

## Rivalry Among the River Towns

Along the Mississippi River, Iowa towns had within a few years emerged from tiny settlements. Lusty and ambitious, they were soon boasting of advantages and achievements and an unparalleled future. The extravagant terms in which local newspaper editors proclaimed the virtues of their towns and the invidious comparisons that were made with the neighboring towns, displayed a lively, though sometimes bitter, rivalry.

Keokuk: "Our sister cities accuse us of being 'vain glorious' and somewhat extravagant in our estimation of ourselves. They cannot expect to enjoy the reputation and prosperity that Keokuk does."

Burlington: "Burlington is the greatest city in ancient or modern times! . . . It will be the geographical center of the world!"

Muscatine: "Muscatine is a much greater city than Burlington, and, of course, eclipses New York, London, or Davenport."

Davenport: "Greater inducements are held out by Davenport than by any city in the State."

Dubuque: "A proud city shall be reared where at present stands our flourishing village — when

the lofty spires of the State houses and churches shall glitter in the rays of the sun, and the glossy bosom of the fair Mississippi shall swell beneath the weight of commerce."

Although several of the towns were described as occupying a "high and commanding" position, Keokuk's claim to the possession of the most advantageous location for trade and commerce was a constant source of envy. Situated strategically at the junction of the two rivers on which most of Iowa's commerce was carried, Keokuk had great commercial possibilities during the steamboat period of transportation.

"It may seem like idle boasting to those who may have nothing of so much consequence to boast of," declared a Keokuk editor, "but while we show due deference to the peculiar opinions of our sister cities, we must say that their accusations ['vain glorious'] partake of the nature of envy, and prove to all impartial minds, that 'the green eyed monster, jealousy,' perverts the truthful expression of their real opinions or blinds them so they cannot see anything worthy of remark. They cannot expect to enjoy the reputation and prosperity that Keokuk does, or have the same number of men of enterprise, mind and wealth, unless they occupy the same *ground* that Keokuk does, and thereby enjoy the same advantages and facilities." Keo-

kuk could also quote Horace Greeley who testified: "A place combining the natural advantages that Keokuk has must be one of those particular spots that is destined to more than realize the wildest anticipation regarding it." Little wonder that Keokuk assumed the title of "Gate City".

But the northwest was another realm for which Dubuque, the northernmost of pioneer Iowa river towns, had imperialistic aspirations. "Dubuque is destined to be the Queen City of the Northwest, the opposition of interested parties and rival towns to the contrary notwithstanding." And again: "We are at the most important point on the upper Mississippi, a point which has given our city the sobriquet of 'Key City'. As the key, she commands the whole of northeastern Iowa and southern Minnesota."

Burlington, Muscatine, and Davenport were pleasantly situated, and their natural wharfage was good. Muscatine lacked nothing, apparently, for the *Democratic Enquirer* declared in 1855: "Its peculiar location — in the bend of the river, throwing it 45 miles into the interior, will always make it the gateway of commerce for a vast scope, bearing in a measure the same relation to Iowa that Cincinnati does to Ohio!"

Political prestige had something to do with claims of superiority. Dubuque was the seat of

government of one of the two original counties while Iowa was a part of Michigan and Wisconsin Territories. Men of Dubuque had been active in politics from the beginning. And so, when Wisconsin Territory was formed, political influence, location, and population favored Dubuque as the capital of the Territory.

But Dubuque had a powerful rival. Burlington was the seat of government of the other original county in the Iowa District. In the contest for the prize of capitalship in Wisconsin Territory, Burlington became the Territorial headquarters until the new capital city of Madison was ready, and Burlington became the first, though temporary, capital of the Territory of Iowa when it was separated from Wisconsin Territory.

