

7-1-1941

A Prairie Tour in 1850

Philip D. Jordan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest>

Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Jordan, Philip D. "A Prairie Tour in 1850." *The Palimpsest* 22 (1941), 213-224.

Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol22/iss7/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Palimpsest by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

A Prairie Tour in 1850

On a crisp October morning in 1850 two missionaries climbed into a two-horse wagon, chirruped to their team, and left Eddyville for an 874-mile tour of western Iowa. Their route angled across the "wild" prairie to Kaneshville on the Missouri River, and returned by way of Fort Des Moines to Wapello County. When they arrived at home on November 18th, they had witnessed the great trek to the California gold diggings, had seen the Mormon campfires, and had laid claim, in the name of the Presbyterian and Congregational churches, to several locations "where salvation was badly needed."

Julius A. Reed, agent of the American Home Missionary Society, and G. B. Hitchcock, Eddyville pastor, knew what they were about as they loaded their wagon with provisions, cooking utensils, and blankets and set out along the Mormon trail. Like many another missionary they were competing for the spiritual conquest of the frontier. They were exemplifying the slogan of the American Home Missionary Society, "Go . . . preach the Gospel." Years earlier Reed had preached a sermon to the members of the Iowa

Band on the characteristics of a good minister and had taken his text from *Acts* 20: 28: "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood." And Hitchcock had welcomed the Band as eagerly as Asa Turner had wanted them.

Reed, like his companion, was an Easterner. His childhood home was the pleasant village of East Windsor, Connecticut, where he was born on January 16, 1809. A descendant of William Bradford, Reed was schooled at Trinity College, Hartford, and was graduated from Yale University in 1829. He taught school for a time and then journeyed to Natchez, Mississippi. From there he moved to Jacksonville, Illinois, where he remained until 1833 when he returned East to enter the Yale Divinity School. Completing his theological training in 1835, he received a commission from the American Home Missionary Society and was assigned to parishes in Illinois. When the Mormons moved into Nauvoo, one of Reed's locations, the pastor returned East where he served as chaplain of an insane asylum at Worcester, Massachusetts. In 1840, Reed again moved westward, this time to Iowa where he remained until his death on August 27, 1890.

As the travelers crossed the rich and rolling land of Lucas County, they commented upon the fine stands of timber and chatted with the settlers along the Cedar and Whitebreast creeks. Chariton was a thriving community of fourteen houses badly in need of a pastor. The American Home Missionary Society was eager for news such as this and its general secretary made careful note of Reed's recommendations.

Wending their way across the northwest corner of Wayne County, which they described as "good" country, the missionaries came upon the Mormon settlement of Garden Grove in Decatur County. Along the fertile banks of Weldon River stretched a common Mormon field of almost a thousand acres. Only thirty-five Latter Day Saint families remained, however, as the majority already had moved on to their destiny in the valley of the Great Salt Lake.

From this experiment in Utopia, the missionaries drove about forty miles northwest to Mt. Pisgah over prairie land which struck them as "large, well watered, and fertile." Mt. Pisgah was a desolate village indeed, standing stark and naked in the center of plowed ground and surrounded by the ugly stumps of trees. Even the cabins of the emigrants were jerry-built. Mormons had laid out a field of some sixteen hundred

acres, but their type of agriculture, commented the biased preachers, was primitive and temporary. They were glad, indeed, to push on to Johnson's mill on the East Nodaway River where fifteen workmen and boys were busily raising huge beams.

As the weary explorers of the Lord bedded down that night on the floor of a two-room cabin, the whistling Iowa wind chilled them and snowflakes sifted through the walls of the house. On the following day, bundled in their great coats and, no doubt, blowing upon frosty fingers which held the reins, they began a forty-mile drive to Indiantown which afforded, they said, good mill sites. Limestone was abundant, and they thought they saw sandstone although they discredited the common rumor that lead ore had been discovered in the vicinity. When the yellow sun slipped behind the prairie's rim, the men pulled up in front of the cabin of a Mormon family which had emigrated from New York. There they spent the night. "The only book we saw in the house, besides our own, was one of James' novels. They said they had a Bible, but did not show it."

