Chapter 3--Frontier Iowa, from A New History of Iowa

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Most immigrants to Iowa in the mid-nineteenth century came from Northern states, such as Illinois, Ohio, or New York. But some were from Europe, with migrants from Sweden and Holland among those who came to Iowa before the Civil War. People settled first in southeast Iowa, then moved northwest, following river valleys. Settlers came seeking land, which gave them economic independence. Property ownership was crucial for family security—it was their sustenance and provided land for future generations. Family farms dominated the state, with men, women, and children all working together to ensure survival and prosperity. Female labor was especially crucial to family success and women completed many important tasks. The challenges of life in Iowa were varied, including harsh weather, prairie fires, disease, and unending labor. As farms spread across the state, villages and towns grew, providing services to local communities. Americans and Europeans had settled most of the state by the time the Civil War broke out in 1861.

Immigrants went west seeking economic independence. A Wapello County history noted that older states, such as New York and Pennsylvania, were “good—to emigrate from.” Migrants wanted affordable farmland so they could feed themselves and following generations. People moved to achieve what they could not in more populated or expensive areas. Family welfare required property ownership and cheap land provided the opportunity to start a new life or to add to a family’s wealth. Since most households lived in rural areas, people made their living from the soil. Inexpensive and fertile land provided unparalleled opportunities for economic gain. James Crawford wrote to his father in Vermont, extolling the virtues of Iowa. “I can raise all the provisions we shall want for one half the labor you can on the best land you have.” But, the ideal of the self-sufficient pioneer family was “inconsistent with the Iowa experience,” argued historian Dorothy Schwieder. Most Iowa farmers wanted to produce a surplus and make a profit to pay off debts, buy land, or improve their lives.¹

People came to Iowa for a variety of reasons. “Push” factors are those that forced people to leave their homes, such as unemployment, hunger, or political or religious repression. “Pull” factors are attractions that drew migrants to a new area, such as job prospects or positive reports from earlier migrants. There was a direct correlation between cheap land and migration in the Midwest. Inexpensive farmland was an “almost irresistible attraction to many,” wrote historians Jeremy Atack and Peter Passel. Land in antebellum America provided the most obvious route to wealth accumulation and upward mobility. Property was more abundant in the West, so social mobility usually required westward migration. This drive for economic improvement motivated most migrants to Iowa.²

Most native-born immigrants came from Northern states seeking economic opportunity. A. C. Sutliff left Ohio and settled in Johnson County in the early 1840s. Sutliff traveled several

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hundred miles searching for a good farm site in 1838. “I had not come as far as I had for chances as others. I was looking for the best and would go farther to get it,” he wrote to his brother. He found a “handsome situation for a farm,” with fertile land, timber, and water near a navigable river. The Sutliff family lived as squatters for a few years in Iowa. He wrote that he hoped “to make enough off the land before it is offered for sale to pay for it.” He planned to produce butter and cheese, as the prairies provided great pasture for cattle. “The local advantages far exceed any other country I ever saw for doing business,” he boasted.3

Other Americans came from the Northeast and the Upper South. Some moved directly to Iowa, while others lived in several places before reaching the state. John Kelsey, a carpenter from Niagara County, New York, bought land near Cedar Rapids in 1848. He asked his family to come join him in November 1849, writing, “If you in tend to come atall the Sooner the better as real Estate is rising very fast.” His parents and siblings joined him by 1851. He married Harriet Jane Rogers two years later and began farming. Sarah Welch Nossaman and her family left North Carolina in 1831, living in Indiana and Illinois for four years before moving to Iowa Territory. They lived in Van Buren County until her family moved west again to Jefferson County. Sarah married at age 17 and moved farther west in 1843 with her husband and children to live south of Pella. They lived in a shanty of poles and bark, chasing snakes and skunks out of their primitive shelter.4

Swedes and Dutch, as well as those from other nations, came to Iowa before the Civil War too. A group of Swedes established the appropriately named New Sweden in Jefferson County in 1845. They left their homes because of heavy taxes, political repression, and the lack of economic opportunity in a crowded nation with limited farmland. Positive reports about political liberty and economic opportunity brought many Swedish immigrants to Iowa in the nineteenth century. Some founded the town that later became Madrid, south of Boone. New Sweden had about 500 people by the Civil War. Other Swedes, including Charles J. A. Ericson and his family, left their homes as well. They had received letters from relatives about higher wages and affordable land in the United States. In 1852 the family departed for America. None of them spoke any English. Charles lived in Illinois for a few years with his brothers, working a variety of jobs for six dollars a month as a teenager. In 1859 Ericson moved to Boone County, following a brother, where he opened up a store at the age of twenty.5

