The PALIMPSEST

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS MAGAZINE

THE PALIMPSEST, issued monthly by the State Historical Society of Iowa, is devoted to the dissemination of Iowa History. Supplementing the other publications of this Society, it aims to present the materials of Iowa History in a form that is attractive and a style that is popular in the best sense—to the end that the story of our Commonwealth may be more widely read and cherished.

BENJ. F. SHAMBAUGH
Superintendent

THE MEANING OF PALIMPSESTS

In early times palimpsests were parchments or other materials from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete; and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the records of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

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THE PALIMPSEST

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Buffalo Hunting with Keokuk

A gloomy spirit pervaded the Sauk and Fox villages. It was early spring of 1833 and the confederated tribes were on the verge of starvation. Crushed and humiliated in the Black Hawk War, their fields untilled, the remnant of Black Hawk's band had flung themselves on Keokuk for protection. The task of feeding so many hungry mouths throughout a long winter had taxed the resources of Keokuk and his followers.

While the white squatters were preparing to enter the Black Hawk Purchase, the Sauk and Fox Indians were planting their crops in the Keokuk Reserve. This reservation, on both sides of the Iowa River, included portions of Johnson, Muscatine, Louisa, Washington, and Des Moines counties. It would require more than a bountiful harvest to sustain the confederated tribes during the following winter. Since it had been customary for the Sauks and Foxes to supplement their crops with a buffalo hunt, Keokuk issued a call

for the chiefs and headmen of both tribes to convene at his village.

Keokuk's principal village was located on the right bank of the Iowa River "about twelve miles" from its confluence with the Mississippi. It was there that preparations for the expedition were made. Solemn religious rites were observed, for the Indians obtained a large supply of their meats and pelts from these annual summer forays. The hunt usually took place during the months of June, July, and August, when the buffalo were fat and their hair thin. At this time the flesh was in the best condition for food and the pelts easiest to dress on both sides for the making of clothing, shields, bags, ropes, snowshoes, tents, and boat covers.

A hunting party, like a war party, was well organized. Sometimes the leader was the head of a family or kindred group; again he might be appointed to his office with certain ceremonies. In as much as Keokuk had just been recognized by the United States as the head of the confederated tribes, it was natural that he should head the hunting party.

The duties of a leader were numerous but well-defined. He decided the length of the day's journey and the night encampment. Moreover, since the main body on a tribal hunt was com-

posed of old men and children, squaws and papooses, the leader had to throw a cordon of brave and trustworthy men around them. Although the Sauks and Foxes were originally a canoe people, a transition to horses was noted after the Black Hawk War. Hence a goodly number of the buffalo hunters in 1833 were probably mounted.

Whether on the trail or in camp, the Indians always kept close together. Stalking the buffalo alone was prohibited under penalty of flogging. If a man slipped away to hunt by himself, thereby scattering a herd and causing serious loss to the entire tribe, punishment as severe as death might be incurred. The destitute condition of the confederated tribes would have forced Keokuk and his chiefs to invoke drastic measures for the slightest infraction of the rules of the hunt. Apparently the Sauk and Fox hunters were well disciplined, for no such crimes were mentioned.

Early in the summer of 1833 Keokuk set out for the headwaters of the Iowa River. An Indian trail followed the west bank of the Iowa River to Wapello's village which was located five miles upstream near the present site of Wapello, Iowa. Wapello was first among the Foxes, and second only to the wily Keokuk in the councils of the Sauks and Foxes. A large party of Foxes, in-

cluding Wapello himself, joined Keokuk. Although Wapello preferred to hunt on the headwaters of the Skunk, he realized the Sauk hunters must have strong support because of the implacable hostility between the Sioux and the confederated tribes. Thus, the Sioux had paid scant attention to the Neutral Line agreed upon by their chiefs and the Sauks and Foxes at Prairie du Chien in 1825. The creation of the Neutral Ground in 1830, although it formed a forty-mile barrier between them, could scarcely be expected to ward off Sioux depredations, particularly when the buffalo themselves showed a preference for grazing in this area.

