

The
PALIMPSEST
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THE PURPOSE OF THIS MAGAZINE

The PALIMPSEST, issued monthly by the State Historical Society of Iowa, is devoted to the dissemination of Iowa History. Supplementing the other publications of this Society, it aims to present the materials of Iowa History in a form that is attractive and a style that is popular in the best sense—to the end that the story of our Commonwealth may be more widely read and cherished.

BENJ. F. SHAMBAUGH

Superintendent

THE MEANING OF PALIMPSESTS

In early times palimpsests were parchments or other materials from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete; and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the records of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

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THE PALIMPSEST

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The Passing of Homer

Homer. What a name for a town! It seems to conjure up a vision of a well-ordered city, with close-cropped lawns and beautiful homes, churches overgrown with ivy, a good library, and modern, well-equipped schools.

All of this classical suggestiveness in the name of Homer vanishes, however, in view of the reality: five or six small houses scattered indiscriminately along the road, numerous decayed piles of wreckage that tell the tale of what was once a habitation, two wooden church buildings, and a two-story frame schoolhouse. Yonder are piles of old stones and crumbling foundations which upon closer observation appear to be the remains of two business buildings — stores of by-gone days. At the northern extremity of the town is "the store" of the present — a building of indifferent appearance devoted to the needs of casual country shoppers and the Odd Fellows lodge.

The Homer of to-day is an incarnation of the commonplace, but the ramshackle appearance of the place is in itself indicative of better days. Though at present it is a mere dot upon the surface of Iowa it has had possibilities — possibilities that are gone like “the glory that was Greece” and “the grandeur that was Rome”.

Webster County, embracing the territory formerly included in Yell and Risley counties, was established by the State legislature in January, 1853. It was not until the following fall, however, that Homer, the first county seat, was located and platted near the geographical center of the new county. Early in 1854 David Carroll built the first log house in town. It was said to be about sixteen feet square — large enough to accommodate his family and household goods. Soon afterward Granville Burkley, the first postmaster in the county, built another house, which constituted not only his dwelling, but served as a post office also. It is reported that he kept the mail in a box under his bed, and those who called were free to examine the contents for themselves. By 1856 the population of Homer amounted to approximately six hundred people.

The first postmaster, Granville Burkley, seems to have been a versatile man. He practiced law, taught school, and upon occasion he turned carpenter. It was he who erected the first schoolhouse in Homer, and whether he did not build according to the specifications — as many later contractors for school

buildings have been known to do — or whatever was wrong, the people refused to accept the building and Burkley declared that school should not be held there. No doubt sundry small boys hoped that the key would never be surrendered, but a compromise was reached and the new schoolhouse was used in the winter of 1854 and 1855.

After the General Assembly had created Webster County, an election was ordered to be held on the first Monday in April, 1853. The polls were located at the home of William Pierce, and whether his fellow voters felt so grateful to him for his hospitality or whether he had exceptional judicial capacity, at all events Mr. Pierce became the first county judge.

This election was merely to fill the county offices until the regular general election on August 1, 1853, and the records attest that the judge and treasurer received the salary of \$12.50 each for their four months' service.

The first record of Judge Pierce's official career was the issuance of a marriage license to John J. Holmes and Emily Lyon, on May 14, 1853. Holmes was a doctor over at Fort Dodge, and pretty Emily was a cousin of my father. Could Judge Pierce have foreseen the end of this ill-starred marriage, he might have felt that it was an omen of ill luck for the town. The marriage was a failure, and the fate of Homer was worse than failure — it was a tragedy.

Court was held in the schoolhouse at the new

county seat, and many an interesting session not pertaining to pedagogy must have taken place in the house of learning. As the first county attorney, Granville Burkley probably enjoyed pleading cases in the schoolhouse, the possession of whose keys he had so stoutly defended.