Dutch immigrants also came to Iowa, settling in Marion County in 1847. Their new colony was called Pella, named for a city that Christians sought refuge in after Jerusalem was destroyed by the Roman Empire. These immigrants left the Netherlands because of agricultural failures, religious persecution, high taxes, and a lack of economic opportunity. Eight hundred people departed Holland, with 500 or 600 settling in southern Iowa in 1847. Other immigrants came in following years. Dominee Hendrik Peter Scholte, leader of the emigrants, had purchased 47,000 acres with a group of associates for the colony. They wanted to live in an area that Dutch farmers would recognize and could grow wheat and oats and raise cattle. Scholte also wanted the settlement to be established near navigable rivers so farmers could export surplus

4 Susan Kuecker, editor, “’In Good Iowa Style:’ The Kelsey Letters, 1848 to 1882,” The Palimpsest 72:3 (Fall, 1991), 114-117; Sarah Welch Nossaman, “Pioneering at Bonaparte and Near Pella,” Annals of Iowa 13 (October, 1922), 441-448.
production and purchase necessities that they did not make themselves. The immigrants also built smaller Dutch towns in western Iowa, such as Sioux Center. By 1860 the Dutch population in Iowa was 2,615.6

It took substantial resources to establish a farm. The lowest price for an acre in Iowa purchased from the United States government was $1.25. About one-third of Iowa was bought directly from the federal government with cash. Settlers also purchased another forty percent of the state using land warrants that veterans received for military service. Veterans of the Mexican War, who had served at least one year, earned a warrant for 160 acres of land. State land grants, including those to support railroad construction, as well as property given out through the Homestead Act, made up the rest of land sales in the state. Some land was purchased from private owners, of course.7

Settlers needed capital to migrate west, as well as to purchase tools, seed, wagons, and livestock. Newcomers also had to feed themselves while waiting for their first crop. It could cost from $500 to $1,000 in the 1850s to establish a 160-acre farm, with essential livestock, such as oxen, horses, cattle, and hogs, costing at least $200. Expenses could run into the hundreds of dollars for the first year. One Welsh immigrant, Joshua Jones, wrote in 1852 that the cost for forty acres of land, a wagon, and two oxen was $210. Families might pay for property in Iowa by selling a farm in a state such as Illinois or Ohio. But not all migrants were so fortunate. In 1860, nineteen percent of farmers in Iowa were tenants, who paid for rented property with a portion of their harvest. Families often labored for years to save money. Men worked as hired hands or as an artisan, such as a carpenter, if they had such skills. Women might sell surplus eggs or butter.8

Those who could not afford to buy land and outfit a farm often remained in Iowa though. These families usually rented land, hoping to accumulate enough money to buy property after a few years of work. Normally, they tried to feed themselves and produce a surplus for market sale. However, low crop prices during economic downturns, such as after the Panic of 1837, reduced opportunities to earn an income. Other misfortunes, from droughts to floods, could also make it difficult to pay off debts or save money. Even a small forty-acre farm was too expensive for forty percent of Midwestern families in 1860.9

Family goals included providing land for children, which required earning money. In 1849, John Garnavillo wrote to a friend, Louis M. Trombly, and argued that good land with fine homes could be bought for less than $1,000. He suggested that Trombly move to Iowa—land had doubled in value in one year. Prices increased quickly since land was “near the market,” which was accessed by a river. A friend who had visited him planned to buy a farm and leave.

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7 Jeff Bremer, “‘Land Was the Basis For Business:’ Merchants, Markets, and Communities in Frontier Iowa,” The Annals of Iowa, 76:3 (Summer, 2017), 262-263; Roscoe L. Lokken, Iowa Public Land Disposal (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1942), 135-142.
8 Jeff Bremer, “‘Land Was the Basis For Business:’ Merchants, Markets, and Communities in Frontier Iowa,” 262-264; Dorothy Schwieder, Iowa: The Middle Land, 42-44; Alan Conway, editor, The Welsh in America: Letters from Immigrants (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1961), 109-110.
behind rocky lands and an unhealthy country that had “nothing for their children.” (He did not mention any location.) Iowa provided opportunity to purchase fertile land in a healthy place that allowed families “to provide for their children,” Garnavillo contended.  

However, not everyone found immediate success. Mary Jane Parsons, who lived near Jefferson, noted that her family could not afford to buy coffee “all the time” and were also too poor to buy shoes. They were often short on flour their first winter in Iowa. They built their first fences without nails because “we did not have money to buy everything and nails were expensive in a new wild country where everything had to be freighted in by oxen or horses.” Robert Christie, who lived near Pleasant Valley, wrote “my last years farming proved a complete failure. I rented five acres of ground at six dollars an acre and did not realize ten dollars for the whole crop.” Worse yet, he had discovered that his lands were to be sold by the federal government the next year. “This is a heavy blow for those that are not prepared to pay and unexpected to all.” He wrote to family members and asked for money. Fortunately, his brother Lyman sent him $400 to secure the property.  

