

# THE PALIMPSEST

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VOL. XXV

ISSUED IN JULY 1944

No. 7

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## With Captain Allen in 1844

At ten o'clock on Sunday morning, August 11, 1844, a detachment of fifty United States dragoons rode out "in very good order" from Fort Des Moines at the mouth of the Raccoon River. Wagons loaded with camp equipment and "pork for 40 days, flour for 60 days, and small rations for 70 days" creaked along behind the file of horsemen at the slower pace of mules and oxen. At the head of the column rode Captain James Allen, classmate of Robert E. Lee at West Point, commandant at Fort Des Moines, and competent explorer. First Lieutenant Patrick Calhoun and Second Lieutenant Patrick Noble, both South Carolina graduates of the United States Military Academy, assisted in command of the expedition. Brevet Second Lieutenant J. H. Potter acted as the commissary and was assigned the duty of preparing a map of the march. The medical staff consisted of Assistant Surgeon J. S. Griffin.

According to orders No. 13 issued from head-

quarters at St. Louis on June 13, 1844, Captain Allen was directed to organize Company I for an exploring expedition "up the Des Moines river, and to the sources of the Blue Earth river of the St. Peter's; thence to the waters of the Missouri; and thence returning through the country of the Pottowatomies." Preparations were made at once but the company was detained for about a month by subsequent orders.

Though the southern part of the region designated had been previously traversed by companies of dragoons, very little was known of the geography of northwest Iowa. The captain was instructed to report upon the physical features of the country, the prospects of settlement, fertility of the soil, and particularly on evidences of recent floods. As a basis for his report he kept a daily journal of the march, full of exploring adventures and geographical information.

For three or four miles the dragoons followed the trail of the Oregon emigrants up the Raccoon River. The covered wagons of Iowa settlers who had caught the Oregon fever in 1843 had cut a clear trace in the sod as they crossed the Sauk and Fox country to Council Bluffs. Presently the dragoons swung northward away from the Raccoon. The supply wagons lumbered along through the high grass on the trail made by the

mounted troopers. The weather was fair and the soldiers were happy to get away from the routine of garrison life. Early in the afternoon the company crossed Beaver Creek and camped in the timber about eight miles from the fort.

The dragoons were up early on the following morning, but the oxen had strayed during the night and so the march was delayed until ten o'clock. A hard rain in the night had softened the prairie. Though the company followed the divide between the Des Moines River and Beaver Creek, the heavy wagons often stuck in the mud, particularly those drawn by the sluggish oxen. Nevertheless, the explorers marched sixteen miles before making camp at five o'clock on a wooded ravine near the Des Moines.

On the next three days the dragoons were on the march by seven in the morning and averaged about seventeen miles a day. Their route continued up the west side of the Des Moines River, skirting the timber and deep ravines. Captain Allen observed many "good springs". The weather was "fine". One day they found a bee tree full of honey. As they approached the Neutral Ground they saw many signs of wild game. On August 16th a drove of a hundred elk was sighted at a distance. That day they crossed Lizard Creek "after going much out of the way

to get down to it" because the country in that vicinity (Fort Dodge) was very rough.

Saturday, August 17th, was spent in camp near the mouth of Lizard Creek "to allow the men to wash, and the teams to rest." Apparently they did some hunting too, for an elk, two deer, and several coons, squirrels, and waterfowls were shot. Lizard Creek "is a pretty little branch of the Des Moines," wrote Captain Allen, "clear, crooked and many ripples; when we crossed it yesterday near its mouth, it was 20 feet broad, 10 inches deep, with current of four miles per hour". Its valley, "which is narrow and deep, is skirted with timber enough to support farms along each side of it."

Captain Allen, who had explored the upper reaches of the Mississippi in 1832 and later served at frontier posts in Kansas and Oklahoma, was pleased with the Des Moines Valley below the fork. This "beautiful river", he said, was bordered by "elevated rich prairie, broken by points of timber". The valley "often expands to make bottoms, sometimes prairie and sometimes timber, of one, two, and three miles in breadth, and always of the richest quality of soil."

With regard to the "extraordinary floods" of the early summer, upon which he was requested to report his observations, Captain Allen had

neither the time nor means "for making the nice observations necessary to a close investigation of this matter," but he found evidences of overflow in the timbered bottoms which left alluvial deposits at the rate of about one-half inch to three feet of flood water. The Des Moines seemed to have risen in proportion to its breadth all the way to its source. At Fort Des Moines it was thirteen and a half feet above common stage in 1844, at Iron Banks on the west branch a hundred miles above the Raccoon it had risen to ten and a half feet, and a hundred miles farther up the high water reached a seven-foot stage. Inasmuch as the Des Moines had few tributaries above the Raccoon and drained a flat, marshy country above the fork, Captain Allen predicted that it might "never rise in height like some other streams of lesser magnitude."

