

A Visit to Dubuque in 1835

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A VISIT TO DUBUQUE IN 1835¹

I reached Dubuque without accident, and proceeded to the only tavern of which it can boast. The landlord, whom I had met in the steamer, on ascending the Mississippi, promised me a bed to myself—a luxury that is by no means easily obtained by travellers in the West. The bar-room, which was indeed the only public sitting-room, was crowded with a parcel of blackguard noisy miners from whom the most experienced and notorious blasphemers in Portsmouth or Wapping might have taken a lesson; and I felt more than ever annoyed by that absurd custom, so prevalent in America, of forcing travellers of quiet and respectable habits into the society of ruffians, by giving them no alternative but sitting in the bar-room or walking the street.

It may be said that I am illiberal in censuring the customs of a country, by reference to those of a small infant village; but the custom to which I allude is not confined to villages; it is common to most towns in the West, and is partially applicable to the hotels in the eastern cities. They may have dining-rooms of enormous extent, tables groaning under hundreds of dishes; but of comfort, quiet, and privacy, they know but little. It is doubtless true, that the bar of a small village tavern in England may be crowded with guests little, if at all, more refined or orderly than those Dubuque miners, but I never found a tavern in England so small or mean that I could not have the comfort of a little room to myself, where I might read, write, or follow my own pursuits without annoyance.

I sat by the fireside, watching the strange and rough-like looking characters who successively entered to drink a glass of the nauseous dilution of alcohol, variously coloured, according as they asked for brandy, whiskey, or rum, when a voice from the door inquiring of the landlord whether accommodations for the night were to be had, struck my ear as familiar to me. I rose to look at the speaker, and our astonishment was mutual, when I recognized Dr. M. of the United States

¹From Charles A. Murray, *Travels in North America*, (London, 3rd Edition 1854) I, pp. 165-168.

army, who is a relative of its commander-in-chief. He is a very pleasant, gentlemanly man, from the state of New York, whose acquaintance I had made in my trip to Fort Leavenworth, to which place he was now on his return. After an exchange of the first expressions of pleasure and surprise, I assisted him in getting up his baggage from the canoe in which he had come down the river, and in despatching a supper that was set before him. We then returned to the bar, and after talking over some of our adventures since parted, requested to be shown to our dormitory. This was a large room, occupying the whole of the first floor, and containing about eight or nine beds; the doctor selected one in the center of the wall opposite the door; I chose one next to him, and the nearest to me was given to an officer who accompanied the doctor. The other beds contained two or three persons, according to the number of guests requiring accommodation.

The doctor, his friend, and I, resolutely refused to admit any partner into our beds; and, notwithstanding the noise and oaths still prevalent in the bar, we fell asleep. I was awakened by voices close to my bedside, and turned to listen . . . to a conversation between the doctor and a drunkard who sought to share the bed.

Three other tipsy fellows staggered into the room soon after midnight, and slept somewhere; they went off again before daylight, without paying for their lodging, and the landlord did not even know that they had entered his house.

It certainly appears at first sight to be a strange anomaly in human nature, that at Dubuque, Galena, and other rising towns on the Mississippi, containing in proportion to their size, as profligate, turbulent, and abandoned a population as any in the world, theft is almost unknown; and though dirks are frequently drawn, and pistols fired in savage and drunken brawls, by ruffians who regard neither the laws of God nor man, I do not believe that an instance of larceny or house-breaking has occurred. So easily are money and food here obtained by labour, that it seems scarcely worth a man's while to steal. Thus, the solution of the apparent anomaly is to be found in this, that theft is a naughty child, of which idleness is the father and want the mother.

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