Most new families planted a few acres of land in crops and built a cabin, unless they purchased improved land that had housing. They usually brought some livestock, such as cattle, hogs, horses, or oxen to their new homes. While families were forced into a primitive existence when they first arrived,few remained outside the market economy for any length of time. New migrants who couldn’t get a crop in the ground often had to purchase some food their first year. Nearly everyone in rural areas consumed a large part of what they grew, especially corn and pork, as well as vegetables from the family garden. But most also wanted some items they could not produce themselves, such as sugar or coffee. These were bought from a local store, usually in exchange for surplus grain, eggs, or butter from their farms. Burlington had two stores by the end of 1833 and lumber came to Iowa from as distant as Pittsburgh by 1836.

Building a new farm, or working one, was labor-intensive. All members of a family worked to feed and house themselves, often in gender-segregated tasks. The labor of men and boys usually revolved around physically demanding, outdoor work. This would include the construction of buildings or fences, plowing, planting and harvesting, as well as hunting. The work of females revolved around the home and garden and included a vast array of responsibilities. These included childcare, food processing and cooking, sewing and weaving, washing and cleaning, producing butter, soap and candles, caring for chickens and cows, as well as tending to an extensive family garden. They also earned income for their family through the sale of eggs, chickens, butter, or other products from their household. And, of course, women and girls helped men and boys with fieldwork when needed.  

Farmwomen were “the chief laborer within the home,” wrote historian Glenda Riley. They were absolutely necessary for the success of a household. Marriage meant the start of a

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10 John Scott Garnavillo to Louis M. Trombly, December 19, 1849, Merle Davis Letters, SHSI-IAC.  
11 Mary Jane Parsons, “Memoirs of the Pioneer Life of Mary Jane Parsons,” 79, 82, 85, Iowa Women’s Archive, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa (IWA); Robert Christie to Brother Lyman, January 31 and May 8, 1840, Robert Christie and Mary Christie Letters, SHSI-IAC.  
shared life, as well as the beginning of an economic partnership. Historian George F. Parker recognized this in 1940, when he wrote, “the one constant unrelieved worker in the Pioneer family was the woman. To whatever class she belonged, the tale of toil was never-ending.” Men could rarely successfully manage a farm without the labor of wives, as well as their children. But this meant endless days for women. Etta May Lacey Crowder wrote, “life consisted of work and work and more work.”

Food preparation was a dominant part of a woman’s daily routine. Farm wives, along with their daughters, usually spent much of their time preparing meals. People of all ages worked long and physically demanding hours and consumed thousands of calories each day. Women gathered, produced, preserved, and produced foodstuffs, from garden vegetables to fruits, eggs, chicken, and milk products. Much of this food, such as corn or wheat, was produced by male labor. Corn could be eaten fresh or dried for later use in cornbread, mush or corncakes. Female food production was far more varied than that of men. They cultivated a large garden, planting, weeding and harvesting vegetables and gathering wild and domestic fruits, including cherries, apples, and strawberries. They also usually grew a herb garden and cared for chickens, collecting eggs, as well as milking cows. Milk was often made into butter, in a time-consuming process of seemingly never-ending churning. In addition to making sure that her family was fed in the spring and summer, food had to be preserved and stored for the long winters.

Florence Roe Wiggins recalled that farm homes “in the early days, were veritable factories.” In addition to the production of butter, women also made soap and candles, created clothing for their families, canned fruit, and cooked huge amounts of food. Women made candles using tallow, or animal fat. They dipped candlewicks in hot tallow, hanging them to dry. This was repeated until candles were large enough. Soap was cooked in a big kettle, with lye, ashes and grease that was boiled. Milk was cooled for a day and the cream was skimmed off. Several pounds of cream could be collected. Matilda Peitzke Paul recalled, “I used to dread to have mother call me and tell me to help with the churning. It seemed as if the butter never would come.” Frontierswomen usually cooked in an iron kettle suspended over a fireplace or in a Dutch oven—a pot with a lid set directly in hot coals. Strips of meat might be cooked over a fire. Bread could be cooked on a board facing the fire. “And the sewing we had to do! We could get almost nothing ready-made,” recalled Maria Brown. Shirts, underwear, socks, and other clothing had to be made at home. “Spinning, dyeing, weaving, knitting, beside the more routine tasks” left little time for leisure recalled Florence Roe Wiggins.

Women were also the primary caregivers to their children. They supervised, trained, and organized their offspring, their education, and their work. Elizabeth Cammack juggled childcare responsibilities...

