

Through English Eyes

Five hours after leaving Chicago, the train reaches the bridge which crosses the Mississippi. This bridge is nearly a mile in length, and is constructed partly of wood and partly of iron. The structure has a very unsubstantial appearance, and, as it creaks and sways while the train passes over it, the contingency of an unwelcome descent into the deep and rapid stream beneath is one which flashes over the mind.

Once across the bridge, the westward-bound traveller enters the young, yet flourishing State of Iowa, a State in which countless settlers may find pleasant homes on its rolling prairies. On either side, as far as the horizon, a few farmhouses alone serve to break the monotony of the prospect. To these vast tracts the epithet which Homer affixed to the sea may not inaptly be applied. They are literally "unharvested," awaiting the touch of industry to yield up their teeming treasures. The long, rank grass which waves on their surface, rots for lack of a mower to gather it in, or is converted into dust and ashes when the spark falling from the passing locomotive, or thrown by the heedless wanderer, kindles

[This description of Iowa was written by an English traveller who crossed the State on the North Western Railway in the autumn of 1869. It is here reprinted from W. F. Rae's *Westward by Rail*, pp. 62-68. — THE EDITOR]

the flame which no human power can possibly extinguish.

The spectacle of a prairie on fire is one of infinite grandeur. For miles on every side the air is heavy with volumes of stifling smoke, and the ground reddened with hissing and rushing fire. The beholder can with difficulty apprehend the possibility of the mass of flame being quenched till the entire country has become a barren and blackened waste. Much depends upon the strength of the wind as well as the quarter from which it blows. A lull will stay the conflagration, while a sudden change, by reversing the direction of the fiery waves, will sweep them back over the tract which they have devastated, and thus lead to their own extinction by what is known as "back-firing".

A scene less impressive, but far more enjoyable, is that of the moon flooding the silent prairie with silvery light. The smallest object then stands forth in bold relief and fixes the attention. Innumerable wild flowers perfume the air. The senses are at once quickened and overpowered by the impression of illimitable space.

As the mind is awakened to the thought that those who people these vast tracts of fertile land will enjoy a freedom hardly less complete, while far better ordered than that of the wanton breeze, balmy with perfume, it is not difficult to understand the proneness to exaggeration, which is the characteristic of the Americans of the West, and to sympathize with

their opinions of countries in which an untrodden wilderness is an impossibility, and every acre is cultivated like a garden. Nor is it unpatriotic to feel a longing that the thousands who earn precarious livelihoods in the United Kingdom by tilling the soil, of which their taskmasters are the lords, could be transported to a locality where the strength of their arms would not only win for them a comfortable subsistence, but would also enable them to become possessors in their own right of the soil which yields them their daily bread. If the Dorsetshire labourer, who hardly knows what it is to taste butcher's meat, or the Irish peasant, whose ambition is to possess a bit of land, could be convinced of the lot which he might enjoy as a settler on the prairies of Iowa, the former would soon cease to serve and reverence the squire, and the latter would turn his face to the setting sun with the same feeling which the Mohammedan cherishes for the sacred city of Mecca.

The picture is a bright one, but it would be unnatural were it unrelieved by shade. The State of Iowa has its drawbacks, in the shape of swamps, as well as its treasures, in the form of rolling prairies. Fortunately the prairie predominates over the swamp. From east to west this State extends 287 miles, and it is 210 miles in breadth. At its western extremity the line of the Chicago and North Western Railway passes through one of the worst swamps in the whole State. A few days previous to my journey

the rain had swollen the waters, and the rails were inundated. The train went along at a snail's pace. It was a puzzle to comprehend how the rails kept their places and the sleepers upheld their burden. The latter were resting upon what appeared to be liquid mud. It was well that they remained unbroken. Had they given way, the consequences would have been disastrous. When asked by an anxious and timid passenger what would happen were the road-bed to sink altogether, the conductor answered, "Guess the cars would go to hell's bottom." These swamps are veritable quicksands. Whatever enters them is engulfed for ever. As it happened, the only serious mischief was a detention of the train. Since then I have learned that the company has profited by the warning, and has renewed the line at this part in such a way as to render a recurrence of the flood danger almost an impossibility.

Several miles before Council Bluffs, the station on the eastern bank of the Missouri, is reached, a fine view is had of Omaha, on the western bank. The prospect is deceitful, as is not infrequently the case when cities are viewed from a distance. Situated on a rising ground, Omaha appears to be a city with fine streets and stately buildings. Seen more closely, the streets are found to be straggling and the buildings common-place, with but very few exceptions.

One of the disenchantments for which the traveller

by this line must be prepared, occurs when he has to be transported across the Missouri from Council Bluffs to Omaha. The accounts he may have read of palace cars running through from New York to San Francisco must have led him to underrate the discomforts to be faced and borne. One of these is changing from car to car and rail to rail. A short time ago I read in the New York *Tribune* a glowing account of the luxurious way in which a party had travelled without change of cars from Sacramento to New York. That this was the rare exception I learned before leaving Chicago; but I did not know that the arrangements were still incomplete for transporting passengers in comfort across the Missouri River, and my ignorance was shared by many of my fellow-passengers.

On arriving at Council Bluffs, we found omnibuses in waiting at the station. The morning was cold and raw. But a small proportion of the passengers could get inside seats, the remainder having the option of either sitting on the roof among the luggage, or else being left behind. In itself the seat on the roof was not objectionable, provided the time occupied were brief. As nearly an hour was thus spent, the feeling of satisfaction at having got a seat at all was supplanted by a feeling of annoyance at the treatment received. Through deep ruts in the mud the omnibus was slowly drawn by four horses to the river's bank, and thence on to the deck of a flat-bottomed steamer.

Seated there, a good view was had of the Missouri. It has been called mighty, which it doubtless is, considered as a stream, yet the appellation of "Big Muddy," which is current here, is the one which more truthfully characterises it. The banks are masses of dark mud, resembling the heights which line the sea coast at Cromer, in Norfolk, and just as every high tide undermines and crumbles away the latter, so does the river's current sweep away portions of the former. The peculiarity of the Missouri is the shifting character of its current. Now and then it suddenly abandons its old bed, scooping out a new one an hundred yards distant. A fellow-traveller who had seen it a month previously said that since then the river had shifted its course, and that what was now a vast bed of mud had then formed the river's channel.

The erratic career of this river is giving sad trouble to the railway company. There is no certainty that any particular spot chosen for the landing-stage will continue available for the purpose from hour to hour and from day to day. There is a plan for erecting a bridge over the Missouri, but the difficulty of finding a solid foundation has hitherto proved insurmountable. The bed and banks of the river are quicksands of great depth. These physical obstacles will probably be overcome, but the cost of success must assuredly be heavy. Moreover, the question of labour is one which adds an element of complication to the problem. It is proposed to bring

Chinamen from California in order to build the bridge. To this the Irishmen already employed make vigorous objections, threatening terrible things should their protests be unheeded. There is too much reason to fear that when the unoffending Chinamen arrive they will be the victims of dastardly outrages.

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