

IOWA HISTORY



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All That Glitters Is Not Gold

Civic leaders in Iowa in 1869 were proud of their state. It offered some of the most fertile soils and flourishing towns and cities. Railroads snaked across the landscape north and south and east and west. It was believed there were inexhaustible amounts of coal beneath the earth's surface in Iowa.

Smaller towns like Eldora, Ackley and Webster City were growing in population. In Ackley there was a new school building. A large hotel block had sprung up between two railroad depots. The town boasted a farm implement business and a law office. Citizens of Eldora were developing several blocks of businesses, and it was predicted it would soon be a bustling city. A group of enterprising people was building up parts of Webster City. And because there were no competing towns of any size within 20 miles, it had become a lively place to start businesses. And much of the land around the town was unoccupied, offering opportunities for resourceful individuals.

It was said new settlers were moving into the state daily, and they were welcomed with open arms. Two cities, Dubuque and Davenport, boasted populations of 20,000 each. And over the previous eight years about 500,000 new people had moved into the state. Most were farm families.

As Iowa's leaders encouraged new settlement in the state, some who had responded to the call were less than thrilled with their new lives in the state. A new Iowa farmer who had moved from New England wrote a letter back East to warn people that "all that glitters is not gold."

The writer had moved to Iowa hoping for a better life. Before leaving New England he had heard of the beautiful prairie homes that Iowa farm families lived in. But he claimed the opportunities offered in Iowa were highly exaggerated and "overdone."

The farmer had lived for a year in Hamilton County, Iowa, and wrote that in all that time he had not seen a decent farm building. He posed the question, "Why have not the farmers who have been here ten years or more grown well off?" He insisted most lived in "miserable little things which they call houses." Most houses he had seen were only about 16 by 24 feet in size and were lacking a cellar to store eatables.

The new settler to Iowa complained that his neighboring farmers greatly exaggerated the fertility of their land and their prospects for making money. When he asked them how much wheat they raised per acre, they blamed low yields on bad weather. When he pressed them about the year before, they replied, "Well it was so wet we didn't raise a good crop." And the year before that, "Oh, that was the grasshopper year; they ate up everything." But they insisted the next year it would be a bumper crop. However, he reported the average wheat yield for the year would be only 15 bushels per acre and corn 35 bushels. And the Iowa farmer was lucky to get 50 or 75 cents per bushel for wheat, and 30-45 cents for corn.

The disgruntled farmer complained about land values in 1869. He wrote that he knew a farmer who had paid \$1,280 for a 160-acre farm in 1854. After paying taxes and interest on his debt, he had about \$4,000 invested in the land. Yet, land in the area was selling for only about \$8 per acre in 1869.

The writer warned future emigrants to Iowa that the railroad companies and land speculators were overselling conditions in the western state. According to him, they were implying the western states, including Iowa, were a "huge and glorious garden" where the "minimum of work is rewarded with the maximum of profit."

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