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with washing and ironing one day while caring for her son Calvin. The boy was “verry troublesome” and climbed on furniture “in all kind of mischief.” Ephraim Fairchild wrote to his parents that his four children “look as ruged as bears and they are as saucy as house pigs.” He complained about tough economic times, but said nothing about the perils of caring for his children. Matilda Peitzke Paul took pride in making all of her children’s clothing by hand. She also did all of the washing by hand, “rubbing every garment, and often stood on one foot while rubbing and rocking the baby’s cradle with the other foot to keep her from waking up.” When Paul hauled water from a well, she tied the baby up in her apron.\footnote{Florence Roe Wiggins, “Life on Grandfather’s Iowa Farm,” 582; Eleanore Cammack, “From Indiana to Iowa,” 403; Mildred Throne, editor, “Iowa Farm Letters, 1856-1865,” Iowa Journal of History 58:1 (January, 1960), 38, 54; Glenda Riley, Prairie Women, 166; Riley, “Not Gainfully Employed,” 260.}

The economic production of women was crucial for a household. The family of Margaret Archer Murray migrated to Iowa in 1846 and established a farm in Jones County, in eastern Iowa. They produced much of their own food, but her mother also sent chicks and butter to market for sale. Her father took pork to Davenport to sell, then purchasing supplies for the family. They also sold apples from their orchard. The Murray family sold dried peaches, too. Mary Lacey Crowders’ mother invested in milk cows and made butter for market. It was packed in 100- pound crocks and tubs and stored in their cellar until taken to Algona, 30 miles away, for sale. Money they earned from such sales was used for winter clothing and supplies, such as groceries. The women and children of the Crowders family helped support their families by growing fruits and vegetables, raising chickens for food and eggs, and producing butter for exchange. Kitturah P. Belknap also made this point in a reminiscence. Belknap and her husband George had moved to Iowa in 1839 and she has sold eggs and butter to earn money. They also sold pork and wheat that they had ground, which they then hauled 60 miles to market.\footnote{Glenda Riley, Prairie Voices: Iowa’s Pioneering Women, 12, 130-131, 184-186; Kitturah P. Belknap, “History of the Life of my Grandmother,” 3-6, SHSI-IAC.}

Women often helped with male fieldwork, too. Land was plentiful, but labor was not always available or affordable. Women often helped with all aspects of supposed men’s work. Mary Ann Ferrin drove oxen to assist her husband with plowing when they could not hire men or boys. John Kenyon relied on the help of his family during harvest. “Sally and the children help farm it, they are equal to two men.” Sarah Kenyon took over work in her family’s corn fields when their hired man quit. “I shouldered my hoe and have worked out ever since and I guess my services are just as acceptable as his,” she wrote. She also helped with reaping wheat. Etta May Lacey Crowder wrote that women sometimes worked in the fields in her family.\footnote{Mildred Throne, “Iowa Farm Letters,” 82-83; Crowder, “Pioneer Life in Palo Alto County,” 76; Mary Ann Ferrin, “An Autobiography and a Reminiscence,” 254; Glenda Riley, “‘Not Gainfully Employed,’” 262.}

Male work normally occurred outside in fields or woods. A cabin and shelter for animals had to be built if they did not exist. Fields and gardens had to be plowed, planted, and fenced as well. Planting corn was done by hand, often with the aid of family members. Tough prairie sod had to be broken, often by hired men using oxen. Harvesting corn or wheat could take weeks of taxing outdoor labor. Hay for animals was cut from wild prairies by hand with scythes. Men and boys could spend years cutting wood to provide necessary fencing. William Porter Nutting wrote that his father cut wood for years to make rails for his fencing, often in the winter. Males also usually hunted for local game, while children often gathered fruits or nuts. While deer could be scarce in many places, smaller game could be plentiful. George W. Clarke wrote that he
successfully hunted ducks, geese, prairie chickens, and passenger pigeons near Drakeville in the 1850s. Men also butchered hogs in colder months, a bloody process often done with neighbors.\(^{20}\)

Corn and pork were basic foodstuffs in frontier Iowa and men were mostly responsible for its production. It was an easy to cultivate grain, which yielded four times more food per acre than wheat. Corn pone, corn bread, grits, flapjacks, hominy, corn mush, and corn fritters were standard items in families’ meals. Hogs supplemented corn and garden vegetables and provided meat when hunting was limited or unsuccessful. They thrived in just about any area that had something to eat, so they were easy to care for. Hogs reproduced rapidly, providing far more meat in a fraction of the time that cattle did. Surplus animals could be walked to a town for sale or butchered in a time-consuming process of scalding, scraping, dressing and curing that “brings no pleasant memories,” recalled George W. Clarke. Freshly slaughtered hogs, salted or smoked, could be preserved and sold in an era before refrigeration.\(^{21}\)

Male labor was usually tied to the seasons, while most female tasks, such as childcare and cooking, continued all year. Outdoor work increased in spring, as the ground thawed. Prairie sod was broken and corn and wheat planted; prairie grass was then cut for hay. Crops had to be guarded against pests and weeds. Caring for lambs or shearing sheep also kept men busy in the spring. By late summer harvest came. Corn had to be stored and wheat grain had to be separated from chaff. Wheat had to be hauled to mills to be ground into flour. By October the corn harvest was a major task. Husking corn or driving hogs to market often occurred in November. Once winter arrived, hog butchering started and wood-cutting for heat and fencing began in earnest. Cold weather brought more leisure time for men. Livestock was usually kept in shelter in the coldest months, turned back into the fields in April.\(^{22}\)

