

Territorial Thoughts

AS I DROVE BACK HOME from Des Moines to Iowa City that day in late February, the Iowa landscape was bathed in late afternoon sunlight. The ground was golden with wintered grasses; snow still lay in the creases of the land and along fence lines. I saw few of the geometric divisions that confront the traveler's eye in summertime — the rectangular fields, the parallel crop rows, the perpendicular roads evident when dust billows up behind pickups speeding along them.

What was visible to me that February afternoon was the lay of the land — the soft hills, the dips, the twists of a river or creek, the soggy bottoms along the Skunk River, and a bit farther east, the trees, where highway deer signs alert the interstate driver to life in the woods beyond.

I had just spent three days in the new historical building in Des Moines working with freelance photographer Chuck Greiner and Society curator Michael Smith as we photographed over 150 artifacts relating to territorial Iowa. I had looked at a dozen maps that showed no middle or western Iowa as we know it today, and only a modest wedge of eastern Iowa that had fallen under the right-angle influence of the

federal surveyor or the entrepreneurial zest of early river town merchants.

So on this drive back to the Society office in Iowa City, where the *Palimpsest* is produced, perhaps I saw the land roughly as the early settlers and surveyors might have seen it. Well, I had to squint, of course, to erase utility lines and poles, fences, graded ditches, clusters of farm buildings. But because I had been immersed for three days in a dark museum exhibit hall surrounded by 150-year-old artifacts and the stories they yielded, I chose what I wanted to see on that drive home. What I saw was an expanse of land, land with few boundaries and with little cultivation. I saw territorial Iowa.

In my job as editor of the *Palimpsest*, words are my constant companions. The written word is my key to the past, often helped by illustrations and

tossed aside by those who lived in Iowa 150 years ago — these pieces of material culture speak of the past in a different voice than does the two-dimensional printed page to which I am accustomed. They tell us details that a writer may not have considered important. They tell us about the individuals who used the items, without the self-consciousness of autobiographical writing, without the selectivity of history.

Let me give an example. When we were photographing artifacts used by frontier farm women, I went to the artifact table to fetch a household broom. Picking it up sent an immediate message from the past: this broom weighed five pounds. Likewise a grub hoe used by farm women in their vegetable gardens — an iron hooked scraper at the end of a three-foot piece of wood: No grace of design here, no light-

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photographs. But while photographing the museum artifacts, I experienced an entirely different way of looking at the past — through material culture.

The objects made or bought, used or flaunted, treasured or

weight, steel-tempered tool. Here was the broom by which strong muscles were formed — and exhausted. Here was the hoe by which backaches were made.

There is a simple moldboard plow in the exhibit. Someone

(the original user?) had fitted a pair of polished, curved horns over the ends of the handles — an individual's touch on one of the most generic pieces of farm equipment from territorial Iowa. I stood behind the plow thinking that it is no wider than my rototiller. And yet how many of the nearly 29 million acres of Iowa prairie were broken by plows no wider than a gardener's rototiller?

Through material culture we realize the diversity of lifestyles and cultures. While territorial farm families were using rude, primitive tools to keep house and cultivate land, the wealthy in Iowa river towns entertained guests with gilt-trimmed porcelain tea services and silver punch urns sporting nymphs on the spout. The similarities are there too: Native American mothers taught their daughters first to sew for their dolls, just as Euro-American mothers taught their daughters to care for the young by giving them dolls to play with.

Material culture helps us make direct connections between yesterday's user and today's viewer. We begin to understand the sense of scale of an individual's setting, the props of one's daily life, the breadth of impact that person had, the contact with other people and other places.

We can compare that person's life with our own by comparing the objects we each use and value.

The irony, of course, was that on this particular February day 150 years later curator and editor and photographer accorded the same honor to the grub hoe as

examined a dozen maps between 1787 and 1846. Each time I searched for the few recognizable boundaries and landmarks — the rivers — so that I could locate my home state in a world that had not yet been carved into the political units we know today. As the years passed, as neighboring

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we did to the silver punch urn. We know why artifacts such as silver punch urns survived the century and a half, but who saved the grub hoe or the broom — and why? Who thought to keep them because of the lessons they could teach us, not because they were useful or valuable?

This *Palimpsest* is devoted to territorial Iowa and commemorates the 150th anniversary of achieving territorial status. The articles that follow have all been prepared by individuals invited to share their views and knowledge of territorial Iowa, and to speak the many voices of the people who lived here at that time — farm couples, legislators and early governors, surveyors, native Americans.

As I worked with the authors and museum staff on this issue, I

states were formed and the remaining land fell under the name of a new territory, I could begin to discern the emerging shape of our state. Slowly Iowa of the 1830s and 1840s came into focus. We hope that as you explore this *Palimpsest* and the museum exhibit "You Gotta Know the Territory" (now open in Des Moines), territorial Iowa comes into focus for you.

— *The Editor*