

THE PALIMPSEST

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The First Iowa Thanksgiving

The population of the Territory of Iowa soared from 22,859 in 1838 to 75,152 in 1844. A steady flow of immigrants from the more populous eastern States had streamed across the Mississippi — upwards of two hundred German families from Hamilton County, Ohio, settling at present-day Guttenberg for the purpose of cultivating grapes. Although the Rock River country in Illinois had been heralded as the “most salubrious district in the west” the Dubuque *Transcript* noted a large cavalcade of Rock River farmers crossing the Mississippi in order to enjoy the “still greater salubrity” of northern Iowa. Before the year 1844 closed a State constitution had been adopted at Iowa City and the six-year-old Territory was rapping at the doors of Congress for admission into the Union.

At the end of the harvest season a century ago, the pioneers of Iowa realized that they had much to be thankful for. Recognizing the general atti-

tude, Governor John Chambers drafted a suitable manifesto at his "Executive Office" in Burlington. Duly countersigned by S. J. Burr, Secretary of the Territory, the first official Thanksgiving holiday in Iowa was proclaimed on October 12, 1844.

"At the request of many of my Fellow Citizens," declared the Governor, "I have deemed it proper to recommend that Thursday, the 12th of December next, be observed throughout the Territory, as a day of general Thanksgiving to Almighty God for the many and great blessings we enjoy as a people and individually, and of prayer and supplication for the continuance of His mercy and goodness toward us; and for the prosperity, happiness and ultimate salvation of the American people.

"We are told that, 'righteousness exalteth a nation,' and are taught by divine authority that the voice of thanksgiving and prayer is acceptable to our Father in Heaven. Let us then, on the day designated, unite our voices, in the humble hope that they will reach the Throne of Grace and obtain for us a continuation and increase of blessings."

The appearance of this Thanksgiving proclamation two years before Iowa achieved Statehood is both noteworthy and significant. It is significant because it revealed the religious bent of the

Iowa pioneers as well as the New England origin of a considerable portion of the population. It is noteworthy because Thanksgiving was not a national holiday in 1844, nor was there any uniformity in the date of its observance among the few States that celebrated it. Washington had designated Thursday, November 26, 1789, as a day of thanksgiving for the successful launching of the new government, but he failed to follow this precedent. John Adams had proclaimed May 9, 1798, as a day of prayer and thanksgiving for the improvement of relations with France, and James Madison urged his countrymen to recognize January 12, 1815, as a day of prayer and thanksgiving for the speedy conclusion of the war. Aside from these instances, however, no other President had issued a thanksgiving proclamation.

But forces were at work throughout the United States to revive the old New England festival and make its observance nation-wide in scope. The leader in this crusade was Mrs. Sarah J. Hale, literary editor of *Godey's Lady's Book*, who editorialized on the subject and urged Governors to issue proclamations for the uniform observance of Thanksgiving on the last Thursday in November. It is not known whether Governor Chambers heard directly from Mrs. Hale or from some of her friends. The fact that many Iowans had im-

portuned the Governor, coupled with the presence of a half-column advertisement of *Godey's Lady's Book* in the *Iowa City Standard*, suggests that her influence was felt beyond the Mississippi.

Only a few newspapers were published in the Territory of Iowa in 1844. Several of these were curtailed because of inadequate paper supplies during the last two months of 1844. The heated presidential campaign of 1844 and the constitutional convention in October filled columns which ordinarily might have contained news about Thanksgiving. Only a few newspaper reactions to the proclamation have been found, but most editors probably agreed with these. The *Davenport Gazette* of November 21, 1844, believed that "former residents of New England" would rejoice to learn that Governor Chambers had introduced the "time-honored custom" west of the Mississippi. "May it long prevail with due observance", the *Gazette* concluded. The *Iowa City Standard* of November 28, 1844, declared: "We believe this is the first Thanksgiving Proclamation ever issued in Iowa; we are glad to welcome the good old Pilgrim custom to our midst, and trust when the day comes around with its plentiful cheer, none will omit to send up to the Almighty Giver a tribute of praise."

Burlington celebrated Thanksgiving in a man-

ner befitting the most populous city in the Territory. Most of the stores and commercial houses were closed and a "partial suspension" of business was generally observed. "During the day," declared the *Territorial Gazette*, "there was an appropriate celebration by the Sunday School scholars, under the management of their teachers; and in the evening the whole town assembled at the Methodist Episcopal Church, to listen to a most delightful entertainment of vocal and instrumental music, and an admirable lecture on music as a science." The music was presented by Mr. Robbins assisted by several "amateur" Burlington musicians who were studying under him. That better music had seldom been heard was manifested by the "frequent and loud plaudits" of the "discriminating audience" that had gathered to hear the "distinguished performers". During the evening, Mr. Shackford presented his "well written, well arranged and highly chaste" address on the subject of music.

Not all Burlingtonians, apparently, spent their time in this manner, for the Burlington *Hawk-Eye* noted that some engaged in "shooting deer and prairie chickens on the bottoms" after which they "wound up" Thanksgiving by attending the ball at the City Hotel in the evening. The Davenport *Gazette*, which had expected appropriate church

services, was shocked at such lack of good taste in Burlington. "We certainly misunderstood the intention of this day," the *Gazette* chided the fun-loving citizens of Des Moines County.

Though the fragmentary newspaper files do not indicate how widespread Thanksgiving was observed, a study of the columns of the press during 1844 reveals there was much for which the Iowa pioneers could offer thanks. The growing population produced higher land values and richer social opportunities. The settlers had been spared from plagues and pestilence. The great flood of 1844 had caused little damage in Iowa compared with the havoc wrought in Missouri and Illinois. The earthquake that shook the Ohio and lower Mississippi Valley was not felt in Iowa.