Children also provided crucial labor for farm families, helping with chores both inside and outside of their homes. They were the most versatile and adaptable workers in a family and often labored without any adult supervision. Boys and girls helped plant and care for the large family vegetable garden, assisted with farm animals, and completed a number of important tasks, from planting to transportation. The work of boys and girls also brought in vital income through the sale of butter, eggs, and chickens to local stores. Boys completed increasingly strenuous labor as they grew older, helping with planting, plowing, and harvesting and assuming most duties of a grown man by their teenage years. W. E. Sanders, who grew up southwest of Oskaloosa, called his childhood “an apprenticeship in practical living.” Girls learned a variety of important domestic tasks from their mothers, preparing to manage their own households as


adults. Child work also helped train younger family members for life, introducing them to the expanding commercial world of the United States and reinforcing gender roles and identity.23

The labor of children was as valuable as that of their parents. They could easily be employed in a variety of chores and often worked with a great deal of independence. “Every child had his or her job,” wrote Florence Call Cowles, who lived near Algona. “The children worked about the farm as soon as they were old enough,” remembered Celia Gullixson.

Children spent countless hours completing essential duties for their families that their parents did not have time for. Kids as young as five or six did light labor, from pulling weeds to chasing birds out of fields. As early as the age of eight, children tended livestock and chickens, hauled water, and collected eggs. Boys usually did men’s work, but when needed they completed female labor, such as milking cows or cooking. Normally, girls assisted their mothers in the home and garden, but they often completed tasks that usually fell to boys, including herding animals and harvesting crops.24

Boys completed work that changed according to their age. Younger boys, not yet ten or eleven, did less physically demanding tasks. These included helping to plant corn, taking care of livestock, and gathering nuts and berries. At the age of six or seven, O.J. Felton took cows to pasture. He spent all day with livestock, “no companions but the black shepherd dog Dash.” Most boys assumed adult responsibilities by the time they became teenagers. J. S. Clark, whose family came to Iowa in the 1850s, harvested “great loads of pumpkins” and broke tough prairie sod with a yoke of young steers by himself. He was fifteen. Matilda Paul remembered that her fourteen year old brother, Herman, took over farming duties after the death of their father.25

Both boys and girls helped in clearing land and preparing it for planting. Older kids assisted in plowing, while younger ones broke up clumps of soil or planted kernels of corn; younger siblings brought in wood or cleaned dishes or helped care for those too young to work. Noted Midwestern author Hamlin Garland recalled spending seventy days behind a plow all by himself at the age of eleven. “It was lonely work,” he remembered. Children gathered wild plants and wood and brought water back home from nearby springs or streams. Abbie Mott Benedict gathered wild plums, berries and crab apples; Ellison Orr collected blackberries, strawberries and plums for his family’s table. Kids also helped care for the many animals a farm family owned, from horses to chickens. Both sexes learned to drive and herd livestock at an early age, bringing cattle in from the fields for milking or taking them to pasture early in the day. “Seemingly, the only reason for being a child was that of becoming a grown-up, failing to

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recognize that childhood is a distinct period in the normal cycle of life,” wrote C. Cruikshank about the endless toil of his youth.26

Daughters, while sometimes working outdoors with their brothers, usually spent their time inside the family home. Starting at an early age, they cooked, cleaned, washed, sewed and completed the many demanding duties expected of farmwomen. Young women learned to make soap and candles, knitted and weaved, processed and preserved food, and cared for their younger siblings. Daughters also helped their mothers make butter or raise poultry to send to markets. Farm wives relied on the labor of their female children in such pursuits. Sometimes boys helped their mother, or their sisters, with chores such as making soap or candles or watering plants, as John S. Ely recalled in his reminiscence “Memories of Early Cedar Rapids.” The work of younger women, like that of their mothers, had few limitations. It also provided them with domestic training for their adult lives.27

Women and girls were also usually responsible for caring for poultry and cows and a large garden. Girls, occasionally aided by their brothers, assisted with the routine of milking cows twice a day. “It was up to the women to do the milking in those days, so I acquired the fine art at an early stage of life,” wrote Emma Knowlton. She also helped her mother gather eggs and make soap; with her siblings she collected kindling and wood for cooking and heating. Girls, and often boys, dug potatoes, hoed vegetables, and pulled weeds. Female work provided important foodstuffs for their households, which helped to diversify farm families’ diets and sometimes provided income from goods sold to merchants or necessities from exchanges with neighbors.28

Margaret E. Archer Murray’s family came to Iowa in 1846 and the labor of its children helped them survive. “We all did our share of work big and little,” she remembered. In the summer and fall the Murray children gathered blackberries, cherries, plums, and grapes for sale to bring in money or purchase groceries. Margaret sadly recalled that her family kept her so busy that she “never had a whole day off for play, not even half day.”29

James R. Howard remembered in “Making An Iowa Farmer” that “hard work was a family necessity.” When he was six years old his family sent him to the nearest post office, which was five miles away. He rode a horse to fetch the mail, usually bringing back “some supplies in a sack tied to the saddle.” At the age of seven he planted corn seeds; at nine he learned to plow and load hay. He completed chores every morning and night for two or three

hours. “Frozen feet and faces were common,” he remembered. When he looked back at his childhood he was thankful for the “necessity of work in those early years.”