The rivalry of river towns grew in intensity as immigrants continued to enter Iowa in quest of the most favorable opportunities. Every point of advantage was emphasized to exert magnetic force upon prospective settlers. Population was the favorite measure of popularity to be used in comparisons. Never conservative, the estimates of population were apparently based upon hope. If the figures as presented by one town shone to the disadvantage of another, the injured rival explained discrepancies. "More than half the population of Burlington", Keokuk pointed out, "are foreigners

and a large proportion of them unnaturalized; yet *all* vote at the charter election . . . while in Keokuk non-naturalized foreigners are excluded from voting, our charter requiring six months in the city as a qualification to vote." Keokuk also explained in 1856 that her population was larger per square mile than that of any other town in the State, whatever her standing was in total numbers.

The United States census of 1850 reported a population of 4082 in Burlington, 3108 in Dubuque, 2540 in Muscatine, 2478 in Keokuk, and 1848 in Davenport. These were the five largest towns in Iowa. Fort Madison, also on the river, was sixth and Iowa City, the capital, was seventh. In 1854 the rank of the cities in population was the same except that Muscatine was fifth and Davenport third. By 1860, a more complete shift had occurred. Dubuque was first with 13,000, Davenport second with 11,136, Keokuk next with 8136, Burlington fourth with 6706 (the only town to decrease in that period), and Muscatine fifth, with 5324. Fort Madison, which had not figured in the rivalry of the other river towns during the fifties, dropped to ninth place by 1860.

In the matter of population Davenport was roundly called to task by the *Muscatine Journal* in February, 1856, for its obvious distortion of the facts: "The population is *put down* at 12,000. If

this is true, Davenport has increased at the rate of 500% since January 1, 1855."

An accurate statement of population statistics was in fact difficult for each year. Though immigrants were "pouring in by hundreds and thousands," with every house "full to overflowing", much of this population was transient. The inadequacy of housing facilities was felt by all of the towns. The necessity to accommodate the increasing numbers and the desire to impress them favorably for permanent settlement led the citizens to build extensively.

Desirable residence districts were widely advertised. "The bluffs of Davenport for residence can hardly be surpassed anywhere and are unequaled by any town I have seen on the Mississippi," was the comment of a traveler quoted for the benefit of Davenport.

Of Muscatine, a "stranger" wrote: "Like ancient Rome it is built on seven hills. Nature bestowed with an unsparing hand her gift of beautiful scenery surrounding and her enterprising citizens have done much to bring out and develop all those beauties which nature has lavished upon her."

Burlington had its advocate: "I prefer Burlington to any town site on the Mississippi. Almost every house has its piazza and porticoes and many

of them a gallery above looking toward the river, with large windows in front."

Keokuk could also quote the remarks of a traveler: "Another object of particular remark is the large number and preponderance of brick dwellings and stores, rather than frame shanties. In this respect Keokuk excels all the western towns I have seen."

With great numbers willing to settle in Iowa, and the towns welcoming the newcomers, the means of transportation was a matter of importance. Ferries carried the immigrants across the Mississippi. The number of passengers reported was as gratifying as census returns and provoked statistics from the "sister cities". Dubuque estimated ferry crossings as 38,400 in 1854. The Burlington *Telegraph* on November 15, 1854, said "not less than 30,000 have crossed the river at Burlington since the first of September". Keokuk demonstrated the extent of her ferrying business when the Keokuk and Hamilton Ferry Company constructed at this time a large double-engine ferry boat, with capacity to carry teams and stock of 200 tons burden.

Small flurries of excitement prevailed over each new improvement. The curbing and macadamizing of streets, the water supply, street lighting, and improvement of the steamboat landing were high

points in the early life of the cities worthy of long editorials and editorial answers. When Keokuk had streets lighted by gas for the first time on January 4, 1856 ("the works of sufficient capacity for a city of 75,000"), the *Gate City* and *Des Moines Valley Whig* took occasion to glory in the advancement of Keokuk. The Burlington *Hawk-Eye* thought best to deflate the ego of the neighboring town and countered with sarcasm. "The Keokuk papers", wrote the editor, "are making a huge to do about the immense business of the little hamlet, but even with all their *gas* they don't compare with the actual state of things in Burlington."

