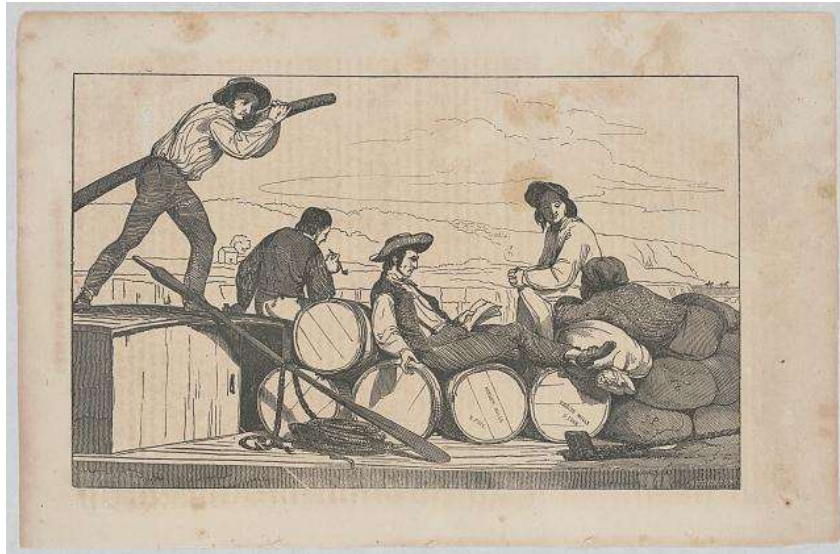


IOWA HISTORY



Courtesy Library of Congress
Iowans used flatboats to transport goods

Sea of Grass Covered 1830's Iowa

“Everybody came from somewhere, as nobody was born and raised here,” John F. Fish said in 1914 when the elderly Wapello County pioneer sat down to visit with a local newspaper reporter.

John was reminiscing about Iowa in the 1830s—before statehood. It was a time when settlers from the eastern part of the United States, as well as immigrants from other countries, moved into Iowa in “torrents.” Many entered the territory by way of Keokuk and Burlington. At Burlington steam ferry boats ran night and day.

The old pioneer recalled seeing acres of land on the Illinois side of the river covered with wagons, horses and cattle waiting their turn for the ferry. Although roads followed the easiest routes, at times the newcomers had to double-team to ford a stream or climb a hill. Bridges were not plentiful. John talked about a swinging bridge held up by iron rods looped together to span the Skunk River. And there was a “pontoon” bridge across the Des Moines River at Racoon Forks made by anchoring flatboats with planks laid from one boat to the other.

Those early Iowa roads were surrounded by a “great moving sea of grass” as far as the eye could see, according to John. “It moved in gently rolling billows on stems bending with the breeze,” he recalled. And the wild flowers threw off aromas that “no perfume manufacturer could imitate.”

Settlers who wanted to farm first had to burn off the thick vegetation that covered the prairie. But it could be a dangerous undertaking. Farmers had to be careful about controlling the fires as the flames could easily spread and destroy everything for miles. Deep furrows were plowed along fences, stacks of grain and buildings to create a buffer.

John described a frightening experience he had when he tried clearing his land of several years’ dense grass. The new sprouts would give his sheep herd—numbering a couple thousand—a tasty, tender treat. He lit a match to the old grass early one morning. Within a few minutes John

said the “heavens and earth” appeared to be ablaze. The wind rose and fanned the flames, moving the fire in the direction of a neighbor. Quickly mounting his horse, he “put spurs hard to the horse’s flanks” and got to the neighbor’s farm ahead of the fire, where he managed to extinguish the flames. On his way back over the smoking prairie, he claimed he saw “thousands” of rattlesnakes killed by the fire laying curled up “like ram horns.”

Merchants and farmers transported goods by teams of horses or oxen. Farmers shipped wool, pork and hides. Merchants traveled to St. Louis to purchase goods for their stores. Steamboats plied the Des Moines River. Sometimes the water fell before the steamboats could leave, and the crew was stuck until it rose again. They made use of their time by fishing or hunting deer, squirrels and pheasants in the Iowa woods. Or they helped local farmers plant their corn. It wasn’t uncommon for farmers to hold a dance and invite the crew. Sometimes the crew held the dance aboard the boat. Everyone danced into the early morning hours.

Early Iowans loved to fish, according to John. Men, women and children piled into wagons. Women, who were in charge of food, brought plenty of good things to eat. The men used axes to fish, rather than poles. Sometimes they cut grape vines off trees, tying them together with hickory bark. Lashing brush and limbs as tightly as they could to the vines, fishermen worked for hours to make brush seines, 8 to 10 feet in diameter. Two teams of horses, one on each end of the giant seine started down the river. Men followed lifting the seine over obstructions. Another group of men went ahead splashing and making noise to scare the fish into the seine.

John said schools, built with logs and clapboard roofs, were plentiful in 1830’s Iowa. Many highly educated men came from the east to teach in Iowa, he said. *McGuffey’s Readers*, *Sander’s Readers*, *Davies’ Arithmetic*, *Mitchell’s Geography* and *Smith’s Grammar-School Speller* were standard books found in most Iowa schools at the time.

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