

# THE PALIMPSEST

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## Life in the Iowa District

Newspaper editors described the Iowa District in 1837 as a land of promise — a region flowing with milk and honey. Poets would not have hesitated to call it a land of dreams. The historian would readily agree that the Iowa District was rich in opportunity: it was also a land of stern reality. Hard, unremitting toil was necessary to clear the timber, break the tough prairie sod, and raise log cabins. Although the climate was described as “salubrious”, whole families and communities often shook with ague, and cholera was not unknown.

But the people of the Iowa District were inclined to count their assets and discount any liabilities. In 1837 the capital of Wisconsin Territory was removed from Belmont to Burlington on the west bank of the Mississippi. Land surveys were being made, courts convened, elections held, schools opened, churches founded, newspapers printed, and post offices established. Dreamers

were talking of railroads: less visionary men were content to urge the establishment of wagon roads, ferries, and bridges. Everybody wanted more frequent and expeditious delivery of the mail.

The Mississippi River was the main artery by which the pioneers kept in touch with the eastern world whence they came. Covered wagons brought immigrants across country to the new West, but that was a one-way traffic. Stagecoaches jolted back and forth over the ruddy roads between the Mississippi and ports on the Great Lakes. Ferries were crowded with ambitious families crossing the Mississippi to the land of promise. For the most expeditious means of transportation, for trade and commerce, as well as for news, the pioneers depended mainly upon steamboats. One enthusiastic writer, who had attended the Indian conference at Fort Snelling, declared that it cost only ten dollars to come by steamboat from Pittsburgh to Dubuque. The hardships of the trip were "all imaginary" and the danger from Indian attack utterly without foundation.

The steamboat was the chief means of transportation and communication for the Iowa District in 1837. River towns, such as Keokuk, Fort Madison, Burlington, Bloomington (Muscatine), Davenport, Dubuque, and a dozen smaller places, served as entrepôts for the smaller inland settle-

ments. During the year a total of twenty-nine different steamboats (the *Palmyra*, *Dubuque*, *Pavilion*, *Adventure*, *Emerald*, *Smelter*, *Ariel*, *Lady Marshall*, *Cavalier*, *Wyoming*, *Envoy*, *Irene*, *Missouri Fulton*, *Burlington*, *North Star*, *Rolla*, *Wisconsin*, *Gipsey*, *Olive Branch*, *Science*, *Heroine*, *Galenian*, *Alpha*, *Huntress*, *Caledonia*, *Bee*, *Rover*, *Chariton*, and *Cygnets*) churned as far north as the mineral region. Only nineteen had come up in 1836.

A number of these boats steamed on up to Fort Snelling where the Falls of Saint Anthony was already being hailed as a summer "Watering Place" by eastern newspapers. So popular had the Falls become that the Secretary of War had been asked for permission to erect a "spacious hotel" there so "the man of business and the invalid will be invigorated by the healthful breeze and delightful climate."

In the fall of 1837 the steamboat *Science*, Captain S. B. Clark commanding, ascended the Iowa River during a low stage of water as far as Wapello. This was the first craft to turn a wheel on that stream. Those aboard claimed that the Iowa River was navigable to the "town of Catteese" at the mouth of the Cedar River. The country above Wapello was "fast settling by an industrious farming population" and it was believed that the Iowa

River could be "rendered easy of navigation" by light-draft boats at all seasons of the year.

The *Science* also won the distinction of navigating the Des Moines River as far as Keosauqua during the autumn of 1837. Her arrival with a cargo of flour, meal, pork, and groceries fairly electrified the inhabitants of that western outpost of the Iowa District. But the *Science* was not the first to go up the Des Moines: in May the steamboat *Hero* ascended a distance of about thirty miles. Her enterprising skipper, Captain Kenady, hoped to open communication between Saint Louis and the towns on the Des Moines River and "entertained no doubts but that with a little cleaning out" the stream could be "rendered navigable much higher than he had ascended."

The worst steamboat explosion along the eastern border of Iowa occurred in August, 1837, when the steamboat *Dubuque* collapsed a flue of her larboard boiler. More than a score of her crew and passengers were killed. The accident occurred eight miles below Bloomington (Muscatine) while the *Dubuque* was bound upstream from Saint Louis to Galena.