After a day of rest, the march was resumed on Sunday, August 18th. It had rained hard in the night and the prairie was very soft. "We had to double teams, and also apply the men to draw the wagons through the slues, and these were numerous", wrote Captain Allen in his journal. The company moved out away from the timber and so did not find a suitable place to camp until nine at night. This was a deep ravine leading to the Des Moines, "the mouth of which is called 'Delaware

battleground,' a place where a party of some 20 Delawares were all killed by the Sioux three years since."

Six horses were missing in the morning and not recovered until nine o'clock. After the expedition got under way a wagon tongue broke which caused further delay. Nevertheless, they soon came to the west fork of the Des Moines at the Iron Banks, where they "crossed without trouble at a rapid ford, on a bottom of lime rock and primitive boulders". The place was named for a "limestone ledge of 20 feet height, on the east bank, in their horizontal strata, and much mixed and colored with oxides of iron." Above this point, "the prairie seemed to change its character, becoming rolling and dry, and much mixed with sand and limestone pebbles".

Marching up the left side of the west branch of the Des Moines, "as close to the river as the slopes and ravines would permit," the dragoons soon reached the level swampy prairies of Palo Alto and Emmet counties. Progress was "slow and difficult". In four days the expedition traveled only about twenty miles. The ground was so wet "and the slues so numerous" that the route was very crooked.

August 21st was a hard day. The wagons, "being yet heavily loaded, cut deep into the wet

ground, and stuck fast in every mire till pulled out by the main strength of the command; the men were all the time muddy and wet, and more fatigued than on any previous day". About five in the afternoon, while they were fast in a mudhole, "there came a tremendous storm from the north, with torrents of rain; and night and pitch darkness, with rain, thunder, and cold," found the expedition three or four miles from timber. With no firm ground around them and unable to go farther, they spent a miserable night, "without fire, shelter, or food."

All the next day was consumed in going six miles. The weary men were glad to camp at sunset "on a pretty little lake 4 miles long and 300 or 400 yards broad, having a rich looking little island near the centre." This must have been Medium Lake at Emmetsburg. There the expedition rested two days, while a party was sent back about eight miles for the ox team which could not get through the slues. About this time, Jones, a civilian employed as a guide, resigned. He had never been so far north, "and never heard of such a country as we are now in", wrote Captain Allen.

Bright and early on Sunday morning the march was resumed. Presently they came to a prairie stream "100 yards broad and swimming deep". Everything had to be ferried across "in the pon-

toon wagon bed," which occupied the whole day. About dark camp was made on "a large irregular grassy lake that seemed to belong to a chain or series of small lakes". All day Monday was spent "in fruitless search of a way" through "these interminable lakes". At last the officers determined to cross a strait between two of them, probably Swan Lake in Emmet County. "The grass in this country is tall and luxuriant", observed Captain Allen, but then added in exasperation, "the whole country is good for nothing, except for the seclusion and safety it affords the numerous water fowl that are hatched and grown in it."

The expedition crossed the parallel of  $43^{\circ} 30'$  (which became the northern boundary of Iowa two years later) on August 28th. The land was less swampy and the timber sparser. Lieutenant Calhoun and the guide, reconnoitering eastward, found a beautiful large lake with "bright pebbled shores, and well-timbered borders", which they thought was the source of the Blue Earth River. It was probably Turtle Lake, now regarded as the source of the east branch of the Des Moines River. The explorers may have been misled by Nicollet's map which was not accurate in all details.

Meanwhile, Lieutenant Potter explored the west branch of the Des Moines several miles to the west. He found the stream "a reddish muddy



color, 30 feet broad, 2 feet deep, with a current of three miles per hour". The prairie in this vicinity was high and rolling. The dry ground made travel easier and the dragoons marched about twenty miles a day. By the end of August the company camped on a small lake while Captain Allen spent an afternoon riding over the prairie to determine whither to proceed. He decided to leave Lieutenant Noble and half the company encamped near a large irregular lake surrounded by a forest of white oaks. Upon investigation he concluded that this lake, which was not shown on Nicollet's map and which he named Lake of the Oaks (now Shetek Lake), was the headwaters of the "longest and most northerly branch of the Des Moines".

