

Yesterday.

Then no man needed to journey to Pernambuco or Timbuctoo in search of his Great Adventure, he needed only to step, so to speak, over his own threshold.

People did not talk of the last frontier when they saw before them a huge wilderness which seemed to demand years for the bare exploring. Not many years before Fort Dearborn, now the rough but growing town of Chicago, had been the actual frontier but with the rush of the Forty-niners the line had been pushed westward, until in these middle fifties the Mississippi river marked the farthest point reached by steel rails.

In 1846 Iowa, with a scant hundred thousand inhabitants had been admitted as a state, less perhaps because the territory was ready for statehood than because it was desired as an influence in the already bitter conflict between free and slave states. The development of the state had been very slow, the population was almost entirely confined to the south eastern counties where coal could be mined, and altho ten years had elapsed since the formal recognition of the state there was even yet no single mile of railway within its borders. Dubuque, squalid and primitive, perched on the high bluffs overlooking the Mississippi was the terminus of travel by rail, the point of departure for the prairie schooners. Here it was that the home-seekers outfitted, in our time that wise and frequent phrase

is cheapened by careless and constant use, but no other is so suitable. The men who settled the Middle West were indeed "homeseekers", there was ~~no~~ tale of gold, to tempt them with the hope of sudden, effortless wealth, they came with the determination of making on these unhampered plains, a permanent abiding place - a home. Most of them were married and brought with them wives and children and all their household gods, determined to ~~create at once~~ ~~as soon as possible~~ in this new and changed environment, that atmosphere of domestic peace and comfort which had been theirs in the East.

To such travellers the sweet air and open spaces of the prairies were wonderfully pleasant after days in stuffy trains and more days in the tiny hotel, abode of filth and flies, which was all Dubuque had to offer. The prairie schooners, heavy wagons with white canvas covers, were drawn each by two yoke of oxen, moved with great slowness. There were no roads, in places rough trails led from one settlement to another, but in general the journey must be directed by the compass for landmarks were few. From horizon edge to horizon edge the eye traversed a great plain, barely undulating with a long even swell like that of the ocean. Everywhere the long prairie grass, the blue joint, grew long and thick; in the slopings which sometimes lay between two long slopes, grew a coarser and ranker grass. ~~Against~~ ^{Amidst} this green ~~interspersed~~ with the coarse leaves, and brown fruit of the cat-tails.

background lay the tints of myriads of blossoms, contrasting and complementing one another. The prairie hints belied its name by its white and purple coloring, the gorgeous butterfly weed and the shaded mauve and violet heads of the milkweed, each so beloved of the butterfly flies that they cluster about like a second aerial bloom above the terrestrial one; the prairie lily, the purple shooting star, the deep orange yellow of peacock or Indian paint, the delicate white blossoms of the starry camphor and the fairy net work of Queen Anne's Lace, all these and more are typical of the virgin prairies. They are seldom seen now, only in the constantly diminishing pieces of unbroken land and along fences and turn-rows they fight the losing fight of the wild things against cultivation.

When the oxen, tugging stolidly, had pulled the heavy wagons up one long gentle slope, the eyes of the travellers rested upon a scene precisely similar to the one they had just passed through, pathless levels of waving grass dotted with flowers. Occasionally along the course of some sluggish creek or river whose waters had turned aside the sweeping prairie fires, were trees of many sorts, sometimes of considerable size. When possible the night camp was made in these groves, which afforded shelter and fuel, while the stream offered a convenient supply of water. Such camps were not always available, sometimes the day passed without

sight of a single tree. To one who knows the Iowa of today as a state as well timbered as New York or Ohio, it is difficult to vision what it must have been. This, "they tell you," was the forty mile prairie; this old elm, broken and neglected, but still so towering above the later growths, is still called the Lone Tree, but in those days in a journey of fifty miles from river to lake one saw no others.

Such, then, were the plains over which the travellers journeyed, such the streams near which they camped. Deer were still numerous, rarely a single buffalo, a wandering representative of the great herds which had been driven farther westward, was to be seen. Ducks and geese, turkeys and passenger pigeons, prairie chickens and quail, existed in apparently inexhaustible numbers. The summer aspect of the land was friendly and gracious, the deep, dark loam free from stumps and stones, needing only the stirring of the plow, the dropping of the seed to yield its stored riches in abundant crops. Here, there and yonder the travellers stopped where hill slope and clustering trees brought memories of the eastern home they had left, or where the curving valley and little river carried them further, back to the vine lands of France or Germany.

