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

THE MEANING OF PALIMPSEST

In early times a palimpsest was a parchment or other material 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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Mennonites in Mount Pleasant

On Monday evening, July 20, 1874, the citizens of Mount Pleasant held a special meeting to make arrangements for receiving a party of exiled Mennonites who, it was rumored, were soon to visit their city. A committee consisting of P. N. Bowman, P. T. Twinting, E. W. Farwell, R. Eshelman, and D. I. Holcomb was appointed "to make proper arrangements for the reception and entertainment of this worthy and industrious people if they conclude to visit this locality".

A month earlier the Mount Pleasant *Free Press* had reported that inasmuch as a "large number of the people known as Mennonites are about to emigrate from Russia to this country, of whom several thousand will probably settle in Iowa, and some we hope in Henry County, there is considerable curiosity felt concerning their history and doctrines". The *Free Press* then went on to enlighten its readers on the history of the Mennonite church. It was believed at that time that

probably forty thousand of the forty-five thousand Mennonites in southern Russia would come to America during the next few years. Actually eighteen thousand came and settled in compact communities in western Canada, Minnesota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas.

During the reign of Frederick William II, many of the privileges Mennonites had formerly enjoyed in Prussia were curtailed. At the same time Catherine the Great, searching for good farmers to develop the newly acquired lands of southern Russia, extended an invitation in 1776 to Prussian farmers to move to this undeveloped area. During the next few years over six thousand Prussian Mennonites accepted Catherine's invitation.

There in the land of the Czars the Mennonites lived in peace for a century. There they built prosperous communities, free from molestation. There they had their own political institutions and their own schools, in which they taught their German culture, although nearly all of them were Dutch, having migrated to Prussia from Holland many years earlier. But in the 1870's the Russian rulers decided to abolish the privileges Catherine the Great had granted to the Mennonites, and to Russianize all of them. Their schools were to be taken away from them, Russian instead of Ger-

man was to be taught, and military service was to be required of them.

Many of the Russian Mennonites hoped that the rulers would change their policy. Cornelius Jansen, a Mennonite grain merchant serving as Prussian consul at Berdyansk, had no confidence that the Russian plan would be revoked and urged his fellow-churchmen to migrate to America, whereupon the Russian government, wishing to retain these valuable farmers, ordered Jansen to leave the country.

The Jansen family arrived in Quebec in August, 1873. From there Cornelius Jansen and his oldest son, Peter, came to the United States to investigate lands upon which their Russian friends might settle. In Washington they met President Grant, who was much interested in the proposed migration of the Mennonites. Thence they went to visit Mennonite leaders in Indiana and Illinois, and to explore the country beyond the Mississippi. "Early in the spring of 1874," wrote Peter Jansen in his *Memoirs,* "Father and I started out again and landed in Mt. Pleasant, Iowa, a nice little town in the southeastern part of the State. Here we found good schools, which was quite an inducement, as Father was anxious for the younger children to study English. We rented a nice little house" and soon moved to Iowa.

Sometime in June, 1874, the Jansen family established their home in Mount Pleasant. Cornelius Jansen, a man of culture, moderate wealth, and wide experience, soon became a well-known and influential individual. It is no cause for wonder that the citizens of Mount Pleasant were anxious to have his friends settle there.

In November of that year Jansen informed the citizens of Mount Pleasant that at least one thousand Mennonite families were preparing to leave Russia the next spring. The *Free Press* reported, "Mr. J. expects several families of the number to locate here, — those possessing means and desiring a delightful home. Among these will be many of his personal friends. We can assure him that to all such our citizens will extend a most cordial welcome. Mr. Jansen says that in all his travels he has met no town he likes better than Mt. Pleasant, no people with whom he is better pleased, and he is glad to return to it after his travels and labors farther west."

