

THE PALIMPSEST

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Prospecting for a New Home

Steady, contented Easterners envisioned Iowa in the fifties — insofar as they gave the subject a transient thought — as a lonely sea of grass peopled with savage Indians swooping down upon the luckless settlers. The best means of escape, according to a prevalent idea, was to hide in a hollow log. It was always with misgiving, especially on the part of the women and children, that venturesome people left their homes and friendly neighborhoods back East and set out to win a new abode in the “Land of the Unhidden Sky” west of the Mississippi. Laura Cooper Treat, who came from Pennsylvania to Webster City when she was twelve years old, relates with what trepidation she and her mother embarked down the Ohio River in 1857. She had been told that the wind blew over the vast prairies of Iowa so hard that people had to lie down and clutch the tall grass to keep from being blown away. As for the

Indians, she made up her mind that three hollow logs should lie in their yard — one for each member of the family.

In view of the common misapprehension of conditions in Iowa — ideas which prevailed long after the fifties — it is interesting to learn the actual experiences and observations of those who visited the State during the decade before the Civil War. George Shipp, a resident of Rowsburg, Ohio, came to Iowa in the summer of 1856 and again the following winter. The first trip was made by way of the Great Lakes to Chicago and thence by rail to Davenport, but in the winter he came overland to Dubuque on "the cars" and by stage.

According to Mr. Shipp's little black wallet diary, he left Rowsburg at eight o'clock in the morning of July 10th and arrived in Chicago on the 22nd. He noticed a great change in that city since his last visit. The streets were being raised from three to four feet and building was "progressing rapidly". Though business appeared to be dull, the streets were "very much thronged". At nine o'clock he took the train for Rock Island and, although the track was "very rough", they made good time for about two hours. Then suddenly the engine ran off the track. Fortunately no one was injured, but the accident caused a delay of about six hours. The passengers were "very impatient" and did a good deal of "scolding, whining and complaining". The wreck occurred near a house to which many "re-

paired to obtain refreshments and with the assistance of a keen appetite" they "partook heavily of bread, butter, dutch cheese and honey" which Mr. Shipp "enjoyed very much indeed." The train ran off the track again near the Rock Island depot.

At Davenport he sold some wool from some sheep that he owned "near this city". Iowa wool, which did not have "that white soft appearance as in Ohio", was selling at from twenty-five to thirty-five cents a pound. After waiting a day for a boat he paid a dollar and a half fare one "dreary morning" and proceeded to Muscatine by rail. There he was especially interested in watching a machine make barrel staves from large logs. But he remained in Muscatine only a few days and the evening of August 1st found him in Iowa City, the capital of the State. He stopped at the Crummy hotel which had been "highly recommended", but was in his opinion "a miserable place — hard supper and harder bed."

The next morning he left Iowa City at three A. M. "jammed into a small coach with nine passengers", and rode fifteen miles "over a rough road through occasional groves of scrubby timber" before breakfasting upon a "passable nice fowl" at the home of Mr. Alers. Washington appeared to be a "rather pleasant place of twelve hundred inhabitants". There were thirteen stores, a steam flouring mill, and five churches there. Corn was selling for twenty cents a bushel, oats twenty cents, and wheat seventy

cents. Fairfield, where Mr. Shipp probably spent the night, was also described as "rather a pleasant village of 2000 inhabitants." The next day he arrived at Oskaloosa, "a beautiful village of 2500 inhabitants situated in a fine prairie."

It was a full day's ride by stage from Oskaloosa to Des Moines through a fine country with "beautiful rolling prairie farms well improved". On the divide between the Skunk and Des Moines rivers land was selling from five to thirty dollars an acre, at Pella eighteen, at Monroe twelve, at Keiths eighteen, and at Fort Des Moines fourteen.

Mr. Shipp spent a day in Des Moines. He visited the site of the new "State capitol Buildings" on "a beautiful elevation" east of the river where the temporary capitol was in the process of erection. A college was also being built on the west side about a hundred and twenty rods from the river upon "an eminence commanding a beautiful view of the city".

From Des Moines he turned north and arrived in Webster City "by team from Homer" on the evening of August 7th. Eventually he made Webster City his home, but there is only the slightest hint of that in his diary. The village of "some three hundred inhabitants" was "beautifully located upon a high rolling prairie on the western bank of the Boone river almost surrounded by a beautiful grove of timber". "I have seen no village so far west of the Mississippi that appears to be in so thriving a condition", he wrote. "The inhabitants are princi-

pally Eastern men of enterprise and intelligence." Having spent the greater part of a day walking about town and observing the improvements that were being made, he concluded that it was a poor place for a loafer, as everybody appeared to have employment and laboring men were in great demand. From "occasional reports of the fowling pieces" on Sunday he suspected that all in that vicinity were not church-going people.

