

THE PALIMPSEST

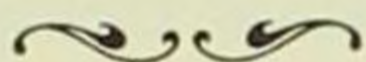
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Land of Promise

"But where is Wisconsin Territory?" queried Easterners in 1837. At least one Pennsylvania editor endeavored to throw light on darkest America by explaining that Wisconsin was "a beautiful territory in the Northwest part of the United States, *which some persons think is on the other side of nowhere.*" If Wisconsin Territory were re-established in 1937 it would include all of the States of Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, and the eastern half of North and South Dakota.

This vast region of the northwest challenged the imagination. It was a wilderness with a glamorous history and tremendous potentialities. Travelers told interesting stories about the Indians of the upper Mississippi Valley a hundred years ago. A celebrated artist, George Catlin, urged Americans to take the "Fashionable Tour" by steamboat to the Falls of Saint Anthony. Shipment of lead down the Mississippi from the Galena-Dubuque mineral region was reaching

giant proportions. Mushroom towns were springing up, newspapers were being published, churches formed, and schools established.

West of the Mississippi and north of Missouri lay the Black Hawk Purchase, which Lieutenant Albert Miller Lea had designated as the Iowa District. By the close of 1837 the Keokuk Reserve, the Half-breed Tract, and the Second Purchase had been added to the original Black Hawk Purchase, comprising in all about one-fourth of present-day Iowa. Approximately 16,000 settlers squatted in the Iowa District, some of whom were disturbed to learn that Senator Lewis F. Linn of Missouri had presented a petition of half-breed Sauks and Foxes, praying that their land "commonly called the Half-Breed Tract, above the mouth of the Des Moines river, may be annexed to the State of Missouri."

A government surveyor, who had worked in Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin, asserted that no land could compare with that in the Black Hawk Purchase. He had never dreamed a country "existed under Heaven" where "wild cherries and plums" grew in "such abundance" they could be carted away by the wagon load. The fruit was of such "fine size and flavor" that the exuberant surveyor was "induced to take several of them with him to place in the

gardens of Cincinnati." All who came and saw were conquered: a New Yorker preferred the Iowa District to "anything he had ever seen in his own State."

The western shore of the Mississippi between Muscatine Island and the mouth of the Wapsipinicon was a region "unrivalled in loveliness". While nature had lined the Mississippi above the Iowa District with "Alpine hills" and "frowning battlements," she had enriched the eastern border of the Black Hawk Purchase with the "milder beauties" of an "Arcadian country".

One traveler set out overland for Dubuque after a "good supper, bed and breakfast" at the McGregor Hotel in Davenport. On his way he saw many fine fields of good corn, some wheat, oats, and potatoes, and thought the land would "produce one hundred bushels of corn per acre" if carefully cultivated. He noted a sawmill at Duck Creek and a grist mill in operation on Crow Creek. Innumerable mill sites were observed and the need for such establishments was described as acute. Parkhurst was a "beautiful village" on the road to "Paradise".

The wayfarer stopped overnight at Mr. Bowen's "comfortable double log cabin" on the north bank of the Wapsipinicon. Here "good eating" in the form of pike, catfish, sturgeon, and red

horse, speared from the clear and beautiful Wapsie soon caused him to forget his weariness. After supper his host regaled him with hunting stories, concluding with a pressing invitation to stay a few days to shoot bear, deer, wolf, fox, and prairie chicken.

An eastern visitor was convinced that the Iowa District was destined to become one of the important States of the Union. "It has many attractions for an enterprising people, which are not united in any of the border States. And the present tide of emigration proves that this fact is well understood at the east."

This same writer pointed out in the *Newark Daily Advertiser* that the emigrant who expected to find a "howling wilderness" would be "agreeably disappointed." Although the government had "sold no land as yet," he explained, families were settling "under the preëmption privilege, and so great is the influx that every foot of the District will probably be thus appropriated before a sale is advertised. The crowd is so great that the ferries of the Mississippi cannot keep up with it, and the parties are obliged to wait their turn from three days to a week."

Nor were the resources of the Iowa District entirely agricultural. The *Iowa News* of June 3, 1837, was of the opinion that "perhaps no country

in the world is better supplied with water power than the Iowa District. The Turkey, Little Makoketa, Great Makoketa, Wabesipinecon, Iowa, Cedar, Schagua or Skunk, and Des Moines rivers, with their numerous tributaries, water the country and afford innumerable mill sites. We have travelled pretty extensively through the United States, and with the exception of the Falls of Niagara and the Falls of the Genesee, have seen no place where a greater water power can be obtained, or a situation better adapted for a great manufacturing town than is found at the great bend of the Des Moines river."