The missionaries then turned from the direct route to Kaneshville and drove southwest to Cutler's Camp on Silver Creek, some twelve miles beyond a ford on the west branch of the Nishna-

botna. There again they found Mormon activities, fields of corn, and grazing cattle. They also talked with twenty-five dissatisfied Mormon families who "reject the tithing and spiritual-wife systems, and will not emigrate to Salt Lake." Information such as this was carefully kept and eventually appeared in the *Home Missionary*, the journal of the society.

Their route now took them across the Missouri bluffs, and they coaxed their team through deep ravines and along narrow ridges. As they entered the Missouri bottom land, between the bluffs and the river itself, they saw a sea of fire. "The flames were flashing up at least thirty feet high. It realized the idea of an 'ocean of fire,' as nearly as any burning prairie I ever saw. It was probably ten feet wide and a half mile long; they are usually, from six inches to two feet in width."

As they visited community after community, among them Civil Bend, Austin, and Florence, they found, as did so many emigrants, that scourge of settlement — the cholera. This dreaded disease was to strike Iowa in at least three well-defined waves and for years it seemed endemic.

Trading Point, a ragged frontier entrepôt, ten miles north of Civil Bend, was one of the principal crossings on the old trail to California. When

Reed and Hitchcock visited this old Indian post, one hundred inhabitants, among them French and half-breeds, were occupying straggling structures of odd construction. The Missouri was so narrow at this point that Reed watched the ferryman pull his yawl from one shore to the other with only fifty-seven steady strokes. Four miles above Trading Point, sometimes also called Trader's Point, was the bustling Kaneshville Landing, later to be known as Kaneshville, and still later to be included in the city of Council Bluffs. Strictly speaking, however, Kaneshville Landing may have been about four and a half miles south of Kaneshville itself, but different traders, emigrants, settlers, preachers, gamblers, and Mormons referred to the two settlements as if they were one, or as if the names were interchangeable.

Kaneshville, itself (not Kaneshville Landing), lay in what was known as Miller's Hollow, a scoop in the prairie which opened into the bottoms. As the missionaries drove down its busy street they saw a rough town of some one hundred and sixty log buildings and about 1100 inhabitants. A mill was doing a thriving business, a printing office was issuing broadsides and a weekly newspaper from a hand press, and six or eight well-stocked stores were displaying yard goods, knives, implements, salt, coffee, and wagon wheels. Most of the gen-

eral stores, commented Reed, were owned by merchants in St. Louis who sent their stocks up river on stern wheelers whose paddles churned the muddy Missouri into yellow froth. It is an error, indeed, to suppose that "everything" in Kaneshville was owned either by Orson Hyde or his church.

On Sunday morning, a pellucid October day, clear and bright, Reed saw evidences of the bustle of the western trail. "I noticed", he wrote, "that a grocery store two doors off was full of customers. People were passing from the market with meat. One was cutting wood, another picking corn, a third mending his wagon, a fourth tarring his wheels." Other Mormons, on horseback or in wagons, rode through the streets intent upon business or pleasure. Another group drove cattle to an island in the Missouri where they could winter upon the rushes. At intervals gun shots punctuated the noises of this busy frontier town.

Had the Congregationalists listened carefully they might have heard snatches from "Sweet Betsey from Pike", a favorite song of the overland trail and one frequently sung by Mormons. The air of this popular ditty was the well-remembered "Villikins and His Dinah". The story, as were many of America's most popular songs, was simple. Sweet Betsey from Pike, with her lover,

Ike, two yoke of cattle, a large yellow dog, a tall Shanghai rooster, and one spotted hog, had a series of misfortunes on the Mormon and California trails.

Their wagons broke down with a terrible crash,
And out on the prairie rolled all kinds of trash;
A few little baby clothes done up with care —
'Twas rather suspicious, though all on the *square*.

The shanghai ran off, and their cattle all died;
That morning the last piece of bacon was fried;
Poor Ike was discouraged, and Betsey got mad,
The dog drooped his tail and looked wondrously sad.

A Mormon meeting, held in a log house about fifty feet long and twenty-five feet wide, attracted the missionaries, and they ventured in to find five preachers "in the desk". A congregation which finally numbered about 160 faithfully heard two brothers laud the Church of the Latter Day Saints and applaud the acts of Brigham Young. One preacher said that the "elders had, during the previous week, visited and laid hands upon the sick, and that, 'consequently, health was in the ascendancy.' "

Only on Monday evening did Reed have an opportunity to preach. Then, in the primitive home of a Presbyterian, he addressed some twenty persons on the necessity of regeneration.

