

The Gem of the West

"The traces of man's industry and genius are few; and at best they are crude and primitive as yet." Thus wrote Ole Munch Raeder, a Norwegian traveler, after his journey in eastern Iowa in the fall of 1847. He predicted that it would be "a long time" before the "dreary monotony of the woods" would be "enlivened by the appearance of neat little towns and smiling landscapes with cheerful farmhouses". Within five years a Davenport correspondent of the *New York Times* observed transitions wrought "under the magic power of the hammer and spade" which were so "apparent and great" that he "burst forth in new strains of admiration." Similarly, the Council Bluffs *Chronotype* reported "the cultivated field and domestic herd every where proclaim the great change". Within a decade after Raeder's journey the *Des Moines Journal* noted "a wonderful and stupendous change". "Thousands" of farmhouses had replaced Indian wigwams; cities and thriving villages had "arisen as if by magic;" mills clattered on the banks of "every river," and locomotives were snorting across the prairies, the *Journal* recorded.

The transformation was wrought by the onward flow of increasing immigration. In 1852 it was "pouring in . . . like a flood, apparently exceeding that of any preceding year", the *Des Moines Star* stated. "Ere long," it believed, Iowa would "bud and blossom like a rose" and become "one of the most prosperous and rich agricultural States." Emigration to Iowa was reported in the *Louisville Journal* to be "astonishing and unprecedented" in 1853. A *New York Times* correspondent noted the arrival of "many thousands" in 1855, while in the next year the *Daily Express and Herald* of Dubuque stated that river ports were "thronged with the surge" of emigrants. "There is a force in this flood of immigration as irresistible as the Mississippi at the 'June Rise' ", wrote Charles Foster of Washington, Iowa, in the *New York Tribune* in the spring of 1857.

That Iowa should receive an influx of settlers was inevitable. Interest in the State was stimulated by correspondents and newspapers, thus speeding the process of settlement. This was the opinion of Josiah B. Grinnell, writing in the *New York Tribune*. Many "favorable notices" given the pioneer Commonwealth in the *Tribune*, *Springfield Republican*, *Chicago Herald*, and other newspapers brought "a deluge of letters" of inquiry, he stated. Questions about land, living

conditions and society, water power, opportunities for mechanics, comparisons with prospects in neighboring States, and "how, on the whole, do you like Iowa?" were most common. Iowa editors and correspondents presented the inducements to settlers in both local and eastern newspapers. Indeed, the State was "very appropriately termed the Canaan of the emigrant," the *Chicago Press* declared.

It was only natural that agricultural opportunities should receive most stress by correspondents, for "an Emigrant", writing in the *New York Tribune* in 1851, recognized that Iowa "probably" contained "more of the first class arable land, in a healthy climate, than any other of the United States." Jacob M. Eldridge presented figures in the same paper to induce farmers to go to Iowa. Abundant fertile land could be obtained at the government price of \$1.25 per acre, or \$100 for an eighty. At \$2.00 per acre, it could be broken for \$160, while fencing it, at seventy cents per rod, would cost \$336. Thus, Eldridge estimated, a prairie farm could be purchased and opened for \$596. An income of \$2380 from the sale of crops could be expected the first year. Forty acres of wheat, at the prevailing price of seventy cents per bushel, would total \$840; thirty acres of corn, at thirty cents per bushel, would net \$540; while ten

acres of potatoes, at fifty cents a bushel, would bring another \$1000. If all his estimates were correct, a balance of \$1784 would remain after subtracting \$596 from the total income of \$2380. "There is your year's work and farm clear," wrote Eldridge. "If you can beat that in the State of New York, just let me know," he added.