Press and pulpit alike could render thanks for the rapid spread of schools and academies throughout eastern Iowa in 1844. Churches of all denominations had gained many adherents. Iowa City was described as the "most virtuous, religious and pious" town in the west with five well-organized choirs capable of making "harmony and sweet sounds" according to the most modern rules of music. Preachers and editors could also be thankful for their success in directing the temperance movement. Steamboats were bringing prosperity to all Mississippi River towns while

smaller steam craft were navigating the Des Moines, the Cedar, and the Iowa in 1844. Stagecoach and mail connections in the Territory were improving and the dreary monotony of frontier life was gradually being dispelled. The lyceum, the circus, and groups of traveling players and minstrels were doing their part to brighten recreational facilities.

Since most of the pioneers were engaged in agriculture the unprecedented fertility of Iowa farms naturally evoked heart-felt thanksgiving. The Dubuque *Transcript* likened the "magnificent farm sites" of the "Makoketa" Valley to the Garden of Eden and declared that farms once established there ought never to be sold. Cultivators of the "sterile hills" of New England were urged to settle in the beautiful Iowa River Valley west of Johnson County where they could have "square fields without roots, stumps, or other impediments to interrupt the course of the plough or the growth of vegetation." A writer in the Iowa City *Capital Reporter* described Mahaska County as "one of the best districts" in the Mississippi Valley with unsurpassed soil and inexhaustible beds of stone and coal. Of Iowa in 1844 John B. Newhall wrote: "In all my travels in Europe, both in France and England, I have been forcibly struck with the superiority of our country, as a well wa-

tered region, either as regards navigation, manufacturing or grazing."

The farms were producing bumper crops of corn, oats, wheat, and hay in 1844. The editor of the *Davenport Gazette* rejoiced that sweet potatoes flourished in Scott County, noting that David Morgan had made \$45 from a small crop of thirty bushels. Fruits were also successfully cultivated in 1844. Many farmers around Davenport had picked from twenty to forty bushels of peaches from their trees and hoped to treble the quantity in 1845. Wagon loads of delicious peaches were brought into Bloomington [Muscatine] at prices which even a printer could pay. The *Burlington Territorial Gazette* found the markets of that city "abundantly supplied" with fine peaches which had been grown in Des Moines and adjoining counties. In addition to experiments with legumes, grains, fruits, and vegetables, Iowa farmers were bringing in flocks of sheep from Ohio. According to the *Davenport Gazette*: "The production of a staple so profitable as that of wool will form a new era in the wealth of our Territory."

The enthusiasm of Iowa editors may well be pardoned when they expressed astonishment over the truly amazing harvest of 1844. "Who can Beat us?" challenged the *Capital Reporter* of October 19th, after viewing the "mammoth produc-

tions" of Johnson County in C. C. Morgan's grocery store in Iowa City. "Among other vegetables," the editor noted, "was a South American Squash, raised by Messrs. Miller and Bowman of 'Squash Bend' weighing 141 pounds, — a Radish raised by D. A. Abrahams, measuring 32 inches in circumference, and weighing about as much as we could lift. We also found a *Beet* which we think hard to *beat*, weighing 15½ lbs. and measuring over three feet in circumference. It was from the garden of Dr. Ballard of this city." Lest the weight of the "South American Squash" should be doubted, it might be noted that the rival *Iowa Standard* verified the weight of this 141-pound "pumpkin" and added that it measured six feet and one inch in circumference! This same editor also called attention to a four-pound carrot measuring sixteen inches in circumference which was left at the office by J. H. Frost of Johnson County.

Iowans could well observe the harvest festival a century ago. Not only could they give thanks for tables heavily laden with beef, pork, and domestic fowl of all kinds but they could also rejoice over the plentiful supply of wild game found everywhere in Iowa. Deer were on the prairie and along the wooded streams. The large number of black bears killed was the subject of con-

tinual comment in the press. On one occasion a fifty-year-old farmer living eighteen miles from Muscatine encountered a "pretty sizeable" young bear in a grove on his farm in the Wapsinonoc Valley. With the aid of his trusty dog and a pocket-knife he attacked the animal and succeeded in killing him in a few minutes!

The streams of Iowa abounded with fish of all kinds and sizes. "Captain" McClellan pulled them out of the Turkey River faster than a bystander could take them off the hook. A large fish in swift pursuit of a smaller fish ran aground on a sandbar in the Cedar River just as the ferry was crossing. The ferryman leaped overboard, stunned the 102-pound pike with a pole, and hauled the huge fish into his boat.

Prairie chickens, quail, pigeons, and ducks were brought into Davenport "by the load" every fair day in the fall of 1844. The *Bloomington Herald* of October 11th declared that when hunters became lazy whole "flocks of quail" came to town inviting massacre. As they fell by the scores from housetops and lumber piles, visions of well-broiled quail overcame all feelings of sympathy.

A Christian people surfeited with all the produce of so fair a land could not fail to respond to the first Thanksgiving Proclamation. The *Davenport Gazette* of December 12, 1844, assumed that

“religious exercises, appropriate to the day” would be “observed in most of the churches”. Church bells, which were already common, called the people to worship. It was said that the large bell of the Presbyterian Church in Iowa City could be heard a distance of ten or twelve miles. In many a community between Lee County and the Turkey River Valley, the Iowa pioneers gathered from far and near on December 12, 1844, to give thanks to their God as did the Pilgrims of old.

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