With the other officers, twenty-five dragoons, and a wagon carrying provisions for a week, Captain Allen circled to the north and east "to extend the examination of the country." He marched northward with his detachment for about thirty-seven miles over "a miserable country, full of swamps, and no timber except sparse little groves on the borders of brooks and lakes." Then he turned east and, toward the end of the afternoon, September 4th, came to the Minnesota River, probably near the mouth of the Yellow Medicine River. Apparently Captain Allen realized that he was many miles northwest of the Blue Earth

valley, which he had supposed he was exploring, and so, after following the Minnesota a few miles downstream, he marched back to Lake Shetek.

Although a few traces of hunting parties were observed on the prairie, no Indians were encountered. Captain Allen thought the country was "too poor, bleak, and broken to attract white men much," but "wild enough for an Indian" and "remote enough for all large game." He was tired of eating elk meat: "it has a coarse fibre, is unlike the deer, and I think a mule would taste about as well."

For two days the dragoons rested beside the "pretty and singular" Lake of the Oaks. Further exploration convinced Allen that it was the true source of the Des Moines River. On the morning of September 9th the dragoons marched west "in search of the Big Sioux river." They were soon on the level divide between the tributaries of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. Signs of buffalo appeared, and on the following day three "rather lean" bulls were shot. "Lieutenant Potter killed the first one in full chase by the first shot of his pistol." That night, on the east bank of the Big Sioux River, the soldiers feasted on buffalo steak. In the morning the dragoons awoke from dreams of exciting buffalo hunts to find the grass white with the first frost of the season.

A few miles down the Big Sioux the explorers "came upon two lodges" of Sioux Indians. Three warriors galloped forward in alarm, but were pleased to find the soldiers had come "on a mission of friendship". The principal man hoisted a little American flag over his teepee. But the next morning twelve of the best horses and mules were missing. It was very unusual for the horses to stray at night, particularly so far from home. Captain Allen suspected that the Indians had sneaked up in the high grass, loosened the pickets, and driven away the animals. Searching parties were sent out in all directions and five horses and three mules were recovered. But the other four were never found. One horse belonged to Lieutenant Potter, another to Dr. Griffin, and the other horse and mule were government property.

"The Sioux", observed Captain Allen, "are great rascals, and capable of all kinds of theft." The trading post, which the Indians had described as being three day's distance down the river, did not exist, which prompted the Captain to remark that the Sioux were reputed to be "prouder of, and more habituated to, lying than truth-telling, and here is pretty good evidence in support of the charge."

On September 13th the expedition came to the "great and picturesque" Sioux Falls in a large S-

shaped bend of the river. The water flowing over a "massive quartz" formation fell about a hundred feet in a distance of less than a quarter of a mile. There were "several perpendicular falls — one 20, one 18, and one 10 feet." The rock bordering the stream was "split, broken, and piled up in the most irregular and fantastic shapes," and presented "deep and frightful chasms, extending from the stream in all directions."

It was rough country over which the dragoons traveled on their marches down the valley of the Big Sioux. The bluffs were high along the river and the ravines precipitous, causing the expedition to move far inland from the river and follow a very crooked line of march. Progress was slowed to ten or sixteen miles a day. Occasionally the troops filed down a narrow brook valley to the river which was larger than the Des Moines below the Raccoon. But it was impossible to find a passage along the bank because the steep hills came down to the edge of the water at the bends. Driven inland on the higher land, "broken almost every mile by deep ravines, that, from the heights, look like great chasms in the earth", the weary dragoons "had all sorts of trouble, upset one wagon twice, killed one mule, and broke another wagon square off at the hounds."

After a day of such experiences the "romance

of marching through a wilderness country", remarked Captain Allen, "is much abated." Nevertheless, he was interested in the broad open plains across the river and would have explored farther west if it had not been so late in the season. "But my horses are much worn," he admitted reluctantly, "and the grass and prairie are killed by the frost, and it is incumbent to hurry home."

While the expedition remained in camp on September 20th, Captain Allen and three officers set out to find the mouth of the Big Sioux. They "encountered bluffs, ravines, vine, valleys, tall grass, and swamp, and plum-bush, and willow thickets, worse than anything" they had seen. Rain most of the day contributed to the general discomfort. After working their way over the hills and through the brush for about seven miles, the explorers came to the top of a bluff overlooking the confluence of the Big Sioux and the muddy Missouri. "Both, at their junction, wash the base of a steep bluff, some 500 feet high, and the great river then pursues its general course to the southward and eastward." With evident relief, Captain Allen wrote in his journal, "I have learned all I can, now, of the river which we have followed down to its mouth. To-morrow I shall march for home by the nearest route I can find."