The district judge was C. J. McFarland — a man who evidently had a profound respect for the prerogatives of his office. There is a story current among the old-timers who knew him that one hot summer day he held court outside of the schoolhouse under the shade trees. In the midst of the session, a severe thunder storm came up suddenly, and the court attachés were about to run to shelter when Judge McFarland issued the following mandate: "God Almighty reigns above, and Judge McFarland reigns below. The business of the court will proceed!"

Far back in the early fifties Homer shone as a bright star on the western horizon. It was the best known town in northern Iowa, probably because the land office was located there. Toward this embryo city the people of the eastern States wended their way, by whatever method of locomotion was available.

A story is told of J. W. Silvers and a company of men who were en route from central Illinois to Kansas. The party had traveled as far as Mitchellville. There they stopped to dine and during the course of the meal they were told of the wonderful country to

the northwest up near Homer. The next morning Mr. Silvers and his party changed their course and in a short time reached the Boone River country. "Coming out on the prairie west of the timber we saw a sight never to be forgotten — the land covered with a luxuriant growth of grass, known as 'blue stem'. It grew tall as a man could reach. I said to the boys 'This is good enough for me'. . . . We had our pick of the land, as it all belonged to Uncle Sam, and he only wanted \$1.25 an acre for it."

A pioneer woman of Sac County journeyed with her parents from Pennsylvania, expecting to locate at Homer. An elder brother who had preceded the family had started a store there, and glowing accounts of the prospects of the town made them all anxious to reach the place. Having come as far as Rock Island by rail they were compelled to travel the rest of the way with ox teams. Bad roads and storms impeded their progress. To add to this discouragement they lost their way between Boone and Homer. While they were wondering what they should do, along came a man who advised them to go with him to Sac County. Accordingly they turned away from their original destination and, setting out with their new friend who knew the country, they settled in Sac County. Thus, while Homer was a place of sufficient prominence to attract the eastern settler, immigrants not infrequently stopped by the wayside or were guided elsewhere by circumstance.

The stage ran weekly between Des Moines and

Homer, by way of Boone. With the prairies often soaked by rain and with only trails to follow, staging was difficult and slow. Many a traveler preferred the safe method of walking to doubtful progress by stage. The mail, however, was an important item of the stage driver's load, and though passengers might be obliged to get out and walk, Uncle Sam's mail had to be carried safely across slough and stream. As late as the sixties the stage was the only recognized means of regular travel between Homer and Des Moines.

I have heard my mother relate that during the Civil War one of her cousins, whose husband was an officer in the Union army, came to visit at her home on White Fox Creek, some five miles north of Webster City. When the guest was ready to return, mother said that she and her younger brother took her to Homer in the farm wagon. They started early in the morning, drove over fifteen miles, and arrived long before the time for the stage to depart. Having seen the lady safely started on her journey, they got the mail, and drove home before dark. Only one generation ago a drive of thirty miles with a farm team and lumber wagon was counted a rare privilege!

Homerites were quite content with their populous and flourishing town in 1855. Homesteaders were coming from the East in ever increasing numbers. Fort Dodge, a frontier fort and trading post about twenty miles up the Des Moines River, had been

practically abandoned in 1853. Webster City, then indicated on the map as "Newcastle", was only a tiny settlement about ten miles across country on the Boone River. With Fort Dodge ex officio dead and the few scattered log cabins of Newcastle negligible, the future of Homer seemed assured.

About this time, however, Fort Dodge revived, boosters came, and before the inhabitants of Homer were aware of danger the land office had been removed to Fort Dodge. Many of the progressive citizens of Homer followed. What a furor it caused! From that time Fort Dodge and Homer became deadly rivals.

But even with Fort Dodge booming, well-advertised Homer still attracted settlers. Some, it is said, looked over Des Moines, traveled on, and invested in Homer town lots. About this time the firm of Snell and Butterworth started a wholesale store in Homer, speculated in land, built a mill, sold lots, and such was their wealth, coupled with shrewd business capacity, that they came near owning and conducting the town.