Leaving Wapello's village the combined body continued up the right bank of the Iowa River to present-day Columbus Junction, following the general route afterward selected for the Rock Island railroad. They crossed to the left bank a few miles below the English River. At this point was another Indian village. In as much as the buffalo hunters were headed for the prairies near the sources of the Iowa River, their trail followed the Iowa onward past the present site of Iowa City.

The popularity of the headwaters of the Iowa as a grazing place for the buffalo is attested by a map of 1835 on which Lieutenant Albert Miller

Lea referred to this beautiful stream as the "Bison" River. Lea and his dragoon companions encountered small herds of buffalo along the upper reaches of the Skunk, the Iowa, and the Cedar rivers in 1835, and succeeded in killing a number of them. It was the first time Lea had seen the "lordly beast in his home", a clear indication that the buffalo was more common at that time in the northern part of Iowa than in the southern district.

Keokuk led his fellow tribesmen past what is now the Amana colonies, the Tama Indian reservation, Marshalltown, Eldora, and Iowa Falls. Ten days after leaving their village near the mouth of the Iowa, the hunters discovered signs of buffalo. Although the exact region is not known, if the Indians traveled twenty miles a day they must have arrived in the Neutral Ground somewhere in present-day Wright or Franklin counties. Keokuk promptly ordered his men to encamp and the squaws were soon busy setting up shelters and preparing the evening meal. The next day Keokuk sent out small parties to make observations. That evening the hunters returned and reported a small herd of not over 300 buffalo. The satisfaction with which this news was received was dispelled when scouts declared they had "discovered signs of the Sioux; saw large

smokes, and had no doubt they proceeded from their encampment." A council of war was immediately called.

Some of the more fiery warriors were in favor of advancing that very night and attacking the Sioux at dawn. Others, more conservative, favored removing the women and children to safety before making an attack. After listening gravely to the speeches of his headmen, Keokuk rose to lend his counsel to the assembled tribesmen. Eloquently he related the many depredations that the Sioux had committed against the Sauks and Foxes, denouncing vehemently the brutal manner in which the Sioux had butchered many of the women and children who had crossed the Mississippi River above Prairie du Chien following the defeat of Black Hawk at Bad Axe. "Scarcely a warrior in my presence but what has lost some friend or relation by the Sioux", he thundered. "Now is the time to chastise our enemies. Let us surround their camp this night, and, by the rising of tomorrow's sun, we will not leave a Sioux to relate the fall of his comrade!"

The assembled warriors greeted this plan with applause. An eye-witness declared: "Fire glistened in their eyes, they brandished their spears — drew their knives, and returned them to their scabbard — eager for the fight they had in view."

After a short pause, Keokuk commenced pacing back and forth across the council lodge. Suddenly he stopped, remembering his promise to Major General Winfield Scott at Fort Armstrong the previous fall. Throwing down his spear he cried: "Warriors, I have been commanded by my Great Father not to go to war with the Sioux. I have promised, and will *keep my word*." A murmur of dissent ran through the lodge. Sensing the opposition of his men to such a conciliatory plan, Keokuk cried out in a stern voice: "I will go to the Sioux camp tomorrow — *I will make peace!* OR FALL IN THE ATTEMPT!"

The determined manner in which their chief spoke swept away all objections to the course he proposed to follow. The council accordingly broke up and Keokuk immediately repaired to his lodge and was seen no more that evening. A party of braves visited Wapello to discuss the situation. A man of few words, Wapello was firm in his opinion that Keokuk would never return, and that the Sioux, if they once got a peace party in their power, would certainly kill them. "But", he concluded, "if Keokuk falls, we will avenge his death."

The next morning at dawn the sleeping camp was aroused by the trample of horses' hoofs. It was Keokuk leaving camp with three young

braves who had volunteered to accompany him. Mounted and armed, the four emissaries of peace slipped quietly out of the still drowsy encampment without speaking a word. As soon as they were out of view the whole camp became a scene of confusion. Hastily each warrior prepared to follow his chief. Suddenly the "Village Crier" proclaimed in a loud voice that Keokuk had commanded that "no one must follow him — but remain in their camp, and be prepared for what might happen."

