

An Iowa Anecdote

HIGH WATER IN CANAAN

Some of the earliest pre-survey maps of the State of Iowa show an astonishing extent of swamp and lake areas. Much of what is now the most arable and fertile farm land was then apparently under water. In some cases this was actually true, while in others it only seemed to be so.

It must be remembered that many of these maps were only sketches drawn according to verbal descriptions of traders and trappers or from the observations of troops of dragoons making their occasional journeys overland, hither and yon, across the trackless prairies. These marches often began in the spring or early summer before the flood waters from the melting snow and frequent spring rains had settled into the ground. Such seasonal conditions gave the dragoons an erroneous impression.

It is a notable fact that many of the first settlers located along the rivers on lands which are now considered the poorest and most unproductive. At least three factors entered into this seeming anomaly — transportation, timber, and lack of adequate drainage upon the high prairies. All

this, however, has long been changed, so that it is difficult for younger students of Iowa history to realize why it is true that what we now consider our very best lands were frequently the last to be "taken up" for settlement.

Canaan Township, in northeast Henry County, with soil of the greatest fertility and almost 97 per cent arable, is considered to be one of the most perfect townships of farm land in the entire United States, yet much of it remained idle and unoccupied until long after other parts of the county had been fully developed. Each year, in the spring, due to its extreme flatness and imperfect drainage, Canaan appeared on the prairie as an immense, unbroken sheet of water, often stretching for miles, as far as the eye could reach, giving the semblance of a vast lake.

The water stood at varying depths, filling the low places in the gently undulating glacial ground moraine. Having no adequate outlet, the water remained, sometimes until late in June, when it soaked away into the ground or evaporated under the strengthening rays of the advancing sun. This condition often prevailed for months at a time. Sometimes it was midsummer before the poor roads then existing became at all passable.

Under these circumstances, it is little wonder that settlement was delayed. Such early Terri-

torial roads as were projected diagonally across the township toward Iowa City failed to materialize, being abandoned in favor of the less direct routes which were dryer, skirting the edge of the hill country through New London and Mount Pleasant. To travel such roads as did exist, during the wet season in the spring of the year, was often hazardous, and a journey to town or away from home was made only when emergency demanded.

Those who did travel frequently went on horseback, often swimming the swollen streams and wading across the low places. Farmers who had a new Turney wagon box were lucky indeed, for it is said that these wagon boxes were so well made that on more than one occasion, when the water got beyond the depth of the wagon, they floated off the running gear and were used as boats in the emergency. At least once such a conversion was credited with having saved the lives of some members of a family who were thus caught in the high water.

As serious as these situations sometimes were, pioneer joviality usually prevailed, capable of making the most of amusing incidents. One morning, when the water was unusually high, Jesse Mathews went by Mike Mulligan's place at the southwest corner of section fourteen, some seven

miles almost due north of New London. He was riding on horseback. Seeing Mulligan through an open window in the house, apparently unable to get out into the yard, he called to him, "Is your cellar full of water, Mike?"

In a droll voice, Mulligan yelled back, "It would be if it wa'n't for running out of the windows."

That evening upon returning home, Mathews saw Mulligan outside in the yard, groping around in the water with a long pole. He seemed to be very cautiously probing every step ahead of him.

"What are you doing?" asked Mathews.

Mulligan, without looking up, replied in a loud voice, "I'm lookin' for the well, by gad."

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