Opportunities for employment and investment in business, rather than civic improvements, finally determined the immigrant's choice of settlement. There was, it appears, a field for every type of manufacture. Iron works, including stove, engine, mill and boiler foundries were established; wood-working shops — sash and blind, wagon, and furniture factories — were started; mattress and upholstery factories were needed; brick yards did a good business; and distilleries of "alcohol and spirit gas" satisfied another class of workmen. There were flour mills, sawmills, pork packing houses. When raw material continued to be exported, a movement was begun to make Iowa still more industrial-minded. "Do we want a threshing



machine or a reaper? It comes from Ohio. Do we need furniture? A manufacturer in Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, or the East, immediately supplies our wants. . . . Out of all the labor-saving machinery and other articles of daily consumption in the State of Iowa, what a beggarly amount is made here?" Thus to prevent the filling of Eastern coffers from Iowa cities, manufacturing continued to increase.

"Keokuk will soon be the point for all the wholesale business for the upper Des Moines. We expect to see the retailers in the country get all their supplies from Keokuk very soon — and, indeed, very many, at this time, never think of going farther than Keokuk to make their purchases, and find it greatly to their interest. So soon as our great water power is developed at this point, we anticipate that Keokuk will be the Lowell of the West."

In a similar vein spoke the rest. Trade areas developed, for each of which there was a "metropolitan" center. Dubuque extended her influence north and west. A petition by Dubuque for a military road to Fort Dodge on the Des Moines River aimed to attract the trade of the upper Des Moines away from Keokuk.

Muscatine, too, was a competitor for the upper Des Moines trade. A road to Fort Dodge from Muscatine would be no longer than the proposed military road from Dubuque to that place, con-

tended the Muscatine *Democratic Enquirer*, and moreover "the hydrography and topography are in favor of Muscatine".

Muscatine's area was central Iowa: "Nothing can stop us — we are a go-ahead people — everybody who visits us acknowledges that! Large and costly buildings, work on the streets, throngs of wagons laden with lumber, stone, brick, furniture, etc., drays rattling here and there with merchandise, and farmers' wagons filled with the produce of the country — all prove that Muscatine is *the city of Central Iowa.*"

Burlington and Davenport had trade areas less clearly defined, but were nevertheless flourishing in business. Burlington, especially, was placing emphasis upon pork packing, which, indeed, was a major industry in each of the towns except Dubuque. Burlington's figures were tallest: the *Business Directory of 1856* avowed that "the pork packing business is carried on more extensively in Burlington than in any city of its age in the United States, and Burlington has already been named by some the 'Porkopolis' of Iowa." As to the excellency of pork houses, Keokuk doubted whether there was a "better pork packing establishment from Dubuque to New Orleans" than that of Messrs. Patterson & Conn of Keokuk.

With every year the prosperity of the towns in-

creased. Supply lagged behind the demand for products, and the scene was everywhere one of "gay and bustling" activity. The wharves were "literally piled high" with goods brought and sent from the river ports. The wharf registers revealed increasing steamboat arrivals with each succeeding year. Every town was a "commercial emporium".

There were several phases of the contest for supremacy, definitely commercial in character, which were especially critical to the life of the towns. They were the problems of improving navigation, building railroads, and bridging the Mississippi.

The rapids of the Mississippi causing the most serious obstruction to navigation were those at Keokuk. But what dismayed the steamboat captains meant profit to Keokuk. Her position was strengthened by the lightering trade. The cumbersome process of transferring the cargo over the shallow waters of the rapids on lighter craft greatly increased the cost of shipping. Freight charges above the Des Moines Rapids were said to be four times what Keokuk business men paid.

In furthering the plan for the improvement of the rapids, the *Muscatine Democratic Enquirer* bitterly attacked the opposition to it: "Open, declared enemies we do not expect," declared the editor in October, 1851, "but secret hostility is ap-

parent, especially at Keokuk, where some of the people are selfish enough to wish that the rapids may never be improved. Nay more, if their wishes and desires were gratified, navigation would terminate just above Keokuk! They think, or seem to think, that if the Rapids are not improved the whole upper country will become tributary to their power, subservient to their will."