Benjamin Gavitt was less grateful for his circumstances when fought a solitary, desperate battle against a prairie fire that threatened his family’s farm. After returning from fishing in a nearby creek, he observed the “tell-tale” smoke of a prairie fire on the opposite side of their farm. He decided to try to protect the fence, corn crop, and home by himself, as his mother was visiting his older sister fifteen miles away. The fire overwhelmed him, destroying a quarter-mile of fencing. He retreated toward the structure, using willow boughs from his fishing site to beat out any flames too close to the residence. He saved his home, with the help of a cleared area with minimal vegetation that could catch fire.

Iowans faced many challenges—like young Ben Gavitt—ranging from blizzards and prairie fires to diseases and accidents. Cholera, malaria, and even occasional smallpox threatened lives in the nineteenth century. Snakes and mosquitoes also proved to be regular companions and hazards. Tornadoes were rare, but frightening events. Prairie fires, both beautiful and terrifying, could quickly destroy a farm or kill those who could not escape its path. Blizzards trapped families in their homes for days, threatening livestock and the lives of those who could not find shelter.

Malaria was the most common disease among Iowans and those who lived west of the Appalachian Mountains. It was often called “ague” and afflicted anyone who lived with mosquitoes. Unfortunately, the insects were everywhere. Mary Ann Ferrin wrote that the “hum and stings of millions of musquetoes” kept her family company at night. Aristarchus Cone complained that they were “so thick you could stir them with a stick.” The Midwest was an ideal breeding ground for mosquitoes, as it had lots of waterways and ponds and prairies had poor drainage. People also lived near water sources where mosquitoes bred. Malaria was usually not fatal in Iowa, but it made life miserable. It brought cycles of high fevers and chills that could repeat every day or two. “Almost every one in the Country had the Fever and Ague or something worse. There was hardly well enough ones to take care of the sick,” wrote Cone. Malaria could be debilitating and undermined the ability of settlers to fight off other illnesses.

Other diseases, notably cholera, threatened Iowans. Cholera was a terrifying intestinal disease that could kill infected people in a day or two. Infections came from contaminated water or contact with victims or their clothing or bedding. Outbreaks occurred in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century and came to Iowa with steamboat passengers in 1849. Caleb Forbes Davis remembered that “almost every boat put off dead or affected persons” in Keokuk, where many died in the spring of 1849. Cholera destroyed intestinal lining, leaving victims unable to absorb food or water. Victims suffered from 20-30 episodes of diarrhea a day, which helped spread the bacteria. Children could die in just hours. Historian Benjamin F. Gue wrote that cholera killed hundreds along the Mississippi and Des Moines Rivers, sometimes within a few

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30 James R. Howard, “Making an Iowa Farmer,” SHSI-IAC.
hours. Measles, diphtheria, typhoid, a variety of fevers and other disease also endangered settlers in Iowa and the Midwest.  

Accidents were not as common as malaria, but the cost could be high. Farm injuries impeded or ended work and life. A huge log crushed a man in Hamilton County. A boy was killed by a wild boar near Webster City. Prairie fires took the lives of others. A broken arm that healed badly kept Daniel Brown out of the Union Army. His son William lost two toes to an accident, making walking long distances difficult. John Kenyon’s hand was crushed while splitting rails—his wife gave him morphine to reduce the pain. He returned to work within weeks despite the injury. Sarah Brewer-Bonebright wrote that her brother Jack, an expert woodcutter, had to amputate the mangled toes of a neighbor boy with his ax. Winter could be as bad—if feet suffered frostbite, toes had to be amputated. Thin ice led to drowning while fishing during wintertime. Others died when boats capsized or when bridges collapsed.

Prairie fires terrorized Iowans. Neither roads nor creeks could prevent their advance in dry weather, wrote Sarah Brewer-Bonebright. “Sweeping with the wind, great tufts of burning grass were hurled rods ahead of the moving body of the fire,” she added. Her family always prepared for fires, even if other chores may have been neglected. Families plowed up strips of land around their homes and fields to serve as barriers against fires. They then burned off grass between the furrows. William Porter Nutting remembered that such fires “go almost as fast as a horse could run.” John and Sarah Kenyon and their family frantically battled a fire approaching their home. They employed everything they could find, from rugs and carpets to a hoe to fight the fire. “The flames roled higher [than] the waves on the ocean. It looked awful to me. I was so frightened that I shook like a dog,” John wrote. His wife Sarah used wet bedspreads to defend the house and livestock. “if it had not [been] for the female department everything would burn,” he wrote. His beard and hair was scorched off during the four or five hour battle against the flames. However, the Kenyons and their neighbors saved their farms without major injury. Some were not so lucky. Bonebright-Brewer knew of at least a dozen people killed by prairie fires in the early 1850s.