Meanwhile Keokuk and his three braves pushed their horses along at a brisk trot. As they neared the enemy the wily Sauk revealed his plans. Two of his men were to remain behind in such a way that they could watch the meeting between Keokuk and the Sioux but not be seen themselves. Should their chieftain fall they were to hasten back with all speed to warn their fellow tribesmen.

After traveling about eighteen miles, the four ascended a slight elevation whence the Sioux camp suddenly burst into view. It was situated on a gentle rise immediately in front of them with a valley intervening. Keokuk concealed the two young men who were to remain behind on the top of the hill. He then advanced boldly across the intervening lowland with his com-

panion toward the Sioux encampment which they discovered to be fortified. On his map of 1835 Lieutenant Lea notes a fort about sixteen miles south of Clear Lake in what is now northwestern Franklin County. Its position in the northern or Sioux cession of the Neutral Ground would correspond with the probable position of the Sioux encampment.

The moment the Sioux caught a glimpse of Keokuk the whole camp sprang into action. Meanwhile Keokuk had halted on the bank of a small creek a hundred yards away and made signs for the Sioux to come to him. Two flag bearers started immediately, followed by ten well-armed men. When they reached the creek, Keokuk motioned the flag bearers to cross but ordered the others to remain behind. To his astonishment, however, the whole force plunged into the creek and started across. The flag bearers reached the other side first and advanced to shake hands. Keokuk instantly seized the insignia from the nearest flag bearer and placed a fur hat upon the emissary's head. His companion did the same. Then Keokuk, waving the flag, rode toward the armed Sioux who had just crossed the creek and were advancing to shake hands with him.

Suddenly one of the Sioux seized Keokuk's whip and attempted to drag him from his horse.

Fortunately for Keokuk the whip was fastened to his wrist by a string which snapped and allowed the Sauk chieftain to regain his saddle. Meanwhile another Sioux had secured his horse by the bridle. Finding himself in this critical situation, Keokuk rose in his stirrups and, smiting his breast, told them his name was Keokuk. But the Sioux were apparently unmoved by this for his companion was also surrounded. Amazed at this gross violation of the rules of peace, Keokuk glanced hurriedly around to see if a way out could be found. Suddenly he discovered a gun presented at him! He exerted all his strength to break the Sioux's grip on his horse but all in vain. Reinforcements had joined the Sioux, and Keokuk perceived another gun raised at him in the rear. He now began to think that he would fall a sacrifice, since resistance seemed useless.

All at once the two Sauk braves who had been stationed on the hill, charged at full gallop upon the Sioux who gave way before them, retiring backwards with their guns cocked. Keokuk and his companion wheeled off in the best manner possible, keeping their faces towards the enemy. The Watchful Fox then called to the Sioux: "We wish to make peace!"

"Meet us at this place tomorrow for council", the Sioux replied.

"We will", shouted Keokuk.

Then the four Sauks set out at a brisk canter for their camp. According to Keokuk, "They soon reached the high ground, wheeled their horses, and took a view of the Sioux as they retired. They discovered that the whole party of Sioux warriors had advanced against them, and were then slowly returning to their camp."

As they were returning home, Keokuk requested his faithful companions to explain to the chiefs and warriors what had taken place. They reached their encampment just as the sun was setting. While still at some distance their approach was discovered by Keokuk's favorite wife, who, contrary to orders and unknown to the camp, had mounted a swift horse, gone in pursuit, and returned in advance to give the news of their safe return. The four Sauks galloped into camp at a breakneck speed and were met by all the warriors. But Keokuk himself rode on to his own lodge at the farther end of the camp, threw himself from his horse, and was immediately surrounded by his wives and children.

Meanwhile the three young braves related to their fellow tribesmen what had taken place. "We are requested by Keokuk", they concluded, "to say that whatever you may determine upon he is ready to execute, but will give no opinion."

The chiefs and warriors of the confederated tribes agreed upon meeting the Sioux in council the next day as Keokuk had promised. They then sent a messenger to inform him of their resolutions and to congratulate him upon his success.

