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# The State of the State: Iowa in 1885

by Mary K. Fredericksen

In late 1884 representatives and exhibitors from the fair state of Iowa journeyed to New Orleans to attend the six-month World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition. This was the second important international exposition in which Iowans participated. Their overwhelming success at the first international exposition at Philadelphia in 1876 and the immediate benefits garnered by the state from its participation led to a high level of interest among Iowans in the 1884-1885 New Orleans exposition. The 1876 exposition had been followed by an increase in the state's population, and by increased investment and greater demand for its products throughout the nation. Hoping to gain similar commercial advantages in 1885 and boost the state's material prosperity generally, Iowans thought it was the simple "exercise of business sagacity that the state should be represented" at New Orleans.

What could be said about Iowa in 1885? What had its boosters to boast about? Exposition Commissioner Herbert S. Fairall claimed that it was a fairy land. It was a veritable garden spot among states and nations. Another Iowa representative proudly observed:

*She is the twenty-ninth in the order of admission into the Union; in number of square miles she is fourteenth; in population the tenth, while in acres of tillable land her place is first. Think of that, ye seekers after homes! She leads every other State in the amount of corn raised, and is second in the number of hogs raised, second in cattle, second in wheat, fourth in extent of coal area, and fifth in the num-*

*ber of newspapers. In religious, educational and benevolent institutions, she stands among the foremost. In point of intelligence she is first, having a less percentage of illiteracy in comparison with her population than any other State.*

Others commented on Iowa's manufacturing establishments. Iowa creameries, the number of which was greater than that of any other state, supposedly produced butter so sweet and healthful as to drive all fevers and ailments away, and to increase the beauty of the ladies. An extensive railway network existed in Iowa which included "more miles of rail to the square mile of land" than any other Western state. It was described as a land peopled by thrifty, energetic, and enterprising citizens. It was a land of promise. The sentiments of a *Clinton Herald* correspondent, based, of course, on geographical and statistical facts, suggested an almost utopian vision when he predicted that "within thirty years Iowa will hold the central position of population in the United States. [And] . . . within three or four decades the National Capital will be removed to the banks of the Mississippi River, not to St. Louis, however, but to some point in Iowa."

The population growth of the state had, indeed, been explosive up to the early 1880s. A 36% leap in total population between 1870 and 1880 (1,194,020 in 1870 and 1,624,615 in 1880), however, was followed by only a slight population increase — 8% — in

the following five years (1,624,615 in 1880 to 1,753,980 in 1885). Settlement of the last largely unsettled part of the state, the northwestern portion, had been hurriedly accomplished within little more than a decade — between the late 1860s and the early 1880s — despite setbacks and uncertain times for the pioneers. However much an historian might want to pin a date on the closing of the Iowa frontier, or to debate the range of possible dates for the closing of the Iowa frontier, it is clear that in the early 1880s life was different in Iowa. A more balanced economy and stable conditions made life more predictable on a year-to-year basis for Iowans. The rugged pioneer life with its emphasis on subsistence (or survival) that had persisted through the 1870s was disappearing. Settlers no longer lived on the marginal edge, with everything invested in and depending on the success of the current crop. A tangible sign of this change was the closing of land offices in northwestern Iowa towns in the late 1870s. There was little free land remaining in Iowa in the early 1880s. Whereas in 1870 the state board of immigration's greatest concern was attracting settlers to the land, in 1886 the new governor's concern was for settlement of the remaining lands by settlers of means. A great change had occurred in the sixteen-year period.

**A**griculturally, Iowa by 1885 was characterized by diversification. Iowa's railroad network — extensive in northwest Iowa by the mid-1870s — had speeded the transition in the northwest from a subsistence economy to a commercial economy which complemented the agricultural pursuits of more developed portions of Iowa. The railroads, moreover, tied the regions of the state together economically and provided the means of marketing Iowa products outside the state. Diversification allowed for movement away from a dependency on soil-depleting small grain crops which often characterized newly settled areas,

# Iowa Day!

**MAY 13th, 1885.**

## PROGRAMME.

- 9.30 A. M.—GREAT IOWA BAND, Military Companies, Citizens and Visitors meet on Canal Street and proceed under command of Gen. Bentley, by boat to Exposition.
- 11 A. M.—Arriving at Exposition Wharf, procession marches through Main Building to Iowa Headquarters in Government Building.
- 11.30 A. M.—United States Commissioners and Assistants and visitors generally, under command of Major Clarke, form in body, join Main Procession, which will move to the Live Oaks.

