

The Promised Land

The first of May, 1843, was the date on which the New Purchase was to be opened for settlement. Long before this the news had travelled like wild fire through the land behind the frontier, so that weeks ahead of the eventful day the settlers were encamped for miles along the boundary, ready for a hurried dash into the "promised land".

The event had been well-heralded by the newspapers, which undoubtedly helped to swell the ranks of the immigrants. "Oregon is a small potato compared with the new Iowa purchase," said one editor, "so far as the interests of a western settler may be concerned." Another declared that the "Indians have represented the country as containing very rich and valuable mines of lead, iron, copper and a metal supposed to be tin ore. There can be no doubt but what the new purchase contains advantages altogether superior to any entirely new country now open to settlement in the United States."

People were urged to "take a look at the new purchase", for the "soil is unsurpassed in point of fertility by any portion of the west," and the "prairies are gently rolling, and well surrounded and interspersed with beautiful groves of a good quality of timber for farming purposes. The country bordering and watered by the Des Moines River

abounds with extensive beds of coal, easy of access and of good quality."

Besides these newspaper accounts there were many handbooks about Iowa, put out by professional boosters such as J. B. Newhall, which purported to be accurate guides to the immigrant and companions to the tourist. In all of these the new purchase was glowingly described as a happy land "possessed of a soil unrivalled in the variety and excellence of its products," and with a most "salubrious climate". They dwelt upon the scenery of the new country, setting forth the southern portion as "most picturesque, abounding with grassy lawns and verdant vales, interspersed with groves and meandering rivulets." The northern part on the other hand was described as more "bold and striking. The traveller here beholds the hill-top crowned with towering oaks to its lofty summit — the river tumbling its crested foam over precipitous ledges of cragged rocks — the spiral cliffs and massy ledges grouped in fantastic forms amidst the cultivated valley."

The prospective settlers were also furnished with minute information as to the climate. They were told that the "winters usually commence with December, and end about the first of March. They are generally dry and bracing, although the month of February frequently presents a temperature quite variable; sometimes warm and pleasant, and a sudden change to cold and freezing." The winter cli-

mate was pronounced to be "somewhat milder than the Atlantic States in the same parallel of latitude", and the snow was said to rarely fall "to the depth of more than six or eight inches, and seldom to obstruct travelling".

Of spring it was granted that the first "months are generally disagreeable and cheerless, and anything but what the softness of the name indicates." By the middle of April or the first of May, however, the "groves resume their foliage, the prairies are covered with their brilliant carpets of green, and all nature around appears to smile in joyous gladness to be released from the chilly habiliments of winter."

The third season was admitted to be warm, yet "not oppressively hot. During the sultry months, the heat is modified by soft, genial breezes and delightful showers, which are constantly giving the atmosphere a reviving elasticity." After the rain the "sun lifts his refulgent beams from the passing cloud — the flowers of every color and hue waving their beautiful crests, in fit resemblance of adoration to the omnipotent Power that smiles upon his own handiwork."

Of the autumn, one writer asserted that the "oppressive summer heat is over by the last of August, and from that time until the middle of November, the mellow softness of the climate, the beauty and grandeur of the foliage, the dry and natural roads that cross our prairies, the balmy fragrance of the atmosphere, the serene sky, all combined, present to

the eye of the traveller a picture calculated to excite emotions of wonder and delight.”

With the whole country flooded with such enticing literature it was not strange that home ties were strained and broken. The ever-rising tide of westward emigration was swelled by hundreds of settlers eager for the moment when they could enter the new El Dorado in central Iowa. There were many seasoned pioneers in the stream of travellers — men who were always ready to move on across the newest boundary line, who had been “first settlers” all the way from the Atlantic seacoast. Among the bona fide homesteaders were men from the established sections of Iowa who had been dissatisfied with the claims they had obtained in the last purchase, and were ready to try their luck anew. There were men from every State of the Union — young men who were out to start their fortunes mingling with the middle-aged rainbow-chasers who had been failures back home and were making a desperate effort to get a foothold in a new land. And with all these men came women and children, and cows and sheep and pigs and oxen, and as much paraphernalia of a household as could be packed within the bulging sides of a covered wagon. For established householders were not immune from the wanderlust.