The next morning Keokuk was mounted on his horse at the first streak of dawn. Mustering his men quickly the Sauk and Fox warriors took up the line of march toward the Sioux camp. A motley array of women and children brought up the rear. When they arrived on the hill overlooking the Sioux camp they all dismounted except Keokuk. The warriors gave their "looking glasses" to the women and boys, mounted them on their horses, and manoeuvred them so as to show a strong force. Then Keokuk, together with his chiefs, braves, and warriors, advanced on the Sioux village.

After crossing the creek, the Watchful Fox halted his party and advanced slowly with his chiefs. But it suddenly occurred to him that if the Sioux fired upon them, all the chiefs might be killed, while they were drawn up in battle order. Distrustful of such treachery, Keokuk requested the chiefs to halt while he alone advanced toward the Sioux camp. He was well mounted on a proud charger that pranced and showed his rider to great advantage.

"On his near approach", Keokuk afterwards related, "he discovered that the advance line of Sioux warriors were painted black — and when about fifty yards off, the Sioux fired their guns in the air, grounded their arms, and threw down their powder horns." The Sioux chief advanced alone to meet him and shook hands. "They were old acquaintances," according to Keokuk, "having been to Washington city together. The whole party of Sioux now rushed up to shake hands with Ke-o-kuck, and his chiefs and warriors, who had all come up. The Sioux women running with their children on their backs, called aloud — 'We have made peace with the Sacs.' "

A large space had been cleared off by the Sioux for the reception of the Sauks and Foxes. Both tribes were ordered to arrange themselves in a line facing each other. As Keokuk related, "The high priest, or master of ceremonies, proceeded to the fire in the middle of the square, cut a slice of flesh from a *roasted dog!* went to the Sioux chief, and calling upon the Great Spirit to witness the sincerity of their hearts in making peace, placed it in his mouth. He then proceeded to Ke-o-kuck, and went through the same ceremony — and continued alternately, giving to the Sioux and Sacs and Foxes, until all had partaken of the sacred morsel of consecrated meat — after which they

were treated with a feast of buffalo meat and marrow bones — shook hands and parted."

Keokuk and his party returned to the creek where their women and children had made an encampment. Soon the Sioux warriors made their appearance, dancing around the Sauks and Foxes in a menacing manner. Unmoved by such a pantomime, the confederated tribesmen folded their arms, looking with utter contempt on the Sioux who presently returned to their camp. That evening the Sioux chieftain, with two of his followers, paid a visit to Keokuk and his chiefs.

Early the next morning Keokuk and his warriors, mounted and armed, rushed upon the Sioux camp, and surrounded it. With blood-curdling cries they dashed hither and yon, displaying feats of daring horsemanship as if in battle. They then dismounted and began to dance. This dramatic episode closed the ceremony between the hostile tribes. The Sioux promised to keep the peace four years while the confederated tribes consented to make peace but did not stipulate the length of time. The Sioux promptly broke camp and started westward to their own hunting grounds.

The Sauks and Foxes were free to continue their buffalo hunting unmolested. Although equipped with guns, most Indians considered it a greater honor to kill the buffalo with the time-

honored weapons of their ancestors. Their skill as hunters was revealed some years later, when Keokuk with a score of his chiefs and warriors were at the Stuyvesant Institute in New York City viewing some of George Catlin's paintings. As Catlin related: "I was exhibiting several of my paintings of buffalo-hunts, and describing the modes of slaying them with bows and arrows, when I made the assertion which I had often been in the habit of making, that there were many instances where the arrow was thrown entirely through the buffalo's body; and that I had several times witnessed this astonishing feat. I saw evidently by the motions of my audience, that many doubted the correctness of my assertion; and I appealed to *Kee-o-kuk,* who rose up when the thing was explained to him, and said, that it had repeatedly happened amongst his tribe; and he believed that one of his young men by his side had done it. The young man instantly stepped up on the bench, and took a bow from under his robe, with which he told the audience he had driven his arrow quite through a buffalo's body." Such exploits may have occurred in the great hunt of 1833.