The mineral region was utterly dependent on steamboats for supplies. "Our paper, of today, appears in a reduced form", lamented the *Belmont Gazette* on December 28, 1836. "This is rendered

absolutely necessary, in consequence of a disappointment, in receiving a sufficient supply of paper, to last us during the winter."

That the government at Washington was becoming aware of the importance of the upper Mississippi as a highway of commerce is attested by the arrival of a young army officer to survey the Lower and Upper Rapids. As a result of these surveys, Lieutenant Robert E. Lee, recommended the improvement of the natural channel instead of constructing an artificial channel, and estimated the total cost of the two projects at \$344,280.

Another index of progress in the Iowa District was the establishment of stage lines and regular mail delivery. Private enterprise and congressional aid combined to provide these conveniences. According to the Dubuque newspaper there were twenty-four post offices in the Iowa country. Twelve were in Dubuque County: at Dubuque, Peru, Weyman's, Higginsport, Pleasant Valley, Davenport, Belleview, Durango, Salisbury, Parkhurst, Wabesapinecon, and Carl Port. In the seven counties that had been carved out of old Des Moines County, post offices were located at Rockingham, Iowa (Montpelier), Clark's Ferry, and Bloomington in Muscatine County; at Burlington and Gibson's Ferry (Augusta) in Des Moines County; at Montrose, Fort Madison, and Keokuk

in Lee County; at Richland in Henry County; and at Wapello and Black Hawk in Louisa County. Fifty-eight post offices had been established in Wisconsin Territory east of the Mississippi.

The tardy delivery of mail and the effort to secure new post roads and more frequent mail service was a source of frequent comment. The *Burlington Gazette* believed the inadequacy of mail facilities was mainly due to the fact that there were less than one hundred miles of stage line in operation west of the Mississippi. Belleview petitioned for two new roads to alleviate the "unsufferable inconveniences" which that town had to endure. Dubuque complained in December that "high water and bad roads" had detained eastern mail and that the mineral community had received "but little news of what was going on in the world."

The first municipal governments were established in 1837. On March 28th a meeting was held in the Methodist Church at Dubuque to organize a government and a resolution was adopted for the election of five trustees on April 1st. This was in accordance with a provision of the law passed by the legislature of the Territory of Wisconsin on December 6, 1836. Burlington also held an election in the spring of 1837. James W. Grimes and Charles Mason were appointed solicitors by the board of trustees.

Judge David Irvin traveled about the Iowa District in the spring of 1837 holding district court in the principal towns. The first session was held at Burlington in February. On March 27th Judge Irvin opened court at Fort Madison, but adjourned for lack of a grand jury. At the next session there in August, fifty-six indictments for gambling were presented. According to the law, district court was held in Farmington, Mount Pleasant, Wapello, and Bloomington in April. The temporary seal at the latter place was "a diamond-shaped piece of paper, fastened to the records by means of a wafer, and impressed with the reverse of a United States dime." By the time court was held at Dubuque on May 1st, the judge was sealing the documents with the impression of a quarter. Due to the illness of Judge Irvin, most of the business at Dubuque was left until the next term of court in the fall.

Sawmills and grist mills were running steadily in many communities. Captain John Sullivan of Zanesville, Ohio, erected a "steam saw and flouring mill" during the summer of 1837 at Rockingham. John Spencer and John Work also started a sawmill on Spencer Creek near Valley City. A noteworthy mechanical improvement was "Getty's Patent Metallic Mill" owned by D. C. Eldridge at Davenport. This so-called "flouring mill" was

described as "not much larger than a coffee mill", but it "did wonders in the way of cracking wheat and corn." Although the flour might not bear present-day inspection, the hot biscuits made from it were better than "corn dodgers".

The first sawmill in Muscatine County is said to have been built by Weare Long in 1837. Benjamin Nye operated the first grist mill at the mouth of Pine Creek, and Eli Reynolds and John Lawson built the first steam sawmill at Geneva on Lime Creek in the same year. William Smith sold his share of a dam and sawmill on the Skunk River at Augusta to his partner, Levi Moffet, for \$5000, and erected a grist mill of his own.