So it was that for many weeks before the first of May the lines of long “blue wagons” with their “white flowing tops” could be seen slowly winding

over the wide prairie like the "sailing craft of the ocean beating their onward course to the wished-for haven." They were stopped temporarily at the Mississippi, but tar buckets dangled from the back end of most of the wagons and the seams were calked so that the bodies would float while the horses or oxen swam. Rafts were also employed in crossing, and many a local citizen of Keokuk, Davenport, or Burlington made good money plying the trade of a ferryman. The *Burlington Gazette*, in commenting upon local events, said that "hundreds of emigrants have landed at our wharf within the last two or three weeks; and the tide still continues to pour in upon us — most of them bound for the Indian country."

When the boundary line of the Indian country was finally reached there was nothing to do but camp until the appointed day for settlement. All along the border of the Indian country, in Van Buren, Jefferson, Keokuk, and Iowa counties, there was scarcely a grove that did not shelter an encampment of pioneers. The women made friends with the other women; loaned and borrowed and gave, and hung out their washing on the same leafless trees. The men explored the promised land and located their claims. In the evening they built common camp fires, swapped stories, and divided the bounty of the day's hunt with their neighbors. A common spirit of sympathy and enthusiasm pervaded the clusters of camps.

But jealousies sometimes flared if there was too much particularized talk of claims and sections. For in the last analysis it was each man for himself and the "devil take the hindmost". The government had decreed that no boundary lines could be marked off, but stakes were surreptitiously driven into the ground so as to be almost out of sight and trees were blazed in inconspicuous places. But even if the invader was sure he could find the same piece of land again he never knew but what some of his neighbors had their hearts set on it too, and would get there first.

To avoid this misfortune a number of the more courageous settlers travelled on to their chosen claims and immediately squatted upon them. A company of United States dragoons was stationed along the boundary to prevent this, and they turned the poachers out as fast as they found them. However, some of the poor squatters, "who were striving to obey the edict", had such a perfect avalanche of bad luck, such as broken wagons, strayed cattle and oxen, or stolen property, that they managed to maintain the process of moving out until the first day of May. One man was busily engaged in driving a stake on his land when he was surprised by a number of dragoons and was immediately arrested. He was put to work digging up a stump near Garrison Rock as a punishment for crossing the line. A certain family, however, when discovered living in a cave near their claim, persuaded the dragoons that

they were doing no harm, and were allowed to remain unmolested.

And meanwhile, as the white people were engaged in an eager strife for the new country, the Indians were reluctantly preparing to leave their familiar hunting grounds. By the treaty of 1842 they were bound to vacate the eastern half of the New Purchase on or before the first of May, 1843. The balance of the purchase to the west of this line was to be reserved for the Indians for three years, after which time they were to move to a government reservation beyond the Missouri River.

These humane provisions, coupled with the fact that the red men had been given a million dollars for the land, silenced any qualms which the settlers might have had in taking possession of the "very heart of Iowa" and the "richest and most desirable portion of land ever obtained from the Indians; and better probably, than any now held by them." The settlers were jubilant over the bargain and cared little that another race was being thrust from its native groves and prairies. They reconnoitered the purchase and wrote back east with the news that "we can safely say there is room enough upon it for the population of almost every State in the Union."

So the "frail dwellings, beaten trails and newly made graves of the Indians" were left to be broken down and plowed over by the conquering civilization. The Indians passed and repassed through the timber, carrying away meager supplies of corn

which had been raised in their fields, and sometimes pausing by their old hunting grounds as if for a last look at the "land which had been so long their home." The wife of an Indian chieftain, as she was being hurried away, broke from the group and turned back with the cry, "Oh, let me go back and take one more drink from the old spring!"

As midnight on the thirty-first of April finally approached, there was suppressed excitement all up and down the long line of waiting settlers. The night was black, but everything was in readiness for a rapid advance into the new country. At the stroke of twelve, guns were fired and brush piles started blazing. It was time to march. What had been quiet expectancy for hours was now frenzied movement and pandemonium. Prairie schooners lurched along through the darkness bound for the farthest claims. Lone horsemen circled the slower caravans with shouts of glee. Men rushed forward on foot with their hatchets in their hands, leaving their women to follow as best they could. Thus the "tide of emigration poured in like the 'rush of mighty waters' ", and by one o'clock the woods resounded with the chopping of axes and the shouts of friends, while out on the prairie torches gleamed fitfully like enormous fireflies. The settlers had begun to lay the bounds of their homesteads.

