primeval wilderness . . . I participated in rearing the first land-marks of a young and rising State", but elsewhere in describing Burlington he remarked that "although the traveller of 1844 alights from a four-horse coach, at the door of a

spacious hotel", he in 1834 "was glad to find the shelter of a log cabin and a comfortable bed, within the folds of a Buffalo robe."

In his first book, *Sketches of Iowa*, published in 1841, he claimed Burlington as his residence, and declared that he had "been engaged in the arduous pursuits of active business from boyhood." Some of these sketches had appeared as early as July, 1839, in the *Iowa Patriot* of Burlington. Later he had articles in the Burlington *Hawk-Eye* under the signature "Chemokomon". Newhall was frequently referred to as "Major Newhall", but without indication of the source of the title. He served as secretary to Governor James Clarke in 1845, and in the following year published his third book, *A Glimpse of Iowa in 1846*.

Despite his love for Iowa, Newhall seems not to have given up thought of further migration. In April, 1849, he left Burlington, bound for the upper Missouri country, and probably for California. This, however, he had not determined on when he left home. Alas, whatever his intention, it was doomed to frustration, for he died at Independence House, Independence, Missouri, of cholera on May 7th, after a day's illness. His wife and several small children had been left in Burlington.

His *British Emigrants' "Hand Book"*, issued a

hundred years ago, was an unpretentious book of a hundred pages measuring six and a half by four inches. Its sole illustration was an in-text diagram showing the manner of surveying a township and numbering the sections. Printed for the author by T. Stutter, the price was to be "one shilling and six pence each" at all booksellers. This would be thirty-five cents in American money. Robert Lucas gave his "hearty approbation" to Newhall's laudable efforts to promote interest in Iowa, and George Catlin, then in London, recommended this guide to all "who desire a more extended acquaintance with one of the most interesting portions of the United States."

Newhall's purpose in publishing his emigrants' handbook was to make available to all the substance of the lectures he had been giving in various parts of England during 1843-44, together with additional detailed, practical information which those actually contemplating emigration would need to plan and carry out their designs efficiently.

His first concern was to establish the purity of his motive in both lecturing and writing, as his feelings had been injured by frequent charges that he was a "speculator" or "agent of some Land Company" who stood to profit personally from inducing immigration. Far from being mercenary, Newhall claimed he was moved only by the misery

due to over-population in which he saw worthy but helpless Britishers languishing. He desired to acquaint them with the contrasting situation in the Mississippi Valley, a situation in which they were welcome to share. He felt particularly obligated to write because "the British public was almost inundated with such copious showers of Journals, Travels, 'Domestic Manners,' 'Notes for general circulation,' etc. respecting America," written by "the gifted tourist . . . while he calmly reposed in the saloons of Mississippi steamers." These accounts were wholly inadequate to supply the prospective emigrant with the kind of accurate, down-to-earth items which would determine the success or failure of his venture.

By far the greater share of Newhall's text was devoted to Iowa. He was almost lyrical in his description of its natural beauty and riches, and particularly in painting the contrast between the Indian wilderness of 1832 and conditions twelve years later when "manufactures and commerce flourish, literature and arts are diffusing their invigorating influence." He was quite carried away by the almost magical populating of a hitherto virgin land, and equally moved at the boundless opportunity for those who would intelligently undertake the hardships of pioneer life.

Newhall sought to lure the Englishman from

his unhappy surroundings by depicting the "grassy lawns and verdant vales, interspersed with towering oaks . . . the river tumbling its crested foam over precipitous ledges of cragged rocks—the spiral cliffs and massy ledges grouped in fantastic forms amidst the cultivated valley."

Hardly less enticing was his brief description of the soil: "It appears to make but little difference what kind of crop is placed in the ground; whatever is sown yields most abundantly and probably a hundred years successive cultivation would not exhaust the rich mould at the surface." Amiably scornful of his English friends who often exclaimed, "Oh! I never learnt to farm!" he declared that "such an objection would make a westerner smile. 'Never learnt to farm!' It requires no philosophy to plant seed or to hold the plough." It seems clear from this blithe attitude that among the "arduous pursuits" in which Newhall had engaged, farming had been excluded, for surely physical endurance and good judgment must have been needed no matter how rich the soil.