Day after day the hunters returned to their camp with trophies of their success. With but slight variations it may be said tribal regulation

governed the cutting up and distribution of the various parts of the buffalo. The skin and certain parts of the carcass usually belonged to the hunter who made the kill. The remainder was divided among the helpers, thereby giving the poor and disabled an opportunity to procure food. The butchering was usually done by the men on the field, each hunter's portion being taken to his tent and given to the women as their property. The squaws then cut the meat into thin slices and strips and hung these on a framework of poles to dry in the sun. When fully "jerked" the meat was put into rawhide packs to keep for winter use. In addition to the meat, a quantity of marrow was preserved in bladder skins and the tallow was poured into skin bags.

Very little of the carcass was wasted by the Indians who hunted in what is now Iowa, for the buffalo was by no means as plentiful as across the Missouri River. The sinew furnished bow strings, threads for sewing, and fiber for ropes; the horns were manufactured into spoons and drinking vessels, and often worn as an insignia of office. The hair was woven into lariats, belts, and personal ornaments. No wonder that the tribes of the plains looked with veneration upon the shaggy bison.

The Sauks and Foxes remained at their camp

until they had killed eighty buffalo. They then began their long trek down the Iowa River to their villages near the Mississippi. The thanksgiving ceremony must have been truly impressive for enough meat had been gathered to insure that no one would go hungry during the long winter months.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

Prairie Fires

The pioneer, suddenly aware that a long band of red light against the distant horizon was moving toward him and spreading its glow as it came, stood awed by the spectacle, notwithstanding its sinister significance. He was not at all callous to the fascination of the prairie scene in its many guises, but emotion was translated almost immediately into action.

Earlier in that autumnal evening he might have noticed with apprehension the dryness of the land. If he had stooped to pluck a blade of prairie grass, he would have found it dry, almost to the point of brittleness. When he felt the rising wind, his glance at the shocks of wheat and at his cornfield was uneasy. A fire would start readily, and his fields were excellent tinder. One precautionary measure had already been taken. A broad strip of bare stamped earth circled his cabin and the cattle sheds. There was reasonable safety within that line for his family and the stock. Fire was known to leap narrow streams, but his path of grassless earth formed a magic ring of protection.

Gradually the dull red glow in the distance was

brightening and widening. The whole picture was becoming further animated with sound. The burning grass crackled, and the wind sweeping the fire onward made a roaring noise, still faint but unmistakably ominous.

The settler paused no longer to watch the spectacle. He sprang into action. Hurriedly firebrands were made. Armed with hazelbrush brooms to control the fires of his own setting, the pioneer, aided by his family, began burning strips of prairie around his fields in the hope of turning aside the general conflagration. The inner edge of the flame was beaten out and the outer edge allowed to burn away. Fire was fighting fire.

The distant "wall of flame" moved forward, lighting and heating the atmosphere. Meanwhile the backfire, or counter-fire, went to meet the giant enemy. The pioneer's wife and children were in the charmed circle of the beaten rim of soil; the cattle, too, were in comparative safety.

The fiery monster was actually turning its course! As the pioneer watched its progress intently, he knew it was no miracle that had happened. His little counter-fire had successfully battled the larger mass of flame and caused the prairie fire to seek easier onward passage to the right of his fields. The pioneer could now observe the scene in all its splendor, yet soberly.

He could scarcely have described what he saw. His impressions of the majestic beauty of the towering wall of fire were probably confused with a sense of terror at the demon beyond his control. Though his buildings, stock, and fields were saved, the prairie with its deep carpet of nutritious grass was only a black and barren waste as far as he could see. The neighbors might not have fared as well as he.

The casual traveler in the West was not directly concerned with the danger to life and property. He could view the fiery tornado in a relatively impersonal manner, something like a spectator watches a magnificent exhibition of pyrotechnics. Immune from the grim reality of the prairie fire, he was often moved to write of the splendor of the "scarlet hurricane of light". Such descriptions were usually extravagant, like the picture given in 1849 by a traveler in Appanoose County.