Two-thirds of his listeners were Mormons who gave good attention. Reed, however, could say nothing good about their religion. "I saw no evidences of piety among them", he wrote in dejection to New York. "Morality among them is at a low ebb. The sale and use of intoxicating liquors, by Mormons in good standing is common." He accused them of being profane and said they are "charged" with stealing.

This reaction, of course, was typical of many honest men who disliked the Mormon social system so thoroughly that they were willing to accuse the Saints of the entire calendar of sins. On the other hand, Mormons were not always blameless. In general, however, Mormon conduct probably was no better or worse than that of any frontier group.

Leaving Kaneshville, Reed and his companion rode seventeen miles north, where they visited Rockford on the Boyer River. From that excellent mill site, they passed through Harris' Grove and pushed on about eighty miles from Kaneshville to another settlement near the Little Sioux River. There they were amazed at mighty trees of oak, ash, and walnut and commented generously upon the many splendid sites for homes.

Iowa, they thought, would soon be settled by God-fearing Easterners who would establish

schools, churches, and colleges. Already the leavening process had begun in the eastern and central parts of the State. The two missionaries prayed, as so frequently did Father Pierre Jean DeSmet, that the armies of the Lord would penetrate farther westward each year until finally the nation, from coast to coast, would be converted and cultured.

As the weather grew colder and the mornings snappier, Reed and Hitchcock turned their horses homeward. Their exact return itinerary is uncertain. They recorded simply the fact that they struck the road which they had traveled on their way west at the West Nishnabotna ford, left it again at Indiantown, and thence followed the route that led to Fort Des Moines.

They wrote that they camped one night at the Middle Nodaway where there was no shelter except a camp made of hay and poles. Instead of crawling into this miserable structure where a man could not stand erect, the weary travelers made a tent of their wagon cover and lay down to rest upon buffalo robes. "We kindled a fire, made a cup of coffee, and went to sleep serenaded by owls and prairie wolves."

On the following morning, bright and early, they were started on a thirty-mile drive to Middle River. There they talked with a stage driver who

presently whipped his horses into a gallop and disappeared over the bowl of the prairie. They next drove to Winterset, the county seat of Madison County, and from there proceeded to Des Moines where they spent Sunday. They were home on November 18th and Reed entered in his diary that they were thankful and pleased. "The circumstances of my journey", penned Reed, "were all ordered in kindness, and I have abundant cause for gratitude." The only mishap of the entire journey was the laming of a horse.

These missionaries, safe at home and sitting before a pot-bellied stove fed with wood, began to set down certain interesting economic facts. They wrote that the soil west of Marion, Monroe, and Appanoose counties was good except a narrow strip including the Missouri bluffs. "The surface is rolling, we saw very little swampy land, and none worth mentioning so broken as to injure it for cultivation, excepting on West Grand River. Clear running streams are abundant. Timber is scarce, which is the principal objection to southwestern Iowa. If it were well supplied in this respect, it would be the garden of the state."

Then they went on to predict that Lucas, Decatur, Madison, Warren, Fremont, and perhaps Page counties and the country from ten to twenty miles from the Missouri River would settle rap-

idly. They spoke of the increasing expectation that a railroad from the Mississippi to Council Bluffs would aid migration. People would move slowly, they thought, into parts of Wayne and Clark counties and the country west of Clark and Madison.

Certainly these men beheld a vision. They saw on the rich Iowa land the foundations, steady and strong, of a great commonwealth. Many mills would grind the grist of corn and wheat grown by willing hands. Acres of prairie would spring into lush life. Bearded wheat would sway in the wind; rye would stand straight and tall; and, after the autumn frosts, the cribs would bulge with yellow corn. Iowa would be a land of plenty. They must have seen the future of schools and colleges and universities where the common man could send his children. They must have dreamed of red barns and fine herds. From the strength of their bodies and souls these missionaries, and hundreds of others, builded well. Democratic institutions and a passion for freedom today testify to their courage and faith.

PHILIP D. JORDAN