Newhall was also greatly impressed with the diversity of trees to be found in the woodlands, and with the facilities for turning these into lumber through the water-power which the many well-distributed streams provided. He remarked that he had noted during his travels in France and

England how dependent those countries were upon windmills which the well-watered character of the western region made superfluous.

The prairies Newhall considered "one of the most captivating features in the landscape of Western America." "Prairie", he thoughtfully explained, was "a French word signifying Meadow" and its "characteristic peculiarity is the absence of timber". Prairie soil was as rich as any and had the great advantage of being already clear of trees and ready for cultivation. Although he thought anybody could plow, he had no illusions about timber felling. He gave plain warning that chopping "is a labour [an Englishman] will never like; a dextrous use of the axe he can seldom if ever acquire." The expense of buying needed lumber was but a trifle in comparison with the saving due to the absence of timber.

On the western climate, Newhall spoke with moderation. He conceded that winters were severe and summers uncomfortably hot for short periods at a time, while the first months of spring were "generally disagreeable and cheerless, and anything but what the softness of the name indicates." He expressed pity for the immigrant who might arrive in March, but bade him be of good cheer, for by the middle of April he would be delighted with the contrast. As for autumn, it

would present "a picture calculated to excite emotions of wonder and delight."

Although Newhall assumed that the best prospect and chief desire of the immigrant would be to take up land, he did not wholly neglect those interested in pursuing crafts and trades. All persons with mechanical skills could count on "certainty of employment and good wages." These included stone cutters, bricklayers, masons, blacksmiths, cabinet makers, millwrights, tanners, saddlers, and gunsmiths.

In the field of trade, he pointed out that while "in England every man followed his peculiar calling, the merchant of the Western States sells from a silk dress to a tin cup, from a cambric needle to a crow-bar; if the farmer has got no cash, the merchant takes his grain, beef, pork, wool, hemp, wax, hides, loads a 'flat boat' and sends it off to New Orleans; in short your genuine Western Merchant is frequently a 'character', perchance captain of his own flat boat, sells his own cargo at New Orleans—takes a packet round to New York and Boston—buys 20,000 dollars' worth of goods, returns to the west and takes his seat in the legislature, to which he had been elected—does a little at law making—a trifle at president making—puts up pork—preaches occasionally at a camp meeting—manufactures lard oil—takes a mail contract from

government—is 'sole agent' for Brandeth's pill—sends out cheese to Liverpool—'comes over' to settle accounts—spends a week at Rome, and returns in good time at the breaking-up of the ice of the Mississippi, to load another flat boat for New Orleans. Thus, you perceive, your Western Merchant is a personage who takes time on the wing. Are you disposed to try it, Reader? There is no obstical [sic] for a person of ordinary tact and capacity soon to become possessed of the qualifications of a Western Trader."

Newhall declared flatly that any industrious and prudent man could succeed if he had a hundred pounds (\$500) in his pocket when he arrived, although "how much more convenient 3 or £400 would be, must be very obvious to any man of sound judgment." He provided a list of essentials which could be obtained for eighty pounds, but warned not to allow the remaining cash to "oze" away, because it was "very convenient for a settler in a new country always to have a few pounds by him," and it had frequently been an error on the part of emigrants to expend their last dollar on additional land, only to become discouraged and to fail when life without any margin of reserve became too hard for them. Apparently, Newhall felt that women were apt to weaken first in the strange and primitive environment, for he referred

in deprecation to the handicap of a "Home sick Wife".

In concluding this portion of his book, Newhall urged the necessity of planning the adventure of emigration while still at home, for the East in which most emigrants would land knew little about conditions in the West, and even had a class of persons who deliberately preyed upon the foreigner. Above all he warned the Englishman not to lose his nerve and cling to the Atlantic seaboard, but to press on to the West where, despite any brief hardships, labor was continuously in demand and no one needed to be poor very long.

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