The coming of the Russian Mennonites was a matter of interest to many others. The New York *Herald* had reported in July, speaking of the six hundred who had passed through that city, "If these are a fair sample of those who are to follow we may expect the great body of emigrant Mennonites about to come to the United States from

Russia to rival their brethren in Pennsylvania and Maryland and the states of the northwest . . . We have had five or six generations of Mennonites born in this country, and the stock has proved so satisfactory that we cannot but receive the new supply with a special and hearty welcome."

So anxious were the frontier States to receive them that Kansas, Nebraska, and Minnesota passed laws exempting the Mennonites from military service. The railroads competed with each other in offering inducements to the Mennonites. The Santa Fe and the Missouri & Burlington railroads offered them immigrant houses, reduced freight rates, gifts, passes, and reduced prices of lands. Canada, too, made them flattering offers and many thousands accepted.

Although the people of Mount Pleasant were disappointed that several thousand Mennonites going to Kansas did not stop in Iowa, some of Jansen's friends finally did settle in Mount Pleasant. All of them, however, were his Prussian Mennonite friends instead of his Russian neighbors. Late in the evening of July 3, 1876, during a heavy rain and thunder storm, a large number of Jansen's friends arrived in Mount Pleasant. It must have been very dark at that hour, for Peter Dyck wrote in his diary, "We had arrived in Mt. Pleasant on July 3, in a heavy downpour

of rain. It was also a very dark evening and as we prepared to go into the station with our luggage, I in this heavy darkness while stepping from the train to the platform fell and bruised my shinbone, which two days later caused a sore foot. However, after applying boiled savory and crushed dock, the injury healed after five weeks."

In August thirty-three more Mennonites came to Mount Pleasant and in September eleven others. This brought to a close the Mennonite immigration to that city. There were enough for a small church with ninety-five members and eleven children. At first their Sunday services were held in private homes, but later the auditorium in the courthouse was used.

The Mount Pleasant Mennonite families had decided to settle as a community group and so delegations visited different localities in 1876 searching for a desirable location. The region around Storm Lake, Iowa, and areas in Kansas and Nebraska were examined, but the scouts had difficulty in making a decision. Finally Reverend Peter Dyck, who had been on at least two of these land-exploring trips, grew tired of waiting and bought a farm in Kansas. A few followed him and, with the Prussian friends who had not stopped in Iowa on the way, they organized a Mennonite church near Whitewater, Kansas.

The larger part of the Mount Pleasant delegation, however, settled near Beatrice, Nebraska, the locality favored by Cornelius Jansen and one of their young leaders, Aaron Claassen, who was interested in becoming Jansen's son-in-law. Later Claassen did marry Miss Jansen, the young lady from whose interesting diary some of the notes for this article are taken.

The first moving from Mount Pleasant to Nebraska took place on November 21, 1876. Elder Johann Andreas, Reverend Andreas Penner, J. H. Zimmerman, and some of the older and wealthier families remained through the winter because of the greater comfort found in Mount Pleasant. They, however, went on to Beatrice, Nebraska, in February, 1877.

During the two years the Jansens lived in Mount Pleasant they had many contacts with the community. For a time Peter attended Howe's Academy. His sister Helena attended the Young Ladies' Seminary, studying art under Miss Long from Burlington. A diary kept by daughter Anna reveals that they attended the Presbyterian Sunday School and that several of them taught classes in the Negro Sunday School. In November, 1875, the elder Jansen addressed the Mount Pleasant Conversational Club, relating the history of his people, explaining the cause of their

migration to America, and telling about his expulsion from Russia. So interesting was the address that the *Free Press* printed it in six installments.

The Jansen family was grief stricken, however, when daughter Margaret died. The members of the family remembered for many years how kind the people of Mount Pleasant were to them during the time of their bereavement. The *Free Press* reported that the funeral was largely attended, "our citizens showing much sympathy for the afflicted family". She was buried in Mount Pleasant and members of the family have often visited her grave.