The Iowa District afforded a veritable haven for the industrious. A person with a nest egg of \$100 could "lay the foundation of an early and comfortable independence, with less toil than he must endure in the old settlements to pay his daily expenses". To "struggle with want, and continue with scarcity" along the Atlantic seaboard until the "energies of soul or body" were exhausted was proof either of a "lazy disposition or a depraved taste." Such character, the *Iowa News* felt, argued a "discreditable want of spirit and energy."

Laboring men were "much wanted" at Dubuque in June. Wages ran from \$20 to \$25 per month with board. High wages were paid for

hauling, and four or five dollars per acre was the rate for "breaking prairie sward". Many lead miners had actually "*settled down as gentlemen of leisure*", but the panic of 1837 suddenly brought an end to their idyllic life.

Settlers in the Iowa District were amazed at the opportunities for women as compared with conditions of "industrious, virtuous, and respectable poor females in the East". In Philadelphia, city of "benevolence and charity", women "unincumbered with children" made a scant dollar a week for sewing coarse shirts. "The price of sewing in Du Buque," the *Iowa News* pointed out, "is five times as high as in the East; and as for female servants, they are seldom to be had — their wages are from \$8 to \$10 per month."

In September, John Plumbe, Jr., urged the need of laborers as "absolutely indispensable to our prosperity!" He advocated the formation of "branch societies" to add "citizens and foreigners who are disposed to go West." But one who signed himself "Osman" objected to dumping the poor of Europe in the West. "By offering increased facilities to foreign emigrants we shall have the scum and refuse, the ignorant and depraved of European cities flooded in upon us, to perpetuate their language, manners and customs, operating hereafter as a political evil. The offer-

ing of bounties to the indigent foreigners would effectually bar the emigration of that more desirable class who bring wealth, intelligence and talent."

The Boston *Times* argued that the western climate was "not fitted" for New England women doomed from the start to trade the "lily white and rosy red" for the "saffron yellow of miasma, ague, cholera and death". But the *Iowa News* insisted there were proportionately as many "hearty, rosy-cheeked, handsome ladies" in the West as in the East. Nor was this hard to prove: Mrs. Butterworth, a resident of Dubuque since 1833, danced at her son's wedding at the ripe old age of 107 years. Again, although eighty years old, the widow of Alexander Hamilton arrived at Dubuque aboard the steamboat *Burlington* on a visit to her son, Colonel William S. Hamilton, then mining lead at Wiotia, Wisconsin.

The Iowa District was predominantly agricultural. Even in the mineral region, the *Iowa News* was "glad to find that those who have turned their attention to farming are likely to reap a rich reward for their industry". The editor hoped the mining district would soon produce enough for its own consumption.

The spring of 1837 was described as "very backward". By August, however, the editor of

the *Iowa News* saw some remarkable samples of wheat: "one bunch grown from one kernel, containing 32 stalks; another containing 42, which when hulled was found to contain 1400 grains! All grown from one grain of wheat." At the same time Dr. Andros produced two ears of corn which were ripe and sufficiently hard for seed. "This proves that however cold our climate may be considered, our soil is sufficiently rich to bring forth fruit in due season."

Apparently the East harbored grave doubts regarding the practicability of farming in the mineral region. "Taking all things into consideration," the *Iowa News* of August 26, 1837, declared, "perhaps this country is not equalled as an agricultural one. One farmer expects about 6000 bushels of corn — a yield of 60 or 65 bu. per acre; and says he did not cultivate it with any thing like care. Another says he expects 100 bushels an acre; this field being cultivated with care. Wheat, rye, buckwheat also yield abundantly; and as for potatoes they cannot be excelled in quantity or quality. Average prices are about as follows: Wheat \$1 per bu; rye 50 cts; corn 50 cts; oats 33; potatoes 25 cts. bu; other things in proportion. Taxes so light they may be said to be merely nominal."

Two thriving communities — Dubuque and Burlington — dominated the northern and south-

ern half of the Iowa District. Many of the "luxuries" as well as the "necessaries of life" were weekly brought up the Mississippi as far as Dubuque which was forging "ahead of any place in the Territory", not excepting Milwaukee. The "chief pressure" at Dubuque was for hands to keep pace with the enterprise of the people. "Among various buildings now going up is a large steam saw mill, which will furnish increased facilities for building. The capital stock of the Miners' Bank has just been subscribed, and the bank will go into operation as soon as the necessary arrangements can be made. The newspaper which was established here last year, has been revived with a good prospect, and schools and churches will not long be wanting."