## UNDER THE OAKS.

- 12:30 M.—MUSIC—Iowa University Band.  
ADDRESS—Herbert S. Fairall, U. S. Commissioner.  
MUSIC—Dubuque Drum Corps.  
Introduction of a Young Iowa Lady—Col. M. T. Owen, of Governor Sherman's Staff.  
Presentation by the Iowa Lady to a Louisiana Lady of a Floral Tribute.  
MUSIC—Eldora Band.  
RESPONSE and ADDRESS—Director General E. A. Burke.  
MUSIC—Decorah Drum Corps.  
ADDRESS—Gen. C. S. Bentley.  
ADDRESS—Major F. M. Clarke.  
MUSIC—Osage Band.  
SHORT SPEECHES—By U. S. Commissioners Mead, Holton, Seibring, Allen, Commissioner General Speed and others.  
MUSIC—Consolidated Iowa Band, led by Capt. McCosh.

Hopkins' Printing Office, 22 Commercial Place.

*The program for "Iowa Day" at the World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition, New Orleans, 13 May 1885. (SHSI)*

toward agricultural pursuits more suited to the quality of the soil and the terrain. As Governor Larrabee argued in his inaugural speech in 1886:

*The mines of California and Colorado have never been half as rich in their output as the prairie mines of Iowa, which have the additional advantage over the former that with proper care they will never become exhausted. We should strive to understand the character and capacity of our soil, and engage in that kind of agriculture which is best adapted to the production of the greatest wealth. It would be much to our advantage to*

*abandon the shipping of grain, and to direct our attention to stock-raising and the dairy.*

Stock raising and dairy farming became highly successful and central features of Iowa agriculture in the early 1880s, as did the production of corn which provided feed for stock. By 1885 not only were the benefits of diversification in the form of a more balanced economy apparent, but the possibilities of further development seemed at hand. As a *Des Moines Register* booster observed: "We expect to raise more good corn, more hogs and more superior beeves than any other State. This is what we are here for and it is what this State was made for."

Iowa's cities and towns grew rapidly during the early 1880s as centers of finance, commerce, manufacturing, and as vital links in transportation networks. Civic boosters gave their attention to civic improvements as well as attempts to entice new industries to their towns. "Progress" was a continuing theme in the middle 1880s. Iowa newspapers regularly carried welcome news of technological advances: "There are now fifty-nine telephones on the Fort Dodge exchange"; "Marshalltown is talking of putting in the Edison system of electric light"; "Stuart is soon to have a steam fire engine"; "There is talk in Des Moines of mounting the immediate delivery carriers on bicycles"; and "It is proposed to run the street cars at Waterloo by electricity." Iowa newspapers also published barbs when a town failed to make improvements: "Des Moines streets are reported to be in horrible condition, and [we] suggest [the] necessity of ferries or suspension bridges on which to cross them." Hopes and dreams also found expression in the press: "Meriden looks for a boom in the spring, and expects to double in size before another season closes"; and "Carroll ought to have two or three dozen street lamps for the conve-

nience of pedestrians these dark nights. The town is certainly large enough to put on metropolitan airs and have its streets lighted."

Few if any Iowa towns could claim metropolitan status in 1885. Only two of them grew in phenomenal fashion between 1880 and 1885: What Cheer's population increased 390% (from 719 in 1880 to 3,524 in 1885), and Sioux City's population increased 159% (from 7,366 in 1880 to 19,060 in 1885). Ten Iowa towns had populations over 10,000 in 1885: Burlington, Cedar Rapids, Clinton, Council Bluffs, Davenport, Des Moines, Dubuque, Keokuk, Ottumwa, and Sioux City. Of these ten, only three had a growth rate of more than 40% between 1880 and 1885: Cedar Rapids (53%); Des Moines (45%); and Sioux City (159%). For the most part the first half of the 1880s was not a period of spectacular urban growth in Iowa. Towns generally increased in size, but gradually, much to the frustration of their civic boosters.