This communication drew a comment from the *Tribune* editor who observed that Eldridge was "a good hand at cyphering — we trust that he is equally good at farming." It was pointed out that no allowances had been made for seed costs, cultivating, harvesting, and marketing. Nor did Eldridge include any costs for equipment such as a team, wagon, and essential implements. Consistent with his policy, however, the editor urged "poor men with little money and a good many children (present or prospective)" to go to Iowa. Those who had previously settled there "may well thank a kind Providence and need not wander to Sacramento in quest of gold," he wrote.

"No country on earth" could compete with Iowa in livestock raising, according to an anonymous correspondent from Poweshiek County. Much land was held by speculators, he pointed out, and farmers could graze their cattle and cut hay on it "for years to come." In the meantime, settlers could fence their own farms and raise

grain and corn to fatten the livestock. This, he believed, was "a very great convenience" to a settler in a new country.

"Buckeye" reported in the *New York Times* that he had seen the "richest and most splendid" crops of corn, oats, and wheat in Iowa. Nor was this surprising, for a New Yorker, who traveled in Iowa, wrote that the soil was "rich as a stable-yard," while Alice Mann declared that it made "little difference what seeds are put into the ground, or how. . . . The seed sown is sure to grow abundantly." Little wonder that a rumor of Iowa farmers being "unable to sleep" because of "the racket made by the rapid growth of corn" was reprinted in several newspapers. Such vegetation justified the *National Intelligencer* (Washington, D. C.) in stating that "flattering accounts" of Iowa's fertility and productivity were "not exaggerated". Indeed, the *Albia Weekly Republican* summarized Iowa's agricultural opportunities as constituting "emphatically Eden for farmers."

Iowa presented opportunities in other fields of endeavor as well. Many correspondents stressed the excellent water-power resources. "The almost unlimited water power at this place", it was reported from Elkader, "forms a nucleus around which, at no distant day, a populous and enter-

prising village is sure to grow." Charles Foster at Washington announced in the *New York Tribune* a great need for laborers at \$1.25 to \$1.50 per day, as well as for mechanics at \$1.75 to \$2.25 per day. Teachers were also needed: ladies could get from \$12 to \$16 per month and men from \$15 to \$50, he stated. Indeed, correspondents were agreed that Iowa in the fifties offered attractive opportunities to much needed workers in all occupations. Only of lawyers and land agents, "our greatest pests", were there "too many", correspondents agreed.

"The privations and hardships . . . incident to Western life, do not exist here," an Iowan wrote in the *New York Tribune*. Other correspondents testified that Iowa's "salubrious" climate was "less severe than in Minnesota," nor did it have the "consumptive changes" of other States. Moreover, "the socialities of life," "Buckeye" stated in the *New York Times*, "are here much better than many conjecture." Indeed, Mrs. Frances D. Gage, temperance lecturer, found Iowa pioneers of the fifties to be "very much the same people in Iowa" that they had been "at home". She paid tribute to the men whom she saw at a political rally in Oskaloosa. They "looked just like men elsewhere," except they were "a little more civil and genteel, and did not

make quite so general a spittoon of the Court-House." Though still in the "log cabinage" stage, the "little deprivations" called out the "latent powers" of people which "cultivates the fallow grounds of heart and feelings," she wrote in the *New York Tribune*. The new country, she reported in 1854, made them "more free, more earnest, more charitable". Her sister testified that neighborly communities were developing. She had settled in Iowa ten years earlier and "for weeks I saw no face of woman." Yet when Mrs. Gage came to visit, the "friendly cheerful smoke of twenty home-fires" could be counted from her sister's door. Mrs. Gage "ate and slept" in these cabins and found "there was peace, plenty and cheerfulness." She could not fathom why people would live in "the dust and smoke and din" of eastern cities when Iowa beckoned with "so much of beauty, freshness and utility unappropriated." Mrs. Gage's opinion was corroborated by another *Tribune* correspondent, "who had travelled in Iowa." He did "conscientiously recommend" and "earnestly advise" people to settle here. That would make the "the fortunates among the children of men," for, he wrote, "I think Iowa bids fair to be the gem of the West."

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