Iowa weather could be harsh and unpredictable—summer storms and winter blizzards made life difficult. In 1856 Sarah Kenyon wrote to relatives in Rhode Island, “I begin to dread the Winter. They tell such cold stories about here.” Thunderstorms were usually less deadly, but no less intimidating. Mary Ann Ferrin recalled, “vivid flashes of lightning and loud peals of

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thunder were terrifying, and the rain poured down as if the heavens were opened.” The wind blew so hard she could not keep a candle lit. Elizabeth Cammack wrote that a storm in the spring of 1855 was so strong that her husband, James, had to hold the door closed, even as “water beat in till the floor was quite wet.” Sarah Bonebright-Brewer wrote of the harsh winter of 1852-1853, where snow covered the tallest fences. Her family endured a weeklong blizzard that blew snow into every crevice in their home. “Snow, snow everywhere, and the supply seemed inexhaustible. For a solid week we were confined to the cabin,” she wrote. John Kenyon wrote in March 1861 that the “cold most severest weather I ever saw. The snow would blow enough to suffocate one to be out in it.” The Reverend John Todd, living in Tabor casually noted that it was so cold that water in his glass froze during dinner.36

There were reptilian opponents as well—snakes, especially rattlesnakes, were a constant threat in warm weather. Snakes were numerous and could be found in farm fields, woodlands, and prairies, as well as all sorts of unexpected places such as homes and schoolhouses. A large rattlesnake entered a school in Delaware County, sending the teacher and her students onto their benches. An adventurous boy killed the invader. Some rattlesnakes could be six to eight feet long, recalled Sarah Bonebright-Brewer. Two of her brothers were bitten by rattlesnakes, but survived. The usual remedy—not recommended today—was to suck the poison out of the wound and to apply a poultice. John Kenyon killed a snake that his wife Sarah described “as large round as my arm and very long” in their garden. J. L. Ingalsbe, a surveyor in northwest Iowa, encountered a rattlesnake of astonishing aggressiveness while crossing the prairie on horseback. He heard a snap when something stuck one of his stirrups. It was a large rattlesnake. His horse danced and snorted in terror as he repeatedly shot at the offending creature. He killed it, later dryly noting, “I have no definite idea of the size of my game but it must be quite a snake that can wrap his jaws on a horseman’s stirrup.”37

Towns grew up amongst a hinterland of farms and they provided crucial services to the countryside. They were communication, transportation, and market hubs. Towns provided access to material goods, stagecoach, railroad and steamboat transport, and contained stores, artisans, post offices, and taverns. Towns arose because they served as a county seat, river port, or trade center. A land office, bank, or roads spurred growth; merchants, speculators, and lawyers provided capital and services. Settlements allowed the exchange of products and operated as gateways for the movement of people and goods. “Villages and market towns sprang up in Iowa, almost on the heels of the first settlers,” wrote historian Mildred Throne. Farm families took their surplus produce to stores in nearby towns, usually in exchange for grain, eggs, pork, or butter. In return, they received the things they could not make themselves.38


Ottumwa was founded in 1844 after land vacated by the Sac and Fox opened up to settlement. It had ten buildings, with one store, as well as a post office in its first year. There was no regular mail route and the postmaster sometimes carried letters in his hat. By 1848 the town officially received mail three times a week—much to the delight of residents and farmers who came to town to get their mail. Two years later there were three stores, a hotel, a courthouse, and a few homes. The courthouse also served as a primitive schoolhouse until school buildings were constructed around 1850. The town quickly gained population, with more than 500 residents by 1850. It had a lumber mill that could not keep up with demand. That year a library was organized, as well as a literary lyceum. Three years later it also had a gunsmith, a blacksmith, tailors, a bakery, a newspaper and a land office, along with eight dry good stores. It had cabinet making shops and a chair shop, too. It was the market center for the county, as well as a transportation hub. Steamboats visited Ottumwa, sometimes bringing goods from St. Louis. During an 1851 flood, steamboats tied up to cottonwood trees on Main Street and customers visited businesses in boats. Residents also built their own craft to ship surplus produce downriver to New Orleans. The railroad came through town in 1859, tying it to Chicago and other eastern cities.39