Iowa representatives in New Orleans could claim 6,900 manufacturing establishments for the state in 1885. The most famous were, undoubtedly, in the creamery and butter-making industries. At the exposition Iowa was recognized as the "Banner Butter State" of the Union and Iowa's product was judged to be the best creamery butter in the world. No longer was it acceptable to call it "wild western butter." The award represented rapid progress for an Iowa industry started only in 1872. The leading manufacturing city of the state was Dubuque with 100 factories. Business ventures of many kinds were either started or proposed in Iowa in 1885. These included a canning factory in Davenport, a packinghouse in Atlantic, a creamery in Algona, a woolen mill in Oskaloosa, a starch factory in Des Moines, an agricultural machinery factory in Keokuk, a barb-wire factory in Manchester, and a paper mill in Fort Dodge. Fort Dodge boosters issued a general plea for factories of any kind to

locate there. Competition for new businesses was fierce among Iowa towns and Marshalltown, whose civic leaders were especially imaginative at designing ways to attract business and capital, proposed the following scheme in late 1885:

*Be it ordained by the city council of the city of Marshalltown, Iowa, that any person, corporation or company who will, after the passage of this ordinance, locate and operate a manufacturing establishment in the city of Marshalltown, Iowa, and employ within the city in connection with said manufacturing enterprise ten persons; that the city council in its equalization of taxes shall rebate the assessment on the property connected with or directly used in said enterprise 10 per cent of said assessment, and if over ten additional persons an additional 10 per cent., and in this ration for each additional ten persons employed a rebate of assessment shall be made until said number of employees shall reach one hundred or over, when the entire assessment is to be rebated for the period of ten years, so far as municipal taxes are concerned.*

The editor of the *Carroll Sentinel* could only note in response to Marshalltown's inventiveness, "The city of Marshalltown is teaching a

**Iowa Towns with Populations Over  
10,000 in 1885**

|                | 1880  | 1885  |
|----------------|-------|-------|
| Burlington     | 19450 | 23459 |
| Cedar Rapids   | 10104 | 15426 |
| Clinton        | 9052  | 12012 |
| Council Bluffs | 18063 | 21557 |
| Davenport      | 21831 | 23830 |
| Des Moines     | 22408 | 32469 |
| Dubuque        | 22254 | 26330 |
| Keokuk         | 12117 | 13151 |
| Ottumwa        | 9004  | 10506 |
| Sioux City     | 7366  | 19060 |

lesson to all ambitious Iowa towns that can be noted with profit."

\* \* \*

The population of this bustling state was 1,753,980 in 1885. 1,443,575 were native-born, while 310,405 were foreign-born. 47% of the population had been born in Iowa, 35% had been born elsewhere in the United States, and 18% were of foreign birth. The overwhelming majority of Iowa's foreign-born residents in 1885 (93.2%) had come from countries in northern and western Europe. Such had been the case since statehood. The Mediterranean countries had a very small representation in Iowa in 1885, though it was visible enough to cause comment and concern among some Iowans accustomed to German, Scandinavian, Irish, English, and Dutch immigrants. A noticeable break in the North European pattern of immigration occurred with the first sizable influx of Italian immigrants into Iowa in the early 1880s. The Italians arrived as mine workers, and the editor of the *Carroll Sentinel* did not seem encouraged by their presence when he wrote:

*They do their own cooking, not a remarkably hard job, as it is estimated each lives on about fifteen cents a day. They are probably a little better than a Chinaman, but the degree of difference is not great.*

Governor Larrabee was concerned in 1886 about the quality of the immigrants who were settling in the state and who would help build a future Iowa paradise. A reflection of a bit of Iowa snobbery can be seen in the remarks with which the Iowa Commissioner of Labor Statistics, E. R. Hutchins, concluded in his 1885 immigration report:

*[Iowa], like all our States, has ever been ready to welcome to her soil the frugal,*

*industrious, healthful family; but with all her advantages, her unoccupied acres, her soil capable of yielding abundantly all kinds of cereals, her vast sources of coal — with all these, Iowa has no room for the shiftless and indolent pauper.*

It has been suggested by one Iowa historian that the early 1880s was a “calm, complacent, and comfortable” time in Iowa, or that “Iowa was one of several states filled with ‘corn, cattle, and contentment.’” But the heated political concerns and issues of 1884 and 1885 indicate that Iowa was neither calm nor complacent, regardless of amounts of corn or numbers of cattle. The prohibition issue was certainly divisive in Iowa during this period. The state militia was called out to quell troubles at the state capitol in 1885 when Governor Buren R. Sherman attempted to remove the state auditor from his office. Auditor Brown was charged by the governor with malfeasance, and the governor was soon taken to task by portions of the Iowa press for forcibly removing a one-armed soldier from office. Labor troubles surfaced at coal mines in Angus and What Cheer. These also required the militia’s presence, and raised heated questions about sliding pay scales and working hours. Continued high railroad freight rates in a time of declining prices for farm goods spurred Iowa farmers to press for rate reductions. And finally, politics became a definite two-party affair again as Iowa Democrats scored surprising victories in the elections of 1884, and their jollifications and celebrations continued into 1885, adding both character and color to the William Larrabee-Charles E. Whiting gubernatorial campaign.