"Soon the fires began to kindle wider and rise higher from the long grass. The gentle breeze increased to stronger currents, and soon formed the small, flickering blaze into fierce torrent flames, which curled up and leaped along in resistless splendor, and like quickly raising the dark curtain from the luminous stage, the scenes before me were suddenly changed as if by the magician's

wand, into one boundless amphitheater, blazing from earth to heaven and sweeping the horizon round — columns of lurid flames sportively mounting up to the zenith, and dark clouds of crimson smoke, curling away and aloft till they nearly obscured stars and moon, while the rushing, crashing sounds, like roaring cataracts mingled with distant thunders, were almost deafening. Danger, death, glared all around; it screamed for victims, yet, notwithstanding the imminent peril of prairie fires, one is loth, irresolute, almost unable to withdraw or seek refuge."

The subject almost invariably evoked figures of speech from a writer. At times the prairie fire came "marching and advancing like an army over the hills and hollows in the night-time"; or "the red fire scourge was galloping over the billowy expanse". Again, it was "a sea of flame, crackling and roaring"; or perhaps a fiery steed, "its hot breath threatening destruction". "I know nothing like it," wrote one, "unless it could be a high sea surf, its breast on fire, rushing and roaring landwards and suddenly stopping at the beach". The prairie appeared to another as "wrapt in rolling sheets of flame, which float in mountain waves across the plains". To a group of spectators the fire "roared past us like a railroad train". The poet spoke of the "infernal geyser".

The prairie fire scene was a motion-sound picture of speed and light. "Faster than a horse could run", commented a witness. And the flight of animals, birds, and even people lent motion to the scene. By its light, wrote another, "we could read fine print for ½ mile or more." Its departure left the sky in comparative darkness, the sun clouded by smoke, and the earth black.

The peril of the prairie fires lay in their swiftness. In nearly every case a high wind accompanied them, so that the fire spread rapidly over the surface of the dry grass. Charles Joseph Latrobe estimated their rate of progress at eight miles an hour, at least, though he confessed that this was extremely difficult to calculate. The fire could not only run, according to all appearances, but it could jump! It leaped great spaces; it crossed the river where it was from "seventy to one hundred feet wide." Streams or places without vegetation would have constituted a more formidable barrier if the fire had not been fanned by the wind.

There was little that could resist the hot swift flames, for the very heat created a powerful current of air that rushed toward the blaze and sucked everything with it. A prairie fire was like a hurricane in power; it could not be combated as a whole. Its course was diverted to some extent

by the contours of the land and other natural deterrents, such as groves of trees, which prevented the grass from becoming thoroughly dry. Its destructive career was somewhat checked by the efforts of the pioneer who stole the fire-demon's very thunder when he fought the prairie fire with a counter-fire. Nearly every farmer was protected at all times by the dirt moat of safety which he plowed around his property. Ditches and furrows he also found helpful if the wind were not too violent.

The most effective enemy of the prairie fire was fire itself. Small as the counter-fire was, it was sufficient to deprive the larger fire of its fuel. Like a huge army cut off from its means of sustenance, the prairie fire grew less until it finally died away; or more probably, it skirted the two ends of the backfire and marched undaunted onward. The success of such methods was not positive. Rowena and Jake in *Vandemark's Folly* found themselves in a serious dilemma.

"We were now between two fires; the great conflagration from which we were trying to protect ourselves came on from the west like a roaring tornado, its ashes falling all about us, its hot breath beginning to scorch us, its snapping and crackling now reaching the ear along with its roar; while on the east was the fire of my own

kindling, growing in speed, racing off away from us, leaving behind it our haven of refuge, a tract swept clean of food for the flames, but hot and smoking, and as yet all too small to be safe, for the heat and smoke might kill where the flames could not reach. Between the two fires was the fast narrowing strip of dry grass from which we must soon move. Our safety lay in the following of one fire to escape the other."

To watch the prairie burn from afar was a thrilling experience. The memory of such a sight lingered in the mind of many a western traveler. But for the pioneer on the frontier who lived in dread of catastrophe from the elements of nature, the ordeal of prairie fire was a terrible thing. On the wings of the wind came destruction, maybe death, swiftly, unwavering, inexorable. Whoever stood in the path of the holocaust had no choice but to fight. And the impressions of such a battle were seared into the very being of those who ran the backfires, and stamped out the flying sparks. Children who saw their parents struggle against apparently insuperable odds never forgot the vivid scene that was traced indelibly upon their minds.