A Keokuk editor, however, ignoring the charge or reversing his attitude, asserted: "Improvement of the rapids will result in the development of immense water power for manufacturing purposes, and will furnish unrivaled facilities for docks for the building and repair of steamboats, thus making Keokuk the great point on the upper Mississippi."

But before the improvement of the rapids had time to prove its effect upon the cities, the railroad fever spread through the West and inspired new hopes for each town. "What shall be the Metropolis of Iowa?" questioned the *Democratic Enquirer*. "It must be either Keokuk, Burlington, Muscatine, or Dubuque. [Davenport was not mentioned by the Muscatine editor.] Railroads will in a few years terminate at different points on the Mississippi, and those places where they do terminate are destined to flourish, while others must decline or progress but slowly. Now is the accepted time!"

And so they all awaited the coming of the railroads to the Mississippi. Which town was to be reached first? The advance of the rails from Chicago was watched with excitement. The five principal lines arrived at the Mississippi within a space of only three years. It was a remarkably close contest. The advantage came first to Davenport when the railroad was completed from Chicago to Rock Island on February 22, 1854.

The railroads "just across the river" immediately stimulated railroad building within Iowa. Each town projected its hopes in prophecy, and laid a veritable tangle of lines in imagination over the State to leave no possible need of communication unsatisfied. "Railroads or death to the town!" was the essence of the appeal in winning pledges for railroad bonds. Moreover, there was a prize for the swift — a railroad bridge would be built where two tracks on opposite sides of the Mississippi needed only a bridge to span the gap.

So loudly did the rival towns press their railroad claims that an observer was led to comment: "These local claims and jealousies have already done much to retard the grants of lands to works of improvement. The bill to grant lands for railroads in Iowa has long and ardently been discussed in Congress and not brought to conclusion because of these local dissensions between rival

towns and railroads. Iowa is in position to advance with unexampled rapidity, if she will only bring her domestic broils to an end."

A memorial to Congress in 1852 asking a grant of land to aid a railroad from Dubuque to the Missouri River preceded by a few days a memorial for a grant in aid of a railroad from Davenport to Council Bluffs. The latter grant led to the organization of the Mississippi and Missouri Railroad — the first in Iowa. It is probable, however, that the first actual construction in Iowa was by the Lyons Iowa Central Railroad Company in 1853, though that road ultimately failed.

A bridge over the Mississippi became the principal object of rivalry. To Davenport there could be no doubt as to the proper place for a bridge. The Rock Island Railroad, efficiently advancing its interests, won the coöperation of the M. & M. Railroad for a bridge, and Davenport's patriotic citizen, Antoine LeClaire, furnished the site at the Iowa end. It was the first bridge across the Mississippi between Saint Paul and the Gulf of Mexico.

The years 1855 and 1856 were peak years of prosperity for the Mississippi River towns. All of them felt the boom period of the preceding five years culminate in the middle of the decade. Promise of good and active times ahead seemed

certain. Culture, every one was sure, would flourish along with economic and industrial enterprise. But a subtle change had been effected. Due to the railroads, the towns were losing self-sufficiency and gaining in inter-dependence, and with it the strong individualism and rivalry of the earlier days were waning. Hardship experienced by one town reverberated in all the towns.

The panic of 1857 broke business confidence and local pride. Business and prosperity, however, were alleged to be mercurial. They would rise again. But there was decadence in the spirit of rivalry. By 1859, dogs had become a subject of town pride. "Dubuque dogs are superior to ordinary dogs; they howl more mellifluously and longer every night, are homelier and present more varieties than any other dogs of any other city in the Union."

A rivalry that had contributed to the healthy growth of the towns was passing, as the interests of the State took precedence over local claims.

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