

IOWA HISTORY



Courtesy Library of Congress
Chicago's Union Stockyards in 1900

New York City Lawyer Becomes Cattle Rancher

“Halt, throw up your hands.” Two shots rang out, and the stage lunged forward as G. Smith Stanton made his way by stagecoach across the Iowa prairie in the early 1860s. He was on his way from Boone to a tract of land near Woodbine. The Columbia College Law School graduate from New York had inherited the property from his grandfather and decided to try his hand at cattle ranching.

Stanton was the son of famed women’s suffrage leader, Elizabeth Cady Stanton. He survived 15 years as a cattle rancher before returning to New York. He wrote about his experiences in a book, *When the Wildwood Was in Flower*, published in 1909.

Traveling on the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad as far as Boone where the line ended, Stanton stayed a few days in the “frontier town” to prepare for his stage ride to his land in western Iowa. The former New Yorker wrote, “There was nothing about Boone that reminded me of Fifth Ave or Broadway.”

“Unhalted mules” wandered the town, “lumbering oxen” loaded with provisions for western forts and reservations moved through and prairie schooners packed with families heading west passed through the settlement. There were about 200 frame buildings and about every other one was a saloon, gambling house or dance hall. According to Stanton, there wasn’t a tree in sight; but there was “plenty of music and whiskey.” Occasional fights added to the excitement, and cowboys rode on “bucking ponies through the dance houses shooting daylight

through the roofs.” And he said he heard enough profanity during his two days in Boone to “pay the dividends on the stock of the Northwestern for generations to come.”

As Stanton made his way west on the stagecoach he encountered the bandit who demanded the eight passengers throw their hands up. But luckily all were saved by the Wells Fargo express messenger who sat beside the driver. The shots that were fired came from his gun.

Stanton’s ranch was 20 miles from Woodbine. He spent the first few months building up his herd, “scouring” the western part of the state for good stock. He wrote about the challenges of trying to drive on horseback a bunch of animals when each one wanted to “bolt back home.” Stanton wrote that back in New York he had worked out at a gymnasium regularly and ridden horses in Central Park, but trying to head a steer on the western prairies “takes a blue ribbon over all the gymnasiums and bridle paths in the universe.”

By far the toughest job for the New York lawyer turned rancher was transporting his cattle to market to the Union Stockyards in Chicago. It was no easy task getting his cattle loaded onto the train cars and spending 36 hours with them as they crossed Iowa and arrived in Chicago. With as many steers as possible crammed into each car, it was standing room only. If one of the precious cargo fell to the floor, Stanton had to prod the animal to its feet or risk it being trampled by the other steers. It required him to “go right among the horns and droppings” in pitch blackness while the train traveled at 30 miles per hour.

After dropping off the cattle at the stockyards, Stanton headed to the nearest hotel for a bath, shave and clean dining room for his first square meal in four days. Then he boarded a passenger train back to Iowa “dressed as a gentleman.”

“No one would have thought that the well-dressed individual comfortably lounging in a Pullman...was the same unkempt dirty citizen who, but a few hours before, with a four-days’ growth of whiskers on his chin, was in a filthy stock car trying to get a steer on his feet,” Stanton wrote.

After 16 years “battling the stubborn Iowa winters,” the dangers of “pioneer life” and “years of toil,” Stanton moved back to New York to “rest on his laurels” at his beautiful home at Great Neck, Long Island.

He dedicated his book to “those men and women who endured the hardships and braved the dangers of the frontier that their descendants might enjoy the comforts and benefits of civilization.”

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