"We youngsters of the family", wrote Ellis E. Wilson of a prairie fire near Waterloo when he was a boy, "were heedless of the remote reflection

in the heavens, for it seemed far away. Our parents, however, were cautiously apprehensive of the distant luminosity as their vigilance and movements showed. We never learned whether they retired at all during that fearful night.

"Sometime in the night brother Barnett awakened me with a vigorous poke as we slept in an upstairs room. 'What makes the room so light?' he asked excitedly. 'It looks like sunshine but it isn't morning. How the rays flash and flicker on the wall!' He looked out of the gable window to the east and shouted, 'It is a great fire. All the prairie land is on fire. I am frightened at the sight. Likely the world is burning up. Let's call father and mother. Get up quickly and look. Now I can see some one near the fire and it looks like father and mother. I am certain it is they. They are setting backfires. Rover is with them and is barking and running around. I think he is looking for his buried bones. If he doesn't keep away from the flames, he will soon be yipping. They resemble the flames that rose skyward when about two years ago we set fire to father's straw stable and roasted two chickens and the spotted pig. I can hear that pig squealing yet. Hurry, get up.'

"I did so. It appeared as though the bosom of old earth itself was ablaze, for there was a whir-

ring maelstrom of flame rolling westward over the prairie. Drawn by the wind, the chariot of fire which created the little glow that we had seen in the east the evening before had now spread into a spacious, vitalized panorama of swiftly scudding and soaring flames that were being puffed forward and upward, threatening destruction to everything combustible in their pathway. Their swirling outbursts made us shudder and shuffle our feet for we felt like fleeing downstairs and away from the scene that loomed in our sight like a supernatural orgy. Eastward lay a section of land, also several adjoining quarters of prairie which were wholly covered with a dense, all-summer growth of wild grass. On the hilltops it was short but in the fens or along the moist hillsides it was three to six feet tall. Killed by the frost, parched and dried by the sun and winds of autumn, it was very inflammable. There was yet a wide area of dry grass between the greater fire and lesser backfire. A vigorous gale was blowing out of the east and rushing the high-lifted flames with over one mile of frontage extending north and south, directly westward toward our home and the farm buildings of our neighbors. It is not exaggeration to say that the crimson blaze when the tall slough grass was burning zoomed up fifty feet, while the thick enveloping volume of smoke

that hung over the prairie had the appearance of a great black canopy.

"About twenty rods east of our homestead was a wide, marshy slough near the center of which ran a sluggish stream in which lived swarms of green frogs that croaked all summer long and only ceased their chorusing when numbed by winter's cold. The grass that grew near the waterway was coarse and bulky, forming a thick, evenly spread garb which when dry was highly combustible.

"Brother and I quickly dressed, hurried downstairs, and from the farmhouse stoop viewed the raging prairie fire. Gloomy shadows were cast by the smoke of the hurrying flames. We knew it was dangerous to venture away from the house. In early autumn the land around the farm buildings had been plowed, leaving on its exposed surface only the bare soil upon which there was nothing to burn. By taking such a precaution the pioneer settlers endeavored to prevent fires from reaching and annihilating their homes.

"From the house we could see our parents' silhouetted forms moving rapidly to and fro in hurried activity. They had lit backfires which were burning low and creeping in a lackadaisical way against the wind. Already a strip of grass land forty rods in length and thirty or forty feet in width was bared. The counter-fires moved in an

unbroken line toward the fire-fostering gale. . . . The prairie chickens were calling to each other in tones of distress like the wail of a banshee and skirring before the dazzling flames or flying bewilderedly into the seething holocaust. Some escaped but many were burned. A wandering wolf faintly tonguing a howl of defiance loped away.

"The critical danger point near our home came when the contending fires met. Suddenly whirling and twisting into one crimson column, the flames shot heavenward and threw athwart the gloom a great light, then faded. Anon we saw mother leave the prairie and come toward the house. When she arrived, her face was aglow with a conquering look which bespoke a combat waged and won.

