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Iowa

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Iowa

From October 1 to 8, 1896, the semi-centennial anniversary of the admission of Iowa into the Union was celebrated at Burlington. S. H. M. Byers wrote this poem for the occasion and read it on the opening day. It was originally published in pamphlet form by the Burlington Federation of Women's Clubs. — THE EDITOR.

TO THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER

A thousand years the prairies kept
Their secret all unseen,
While yonder Mississippi swept
Betwixt its forests green.
O, mightiest river of the West,
Didst thou forever flow,
And were thy shores as now so blest
A thousand years ago?

Well hast thou kept in countless years
The secrets thou hast known;
The tales of Egypt's joys and tears
Are graven on her stone.
But thou dost never tell of time;
Of thy own birth the scroll
Thou hidest in the Delta's slime,
By the far ocean's roll.

Where are the cities that have stood
When time and worlds were young?
Know'st thou if once beside thy flood
Men spoke the Norseman's tongue?
Where was the ancient Aztec's home —
By the dark northern pine?
And didst thou see his chieftains roam
To sunnier lands than thine?

Or hast thou seen thy own fair clime
More glorious still than now?
The orange blossoming in its time,
The grateful palm trees bow;
The patient camel kneeling wait
The driver's low command;
And felt soft winds blow at thy gate
Like airs from Samarcand?

Or wast thou cold in that far day?
Hast seen the glaciers gleam,
Hast heard the icebergs break away
Beyond thy frozen stream?
O, thou art great, as seas are great!
Or Alps, deep-robed in snow,
And *greater*, — they but stand and wait,
Thou dost forever flow.

DE SOTO SEES THE GREAT RIVER, 1541

'Tis centuries since De Soto
Looked down on the beautiful stream;
A thousand years it had lain there,
Like the maid in the fairy dream.

And silence was all about it,
And silence was everywhere;
A thousand years of silence,
By the beautiful river there.

And only the rivers flowing —
And only the odorous breeze —
And the birds, and the blossoms growing
Was heard by the forest trees.

And over the boundless prairies
That swept to the river side,
It was all a sea of blossoms
That bloomed in the spring and died.

It was all a sea of grasses
That covered the leagues of earth,
Where the red deer hid its young ones,
And the antelope had its birth.

The golden rod and the aster
And the cardinal lily shone

On the prairies out in the moonlight,
In the land of the great unknown.

And the mounds of the long departed,
The tombs of the ancient dead,
The altars of perished races,
Stood there in the morning's red.

MARQUETTE AND JOLIET RE-DISCOVER THE RIVER,
1673, AND ARE THE FIRST TO SEE IOWA

When Louis reigned as King of France,
And Charles was King of Spain,
Two sturdy men set out to find
De Soto's stream again.

O, good Marquette, with Joliet,
In thy birch-bark canoe,
In the dark wilds and wilderness
Thou bearest the Christ cross through.

Thou bearest the Christ cross in thy hand,
The red man welcomes thee
Where'er his smoking wigwams stand,
By stream or inland sea.

Days, nights, in thy lone birch canoe,
Thou, with thy little band,
Didst wait and watch as swift it flew
Into the unknown land.

As swift it flew, thou know'st not where,
By forest, cliff and mound,
But ever thou hadst in thy prayer
The stream De Soto found.

Till, on one morning fair, in June,
Thy blessed eyes did see
The mighty river sweep along
In its calm majesty.

Ah! more than river, vast and wide,
He saw the forests rise
Above the steep hills on its side,
Like walls to paradise!

He climbed beyond the forests' height
Up to the great plateau;
The wondrous *prairies* met his sight
Like some vast ocean's flow.

Save that their waves with blossoms shone,
And no white sails were there,
But waves, and waves, and waves alone,
And odorous sweets in air.

He saw its sunsets golden dyed,
Felt its soft breezes cool —
"O, Iowa! How fair," he cried,
"*Thou art the beautiful!*"

THE FIRST WHITE MAN COMES

A hundred years their suns had set,
Still silence reigned supreme,
Since good Marquette and Joliet
Went down the mighty stream.

A hundred years, the ancient mounds
Are standing where they stood;
The Indian's Happy Hunting Grounds
Are still by lake and wood.

At last, at last, the white man comes;
'Tis Julien, brave Dubuque.
With noise of fife and pounding drums
And guns the hillsides shook.

And he has found within the land
The wealth that long has lain, —
Ores rich as gold in Ophir's sand, —
In his new "Mines of Spain."

Twenty long years the red man knew
Brave Julien's honest worth,
And when they buried him there blew
A sad wind on the earth.

High on a cliff above the stream
They made his simple grave,

Where he might hear the eagle's scream
And look down on the wave.

