

# THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

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## Signs of the Times

“There is no better barometer of agricultural conditions in the corn belt than the Iowa State Fair”, declared an agricultural journal eighteen years ago. In a still broader sense the progress of the State fair from the simple stock show in Fairfield seventy-five years ago to the present industrial and artistic exhibition reflects, to an unusual degree, the course of development of the State.

Visitors at the first Iowa State Fair in the fall of 1854, during the intervals between viewing exhibits and listening to addresses, should have been at no loss for topics of conversation with their neighbors concerning the state of the nation and of their own Commonwealth.

The year 1854 stands double-starred in American history — one of those years in which great events seem to crowd and powerful forces culminate. Particularly the conflict between union and disunion

reached a fateful turning-point. The completion of the continental domain during the previous year, the development of trunk railroad lines to the Middle West, the projection of Pacific railroads, and the beginning of the final dispossession of the western Indians, all, in themselves, favored the realization of the Union, one and inseparable. But western expansion, which was to be the most potent influence in nation-making was also to be the most direct occasion of nation-testing. The Kansas-Nebraska Act, designed to promote unification, set in train hopelessly divisive events, inaugurated by the disintegration of political parties — the abortive Know Nothing demonstration and the formation of a new inclusive free-soil combination (whose diamond jubilee is also celebrated the present year). Public land disposal, hitherto an issue between the older and newer regions, now became a contention between free and slave interests. The Ostend Manifesto for Cuban annexation was another evidence of sectional cleavage.

Social agitation found outlet in the first widespread experiment with prohibition. Internationally the opening of trade relations with Japan marked the extension of Far Eastern interests. Prosperity during this eventful year was manifested in trade expansion, the beginning of an "agricultural boom", especially in the wheat market, and the attainment of the high point in immigration before the seventies.

The year was no less vital and dynamic in the history of the new State of Iowa. It marked the "political revolution" by which future party control was to be determined, the beginning of the movement to revise and modernize the State Constitution, the election of a legislature which was to provide for the removal of the State capital, the establishment of an insane asylum, and the prohibition of the manufacture and sale of intoxicating liquor.

The same year witnessed the beginning of the great trans-Mississippi migration of which Iowa was to be the chief destination. For the year ending in June, 1855, some three and a quarter million acres of the public domain within the State passed into the hands of prospective farmers, and within two years nearly two hundred thousand people had been added to the producers and consumers of Iowa.

Still more conclusive evidence of progress in this momentous year was to be seen in educational developments. In December, Governor Grimes recommended a drastic reorganization of the public school system and opened the battle for a technical college with the declaration that the State wanted "educated farmers and mechanics, engineers, architects, chemists, metallurgists and geologists" who could be supplied only "by the establishment of a school of applied science". The State University was opened at Iowa City in the following March and already some half dozen denominational colleges

were struggling for their places in the academic sun. A marked increase in the number of newspapers began in 1854. Culturally speaking, an appreciative traveller declared that Iowa was no longer "way out west", and various others at least meant to be complimentary in calling attention to evidence of eastern sophistication.

At the same time there were plenty of reminders that the Hawkeye State was still in the pioneer stage. Waterloo, Fort Dodge, and Sioux City were outlying frontier communities with unsettled country to the north and south. Indian troubles were brewing which were to burst forth three years later in the Spirit Lake massacre. The first locomotive in Iowa, ferried over the river at Davenport in May, was to haul the first passenger train west from that city a year from the following August. Agricultural machinery was just coming to have a practical application in the older portions of the Northwest and still had comparatively small utilization west of the Mississippi. Iowa alone of the free States had held no State-wide exhibition and demonstration for improved agriculture, though local societies had been functioning for a dozen years. It was this latter need which, unlike most of the others, seemed immediately remediable, that led to the initial steps in the fall of 1853 for the launching of the first State fair in the crucial year 1854.

EARLE D. ROSS