"When the hectic danger had passed, father, followed by Rover, the dog's nose dilated and snuffing the smoky east wind, returned to the house. Standing in the front yard we talked and watched the vanishing of the prairie pyrotechnics. The farm stock sensed danger. The horses in the straw stable were pawing and neighing, the cattle were mooing and milling restlessly around in the barnyard. The roosters kept crowing. The wind still moaned about our home but fear of the flames had vanished. A cowl of calm darkness settled over the scene."

After the fire had spent itself, there was left in its wake little except the black surface of the earth, and a sense of great desolation. If by chance the fire occurred in some dry spring, the ruined nests of the prairie hens were conspicuous by their whiteness on the charred land. The sight of the vast bleak prairie was not as grim as that of the farmer's fields, for such a personal loss in many instances was a serious tragedy. The *Mitchell Republican* recounted an instance in October, 1856. "We have heard," reported the editor, "of several who have lost not only the fruits of their entire summer's labor, but also their house and stables; thus leaving them without shelter, and their herds of cattle without fodder for the coming winter. Houses can be rebuilt, but the season is too far spent for hay gathering, even if the fires made no ravages."

There was seldom any investigation of the source of the conflagration. The cause was less a matter of conjecture and worry than of escape from its ravages. Indians were known to have set the prairie afire deliberately, and this for a mixed motive. For his own advantage the fire would set the game in motion, and against the interests of the white man, a large fire despoiled the land for hunting purposes. Again, fires were kindled purposely "to find fresh feed, the old stubble being

dry and tangled." In general, a prairie fire was to be taken as an event as natural as a change of season for which preparation had to be made.

It has been suggested that the prairie fires were the means of making the prairie. Prairies, according to the theory, are forests denuded by fires. Destructive as were the fires, however, they have been insufficient to account for the destruction of whole forests. In keeping the land cleared for the grasses, the prairie fires may have contributed to the maintenance of the prairie itself.

Prairie land under cultivation made prairie fires impossible. Those mighty spectacles belonged to the experience of the pioneers. Pictures which artists have since attempted to color on canvas, and writers to paint with words, are entirely inadequate. He alone who has seen a prairie fire can fully appreciate its awful grandeur. "I would travel a hundred miles", wrote S. H. M. Byers, "to witness a prairie fire, to see a sea of flame and experience the wild excitement of those times long gone."

MARIE HAEFNER

Comment by the Editor

THE ARCHITECTURE OF HISTORY

The operative mason, who is a master of his craft, can transform a pile of irregular stones into an edifice of symmetry and use. Following the design upon his trestle-board, he builds the solid walls out of materials of the geologic ages to express the thought and purpose of his own epoch in terms that will endure the adversity of future events. The substance of his creation is what the earth is made of, and his working tools are simple.

The historian, too, is a builder. Like the mason, he works with universal stuff, and his instruments are the compass of truth and the square of experience. From the heterogeneous mass of circumstance he shapes the story of the past so that it has significance in the light of present needs and may guide the conduct of generations yet to come. The mansion of fact that he erects can possess charm and character as well as utility.

In the process of his work, the craftsman of history encounters many problems. Maybe the identity of certain characters is obscured by vague illusions. Who was the Sioux chieftain that Keokuk met in Washington and again on his hunting

trip in 1833? No record may have been left of incidents that must have happened. Fires on the prairie were common, but where are the eye-witness descriptions? Perhaps a source of authority can not be ascertained. The Chicago *Democrat* copied the story of Keokuk's hunt from the Saint Louis *Times*. But who heard the chief tell it at the Rock Island council in August, 1833?

If the historian builds according to chronology his house of episodes is apt to be a rambling structure with many ells and gables. But if he undertakes to fit events into a preconceived design, he may be gravely handicapped by missing information. Nevertheless, the scholar will endeavor to supply essential details to complete the pattern of his version. If too much is omitted, a later artisan may devise a different interpretation.

From the abundant material of human affairs, historical architecture can be fashioned in infinite variety. But valid history, like solid masonry, is a product of purpose and inspiration. As the mason fills the chinks between the stones with mortar, so the historian cements the facts with reason. There is room for honest speculation in the reconstruction of the past. A chronicle without plan or meaning is only a pile of unassorted doings.

J. E. B.

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