Next to Dubuque in importance was Burlington, the "Seat of Justice" in Des Moines County as well as the temporary capital of Wisconsin Territory. Burlington had "an abundance of timber for every purpose, running water for manufacturing, and a convenient portion of prairie for grazing and farming." Eight new buildings were going up during the spring of 1837. The population of 1200, which consisted of emigrants from the eastern, the middle, and the western States, had doubled in one year. Almost every profession and calling was represented — lawyers, doctors,

merchants, mechanics, and farmers. Eleven dry goods stores, twelve commission and grocery merchants, two hotels besides several boarding houses, two apothecary shops, two cabinet shops, two smith shops, one carriage and plow factory, one saddlery, one bakery, one boot and shoe maker, one hatter, one silver and watch smith, one gunner, two tailors, one victualler, one painter, provided an index to the prosperity of the town. "We have also the Territorial Library", an enthusiastic resident records, "which is a credit to the Territory and an ornament to the town. We also have a livery and a printing office, and a most excellent newspaper; also a steam ferry boat, which plies across the Mississippi."

Dubuque had no rivals in the northern half of the Iowa District. Peru in the mineral region was only a village. Bellevue, located twenty-three miles below Dubuque, appears on a map of the "Public Surveys in Wisconsin Territory, 1837". Lyons and New York (Clinton) also are noted on this map. Thus only five villages above Davenport merited consideration by the public surveyors. The *Iowa News*, however, carried accounts of others. Durango, a "very promising town, nine miles west of Dubuque", had sprung up over night in 1835 as the result of the discovery of lead. About thirty or forty houses, two stores and five

groceries had been erected, but by 1836 the mineral was worked out and all but four or five of the families had left. Those who remained had become farmers by 1837. The reason Durango does not appear on the survey of 1837 is perhaps explained by the fact that the town was never "laid out", the sale of lots was not made, and the temporary cabins were put up "without regard to streets".

Then there was Richmond, situated on the "Great Maquoketa" three miles from its mouth, another mushroom settlement intended to "rank with the first in the far-famed West". The proprietors were Riley McPherson of Richmond and J. Horton Rose of Bellevue. These gentlemen were perfectly "aware that so many new towns have of late been laid off of minor importance" that they "respectfully invited all" to examine Richmond which was destined to become the "depot for the upper trade of the Maquoketa country, so justly celebrated in the great garden of the West."

Few towns were "more advantageously situated" than Camanche which was laid out in 1836 seven miles above the Wapsipinicon. Camanche claimed a fine steamboat landing, a rich country behind, a mild climate, and an industrious and hardy population. A large three-story hotel meas-

uring thirty by fifty feet, and a large number of stores and dwellings were under construction.

Davenport, Fort Armstrong, and Stephenson (Rock Island) formed an important commercial and trading area by the spring of 1837. The editor of the *Peoria Register* counted fifteen houses in Davenport, three of which were stores. The village also boasted a tavern. A good omen of future growth was the rapidity with which the interior was being settled.

An entirely different condition existed in the southern half of the Iowa District where towns (many of them on paper only) were springing up almost over night. Whereas only five towns were noted on the surveyor's map of 1837 above Davenport, eleven had achieved sufficient importance to be recorded below Davenport. In addition to Burlington, the surveyor located Rockingham, Iowa, Bloomington, Boston, Fort Madison, West Point, Tuscarora, Washington (not present-day Washington), and two Salems.

Fort Madison contained a population of "over 300, one large, commodious hotel, six dry goods stores, three provision stores, four groceries, two lawyers, two physicians, twenty-two carpenters and joiners, five plasterers, one wagon maker, four brick layers, two tailor shops, one blacksmith shop, one boot and shoe maker."

In addition to these villages, the press of the Territory recorded other embryonic settlements. Who would not be lured by the following account? "A Rochester has been laid out on one of the bends of the river Des Moines, which must, ere long, become a great manufacturing mart, for besides all its other natural advantages, it is surrounded with inexhaustible beds of bituminous coal. It is none of your paper cities, got up for speculation, but possesses intrinsic advantages, which must attract an industrious population."

Religion, morality, and education, politics, patent medicines, and preëmption, crops and crimes, mines and banks, these, and many more items, are recorded in the yellowed files of the Territorial press. Life was not easy but those who dared the hardships of the frontier in 1837 had the courage and fortitude to withstand what might otherwise have been considered almost insuperable odds. They brought with them, moreover, unwavering faith, a boundless hope and ambition, and a good sense of humor. Fortified with such armor they could not fail.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN