

Reminiscences

Ira Cook

ISSN 0003-4827



Material in the public domain. No restrictions on use.

This work has been identified with a [Creative Commons Public Domain Mark 1.0](#).

Recommended Citation

Cook, Ira. "Reminiscences." *The Annals of Iowa* 4 (1900), 522-530.

Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.2623>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

REMINISCENCES.

ANOTHER CHAPTER BY IRA COOK.

Sixty-four years ago this day I came to Iowa, landing where now stands the city of Davenport, and although nearly two-thirds of a century have passed since that day, and I am fast nearing my four score years; I cannot forget the impression then produced on my mind, boy as I was, that it was the most beautiful land on God's green earth, and the richness of the soil, the wondrous profusion and fragrance of the wild flowers, the green hills, and pleasant valleys, still remain with me after all these long years.

A journey in those days from our home in western New York to the new land, was a very different affair from that of the same trip to-day. My father, one sister and her husband came out in October, 1835. They came to Buffalo by the Erie canal, thence to Cleveland by steamboat, down the Portsmouth Canal to the Ohio River, then down the Ohio and up the Mississippi Rivers by steamboat to Rock Island. The trip consumed just one month.

In the spring of 1836 the remainder of the family, consisting of twelve people, including the children of my brothers and sisters, left home on the 25th day of March. Our route was one-hundred miles by wagon to "Olean Point," on the Alleghany River. There we built cabins on a lumber raft and floated down to Pittsburgh, from there to Cincinnati by steamboat, thence by way of Ohio and Mississippi river boats to Rock Island. We were two months, less two days, making the trip.

In those days three to four weeks were required to bring from, or send a letter to New York, and the postage was twenty-five cents for a half ounce. Then Iowa was attached to Michigan for judicial purposes, and my father held a commission from the Governor of Michigan as a justice of the peace. Only what was called the "Black Hawk Purchase"

then belonged to the government, and the settlements were mostly confined to a narrow strip along the Mississippi River; all of the rest of this great State, now the home of 2,000,000 people, belonged to the Indian tribes.

During the years 1836 and 1837 the influx of people into the new territory was great and the country was full of "land hunters." My father had a hewed log house with a *shingle roof*, which in those early days was considered "quite swell;" and although there were fourteen all told in the family, still in a way that cabin was a hotel, for there was scarcely a night that some one did not apply for something to eat and a place to sleep, and my father was a man with so kind a heart that no man was ever turned away hungry or tired, so long as there was any thing to eat in the house, or a place to stow away another body, and that would generally be on the soft side of a hard wood (oak) "puncheon." The Indians called him Nish-i-shin Che-mo-ka-man (good white man). I should say here that, in addition to the log cabin described, which was 16 x 18, it had a loft reached by a ladder, where people could be stowed away, and another very small cabin made of rough logs and roofed with "shakes," which, by the way, make a very good "fair weather roof," excellent so far as ventilation is concerned.

As I have before said, we arrived on the 23d of May, 1836. My father and William Van Tuyl, my brother-in-law, had prepared and had ready for planting about twenty acres, broken up the previous year, and on the 24th all hands turned in to planting this ground to corn. We had then none of the modern farm implements and so that crop was planted in the old-fashioned way. The ground was furrowed with a horse, the corn dropped by hand and covered with a hoe. We had a very good crop, and I believe it was the first crop of corn raised in the vicinity of Davenport. I know we had no neighbors within several miles who raised any corn that year.

In connection with this crop of corn, I must tell of a boy-

ish prank of mine. Our field was only about one-half fenced, and as soon as the corn was planted all hands went to the timber making rails to complete the fencing. One evening on returning from the timber we found that a drove of hogs belonging to a neighbor, a man by the name of Faulkner, had been in the field and had made sad havoc with the newly planted corn, so the next day I was left at home to guard the field and replant the corn. Well, if that drove of hogs did not make it lively for me that hot summer day, then I lose my guess! I was a small boy for my age, with very short legs; that drove of hogs was very large, with very long legs (the "razor-back breed"), and they could go around the field and get in their work sooner than I could go across and head them off. The day came to an end, and it came near making an end of me, too. That night I told my brother, John P., of the awful time I had and then he said: "See here, Bub, I tell you what to do. After we go out in the morning you take 'Old Betsey' ('Old Betsey' was a single-barrel shot gun about six feet long), fill your pocket with peas (we had a barrel, brought out for seed) and I think you can keep them off." This looked like a large-sized picnic for me and I acted upon his advice promptly. I did not have to wait long for the enemy, and I was ready for them. As soon as they were in range "Old Betsey" spoke in her loudest voice. That shot took effect, because the individual hog which received the charge "squealed," but it had no more effect on that drove than if I had thrown a stone among them. I kept up that "cannonade" for a half hour. The confounded drove would retreat, but immediately make a charge on another part of the field. At last hot, mad, tired out, the devil thought it a good time to make his appearance, and I have noticed that when "Auld Cloutie" has work for his subjects to do, he takes particular care to provide the means. I happened just then to put my hand in my pocket and there I found a dozen or more buckshot that a man had given me. Without any hesitation I rolled six or eight of them down

"Betsey's" throat, and as the enemy was then just within fair range, I blazed away. The result—yes, sir, all that his satanic majesty could desire! Two of the largest fell to rise no more; others, how many I do not know, went limping and squealing home. One, I know, only succeeded in going a few rods to an Indian trail, where it lay down and became "pork," making a total "bag" of *three*! The enemy were effectually routed and I saw no more of them that day.

The Indians were plenty with us. They were not reconciled to give up their hunting and fishing ground on Rock Island and vicinity. Black Hawk says in his life, dictated by himself: "This was our garden spot, our fruit orchard, and was very dear to us." And so they lingered in the vicinity and made frequent visits to their loved and lost old homes. They were, as a rule, peaceable and well behaved, glad to exchange game and fish for the products of the white man's fields. Occasionally, when under the influence of whiskey, they became troublesome. One such incident happened to my sister, Mrs. Van Tuyl. She was alone in the house when two Indians came in. They had a bottle of whiskey and were already under its influence. It was a cold day, and after warming themselves they made signs that they wanted a drinking cup. My sister gave them a tea cup, which they managed to drop on the floor and, of course, it went to pieces. Then they asked for another, but she said "no," and shook her head. At once one of them drew a knife and threatened her. She stepped to a corner of the room, seized a broom, pointed to the door and said "pucko-chee!" (go), and sure enough they went, and in a hurry, too. It seems to be a fact that a "brave" fears nothing so much on earth as to be struck by a woman. He is disgraced forever.

Those pioneer days were days of toil, interspersed with frequent attacks of ague, and, as I have somewhere said before, "when we were not at work we were shaking." I well remember that in the fall of 1836, 1837 and 1838, and espe-

cially in 1837, there were not enough well people in all the country to care for the sick.

Where the flourishing city of Davenport now stands there was not a single house, on what was the original town site, only a cabin on the bank of the river, in which lived the ferryman. Further up the river and about opposite the Rock Island bridge lived Mr. Antoine Le Claire, and that was the sum total of the inhabitants in May, 1836. During that year and the succeeding ones the influx of settlers was great and we soon had plenty of neighbors. The town of Davenport began to grow and was soon a thriving village, with churches, schools, stores and mechanical trades in full operation.

The country around Rock Island in those days was a paradise for sportsmen. Game was plenty and the river fairly swarmed with fish. To those who had the leisure to take advantage of this condition of affairs, there was lots of sport every day in the week; but to those of us who were compelled by necessity to labor from dawn to dark, and then do the "chores," the fun was not so apparent. However, even we, the unfortunates, occasionally got a "half day off," and on days when it rained so hard and steadily that we could not work, even in the barn, we were allowed to "go a fishin'."

Of public men and public measures in those early days I can say but little. I was but a boy of 15 or 16 years, and that boy was confined closely on a farm and worked from fourteen to sixteen hours each day. I remember one morning seeing Gov. Henry Dodge of Wisconsin pass our farm on his way to Burlington to attend the annual session of the legislature. He was on horseback and attended by other state officers. They had ridden the entire distance from the then capital of Wisconsin, which I believe was at Mineral Point, and still had a ride of one hundred and twenty miles before them.

I once met and was introduced to Gen. Robert Lucas, our first territorial governor. I believe this occurred in the

spring of 1841. I was then living in Tipton, Cedar county. Some of "us boys" one day borrowed an old horse and wagon and started over to Rock Creek for the purpose of fishing. As we were driving through the timber we saw coming toward us two men on horseback. We soon recognized one as Mr. Harmon Van Antwerp, the then member of the territorial legislature from Cedar county. When we met we stopped and Mr. Van Antwerp introduced his companion as "Gov. Lucas." After a little chat and a kindly inquiry by the governor as to where we boys were bound, we said "Good morning" and went on our way. I mention this interview to give me an opportunity to tell how one, at least, of our early governors was dressed. First, he had on a complete suit of blue linsey woolsey, evidently of home manufacture, and the cut and fit showed the handiwork of an amateur. His shirt was of unbleached cotton cloth, with turn down collar, and shirt front of the same material; a pair of coarse cowhide boots and a soft wool hat completed his attire. A sturdy figure of a pioneer was he, but under that soft felt hat was a brain large enough for a ruler of nations, and we of this day (as those of that day could not) can see how much that plain old man contributed to the solid foundations of this great commonwealth.

A notable person in those very early days was Antoine Le Claire. He lived in a very comfortable house, about opposite the lower end of Rock Island, on a section (640 acres) reserved for him by the Indians when they made their first sale to the United States of their Iowa lands.

Mr. Le Claire was of French and Indian blood. He was well educated and exercised a powerful influence over the Indians. He was for very many years in the employ of the United States as an interpreter. He officiated in that capacity in making the treaty at the time (September 21, 1832) the government made the first purchase of the Indians, called locally the "Black Hawk Purchase." And again in 1836 when General Scott made a treaty with the Sacs and

Foxes, at which time a further large purchase of land was made. That treaty was made on the reservation belonging to Mr. Le Claire and was attended by the entire tribe, many thousands in numbers. I remember distinctly the hundreds and hundreds of Indians, squaws, papposes, ponies and dogs, that for days prior to that of the treaty swarmed past our cabin. The main trail from the Indian villages on the Iowa river to the agency on Rock Island passed within twenty or thirty rods of our cabin and right across our land. So, as I was confined at home with the "shakes" (ague) and could not go to the treaty grounds some two or three miles away, I used to sit day after day and watch the moving procession.

Mr. Le Claire was a man of immense proportions, weighing from 350 to 400 pounds, yet he could mount a horse or dance a cotillion with more ease and grace than many a man of half his weight.

He was a good citizen, liberal, public-spirited, benevolent, and always ready to help the deserving. The city of Davenport owes much to him. He accumulated large wealth for those days, and made good use of it. He died September 21, 1861.

Col. George Davenport was another man who figured in the local affairs of Iowa and Davenport, although his residence was on Rock Island, where he had lived since 1816 or 1817, coming there, I believe, with the soldiers who built Fort Armstrong. He had been for many years, and was still as late as 1836, an Indian trader. He was one of the original proprietors of the town of Davenport, and it bears his name. For years he had been again and again placed in deadly peril in his dealings with hostile tribes, yet he lived to meet death at the hands of cowardly robbers, who first shot him, and then so abused and maltreated him to force him to tell where his money was that he died that night.

The pursuit and capture of his murderers was one of the most thrilling chapters of western history. My brother,

Ebenezer, was of the counsel for the prosecution, and his story of the pursuit and capture of Birch, Fox, the two Longs and Young, was most interesting. Birch and Fox escaped in some mysterious way, but John and Aaron Long and Young were tried and condemned, and I had the satisfaction, together with some thousands of other spectators, of seeing them hung! Maybe that sounds rather sanguinary, but the whole country was aroused by the brutal murder of an unoffending peaceable old gentleman, who was known to every citizen, old and young, in the country, and there were not many but who would have been glad to pull upon a rope to one end of which dangled the murderers.

There were many other men who came to Davenport and Scott county in 1836 and 1837 and later who deserve and are entitled to honorable mention and praise for their efforts in building up the new country, but space forbids the record of their names here.

On the 22d day of February, 1858, (Washington's birthday) the Pioneer Settlers' Association of Scott County held their first re-union at the Burtis House. J. A. Birchard, Esq., of Pleasant Valley, in responding to the toast, "The History of Scott County," closed as follows: "We have made the new homes; raised the new altars; built the new school houses and churches. To do this required men; men of iron nerve, of strong arms and large hearts, and such men were the pioneers of Scott county, and I may justly add, and so of all Iowa."

My sister, Mrs. William Van Tuyl, of Davenport, is to-day the oldest living settler of Davenport, and, I believe, with the exception of Capt. Lewis Clark, of Buffalo, of Scott county.

But there were others who aided in laying the foundations of Iowa strong and deep and who contributed largely to the final result. The pioneers of Iowa were a strong and sturdy set of men and of the very best blood of this nation. It took a man of more than ordinary courage and determina-

tion, sixty and more years ago, to decide to pack up his worldly possessions and leave the comforts of the east and come to what was then the very far west; and so it was, that those that did come were of the best, and the best equipped for the work before them.

Last winter, at the biennial meeting of the "Pioneer Law Makers" in the city of Des Moines, on the occasion of the reception of that body by the legislature, then in session, the Hon. S. P. Yeomans, of Lucas county, one of the pioneer legislators, in reply to an address made by the presiding officer of one branch of the legislature, tells the story of the work of the pioneers far better than I can. He said:

I could not keep you on the mountain top if I would. I ask you to step down to the level plain of facts. The profound compliments we receive may turn our heads. Our work was not so marvelous after all. The truth is that the Lord Almighty made Iowa. When we came here we found in Iowa a veritable cornucopia of wealth. We found it in soil, climate, sky and woods. Our civilization was crude. The men who laid the foundations of the state were not pioneer law makers, but for the most part pioneer farmers. They planted trees, they tilled the land, they raised the crops. Prosperity came apace. The iron horse came to carry away to the east the products of the farm. It is true that laws had to be established. A judiciary system was devised, schools were organized and were made free to all. If we did our work well, we have received our reward.

DES MOINES, IOWA, May 23, 1900.

GO TO THE WEST.—We say, as we have ever said, to young men or young women of light purse, but willing hand; to the farmer or mechanic of increasing family, slender means or dubious prospects, your true home is in the West! Seek it, rear your children there to larger opportunities than await them on the rugged hill-side or in the crowded streets of the East.—*Horace Greeley, Oct. 15, 1857.*

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.