After two days in Webster City, where he feasted at Mr. Moon's "somewhat aristocratic" backwoods hotel, Mr. Shipp drove over "a fine rolling prairie skirted by timber" to Eldora. Through Vinton, then to Marion, and thence to Delhi he travelled rapidly. Linn County impressed him as "the best improved" county he had seen and it certainly contained "much the best timber".

Although Delhi was "a miserable place"—"the most unsitely place for a town" he had seen in the State—Mr. Shipp tarried there Saturday and Sunday. The surrounding country was "excellent and well improved", a fine flouring mill was in the process of construction, and stores were "abundant", but he did not like the town. The sand was from four to eight inches deep in the streets.

From Delhi to Colesburg the road lay through a well watered district with plenty of timber, but from Colesburg the stage passed over the roughest country Mr. Shipp had seen in Iowa and all the way through timber, which was "quite a curiosity".

Land could be bought in Clayton County for ten to twenty-five dollars an acre depending on the improvements and the amount of timber. A mill at Elkader with three run of stone burrs was turning out a hundred and fifty barrels of flour per day.

On August 19th the traveller arrived in West Union and for several days thereafter he busied himself "prospecting in W. Union" and the surrounding country which he found "very bluffy". He noticed "quite a change" since his former visit and, judging by the rapid progress in improvements, he thought the town was "destined to be a point of some interest". It contained three churches, a school-house, six or eight stores, and any number of groceries "minus the black warrior — a doggerly that fizzled a few days since. The proprietor was arrested and fined one hundred dollars for selling liquor."

Two flouring mills at Auburn were paying seventy-five cents or thirty-three pounds of flour per bushel for wheat. Most of the buildings in Clermont, a thriving village of about three hundred inhabitants, were of brick. A fine brick mill four stories high contained three pair of burrs. McGregor was "a miserable, cooped up place in a ravine running up from the river, not wide enough for one row of buildings and a street". Nevertheless it was a town "of some trade". After a very brief sojourn in McGregor, Mr. Shipp took passage on the packet *Excelsior* for Dubuque where he changed to the

steamer *Royal Arch* bound for Clinton. On August 30th he left for home.

Another trip to Iowa was begun on January 8, 1857. In striking contrast to the jottings on his summer excursion, the diary of the winter journey is filled with comments about the weather. It was extremely cold much of the way to Dubuque where he arrived on January 19th. The temperature was still "freezing cold" on the twenty-second when he left for West Union. While in Dubuque he "called on Messrs Robinsons and Mr. Allison".

For three weeks Mr. Shipp remained in West Union. His diary affords no clue as to his activities, except that he watched the thermometer very closely, went to church regularly on Sunday, attended the funeral of a woman who "dropped dead instantly while conversing with a friend", took a few cutter rides into the country, got caught in a snow storm, and nursed a cold for nearly a week afterward. On Friday, February 13th, he started for Delhi in a sleigh and spent that night in Forestville, "the meanest dirtiest place" he had ever seen. Rain "commenced to fall in the night" and continued all of the next forenoon with heavy thunder and lightning. Nevertheless he drove on through Burrington to Delhi, and from there to Dubuque on the fifteenth. The snow was melting rapidly and the bare ground could be seen for the first time since the previous November.

On February 17th Mr. Shipp set out on a trip

through Cascade, Anamosa, Marion, and Iowa City to Atalissa. At Marion he called to see an acquaintance who lived "comfortably in a good brick building" and whose wife he found "rather pleasant". He reached Iowa City "just in time to miss the cars" and so spent the night at the Trusdell House, "rather a nice place", fare a dollar and a half per day. A number of the members of the constitutional convention were boarding there. The streets in Iowa City were muddy and business was dull. After staying a few days with friends near Atalissa he returned to Ohio, apparently having found travel too difficult at that season of the year.

Again toward the end of May, 1857, he set out for the West by way of Columbus, Cincinnati, and the Ohio River. Perhaps it was then that he came to live permanently in Webster City, the prosperous town that had so taken his fancy the previous summer. For more than forty years he contributed his thrifty and wholesome influence to the community, first as a farmer and later as the owner of a general store. And now his great grand children are enjoying the fruits of his foresight and doing their share in the progress of a new day.

BESSIE L. LYON