Just when Homer was at the height of its glory, when grand preparations were afoot for a brickyard, a wholesale grocery establishment, and other municipal projects, there came another note of warning from Fort Dodge. It was no less a proposition than to remove the county seat from Homer to Fort Dodge. The people of Homer were amazed at the preposterous notion. Had there been a political

Napoleon in Webster County to swoop down upon the Fort Dodge forces and keep them separated from those of Newcastle, the whole history of that section of the State might have been changed. As it was, Fort Dodge and Newcastle united on the issue and the seat of government was transferred to Fort Dodge. It might be added that in all probability the two towns have never been harmonious since.

Elderly pioneers, who as small boys helped stuff the ballot boxes in the election on the removal of the county seat, assert that there is some truth in the legend concerning a famous wrestling match which formed a sequel to the county seat contest. One version has it that Attorney John D. Maxwell of Homer accused the Fort Dodge faction of corrupt practices in the election. Thereupon John F. Duncombe, prime booster for Fort Dodge and future father-in-law of William S. Kenyon, returned the charge and accepted a challenge to wrestle it out. Maxwell was tall, sinewy, and powerful while Duncombe was skilled in the technique of wrestling. No one remembers the details of the contest but there seems to be no doubt that Duncombe came out on top. He lived to see Fort Dodge become one of the important cities of the State. As for Maxwell, it is related that he recognized the significance of his defeat, "spit on his fire, called his dog," and moved to Newcastle where he became a prominent figure.

Meanwhile the village of Newcastle grew, and adopted the more ambitious name of Webster City.

Within a year from the time that Fort Dodge became the county seat of Webster County the State legislature created Hamilton County and, quite overlooking the pride and claims of Homer — a former county seat — designated Webster City as the seat of justice. Poor broken remnant of a village of classical name. Well might it cry, "O tempora, O mores!"

Finally, climax of catastrophies, the railroad went through Webster City and Fort Dodge. Stranded, ten miles from the railroad, its business gone and its citizens leaving, Homer simply shriveled up. Year by year it has decayed and disintegrated until now — a few scattered houses, a group of old tumble down buildings, a wooden schoolhouse — these are all that remain. Homer, its early visions of greatness gone (there is not even a Standard Oil station in town), is just a bit of wreckage on the historical horizon.

BESSIE L. LYON

Pilot Grove

During the Illinoian glaciation the present channel of the Mississippi River was obstructed by ice. Its waters were diverted from their natural course and swept southward along the western boundary of Henry County through the present valleys of the Skunk River and Big Cedar Creek, thence southeast up the channel of Little Cedar Creek, and across the prairies of southern Henry and northern Lee counties to the valley of Sugar Creek, whence the Mississippi returned to its former course below the present site of Fort Madison.

Where this stream passed over the prairies between Little Cedar and Sugar creeks, it excavated a wide channel now known as the Grand Valley. A branch of this valley heads in the eastern part of Marion Township in Lee County and extends westward to the middle of the township. There it turns south and connects with the Grand Valley. On the promontory partially encompassed by this crescent valley is the site of the once prosperous village of Pilot Grove.

The name Pilot Grove is significant. On the crest of the promontory, far removed from any forest growth, was a beautiful grove of elm trees. In the midst of this grove stood a giant elm, a veritable

monarch, towering above the stately trees that surrounded it. This grove could be seen for many miles across the prairies and served as a guide to the pioneer who journeyed over the plains to seek a home nearer to the setting sun. Hence the name of Pilot Grove. Many early settlers were guided to their destination by this friendly and unerring pilot.

Perhaps the first white man to discover this noted landmark was Alexander Cruikshank, a worthy pioneer of 1834. The discovery of the grove can best be told in the language of his son, J. P. Cruikshank of Fort Madison:

“My father on March the fourth 1834 procured a canoe at the town of Commerce, now Nauvoo, Illinois, and took aboard a few personal effects and provisions. Being a sailor of fifteen years experience, he readily rigged up a mast and using a blanket for a sail, he easily sailed up the river eight miles, landing at the site of Old Fort Madison, marked by two of the old stone chimneys, the barracks having been destroyed by fire over twenty years before. There were two or three cabins at the landing, occupied by settlers, some of whom had made settlement before the country was opened for that purpose, and had been removed a year previously by government dragoons. Remaining over night at the fort, my father the next morning boldly started for the interior wilderness, afoot and alone, selecting a site for his future home in a point of timber jutting into the windswept prairies on the headwaters of Sutton

Creek, fifteen miles northwest of the old fort and about three miles south of the present village of Lowell on Skunk River.

“My father being unsatisfied with his location, began after he had planted his small crop to reconnoiter for one where the soil was more fertile and the water facilities better. He had learned from an Indian who had stopped over night at his cabin of a fine spring of water about seven miles southwest. Taking my father to a high point on the prairies nearby he pointed in the direction of the spring and to a grove that stood boldly out on the prairie about five miles due west. Four miles to the south the Indian called his attention to a high point of timber (the site of the present town of West Point). By means of broken English, signs, grunts and gestures in which an Indian is past master in making himself understood, he made it clear to my father that in order to find the spring he must follow the course pointed out, keeping the elm grove to the right and the point of timber to the left, about equally distant from the course line; after crossing Big Sugar Creek, he would see another grove or point of timber ahead, where he would find the flowing spring.

“Not long after this occurrence father started in quest of what he feared might turn out to be another fabled fountain of youth with which the Indians lured the early Spanish adventurers. . . . The land on which the elm grove stood is about the highest point in Lee county, and could be seen for miles

around. Keeping the grove to the right and crossing Sugar Creek at a point now known as Pilot Grove station, my father found the spring in the edge of the point of timber just as the Indian had described. Here father made his second claim, on which he built another cabin on the exact site now enclosed and known as the Clay Grove or Howard cemetery, where he, my mother and other members of the family lie buried.''

From that time on the high elm grove became generally known as Pilot Grove. The early settlers' trail from Fort Madison to the Aaron Street settlement at Salem and the trail from Burlington to a settlement on the Des Moines River crossed at or near Pilot Grove. Long before the advent of the white men the aborigines used this grove as a guide.

Iowa settlers were not slow in discovering the beauties of such locations and their natural advantages for the founding of villages. Jonathan Jones, an enterprising and thrifty pioneer, claimed the land on the promontory in 1837 and acquired title to the same in 1840. At this early date, when all around was a trackless plain, Mr. Jones was imbued with the idea of founding a town. He planted a grove of black locust trees in the form of a square, the trees being arranged in regular order, and he enclosed this grove with a fence of elaborate design. Near the grove he set apart a plot of land for a cemetery and there Mrs. Jones was the first to be buried. In 1851 the government established a postoffice, giving it the

name of Pilot Grove and Jonathan Jones became the first postmaster. Attracted by the beauty of the location and the richness of the surrounding prairie many settlers established their homes nearby. On March 20, 1858, the town was regularly laid out and platted by George Berry, deputy county surveyor. This plat is on section 10, township 69, range 6. The platting was approved by J. A. Goodrich, acting county judge, and was filed in the office of the county recorder on April 16, 1858.

The town grew rapidly: George H. Moon and son opened a store for general merchandise, E. B. Ringland soon followed with a dry goods store, Townsend Hubb established a shop for the manufacture of wagons, buggies, and farm implements, and Enos Neal set up as a blacksmith. Schools and churches were established and Pilot Grove became the community center for the surrounding country. The park with its ample grove of shade trees furnished a delightful place for all outdoor meetings. Here the Fourth of July was celebrated in real pioneer fashion. Speakers of note fired hot oratorical shot into British tyranny and lauded the virtues of the American patriots.

Pilot Grove was the focus of the intellectual activities of the surrounding communities. Literary societies were organized where the younger generations practiced the art of elocution, and local orators discussed many problems of government and philosophy in the forum of debate.

In ante-bellum days, Professor Belding, an elocutionist and reader of considerable ability, conducted schools of elocution at Salem, Chestnut Hill, Lowell, Pilot Grove, Dover, and other points. At the close of these schools a grand contest for championship was to be held. No more fitting place could be found for such a gathering than the public park of Pilot Grove. Great interest was manifested in these exercises. The day set for this occasion proved to be ideal and people from the surrounding country came to the park in large numbers. The audience was estimated to have included from six hundred to a thousand people. Judge John Van Valkenburg of Fort Madison, Joel C. Garretson of Henry County, and Joseph D. Hoag of Chestnut Hill were chosen as judges of the contest. The audience was highly entertained and the honors were fairly distributed. Miss Lizzie Mitchell of Salem received first prize. Her selection was "Hiawatha". "Regulus", rendered by Caleb Weir of Pilot Grove, was given second place. Lydia Ellen Townsend, also of Pilot Grove, received third place. Miss Lizzie Wiggins of Salem was given the premium for making the best appearance on the platform. She spoke Poe's "Raven". John E. Mitchell and Miss Sue Wiggins received honorable mention.

The population of Pilot Grove never exceeded three hundred people, but its importance as a community center was out of proportion to its population. Here the farmers for miles around received

their mail, went to church, talked politics, did their trading, and found a market for the stock and produce of the farm.

Four church organizations were maintained in the town: Baptist, Presbyterian, Friends, and Universalist. Only two church buildings were erected, however — Baptist and Quaker. The Presbyterians held their services in the Baptist church while the Universalists occupied the public hall. The town was well supplied with ministers. Samuel Pickard and Zehn Leweling taught that immersion was essential to salvation. Reverend McNight preached the time-honored doctrine of election, while at the head of the Quaker meeting sat Ephraim B. Ratliff who on occasion when the spirit moved him to utterance proclaimed the glad tidings of peace on earth and good will to men. Joshua Hicks and Joel C. Garretson believed that as Christ came to seek and to save that which was lost He would through God's infinite love finally restore the whole family of mankind to holiness and happiness. Thus the various phases of religious thought had their adherents and devoted champions.

Pilot Grove also presented a field for political activity. In the ever memorable campaign of 1860 the picturesque "Wide-awakes" from various towns with their oil cloth caps and capes and their greasy lamps marched and countermarched. Here also the followers of the "Little Giant", their hickory clubs bedecked with ribbons of the national colors, gave

their spectacular parades, while venders of refreshments openly sold "Douglas whiskey" and cider to the thirsty throng. No political campaign was complete without a grand rally at Pilot Grove .

During the Civil War the political feeling was very intense. An anecdote will illustrate the spirit of the times. One evening in the fall of 1862 several hundred men had gathered at the schoolhouse to listen to orators from Keokuk uphold the Union cause and hear the glee club from Fort Madison sing the war songs of the hour. After the meeting was over and the men had assembled in the yard one enthusiastic citizen drew a pistol from his pocket and fired at random in the air. This seemed to be a signal for in a moment the place resounded with pistol shots from the whole assembly. It seemed as if every man was armed and ready for immediate action should occasion arise.

About 1867 a high school was established and Professor Morrison instructed the youth in the higher branches of learning. Morrison was followed by Eli Beard of sainted memory. Beard was an educator of wide experience and was much beloved by his pupils. A monument erected to his memory at Milo, Iowa, by his former pupils stands a witness to the love and esteem in which he was held. In 1871 the schoolhouse was destroyed by a tornado. The enterprising citizens soon replaced the structure with a more commodious building and the high school was again opened with C. M. Frazier and Belle Coleman

Frazier, his wife, as instructors. The school prospered for a time but the citizenship of the surrounding country changed and the school was finally closed. Frazier entered the law and afterwards became Attorney General of Arizona.

