

Letter from Iowa

A yellowed letter, written in a small, cramped hand, has survived almost one hundred years to rest at last in the document collection of the State Historical Society of Iowa. The envelope, also yellow with age, is addressed to Mr. Chester B. Orvis, Rutland Center, Jefferson County, New York. In place of a stamp, a notation in the upper right-hand corner indicates that nine cents had been paid for postage. There is no postmark, but "Jaynesville June 8" appears in handwriting in the lower left-hand corner.

Neither the letter nor the envelope give the year, but the reference to the Indian scare in Bremer County, which occurred in the autumn of 1853, the fact that it was written in June, and the 1856 census record that the family had been in Bremer County for about two years indicate that it was written in June, 1854. The writer was, it is probable, Mrs. Melissa Orvis, although she appears as "Malissa Orvan" in the State census of 1856 and as "M. Orvice" in the Federal census of 1860. Apparently she was living in the home of her daughter, Laurancia, whose husband was Matthew L. Stewart. According to the 1856 cen-

sus the Stewart family included three boys — Franklin, William, and Charles, aged eleven, nine, and five — and two small daughters, one three and one a year old. The Chester Orvis, to whom the letter was addressed, was evidently a son and it seems that Henry was another son, whose wife, Prudence, had recently died. Since Mrs. Orvis and her daughter were both born in Illinois, one wonders how Chester Orvis and Henry happened to be in New York, but no answer to this question is even suggested. Mrs. Orvis's name does not appear on the Bremer County census rolls in 1870, although the Stewart family, then including nine children, was still listed.

The letter is reproduced as written except for minor changes in punctuation and capitalization which have been made to render the account more readable.

Janesville Bremer Co. Iowa June

Dear Chester

More than one year has passed since I last wrote you and almost two since I left you and I am here two hundred miles farther west. While all of my number here have been spared to me one of my number from Jefferson Co [New York] has been taken. Sad news it was. I was unprepared for it. Why should I sorrow for her as one who had no hope when I believe she has gone to a better land?

I sorrow for those little ones that she has left for they miss her more than I can. She was first to leave our number and I often ask myself who must follow? Is it I? How lonely Henry and her mother must feel without her. When I last wrote I did not expect to go any farther west and made up my mind not to go. I never have been sorry I came though the children have been sick some and we run from the Indians. I got pretty badly frightened. We went back over sixty miles, one night and two days drive that was harder on us all than our whole journey to Iowa. We expected they would come and destroy all our clothes, provision, and cattle but thought our lives of more account than all. Some of the inhabitants said it was an affair got up by speculators to scare people off the land. Most of the inhabitants left for thirty miles north of Janesville. All the change we discovered was a very formidable fort built in the village on our return. We were gone over a week. Matthew carried fifteen in his wagon. After his return he purchased two lots in the village and built him a small cheap house, which we lived in through the winter. He paid \$60 for the lots and sold them this spring with the house on them for \$175.

During the winter M—— built him a house on his farm 18 by 24 and we moved into [it] about

two weeks ago. It is not finished but it is comfortable for summer. We are a half mile from the village and handy to school and meetings which we have every sabbath, though we have no meeting house but a small poor school-house, but there is stone drawn for a nice one to be built this summer. I like the country here much better than I did at Belvidere [Illinois] when I first went there. There is more hills and less sloughs, and it is a great deal cleaner country. The timber on the streams here [is] the same as in Illinois only in larger bodies and larger and better timber. The streams are very beautiful. We are on the east side of the Cedar. Two miles west of us is another stream called the Shellrock and plenty of excellent fish in both streams and them you know I prize. Plenty of walnuts, butternuts, plums, grapes and berries of all kinds. We go to the Cedar every week to wash.

William Stewart and his wife, Harriet, and her husband and Bingham are living with us now. They will live in about a mile of us when they get their house done. Daniel Wheeler's two oldest sons are about seventeen mile up the river from us. Dianna's husband lives about thirty miles from here. There is a great many Belvidere people settling near here. If I understand right I am entitled to another land warrant. I wish you or Henry or

both would see and get it and send it to me and I will have it on some land here and when I can sell it for enough more I will come and make you another visit. Please say to Henry that I have not sent Prudence's daguerreotype for I could not bear the idea of having it lost, and as soon as an opportunity permits that I can have one taken from it that I will send it, and not to be looking for it yet. Lurancia has received one letter from Henry since the death of Prudence. He was then about to start for New York. How is he, and where is he, and why don't he write? and why don't you write often? I will own that you have reason many times to think that I have forgotten you all but it is not so. I will own that my time is too much taken up with the labors of each day. I will make the promise now that you shall hear from me oftener, that means you and Ester and Henry. Not that mine is so much better or contains any more knowledg but that there is three of you and only one of me. How have you done since you took the farm and how are you doing? You never wrote me the day or the month you were married nor any of the particulars, only that you were married and that Ester was your wife. Tell me all about Prudence sickness and death how she felt and what she said about herself and children and Henry. All that I know [is] where

you are. Henry says you are living as snug as mice at the old homestead. I should like to ask a great many more questions but cannot for want of room. Kiss Esther for me.

Do come once and fetch Esther. I was in hopes Henry could come this summer and bring David. How is Mrs. Howland and how does she bear up under her loss?

Has there ever a thought pass through your mind that you shall ever come west if you are prospered and see where [we] live. Matthew and the boys are chopping in sod corn today.

My love to all,

Your Mother