For, in their wigwams, it was said,
Some day his spirit would
Leap from its lofty burial place
Down to the shining flood.

And painted chiefs, and warriors dight,
And maidens brown and fair,
Oft sought his grave at dead of night
To see if he were there.

And old, old men for many a moon
Went to that burial place,
Or watched beyond the shining dune
To see brave Julien's face.

And often yet, on moonlight nights,
Maids with their lovers climb
Above the city's shining lights
To talk of that old time.

And, shuddering, clasp their lovers' hands,
High on the dizzy place,
And think beyond the moonlit sands
They, too, see Julien's face.

THE INDIANS PASS AWAY

The scene is changed, and Julien's spirit walks
No more beside the Indian's lone tepee;
The wigwams all, the calumet, the "talks,"
Are gone like dreams beside some moaning sea.

I saw them pass as yestere'en I lay
On the green grass of yonder sloping wood;
Like in a dream I saw them pass away,
And in their place the hunter's cabin stood.

And on the trail where once the Indians went
The white-topped wagons of the pioneer
Crept in long lines to some new settlement
In the fair lands the red man held so dear.

It little helped that barter and not force,
Drove him away from his dear forest home;
Forever west the white man steered his course;
Forever west the Indian still must roam.

No more along the Mississippi's flood
The birch canoe its arrowy course could trace;
On moonlight nights no longer warriors stood
On yonder cliff to see dead Julien's face.

No more beside the little forest streams
The Indian maiden twined her braids of hair,

Nor watched she more the mirrored brook to dream
She saw the face of her true lover there.

In yonder wood by yonder billowy plain
The white man builds his cabins one by one;
The virgin sod yields to the yellowing grain,
The corn fields ripen in the golden sun.

Let him who *will*, forget the hearts that break
When a whole people leave their altar fires —
Their childhood home, their sacred wood, their
lake,
The graves, still green, of their departed sires.

Yet must there be in happier lands afar
Green hunting grounds, the red man's heart to
cheer,
There must be trees where the dear angels are,
Who loves God's woods to God himself is near.

THE PIONEERS

Touch memory's veil; who lived then can forget
The hardier lives of yonder pioneers?
The old log house — I see it standing yet,
Back from the road where the new home ap-
pears.

Ah! that log house, with its plain puncheon floor,
Its clapboard roof, and papered window screen,

Could it but speak and tell the tales once more
Of the old days that it and they have seen!

The simple fire-place, built of sticks and clay,
The unbolted door, on wooden hinges swung;
"Come in," was writ on every heart that day,
The welcoming latch string to the stranger
hung.

Then all were neighbors, whether far or near,
And all were friends, no matter rich or poor;
Misfortune claimed the rudest settler's tear,
Distress and loss were yet of pity sure.

And joys were shared by everyone the same;
To fair or feast each soul was bid to come;
No child but heard the welcomed stranger's name,
No hearth so small but by it there was room.

Then things were great that pass unheeded now —
The weekly mail, the school house in the wood,
The threshing days, the new-bought prairie plow,
The old-time clock that by the window stood.

The spelling school, where old as well as young,
Stood round the wall to spell each other down;
The singing master, the old songs he sung,
And singing, taught the names of state and
town.

The circuit preacher on his monthly ride,
With simple ways, such as the Master taught:
Nor scrip he bore, nor gold, nor aught beside;
They welcomed him for the glad news he
brought.

The meeting-house — the first green grave be-
hind —
Ah! that first grave in yonder settlement;
The sweet-briar bush bends o'er it in the wind;
The plain board tells the year, the day she went.

Brown-haired and sweet and like a flower she grew
Till her soft eyes with love's dear lamps were
lit;
Breathe not her name, enough, they loved who
knew,
One heart string broke — her epitaph is writ.

* * * * *

Those far-off times, — who saw will not recall
The old-time weddings of that merrier day, —
The feast, the dance, the wedding-infair, — all
So strangely different from our modern way.

No perfumed notes announced the happy time;
From home to home the joyous news was sent;
The singing birds made merrier wedding chime
As friend and neighbor to the cabin went.

And many a youth across the prairies rode,
 Whole heart, and free, into the odorous air,
 Nor dreamed that Cupid watched yon rude abode,
 That fate and love were waiting for him there.

Like a wild rose that over night had bloomed,
 With eyes like skies where swallows love to
 swim,
 She came, he saw, and all things were illumed, —
 A simple rose, that waited there for him.