All day Saturday, September 21st, was spent

“at hard labor in making ten miles out from the river over these terrible hills”. Two small streams had to be bridged. During the next day, however, the going was easier. Floyd River was “a very pretty, clear stream”, slightly skirted with timber, but the west fork of the Little Sioux was deep and sluggish. A practicable ford was hard to find. Wood for the cook-fires had to be carried, for there was none on the prairie.

It was nearly noon on September 24th when the troopers reached the Little Sioux somewhere near the northeast corner of Woodbury County. It was a clear stream, as large as the Raccoon at its mouth, and bordered by narrow groves of cottonwood, walnut, and oak. Even after preparing the banks for crossing, some of the weak horses had to be helped out of the mud. By sunset, however, the expedition was safely on the east side, camped at the site of a former Indian encampment supposed to have been used by the Potawatomi on a hunting trip in July.

The nights were growing colder and there was little wood for fires. While the prairies were easily traversed, the steep, muddy banks of the streams caused long delays in crossing. Twelve, fifteen, and twenty miles a day was the best that the tired horses and men could do. They crossed the divide into the Des Moines Valley on Septem-

ber 26th and changed their course to the south.

Beyond the Raccoon River in the northern part of Calhoun County the dragoons found the "country full of marshes and old shallow grass, like that of the Upper Des Moines." Though they camped one night near an "island of timber", they could not reach it on account of the "ugly marsh that surrounded it." The whole forenoon of Saturday, September 28th, was spent in traveling "ten miles to make four" on their course. Four-fifths of the land was swampy, "which turned us to all points of the compass." Finally they reached a small lake and, "after much winding around the peninsulas", found an Indian trail that led south to better ground.

Jaded though they were, the troopers did not halt to rest on Sunday. Instead, anxious to get home, they marched twenty miles over hilly country and came to the Raccoon River on the east side below the mouth of Cedar Creek in Greene County. The next morning, however, both horses and men were too tired to make an early start. "The grass has been so much deadened by the many frosts," explained Captain Allen, "that it no longer gives the horses a good subsistence; the horses and mules have failed wonderfully since we left the Little Sioux, though we have walked (on foot) most of the way."

Captain Allen was as weary as the rest of the company. The notes in his journal dwindled day by day as he plodded down the Raccoon Valley. If he observed the details of timber, streams, and other geographical features, he did not bother to record them. Perhaps he was on familiar ground as he marched along the dry ridge between the Raccoon River and Beaver Creek and felt no need for describing the country. One day Sergeant Williams enlivened the march by chasing a fine bear over the prairie and shooting "him dead on first fire with his carbine from his horse at a gallop."

At one o'clock on October 3rd the travel-worn expedition returned to Fort Des Moines. Uniforms were dirty and ragged, wagons falling apart, equipment lost and broken, horses famished, and men glad to resume garrison duty. They had marched 740 miles in fifty-four days over uninhabited and difficult country.

Captain Allen must have been very busy at Fort Des Moines that fall, for it was January 4, 1845, when he sent his report of the expedition to Colonel Stephen W. Kearny at St. Louis. As he read his journal and recalled his experiences on the long march, he concluded that northwest Iowa was not much good. The marshy land in the lake region gave "the greatest embarrassment to the



traveller" even if he had a raft or a pontoon wagon. For seventy or eighty miles below the source of the Des Moines River there was "not enough timber to supply a single row of farms along its border." While there were "many hundred acres of excellent timber" in the vicinity of the Lake of the Oaks, "the country all around it is high and bleak, and looks so inhospitable that it will be many years before any settlement can be led to it."

The "great buffalo range" in the Big Sioux Valley pleased him. "Surely, of all this upper country," he wrote, "these animals could not have selected any more rich, luxuriant, and beautiful for their summer feeding." The surface of the land between the Minnesota and Big Sioux rivers was "well adapted to the operations of cavalry", he thought, but the "ugly hills" between Sioux Falls and Sioux City were too formidable for ordinary travel. There was not enough timber along the Big Sioux "to authorize a full settlement of the valley". In contrast, the Raccoon Valley, a hundred miles long, was "clothed with the richest of timber." This river, in the opinion of Captain Allen, was "one of the most beautiful in the territory," and would "soon induce settlement and cultivation of its borders along its whole length."

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