The oldest son, Peter Jansen, later became one of Nebraska's illustrious citizens. He served in the State Senate, was a delegate-at-large to the St. Louis convention which nominated McKinley, and in 1900 was one of the twelve United States commissioners to the Paris World's Fair. He was intimately acquainted with most of the Presidents from Grant to Wilson, especially with McKinley and Taft. At one time he was offered the nomination for Governor of Nebraska but refused it because as Governor he might have been called upon to enforce the death penalty.

MELVIN GINGERICH

Rickenbacker Wins

The eyes of the automobile racing world were on the Sioux City speedway that eventful Fourth of July back in 1914. It was for a good reason that this two-mile dirt track had gained the attention of auto-conscious America. Sioux City was staging a $25,000 sweepstakes race which had attracted some of the most famous drivers in the world.

It all started when C. M. Wyckoff, local automobile dealer, went to the Indianapolis 500-mile race the previous spring and got the idea for an auto race to be held at Sioux City which would "be every bit as good as the Indianapolis event." Upon his return he told his plan to S. C. Douglas and E. R. Shultz. The three men talked the idea over with other businessmen and presently everybody was preparing for the $25,000 auto sweepstakes which was scheduled for Saturday, July 4th.

Among the first entries to come in were the names of Eddie Rickenbacker, Barney Oldfield, and Spencer Wishart. Even the backers of the race had not planned on such a famous group of drivers entering the race. When it was an-

nounced that these three world-famous drivers would compete, loyal citizens became aware of the fact that the Fourth of July race was going to make history. Additional bleachers were erected for the crowd that would swarm out to the race track. Entries continued to flow in and when the final day for entering arrived, twenty drivers had registered their intent to participate. While the managers were busy with their tasks, a crew of workmen had started rolling, oiling, and watering the Union County two-mile dirt track which was located across the Big Sioux River in South Dakota.

Interest in the speed carnival was stimulated on Tuesday afternoon when three members of the Sioux City Automobile Club raced sixteen miles on the speedway in stock cars. Win Watson won with a Mitchell in 17 minutes and 33 2/5 seconds. Racing fever really struck Sioux City on Wednesday, July 1st, when the drivers began the time trials for the 300-mile race. After Dr. P. E. Keefe had examined the entrants and their mechanics, the time trials were started. During the trials each driver was allowed three attempts to circle the track in the lowest possible time. An entrant had to average seventy miles an hour for one lap to qualify. Reward for the fastest time was the pole position in the Saturday race.

The time trials lasted until July 3rd. During that time the "speed bugs" saw many records broken by the daredevil drivers as they roared around faster than a mile a minute. Spencer Wishart, a New York millionaire and holder of many titles, piloted his Mercer car around the course in the record-smashing time of 1:26 4/5 with an average speed of eighty-three miles an hour to win the time trials. "Smiling Howdy" Wilcox, in his Gray Fox, made the second fastest time of 1:27 4/5. Eddie Rickenbacker had previously qualified with a time of 1:27 1/5 but his speed was not recorded as he had entered a different car in the main race from the one he had driven in the time trials. Barney Oldfield, idol of the racing crowd, encountered engine trouble in his first time around the track but later made a run of 1:29 to win a great ovation from the spectators.

Much excitement was provided during the time trials when Joe Horan broke a crankshaft while going eighty miles an hour. The auto swerved to the left and he missed Wishart's racer by "a fraction of an inch". Through skillful driving Horan brought the car to a stop without further mishap. Billy Chandler and George Babcock were both cut by flying clods of dirt which had been dislodged by the tires. No serious accidents, however, marred the time trials.

The feature attraction at the Wednesday trials on July 1st was a race between H. A. Wetmore, Sioux City entrant, and Matt Savidge, pilot of an airplane. At a given signal the pilot swooped down over the field in his biplane and began to overtake Wetmore in his Chalmers racer. The pilot bucked a strong headwind on the back straightaway and the car pulled into the lead. It was a nip-and-tuck battle but the racer proved its mastery by finishing ahead of the plane.

