

Comment by the Editor

THE PASSING OF THE PRAIRIE

Within the last month we have had the pleasure of listening to and talking with two men who have portrayed in fiction the Iowa of an earlier day — Hamlin Garland and Herbert Quick. Each has seen with his own eyes the breaking of the original prairies and even had a part in the process; and each is stirred with the glory of the beauty of that life that passed with the coming of the plow.

They are temperamentally different — these two men — but each writes faithfully of the thing as he sees it. “I hate a cow!” says Hamlin Garland with feeling, and the “cinnamon hog” to him is anathema. Herbert Quick, however, is more sympathetic. In *Vandemark's Folly* he writes:

“Any stockman knows that a cow is a beast of very high nervous organization, but she has no very large number of ways of telling us how she feels: just a few tones to her lowing, a few changes of expression to her eye, a small number of shades of uneasiness, a little manner with her eyes, showing the whites when troubled or letting the lids droop in satisfaction — these things exhausted, and poor bossy's tale is told.”

But when Garland forgets these tame animals he has known and reverts to the wilder animals and the

untamed prairie, the beauty and sympathy of his descriptions are scarcely to be excelled. Witness these sentences from *A Son of the Middle Border*:

“Nothing could be more generous, more joyous, than these natural meadows in summer. The flash and ripple and glimmer of the tall sunflowers, the myriad voices of gleeful bobolinks, the chirp and gurgle of red-winged blackbirds swaying on the willows, the meadow-larks piping from grassy bogs, the peep of the prairie chick and the wailing call of plover on the flowery green slopes of the uplands made it all an ecstatic world to me. It was a wide world with a big, big sky which gave alluring hint of the still more glorious unknown wilderness beyond.”

Into these meadows came the breaking plow and Garland writes of the results with keen emotion:

“At last the wide ‘quarter section’ lay upturned, black to the sun and the garden that had bloomed and fruited for millions of years, waiting for man, lay torn and ravaged. The tender plants, the sweet flowers, the fragrant fruits, the busy insects, all the swarming lives which had been native here for untold centuries were utterly destroyed. It was sad and yet it was not all loss, even to my thinking, for I realized that over this desolation the green wheat would wave.”

And Herbert Quick, who laments the prairie as vanished forever, is stirred by the same deep appreciation of the beauty of the original Iowa country. Putting his own ideas into the thoughts of young Jacob Vandemark as he first looked out upon the

prairies of northeastern Iowa in the fifties, he says:

“I shall never forget the sight. It was like a great green sea. The old growth had been burned the fall before, and the spring grass scarcely concealed the brown sod on the uplands; but all the swales were coated thick with an emerald growth full-bite high, and in the deeper, wetter hollows grew cowslips, already showing their glossy, golden flowers. The hillsides were thick with the woolly possblummies in their furry spring coats protecting them against the frost and chill, showing purple-violet on the outside of a cup filled with golden stamens, the first fruits of the prairie flowers; on the warmer southern slopes a few of the splendid bird’s-foot violets of the prairie were showing the azure color which would soon make some of the hillsides as blue as the sky; and standing higher than the peering grass rose the rough-leafed stalks of green which would soon show us the yellow puccoons and sweet-williams and scarlet lilies and shooting stars, and later the yellow rosin-weeds, Indian dye-flower and goldenrod. The keen northwest wind swept before it a flock of white clouds; and under the clouds went their shadows, walking over the lovely hills like dark ships over an emerald sea.”

The ancient prairie, so real and wonderful to the first comers, has vanished, and with its passing have gone much that was wild and picturesque and beautiful, and also much that was a source of dread and anxiety. The buffalo and the bear were not alien to the Iowa country but their real home was farther

west and they can hardly be said to have waited for the coming of the settler. The deer, however, lingered in the land between the rivers and for many years the prairie chicken let the frontier slip past and the prairie wolf skulked reluctantly away from the advancing hordes of his enemies.

The loneliness of the wide prairies, away from the streams, for a time kept them unmolested but stout hearted pioneers ventured out upon the sea of waving grass and turned the prairie sod. And when the plow had laid out its black acres the prairie fire, with its fantastic and awful beauty, no longer found fuel for its devastating sweep. Even the pitiless blizzard lost many of its terrors when fences and windbreaks and frequent habitations spread over the land.

People and more people came, by wagon and finally by railroad, and acre by acre the primitive gave way. Yet here and there fragments of the prairie foliage still remain. Curiously enough the very factor that helped the invasion of the prairie land and made possible its widespread conquest is the one that has preserved these relics of the struggle; for the original flowers and sod of the old Iowa prairie, like prisoners of war, are to be found along the right of way of the older railroads.

IOWA FROM A CAR WINDOW

Recently we rode across a part of Iowa on a glorious sunny morning, when the landscape had been

freshly washed by a rain of the day before. The alternation of green and brown fields stretched wide under the blue sky. The corn was just creeping up into the sunlight. Here and there oak groves with wild flowers growing in the shade beneath whirled past us; and off toward the horizon the darker green of a strip of wood turned to a bluish haze where it met the sky.

The little towns and the clusters of farm buildings were but incidental to the general scheme of nature. The roads and fences did not so much interrupt as tie the whole scene together. True, one might see anywhere, surrounded by small round-bellied pigs, the "cinnamon hog", couchant upon a field of drab, but if one did not care for this particular heraldic design he could find a more idyllic pastoral scene in the next field where sheep grazed in the company of little wobble-legged lambs. Nor could one fail to note that the neighboring fence posts were surmounted by swamp blackbirds, gorgeous in their red and black livery, and by meadow larks warbling their happy hearts out as freely as did their ancestors on the swaying weeds of the unbroken prairie.

After all the changes have perhaps not been so great. Time will never change the arch of blue sky, nor will the cloud shadows that Vandemark observed cease to ride across the hills. The passing years can have little effect upon the winding streams and the smooth undulations of the landscape. And doubtless our children's children as they ride across Iowa will

still be able to watch the sunlight dance upon the rippling leaves of oak groves, while meadow larks and red-winged blackbirds sing the same song from the fence posts, and the wild flowers and grasses of the right of way whirl by in a riot of profusion and color — faithful reminders of the old time Iowa prairie.

J. C. P.