

Westward

It is a matter of surprise how little the intelligent inhabitants of New England know of the country west of the Mississippi, and especially of this Territory. Ask the first intelligent man you meet for the geography of Iowa, and, in nine cases out of ten, he can give you no definite idea of its position. He knows it is a Territory lying "somewhere out west," and this is about the sum of his knowledge on the subject. Tell him that in 1832 the white man made his first permanent settlement on its soil, and that it now contains a population of over seventy thousand, distributed among nineteen different counties, each thoroughly organized, with its seat of justice, its judicial and executive officers, its schools and churches; tell him that Iowa contains several cities already risen to commercial importance, and exporting annually millions of dollars in value of the productions of the soil; tell him that throughout its whole extent are scattered flourishing towns, where may be found taste, refinement, and education, and your auditor will listen with incredulity, if not with positive unbelief.

I suppose you of the east consider the present

[This letter by an unknown correspondent describing the character of the settlers and conditions in Iowa in the spring of 1843 is here reprinted from *Niles' National Register*, Volume 64, pp. 120, 121, April 22, 1843. It appeared originally in the New Haven *Palladium*. — THE EDITOR]

residents of Iowa the very pioneers of the west. Never was a greater mistake; the true western pioneers have pushed on beyond us, or if here and there one still lingers, it is only that he may dispose of his farm and "improvements" and move on to a "new country".

Strange restless beings are the genuine pioneers. Among them you may find some who have helped to lay the foundation of every State, from the "old thirteen" hither; men who have successively held seats in every legislature, from Virginia to Iowa inclusive, but who are now moving to a new country, again to "make a claim", again to act a conspicuous part in the community in which they live, again to run the political race, become the members of the legislature of some future State, find themselves thrown in the shade by those of greater attainments who follow in their wake, and again to push for the "new purchase".

Fearlessness, hospitality, and independent frankness, united with restless enterprise and unquenchable thirst for novelty and change, are the peculiar characteristics of the western pioneer. With him there is always a land of promise farther west, where the climate is milder, the soil more fertile, better timber, and finer prairie. And on — on — on he goes, always seeking and never attaining the Pisgah of his hopes. You of the old States can not readily conceive the every-day sort of business an "old settler" makes of selling out his "improve-

ments", hitching the horse to the big wagon, and, with his wife and children, swine and cattle, pots and kettles, household goods and household gods, starting on a journey of hundreds of miles to find and make a new home.

Just now Oregon is the pioneer's land of promise. Hundreds are already prepared to start thither with the spring, while hundreds of others are anxiously awaiting the action of Congress, in reference to that country, as the signal for their departure. Some have already been to view the country, and have returned with a flattering tale of the inducements it holds out. They have painted it to their neighbors in the brightest colors; these have told it to others; and the Oregon fever has broken out, and is now raging like any other contagion. Mr. Calhoun was right when he told the Senate that the American people would occupy that country independent of all legislation; that in a few years the pioneers would overrun it and maintain it against the world.

"Wilson," said I, a few days since to an old settler, "so you are going to Oregon."

"Well, I is, horse. Tice Pitt was out looking at it last season, and he says it is a leetle the greatest country on the face of the earth. So I'm bound to go."

"How do the old woman and the girls like the idea of such a long journey?"

"They feel mighty peert about it, and Suke says she shan't be easy till we start."

The recent purchase is attracting considerable attention at this time. We have just heard of the ratification of Governor Chambers's treaty made last autumn with the Sac and Fox Indians, by which they ceded to the United States a large tract of country lying on the Des Moines River, west of the present settled portion of this Territory. This is a part of Iowa, and, by this cession, comes under the Territorial jurisdiction. It is a valuable purchase, having an excellent soil, well watered, and abounding in timber conveniently interspersed throughout the prairie. The Indians are to yield possession on the first of May. Now comes a rush and a scramble for town sites, mill privileges, county seats, and spring tracts, such as no one but an eye-witness can have any idea of. For more than eighteen months past settlers have been crowding to the frontier in anticipation of the purchase. During that time, singly and by companies, they have travelled over the whole tract, each selecting for himself a "claim" according to his fancy.

I was through the country, hunting buffaloes, last June, and saw with some surprise that even there, on both sides of the Des Moines, from the line to Raccoon Forks, a distance of ninety miles, settlers had been before me and "claimed" every eligible tract of land. The sign adopted to signify to others that any individual had "claimed" a particular tract varied according to the taste of the claimant. In some instances, a simple blaze on the trees was the

only sign; in others, the settler had cut his initials in the bark; while the more warlike had decorated the blaze with the figures of a bowie-knife and pistol crossed, signifying, I suppose, that the gentleman who had put that mark there would, with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, maintain his right against the world. The "knowing ones" have a sign preferable to either of the above: they stake out their "claim", drive the stakes, with the date of their visit cut in them, so deep in the earth as not to be visible, the object being, in case of a dispute, to refer to the stakes for evidence of the priority of their claim.

You must know that the laws forbid any white man, except licensed traders, to settle or hunt on the Indian lands, or to be on them for any purpose except to pass and repass. You must know further, that after the Indian title is extinguished and possession yielded up, the first person who builds on, or in any other way improves a particular tract, not exceeding three hundred and forty acres, has a preëmption right to the same at the minimum price of one dollar and twenty-five cents per acre. These preëmption rights are, in the language of the country, called "claims". They are often quite valuable, the holder sometimes selling a mere claim on a choice tract as high as one or two thousand dollars.

The settlers are so eager to get on and secure their favorite selection, that even before the treaty, hundreds had gone on and commenced their "im-

provements''. But, by the energy and firmness of Governor Chambers (by the way a high-minded gentleman and an excellent officer, who executes the laws regardless of personal consequences) these trespassers were driven out of the country, and their improvements destroyed. This was not accomplished without the aid of a corps of United States dragoons, whose presence has since been constantly required to keep the settlers within the boundary line. Consequently, they are crowded along the frontier just within the line, some two or three families in a cabin, each ready, when the day arrives, to hasten to his favorite spot, put up his cabin and confirm his claim. There will be warm work on the purchase on the first day of May. Some individual, who long before has marked out his claim, will be on the spot, bag and baggage, by half-past twelve o'clock of the morning of that day, and will find some other man has reached the place five or ten minutes before him, who, with materials previously provided, has got a cabin half up. Then comes the strife; he who first picked it out will assert his right on the boy's principle of "I dubs first", while his competitor will as pertinaciously maintain his claim because he "squatted" first under the law. Of course, the more audacious and obstinate will prevail; but when two unyielding, bold spirits come in collision, the rifle and the bowie-knife will act as umpires and settle the dispute.