Des Moines began as the location for a military fort (Fort Des Moines Number Two) in May 1843. About 140 soldiers were stationed where the Des Moines River and Raccoon River met. Soldiers patrolled central Iowa, keeping squatters at bay and ensuring that the Sac and Fox left Iowa. By 1846 the region had been cleared of its original inhabitants and settlers surged into the middle of Iowa. The presence of the fort, which was abandoned by the military once the Indians departed, as well as its strategic location helped its growth. The name was changed to simply Des Moines in 1857. It benefitted from being located on a river, which could be used by steamboats in high water. Wagon roads tied it to Oskaloosa, Iowa City and Council Bluffs. Transportation links brought immigrants and business to the area. People came from Boone to buy goods and sell their surplus. Thousands of California-bound migrants used the ferry at Des Moines to head west. By 1850 the city had scheduled stagecoach routes heading east and west. It also had nine dry goods stores, a baker, blacksmith shops, two hotels, two newspapers, and far more doctors than patients. Des Moines also benefitted from being chosen as the new state capital in 1857, when it contained 3,800 inhabitants. Its importance grew when telegraph lines reached the city in 1862. Railroad lines arrived in 1866 and 1867, when it had a population about 10,000.40

Land speculators established Sioux City in 1854. Town site promoters, led by John Cook from Council Bluffs, received help from Iowa’s two U.S. Senators, who were speculators themselves. The senators, Augustus Dodge and George Jones, as well as one of Iowa’s congressmen, Bernhardt Henn, each acquired a one-eighth share in the town site company. Cook was appointed deputy surveyor and bought out squatter claims in the area. Political connections brought a U.S. land office to Sioux City, which sold millions of acres of land in northwest Iowa.


The town’s location on the Missouri River aided in its early growth. Steamboats regularly visited, taking fur trappers, miners, and equipment upriver. It also became the county seat. By 1856 town lots sold for as high as $1,200—twenty times the price from the year before.\(^{41}\)

John H. Charles was one of the earliest settlers of Sioux City. He came to the town in 1856, after working as a carpenter and a teacher in Ohio and as a miner in California. Since there was no stage route to Sioux City, Charles arrived from Fort Dodge riding in a lumber wagon. The trip took six days. On arrival, he took refuge from a blizzard in a hotel. One old man “sat by the stove with an umbrella raised over him,” Charles recalled. The storm blew in so much snow that it melted near the stove and turned to rain. His companions were a “hard-looking set” who mostly talked about real estate. The land agents and speculators who filled the town could sell land for double or triple its cost in a year. Charles went to Nebraska, claimed some land, and went to work sawing logs for sale. He made enough money to buy a compass and worked as a surveyor. He was also a clerk and a justice of the peace. The town had less than one thousand people in 1857. Most were transients, he wrote, who came to Sioux City to buy and sell land. Like most others in the town, he became involved in the brisk real estate business of northwest Iowa. He eventually became a merchant. After the Civil War, he owned and operated steamboats with a partner. He lived in Sioux City for almost fifty years, dying in 1904. His life mirrored the economic development of his hometown.\(^{42}\)

Life was more than just endless labor and toil for those who lived in frontier Iowa. People found pleasure and reward in their ability to making a living from their farms. They found fulfillment in their work and their accomplishments. Families found joy around the, as their children grew and as their neighbors became friends. They also loved their animals, which became part of their lives and could be cherished almost as much as children. Etta May Lacey Crowder recalled that her family played games, such as checkers, sang songs and hymns, and enjoyed the company of neighbors and friends whenever possible. Roger S. Galer remembered that the Iowa prairies allowed for the “realization of dreams—that the world is plastic to the touch.” Life was challenging, but “all was not dreary, or commonplace or sad,” he wrote. There was lots of laughter, a willingness to learn, and a “patient bending to daily tasks. If times were hard, they would soon be better.” Holidays, fairs, sports competition, and church brought joy and companionship. Samuel Clough wrote, “on the whole I have enjoyed my labor and been happy and believe I have done some good in the world.” Albert P. Butts wrote about his wife’s grandparents, who came to Iowa in 1870. Farm work gave them “something tangible to show for labor performed by their own hands,” from memories of the first furrow plowed to trees that they planted. Generations found usefulness in creating lives together and in caring for each other.\(^{43}\)

The pursuit of economic independence brought people to Iowa. Most migrants came from Northern states, but some ventured to Iowa from countries in Western Europe such as The Netherlands and Sweden. The state’s population grew tremendously after statehood, reaching 674,913 by 1860. Almost one-half million people flooded into the state in the 1850s, pushing

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settlement by 1860 to a rough line drawn from Mason City to Fort Dodge to Atlantic. Settlers faced a number of threats, ranging from diseases such as malaria to prairie fires and week-long blizzards. Towns sprouted in the wake of settlement, providing services to nearby residents and migrants. In the 1850s, as settlement reached the Mississippi River, the sectional crisis dominated national politics. Iowa—the first free state from the Louisiana Purchase—would be drawn into the boiling national crisis that eventually led to the Civil War.