The town of Pilot Grove was also doomed. Two causes contributed directly to its decline. About two and one-half miles southeast a settlement of German Catholics was established about the village of St. Paul. These Germans were an industrious and frugal people. They rapidly extended their holdings and soon absorbed the surrounding land. The interests of these people were not at Pilot Grove but were centered in the village and church of St. Paul. The children were sent to the parochial school and public education was abandoned.

Pilot Grove had flourished without a railroad. In 1880 a branch of the Burlington road was constructed from Keokuk to Mt. Pleasant, passing four miles to the westward. A few years later another branch of the Burlington extending from Fort Madison to Ottumwa was located two miles south of the village — the final cause that ended the career of Pilot Grove. The trade of the country was naturally diverted to the shipping points on these roads, and Pilot Grove was left without adequate financial support. To add insult to injury a station on the Ottumwa line now bears the name of Pilot Grove.

To-day the original village is no more: the buildings have long since been wrecked, and the streets

and alleys have become a part of the adjacent farms. The public park — the one time pride of the village — is unenclosed and only a few straggling and ragged trees remain to tell the glories of the past. The historic and stately elms that played such an important part in the days of the pioneers have succumbed to the ruthless hand of utility. This beauty spot of nature, once vibrant with life and energy, is as silent to-day as it was when the stranger guided his footsteps by the lofty pilot of the plains.

O. A. GARRETSON

Comment by the Editor

A COMMONWEALTH OF VILLAGERS

Napoleon's contemptuous remark that England was "a nation of shopkeepers" might be legitimately paraphrased "a nation of villagers". Indeed, the same might be said of America. Iowa in particular is a commonwealth of villages — and therein lies the glory of the State, an explanation of its loyal spirit.

Most of us live in or near small towns. If it were not so the uncanny realism of "The Days of Real Sport" would lose its universal appeal.

The notion seems to be prevalent that village life implies inevitable, unmitigated narrowness. It is true that people who live apart are inclined to be provincial, but that is equally true of city dwellers.

Small town society may be unsophisticated, but it is not entirely simple and shallow and drab. Human existence may be complex without being dramatic, commonplace without being dull. To be sure there are bumpkins in villages: the same type of person is a cad in the city. Of the world's greatest thinkers the village has furnished more than its share because it breeds leadership.

THE VILLAGE IN LITERATURE

Ever since the time of *Piers Plowman* village taverns, spires, and cottages have figured in English literature. In the modern era Goldsmith, pleading the cause of the gentle, kindly folk of sweet Auburn, put the essence of all community life into his *Deserted Village*. Crabbe told of the hopeless wretchedness of the people of Aldeburgh — a surly, joyless, unlovely race akin to the place they lived in. The artistry, freshness, and fidelity of Mary Mitford's sketches of *Our Village* have never been excelled, while Mrs. Gaskell contrasts the naïve, individualistic inhabitants of untroubled *Cranford* with the growing industrialism of the cities.

The typical American village has never been described. Perhaps there is no single type. Much has been written about New England towns; the uncouth, ephemeral frontier posts and mining camps continue to live in Bret Harte's stories and Joaquin Miller's poems; Mark Twain, Octave Thanet, and Zona Gale have immortalized midwestern small town life.

While American literature contains no village epic, the villagers, wherever the scene may be laid, seem to be endowed with common traits. Such homely virtues as honesty, contentment, industry, reverence, tranquility, and strength are usually revealed. But all American villages are not replicas of Longfellow's idyllic Grand-Pré where the "dwell-

ings were open as day and the hearts of the owners” and where “the richest was poor, and the poorest lived in abundance”. Villagers, being human, have their faults. They live by the standards they know — and in general those standards have met with approval.

A profound change seems to be reflected in the literature of to-day. People who live in small towns are treated contemptuously or with pity. Their lot is depicted as sordid and monotonous — and theirs is the fault. Has the character of the village changed? Have the sturdy virtues of the “village smithy” been supplanted by the sophistication of the garage tinker? Is the modern American village really decadent, insufferable, inhabited by dullards? Or is this interpretation confined to the imagination of urban sophists who do not see and can not understand?

J. E. B.

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