After each driver had taken the track in an attempt to make his best speed, the qualifying trials were officially closed on Friday, July 3rd. No sooner had the cars been driven off the track than workmen began preparing the course for the long race. They poured five thousand gallons of boiling crude oil on the track in order to eliminate dust. The crew labored far into the night smoothing and pressing the track with a ten-ton roller.

A crowd of 50,000 was expected at the race and the managers had installed a special section for a thousand newsmen. Cars from every State in the Union were arriving in Sioux City all day Friday. They only added to the confusion of the great crowds which had been attracted to the town by "gasoline fever". Special trains bearing fans arrived throughout the night. Two thousand racing fans from Omaha came by train and auto.

All hotels and rooming houses were sold out the night before the race. Many of the visitors slept on lawns or pitched their tents on vacant lots. Race talk filled the air on that sultry night before the "big race". News of the assassination of the archduke of Austria at Sarajevo, which started the first World War, was completely ignored.

Professional gamblers picked Wishart to win the race. One bookmaker, however, was offering odds of two hundred to one that a person could not select the winner. Betting on the outcome of the race was above the $30,000 mark according to the Sioux City *Journal*. The French cars which had carried off top honors at the Indianapolis 500-mile race on Memorial Day were not rated so highly on the Sioux City dirt track.

The drivers, in the meantime, were busy warding off the crowds in a vain attempt to get to their hotel rooms in order that they might be in bed by ten P. M. Barney Oldfield spent most of his time shaking hands with hero-worshipping youngsters. One of the fans asked the cigar-smoking champ how many "stogies" he smoked in a day. Barney replied: "I don't even count 'em any more, I just buy them by the rope length and keep up a continual puff!"

Eddie Rickenbacker, whose headquarters were in Des Moines, was a general favorite. He had

brought his racing cars directly to Sioux City from Indianapolis where he had placed tenth. Cornered by a reporter and asked to make a comment concerning the sweepstakes, the man who was destined to become premier ace among American pilots in the first World War answered: "The motor racing game is in its infancy. I have found that money commands the cars and drivers, these in turn attract the crowds and the crowds bring the money — Sioux City has entered the racing game at the right moment."

Soon the heroes had disappeared but the fans continued to fill the hotel lobbies with talk of the sweepstakes. The question on everyone's lips was, "Who will win the race?" Children went to bed that night dreaming not of firecrackers and skyrockets but of the sleek, powerful machines called racers which would be roaring over the track the next day.

"The opinion of many is to the effect that the people of Sioux City do not really know just how big a race is going to be held on the two-mile oval July 4", wrote Allen Rankin of the Chicago *Herald*. "To the men connected with the game it is different. The clash of stars on the track will be the second biggest in the United States. It is so little behind Indianapolis that it ranks right alongside except to the very few. Never in the history

of dirt track racing has such a field of stars and such a field of fast machines been gathered as has been named to take the flag from Starter Fred J. Wagner the day when roaring and popping exhausts will take the place of fireworks".

Cafe owners had ordered the following food and drink with the hope that they could partially satiate the appetites of speed fans: 100,000 bottles of pop, one dray load of chicken dinners, one carload of ice cream, one carload of fruit, 20,000 packages of "munchers", five tons of peanuts, 40,000 buns, and many hundreds of pounds of meat.

The first gray streaks of the morning sun signaled the beginning of one of the biggest caravans of automobiles ever seen in the Midwest. Thousands of cars chugged into the long string of autos that threaded its way over the Big Sioux road and into the speedway grounds. The early morning crowd which packed the bleachers many hours before the race was prepared to spend a glorious Fourth watching the speedsters circle the track for 300 thrill-packed miles.

Auto pits were bustling with activity as the mechanics, drivers, and helpers were busy tuning up the motors of the racing cars which were to endure a speed of over seventy-five miles an hour for approximately four hours.