Always the spot chosen was well set with trees which offered material for a house, fuel and shelter from the winds. The houses were built of willow

logs with the chimneys stuffed with clay, plank and floors and shake roofs were necessary because no sawed lumber was to be had. There was no waiting for the wood to season, the journey had consumed much of the precious summer and there was an imperative need of a house before the winter set in. While the men with incredible labor put the green logs, heavy as iron beams, in place and hewed out shakes and plank the women ~~managed~~ ^{worked} as they could in tents, cooking over the open fire, and even with that Canadian art preserving such fruit as was available for the winter; the wild plums were the best, the tiny trees clustered in to thickets bore fruit small but amazingly delicious, while the wild grape vines, which festooned themselves over the trees were loaded with clusters of grapes, tiny and remarkable for the quantity of seeds rather than for the amount of pulp, but infinitely better than nothing. The fruit was dried in the sun, and, when it was to be used, was stewed with sugar and water, or made into pies. If there was a river near at hand fish were caught and salted; those who had come early in the spring had vegetables for themselves and corn for their cattle but the later arrivals were less fortunate. Flour and all other supplies must be hauled many miles, fifty, sixty, even a hundred, with ox teams over the open prairie, a journey of weeks under the most favorable conditions, and wholly impossible directly winter set in.

To the winter they looked forward with dread, almost with horror, directly the snow covered the prairies, traveling was no longer possible, their isolation was complete; for months they were cut off from the great world outside, they could receive no news, hope for no assistance; if fuel or shelter proved inadequate they faced death by freezing, if provisions proved insufficient starvation haunted them. Each little cabin or cluster of cabins was a world of its own and must be sufficient to itself mentally, morally and physically.

They had good reason to dread the season; when the north wind blew it seemed to come roaring from the top of the world without a single obstacle to break its course, when snow clouds blotted out the sun and the wind-driven masses scurried over the fields they dared not venture from their houses for they had no landmarks, earth and sky showed one pathless white level. The snow sifted through the ill-built houses, and, more penetrating than the snow, the bitter cold pressed in every where, mocking their efforts at warmth. For those who lived near timbered streams the fuel problem was simpler; those who settled on the open prairie were forced to burn the rough prairie hay, twisted into knots, and when

cold and wind were severe someone must sit by the stove night and day, feeding it constantly. Luxuries they had none, even the most common comforts were denied them, it was life stripped of all refinements, reduced to the ultimate requirements of a bare existence.

There was a greater fear which kept by them night and day, the fear of the Indian bands, which, leaving their reservations, prowled on the edges of the settled country. Miserable, harassed, ignorant, they revered as these innocent settlers the wrongs which stronger and more unscrupulous white men had inflicted on them. They, too, desired food, warmth and shelter and took by violence what they desired, when full-fed they were quiescent, but if food were refused they turned to threats and force. Often it seemed to the unfortunate settler that his choice lay only between a quick death under the Indian hatchet and a slow one by starvation.

Despite the terror they spread about them, the Indians gave to the frontier life a touch of wild picturesqueness; the stolid braves, draped in gaudy blankets, bearing their guns over their shoulders; the squaws, with their papooses strapped on their backs, struggling with restless fancies and with the

awkward "travies," in which their household goods were packed; the camps with clustered teepees outlined against wood or hill, were objects of never-ending interest to those to whom such a sight was incredibly novel. The Indians were not always hostile, often they only begged and accepted gratefully the provisions which the settlers gave them, and their visits were looked upon as events, whose recital should prove to the friends at home that Iowa was really the frontier. When hostile bands were in the vicinity the news spread from cabin to cabin and the settlers banded together for protection, or, hiding their household goods upon wagons, fled for protection to the nearest fort.

When spring came, a season seeming never so beautiful, since winter had never seemed so severe, there was breaking to be done; the oxen, tugging at the heavy breaking plow, must strain every muscle to turn the tough prairie sod, which turned back from the share in an unbroken ribbon of glossy black. Sod corn was the first crop. The seeds, dropped by hand in the furrow and covered by hand, grew into plants rank and green as only the first crop on virgin soil can be. Small gardens were planted, too, and eager eyes watched the growing vegetables and longing palates anticipated

the savor of those first green morsels. Of pasture for the cattle and of hay there was no dearth, one needed only to select the most favorable spot and drive the cattle there to pasture or cut and cure the hay for winter use.

Valuable as the prairie hay was for the cattle there were times when it became a positive menace; as it ripened it became brittle and dry as tinder, the merest spark sufficed to set the whole prairie in a flame which, driven by the wind, swept for miles. For protection, strips, called fire guards, were plowed about the buildings and large sections of the grass in the vicinity were burned so that the fires must burn out for lack of fuel. Tho' such forethought rendered the fires much less ~~harmful~~ ^{dangerous}, still they formed an important part of the many perils which the frontier farmers must meet and overcome.

Thus the pioneer must contend against fire, against the severities of the winter, against this isolation, against hostile Indians and against devastating hordes of grasshoppers. The strong stayed and engaged them all, the weak resigned themselves to failure and returned to their eastern homes. To those who remained each succeeding year became easier, with good crops they were able to save money and buy necessities and even luxuries. New settlers came and

ever remote from the railroads new towns grew up; then the railroads came too, with greatly increased possibilities for marketing produce. The tiny house and barn, hastily and poorly built, gave place to better structures, the trees planted as a wind-break grew and shut off the breezing sweep of north-west winds, the land, homesteaded and purchased from the government for a dollar and a quarter an acre, increased in value, slowly at first and then with amazing rapidity. Gradually, imperceptibly yesterday had vanished, slipping so softly, so inevitably into today, that no man could put his finger on the spot where the old days ended and our time began.