* * * * * * *

The guests have come; the marriage will begin,
 The preacher's word in kindly mood is said;
 The bride is kissed by all her kith and kin,
 The table waits, the wedding feast is spread —

Quick flies the meal, the cabin floor is cleared;
 The violin, in yonder corner, hear,
 Old Jerry Church has stroked his bow and beard —
 Old Jerry Church to all the county dear.

"Choose partners, all!" he lifts his bow and calls —
 And all the night he tells the dances through;
 Out on the grass, close by the chimney walls,
 The table stands, the big decanter, too.

And all the night the merry dance goes on —
 Eyes melt, hearts break, just as in marble hall;

O love, O love, whatever times are gone,
Thou still hast been the master of them all.

Let none deride these simple marriage ways,
Love sat with them by every wedding vow,
And courts were not, in those old-fashioned days,
For marriage scandal, as we see them now.

But not their weddings gave them joy alone —
The quilting bees, with rude and simple cheer —
The husking corn, where many a bright eye
shone —
The kiss to him who found the lucky ear;

For them the grouse boomed at the early dawn,
The antlered elk roamed o'er the enflowered
plain;
In the tall grass the red deer hid its fawn;
They knew the spot where the gray wolf had lain.

At times they heard the bison's mighty roar,
As in vast herds they battled long and far,
Or watched them thundering the broad prairies
o'er
When terror-struck, like flying hosts of war.

Nature for them endowed with magic hand
A scene as fair as Araby, the blest —

Tired of the old, she touched with magic wand,
There sprang to life *the prairies of the West*.

Not desert sands, and leagues of burning plains,
Far and encircling to some ocean's brim —
But billowy waves of blossom-covered mains
Swept in great seas to the horizon's rim.

And farther, farther, past the setting sun,
Rolled grassy waves, now purple and now
green;
Touched by the wind they bend, and bow, and
run —
It is the land that only God has seen.

A thousand years it blossomed just as now;
A thousand years the harvest moons had set,
And suns arose, nor scythe, nor any plow,
Nor human hands, had ever touched it yet.

And other scenes, and fierce, the pioneer
Sees from his cabin, standing there alone,
When autumn's frost turns the green prairies sear,
And these same billows into flames are blown.

Night comes: he sees with anxious heart the sky —
Far, far away, a strange and reddening hue;

Long bars of light on the horizon lie,
Red streaks of flame the black clouds bursting
through.

Some roaming hunter, doubtless, made his bed
In the tall grass, or by some cooling stream,
Lit his lone fire, nor, careless, saw it spread
Until too late, the whole night is a gleam!

In bounds and darts the lighted grasses go;
Leaps to its start the dreaded *prairie fire*,
In long, long lines the burning billows glow,
Roars the night wind, the flames are leaping
higher.

Like battle steeds th' extending lines rush on,
Black grows the night, save where their banners
are.

One sweep, one roar, and flowers and grass are
gone;
The moon goes out; there is not any star.

Wild, fierce, devouring, o'er the waste they come,
The very ground burns 'neath them as they
pass,
As if the world were hurrying to its doom,
And earth and sky had turned to molten brass.

Nor battle scene, nor wild Niagara's roar,
Nor seething Aetna with its lava hiss,
Nor ocean, thrashing on its rocky shore,
So threatening seemed, yet beautiful, as this.

Alarmed, alone, by yonder little farm,
The settler guards like midnight sentinel;
Fights flame with flame, keeps house and stacks
from harm,
And gives God thanks when all has ended well.

THEY BUILT THE STATE

'Twas scenes like this that fired our fathers'
breasts
To love of nature, and to deeds of fame;
They built the state; still its foundation rests
On the bed-rock they quarried when they came.

They built the state; still its foundation rests
On truth and right her boundary lines were set.
O men, O youths, so may they ever be —
O sons of theirs be worthy of them yet!

They built the state, and when the conflict burst
To save its life their blood they freely shed;
In war's red lines they stood the very first,
And honor wept o'er their heroic dead.

They built the state, and lived to see it stand
First in all things that make a people great;
Wealth, plenty, honor, traveled hand in hand, —
There was no good but entered at its gate.

They built the state, more glorious than they
thought,
These simple carvers of an earlier time;
Though rude the tools and few with which they
wrought,
The passing years have made their work sub-
lime.

And like in dreams they hear its praises sung,
Its stretching seas of green and waving corn,
Its glorious soil, whence wealth and plenty sprung,
Land of new hopes for millions yet unborn!

They built the state, and while its rivers flow,
Deep, vast, resistless to yon ocean's tide,
May love for it and its new splendors grow
Till all the world shall see how just our pride.

They built the state, our hands shall keep it whole,
Proud and erect and glorious it shall be,
Lofty its path, forever great its goal —
Beloved one, we pledge our lives to thee.

S. H. M. BYERS