While the dispute between Governor Sherman and Auditor Brown may have been the most entertaining issue for Iowans in 1885, the prohibition question was most hotly debated. Much depended on the determination of the legality of local option or licensing

formulae of various kinds. After 1855 the sale of strong liquors had been prohibited in Iowa, although municipalities had been allowed to either prohibit or license the sale of beer and wine. However, wide disregard of the law prompted a demand in the early 1880s to prohibit the sale of all intoxicating liquors. A constitutional amendment to this effect was passed by two Iowa General Assemblies, in 1880 and 1882, and it received popular ratification in 1882. However, a technicality in the wording of the amendment caused the state supreme court to set it aside. Iowa prohibition forces then secured the passage in 1884 of a law “for the prevention of intemperance, pauperism and crime,” which effectively would have prevented the manufacture and sale of all intoxicating liquors and provided stiff penalties for violators of the act. The prohibition legislation presented serious problems to growing cities at the time. The following protest by Sioux City businessmen illustrates some of the difficulties:

*We have labored long and industriously and given freely of our means and time to build up and help along the city, to get in capital, manufactories, and to aid and encourage all worthy enterprises both of a permanent and temporary character, that would work good for either the business prosperity or social and moral advancement of the city and its people, and at all times we have been heartily and promptly met and supported in all such enterprises by both labor and means by those who will be most seriously affected by the enforcement of this law.*

*That at this time we are laboring under a heavy burden brought on by the increased necessities of the city in its change from a thriving village to an important business center, and can ill afford to lose the revenues which may be had if the law is not enforced, and to lose the support and cooperation with which*

*we have brought the city to its present prominence, and to substitute in its place the dissension and bad feeling which result from the enforcement.*

Prohibition legislation presented serious problems to cities which had long depended on licensing revenues as a source of municipal income. Council Bluffs found itself in a precarious financial situation in 1885 when "resolutions were passed ordering the dismissal of the fire department, city engineer's force and all laborers employed by the city, and the turning off of the gas in the streets and public buildings." The prohibition issue divided the Republican party, which was the party officially supporting prohibition in the elections of 1884 and the campaign of 1885. The Democrats took advantage of the Republican split and united behind a plan for local/county option and a statewide licensing scheme for intoxicating liquors. Indeed, the vehemence of the prohibition debate suggested anything but calm, complacency, and comfortable contentment on the Iowa political stage in 1885.

\* \* \*

The Iowa booster spirit, however, so evident at the 1885 World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition characterized

the mood of the state in that year. Iowans had great hopes and expectations for a prosperous future. And, in all aspects of life, there was a self-confident sense of the appropriateness and justness of Iowa's past success. In 1885 Iowans believed that the work of the pioneer was behind them. The majority of the land had been settled, the population growth had stabilized, and the time had arrived to settle down to the business of making the state a veritable paradise. An economy soundly based on both diversified agriculture and industry, combined with continuing improvements in Iowa's transportation networks and commercial centers held promise for continued economic growth in the future. Perhaps, in 1885, the actual potential for the development of our state which had recently emerged from the frontier era was not far off the mark predicted by the 1885 Exposition boosters. □

#### Note on Sources

State reports, censuses, and newspapers of the mid-1880s proved to be the richest sources of information for this paper. The best single source for the way Iowans viewed their world position was Herbert S. Fairall's exposition report, *Iowa at the World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial and the North, Central and South American Expositions, New Orleans, 1884-6*. The messages of Governors Buren R. Sherman and William Larrabee provided good information, as did the 1885 Iowa census, and John A.T. Hull's *Iowa Historical and Comparative Census, 1836-80*. The *Carroll Sentinel*, 1884 to 1886, proved to be an especially enjoyable and informative newspaper.