Scorecards listed the twenty drivers, and their machines, who had qualified for the 300-mile sweepstakes race. They were: Gil Anderson (Stutz), Bob Burman (Peugeot special), George Mason (Mason special), Billy Knipper (Delage), W. J. Shrunk (White), Spencer Wishart (Mercer), Barney Oldfield (Stutz), Cyrus Patschke (Marmon), Mel Stringer (Peugeot), Harry Grant (Sunbeam), Ralph Mulford (Peugeot), Howard Wilcox (Gray Fox), George Babcock (Sunbeam), Eddie Rickenbacker (Duesenberg), Thomas Alley (Duesenberg), H. A. Wetmore (Chalmers), Jack Le Cain (Chevrolet), Ely Cailloutte (Moon), George Jessop (Chevrolet), and Billy Chandler (Braender Bulldog).

Just before the race, Starter Fred J. Wagner issued a call for Ely Cailloutte, George Jessop, and Jack Le Cain who reported to him in a few minutes. Wagner reluctantly told the drivers that it had been decided that their autos were too slow for the rest of the field. Upon hearing this Le Cain "wept like a baby" and pleaded with the officials, but to no avail.

Shortly before 11:00 A. M. the seventeen autos were placed in the positions they had won as a result of the time trials during the previous three days. At a signal from the starter the racers circled the course, with the three fastest cars in

the first line. The whole group went around the track and came down the straightaway slowly, maintaining their positions. As they passed the judge's stand, Wagner raised the starting flag. The noise of the seventeen powerful motors was deafening and the crowd anxiously awaited the drop of the flag. An official in the stand waved the $25,000 check which the ten winners would share. Suddenly Wagner lowered the flag as the first three cars went over the starting line. The race was on!

"Wild Bob" Burman immediately seized the lead and maintained a substantial margin over his closest rival for sixteen laps. Wishart was behind Burman during these first thirty-two miles. When "Wild Bob" went to the pits to change a tire, Wishart surged into first position. Cyrus Patschke and Billy Knipper were staging a fight for second place throughout the first fifty miles. Behind the leaders were Eddie Rickenbacker and Barney Oldfield who were content to bide their time, following the pace setters. Accompanying Eddie and his mechanic was a small kitten named Duzenbacker which slept by his master during the race.

At the start of the second hundred miles, Tom Alley wrested the lead from Wishart. This was the signal for his teammate Rickenbacker to make

a bid for the Number 1 position and he pressed more heavily on the Duesenberg accelerator. A Wishart-Rickenbacker duel began as Spencer pulled away from his rival on the straightaway but was overtaken by Eddie on the turns.

While the leaders were holding the interest of the crowd, Ralph Mulford went out of the race when his car's oiling system was damaged. A short time later Mel Stringer broke the crankshaft of his car while going eighty miles an hour. His machine headed for the judges' stand but Stringer managed to halt the Peugeot a few feet from the structure.

Spencer Wishart again took the lead when he overtook Alley on the seventy-fifth lap. While Wishart was forging ahead of Alley, Barney Oldfield's Stutz radiator burst and the champion was forced to go to the pits for the remainder of the race. A half lap behind Wishart was Rickenbacker. Trailing Eddie were Knipper, Patschke, and Alley. For approximately one hundred and fifty miles "Rick" and Wishart waged a see-saw battle. Then, as if from nowhere, Patschke bolted past Wishart and the fans went wild. After a heated discussion at the judges' stand, however, it was found that Patschke was really in fourth place and a lap behind the leaders.

As the race went on, clouds of dust began to

blanket the stands as the cars churned the track at high speeds. The turns were becoming more hazardous as the tires skidded and slipped while rounding the treacherous curves. Alley was severely burned when gasoline burst into flames while he was refueling. The car was not damaged, however, and continued with Mulford as relief pilot. A few of the drivers who were many miles behind the leaders dropped out of the race, but they returned when they discovered that they still had an opportunity to share in the prize money.