In many cases wives held the torches while husbands drove stakes or blazed their claim on the sides of trees. Compasses were used to direct the lines,

and so many steps each way meant that the settler had encircled a quarter or half section farm. It was exciting business.

As daylight broke over the strange array many of the settlers were forced to admit that "haste makes waste", for much of the night's work had to be done all over again. Claims which were supposed to be square turned out triangular or many sided. Often they overlapped, while in other places wide expanses of fine land were left unclaimed.

In general every one had sought the heavily wooded areas, for they thought that "land that wouldn't grow timber wouldn't grow corn". They were also desirous of having plenty of fuel, protection from the winter winds, and a good supply of fish and water from the streams which usually accompanied the timber. If prairie farms were taken at all it was customary to include a bit of timber with them. The Des Moines River lands were particularly sought, for that stream was deeper and clearer than it is now, and well stocked with fish. The pioneers had yet to learn that stump-pulling was endless work, and that heavy timber shut out the sunlight so that water became stagnant and caused fever.

As soon as the arduous task of bounding the land was over the next thing to do was to make "improvements" upon it. This usually consisted of a log house and a little broken sod. The houses were roofed with bark and sod or swamp grass, and had

stone fireplaces with flues of sod, or of stones plastered together with mud. Some of these dwellings were actually half built by dawn of the first of May.

Numerous disputes arose as to the rightful squatters on conflicting claims, or whether a cabin was a greater "improvement" than a few acres of broken sod, but once the question was settled every one abided by the decision. The new citizens of a land which had no government held sacred the bounds of a homestead.

Within a few weeks "claim committees" were organized to deal with the unscrupulous breed of men known as "jumpers", who squatted on a piece of land after it had been taken, and under one pretext or another tried to drive the homesteader out. The type of justice administered by the committees was crude but effective. They usually made a plain statement of their opinion of the rights of the injured party, and ordered the trespasser to submit to their judgment, in default of which he might be driven out of the country, if not out of the world altogether. It was well understood that "when the committee reported it meant business", and generally the "mighty threats of battle ended in smoke."

On that first day of settlement every settler was potentially a farmer, but there were some who had visions of towns and cities being subsequently located on their claims. One such group in particular, organized as the Appanoose Rapids Company, became the founders of Ottumwa, at first called Ottum-

wanoc after an Indian village of that name. They located claims on the Des Moines River near the center of the newly created county of Wapello, and proceeded to mark the land off into streets and lots in the hope that the county seat would be located there.

Other towns grew more spontaneously where a few chance settlers had clustered together. The most important of these were Philadelphia, Iowa-ville, Dahlonga, Eddyville, and Agency City. The first two have long since passed out of existence and Agency City, now only a village of less than four hundred inhabitants, is known as Agency. It is on the site of the old Sac and Fox Agency a few miles east of Ottumwa.

Whatever the motive for settlement, the New Purchase was suddenly swarming with people, particularly along the Des Moines and Skunk rivers. It was estimated that two thousand settlers came into Wapello County on the first of May, and the influx of homesteaders in neighboring counties was equally remarkable.

The citizens of the New Purchase proceeded to make themselves comfortable in their hastily constructed log cabins. They fared bountifully on corn bread, mush and milk, turkeys and grouse, and a profusion of wild berries. There was little preparation for the coming winter, however, as it was too late in the spring to sow crops. "Sod corn" was about the only grain planted. This was done by

striking an axe into the turf, dropping in the corn, and letting nature do the rest. The yield was usually fifteen or twenty bushels per acre, and the crop had the further merit of rotting the sod so that it could be more easily broken the next year.

The glorious summer passed pleasantly and all too soon. Before the settlers were well prepared, cold weather began and the long winter was unusually severe. Faith in the "salubriousness" of the Iowa climate was taxed to the utmost. But the hardships of the present were rendered endurable to most of the settlers by their hopes of the future — the time when, with their frugally saved gold, they could pay the government \$1.25 an acre, and become the lords of their precious homesteads.

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