A number of new professional cards appeared in Iowa newspapers. T. A. Livermore, for nearly four years "Surgeon Dentist" at Galena, informed readers of the *Iowa News* that "by having teeth which have commenced decaying, plugged with gold or silver, in a proper manner they may almost invariably be preserved during life. Persons who have lost their teeth can have teeth inserted by means of a gold or silver cap or clasp, which will answer the purpose of natural teeth." Ailing pioneers read that Dr. Warsaw's "celebrated remedy" cured ague. If that failed and the patient still lived, Rowland's "Tonic Mixture would be found a sure cure for Fever and Ague."



A number of men destined to become political leaders represented the legal profession in the Iowa District. W. W. Chapman, Stephen Hempstead, Thomas S. Wilson, Peter H. Engle, and William W. Coriell were practicing at Dubuque. Alexander McGregor was located at Davenport. In Burlington David Rorer and James W. Grimes had been practicing a year. Charles Mason arrived in February, 1837, and William H. Starr, Henry W. Starr, M. D. Browning, and James W. Woods were attracted to the new capital. Philip Viele and Alfred Rich hung out their shingles in Fort Madison. At Muscatine S. C. Hastings represented the legal profession.

Schools were springing up all over the Iowa District — log-cabin schools for the most part with short terms and simple studies. A step above the three R's was taken at Dubuque where a Female Seminary was established by Mrs. Louisa King. Aided by her daughter, Mrs. King promised to take "great pains" to "impart useful and general knowledge and to cultivate a taste for learning." Young ladies would be taught "useful and ornamental needle work" and could also receive instruction in "Piano Forte".

Religion was gaining a firmer grip on the pioneers as churches were established in the various river towns and circuit riders carried the Gospel

to the scattered settlements farther west. Dubuque could boast a Methodist, a Catholic, and a Presbyterian church, the latter still soliciting subscriptions in October, 1837, for the completion of the building. Asa Turner in Lee County was laboring for the Congregationalists and Presbyterians. Methodism took root at Muscatine in the fall of 1837 when Norris Hobert preached there.

A fiery circuit rider of the "Baptist persuasion" carried the Gospel west of the Des Moines River in 1837. Before more than one hundred frightened pioneers gathered on the bank of Chequest Creek he preached "two hours of agony" on hell-fire and salvation. Unfortunately, perhaps, most of those present were already saved.

Prompted by Christianity and good will to all mankind, the Catholics of Dubuque formed a society "for the furtherance of divine service, and for charitable and other praiseworthy purposes." The religious belief or place of nativity was not to be an "impediment to the admission of members" and the society gave preference to no member for those reasons.

Crime was not unknown in the Iowa District. A public meeting was called at the Harrison Hotel at Dubuque on August 28, 1837, "to adopt measures for the disposition of a sum of money belonging to a man arrested for passing counter-

feit, and left as a security for his appearance, he having failed to appear, the money is forfeited! A general attendance is requested."

On September 9, 1837, the *Iowa News* observed that William Post and Monroe Gibson, two gamblers who were "driven from Du Buque" in the spring of 1837, had been taken up as vagabonds at Saint Louis and "sold out for six months, to be put to hard work." "This is right", the editor declared, "and we hope hereafter such a course will be pursued by our citizens if there is any provision in the statutes authorizing it."

Thomas Carroll warned the public not to purchase a certain lot from William Burke. He himself had "indisputable title", because he was the first to take it up and improve it. J. Strosser, having decided to leave Dubuque, requested all debtors to pay at once and urged his creditors to "come and get it". He branded all assertions that he was running away as "palpable falsehoods, and the authors of them contemptible, infatuated calumniators."

Celebrations were common and none was observed with greater enthusiasm than the Fourth of July. In Dubuque a ball was given in Henry Pfozter's "old house" on Main Street. Alexander McGregor spoke at the celebration at the Lower Rapids, giving ample testimony that he had

read the address of Stephen Hempstead at Dubuque the previous year.

The Iowa District could boast of three newspapers in 1837. The *Du Buque Visitor*, which had been established on May 11, 1836, changed its name to the *Iowa News* on June 3, 1837. The file of this pioneer journal is the only one that covers the entire year of 1837, and therefore it constitutes the most important single documentary source on Iowa history a hundred years ago.

A newspaper appeared at Montrose on June 28, 1837. It was a "large and well executed" sheet with the imposing title: *The Western Adventurer and Herald of the Upper Mississippi*. Published by Dr. Isaac Galland with Thomas Gregg as editor, its "editorial columns" exhibited "much talent and ability". By September the same press was issuing a sixteen page monthly periodical entitled *Western Emigrant and Historian of Times in the West*. This magazine was devoted to the "interests of emigrants" and contained many selections of western incidents. So confident of success were Galland and Gregg that they also proposed to publish the *Chronicles of the North American Savages* containing sketches of their "ancient and modern history, religion, traditions, dialects, medicine, biography."

A month later the Belmont Gazette was moved

from Belmont to Burlington and renamed the *Territorial Gazette and Burlington Advertiser*. "The Gazette", wrote the editor of the *Iowa News*, "is a little larger than our sheet, and contains more reading matter than the *New York Courier and Enquirer*, whose only merit is its size; and less accounts of lurid murders, fatal accidents, and other items to fill the mind (already troubled with the *blues* or pressure) with horror, than the *Saturday Evening Post*."

The pages of those old newspapers mirrored the times in great detail. The temperament of the people was reflected as clearly as their doings. Domestic affairs and cultural interests received almost as much attention as politics. For example the *Iowa News* did not hesitate to point out to wives the advantage of gentleness over force in governing a family.

"Avoid contradicting your husband;" advised one essay, "occupy yourself only with household affairs; never take upon yourself to be a censor of your husband's morals; command his attention by being always attentive to him; never exact any thing and you will receive much; appear always flattered by the little he does for you, which will incite him to perform more; all men are vain — never wound this vanity; choose well your female friends — have but few; cherish neatness without

luxury, and pleasure without excess; dress with taste and particularly with modesty; vary the fashion of your dress; especially with reference to colors; such things may appear trifling but they are of more importance than is imagined."

To cater to the feminine needs Mrs. A. W. Bartlett informed the ladies of Dubuque and vicinity that she had procured the "latest and best New York fashions" and was opening a millinery and dressmaking shop over Ezekiel Lockwood's store. Mr. Lockwood advertised clothing for men — frock coats, roundabouts, shirts, pantaloons, and fancy vests — just received from New York.

During the summer of 1837 E. W. H. Winfield, fishing in the Mississippi River at Rockingham caught a catfish that weighed 170 pounds. As soon as it was hauled up in front of the hotel a crowd gathered. The little daughter of the hotel proprietor, H. W. Higgins, peeking between the curious spectators, caught a glimpse of the monster as it lay floundering on the ground. Off she ran exclaiming, "There, now, if I don't go and tell my Pa. They have killed our sow!"

Wild game was abundant and residents spent much time hunting and fishing. Venison could often be purchased in Davenport for two or three cents per pound. Wild turkeys sold all the way from twenty-five to fifty cents, and prairie chick-

ens were so plentiful sportsmen usually gave them away.

Citizens on both banks of the Mississippi River apparently enjoyed the climate which was described as "mild and temperate". When word reached Belmont that citizens in the East were complaining because of the lack of snow for sledding, the editor of the *Belmont Gazette* announced that "for *eighty-five* days we have had good sleighing, and the snow is still in fine order, and that on but two days this winter has the thermometer stood as low as 20 degrees below zero."

Life in the Iowa District in 1837 may seem somewhat drab to a generation accustomed to canned food and electric refrigeration, stream-lined automobiles and paved highways. But there were many compensations: the pioneers did not have to travel five hundred miles to catch a fish or shoot a duck. Living in a wonderland of nature, they thrived on the simple things about them. During their conquest of the soil they did not lose sight of social, political, and spiritual values. The churches, schools, and political institutions they founded are monuments to the vision of the pioneers a century ago.

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