Billy Knipper took the lead when Wishart's Mercer was driven to the pits for repairs, but Wishart returned after a brief period and recaptured his position. Knipper dropped back to third place only to return at the beginning of the one-hundredth lap to threaten Wishart and Rickenbacker again for forty miles. At the end of 121 laps Knipper withdrew temporarily to the pits opposite the grandstands, leaving Wishart and Rickenbacker to fight for the position of pace maker. The other contestants were far behind. Though Knipper returned to the race he could not hope to overtake the leaders. Eddie trailed his rival by half a lap for a few more miles and then, with a burst of speed, zoomed into first place. When he rounded the first turn after completing

the 143rd lap, officials discovered, to their dismay, that in reality Rickenbacker was on his 147th lap. How the error in scoring occurred was never discovered. Spencer Wishart saw his chances of victory quickly vanish but he fought a desperate battle in the closing laps. The final "stretch drive" was one that brought the crowd to its feet as the two drivers took the turns at breakneck speed.

To insure his victory, Rickenbacker circled the course three additional times. The official starter had his checkered flag poised in midair, ready to drop it as Eddie came down the straightaway to cross the finish line. Bang! went one of his tires as the shattered tube burst into the air and pieces scattered over the track. Undaunted by the blow-out he piloted his auto over the finish line to capture the Sioux City sweepstakes!

As soon as the Duesenberg rolled to a stop the champion was placed on the shoulders of the mechanics and was carried triumphantly from the scene of his victory. He had averaged 78.8 miles an hour in traveling the three hundred miles in the amazing time of three hours, forty-nine minutes and two seconds, missing the world's record for that distance by thirteen seconds.

The race lasted for an hour after Rickenbacker's finish. And as the crowd slowly filed out of

the grandstands the judges of the sweepstakes decided that further racing was needless. Many of the drivers were many laps behind the cars which had finished and interest in watching these racers had dwindled to indifference. Finally, the officials stopped the race and made an agreement with the drivers to give them the position they held at the time the race was ended. The announced order of finish was: Rickenbacker, first; Wishart, second; Alley and Mulford, third; Anderson, fourth; Patschke, fifth; Knipper, sixth; Wilcox, seventh; Chandler, eighth; Shrunk, ninth; and Wetmore, tenth.

A few minutes after the close of the race protests were filed by Wishart, Charles Erbstein, the owner of Patschke's auto, and H. J. Stutz, the owner of Anderson's car. The three men were dissatisfied with the method of scoring and keeping lap records. Following the submission of the protests a meeting was held to settle the controversy. For eighteen hours the drivers, owners, and officials debated. During that time the judges checked the laps and conferred on the scoring procedures. Needless to say the matter was hotly contested by the drivers who attended the session. Wishart believed the judges had miscalculated his laps and demanded a recount. Rickenbacker fought harder to hold his first place title

than he did during the race. A careful recheck of the records confirmed Wishart's second place. Finally, toward the end of Sunday afternoon, the judges accepted a readjustment which Rickenbacker had proposed to satisfy the disgruntled persons. His teammate Alley, whose race was finished by Mulford, was shifted from third to sixth, Patschke was moved up from fifth to third, and Knipper advanced from sixth to fifth. After this adjustment, "Rick" was allowed to keep his well-earned first prize of $10,000. Wishart was killed seven weeks later in the Elgin National Trophy Race.

The racing fans who had witnessed the thrilling Fourth of July sweepstakes at the Sioux City track awoke the day after the races with aching eyes, caused by dust and glare from the sun. Hurried trips to the doctors yielded little relief. "Bathe 'em in cold water", was the unsympathetic advice of physicians who had more patients than patience. And so most of the 40,000 who had seen the $25,000 sweepstakes went home to re-live yesterday's exciting race — with cold damp cloths over their eyes.

REEVES HALL

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