

Blane's Excursion 1822

[From William Blane : An excursion through the United States and Canada, during the years 1822-1823.]

William Blane

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A Tour in Southern Illinois in 1822

FROM Vincennes, I turned to the left, in order to cross White River, below the junction of its two Forks, and proceed through Princetown and Harmony, to Birkbeck's English settlement at Albion.

The road, or rather path, to the ferry on White River, runs chiefly through low flat Barrens, with here and there a patch of Prairie. Upon arriving at the bank, I found the ice running so thick, and in such very large cakes, that the boat could not cross. Some men with a drove of hogs had already waited there two days, and the ferryman said that I had very little chance of being able to cross for a day or two, and perhaps not for a week. I therefore determined to cross the country, in a westerly direction, so as to meet the Wabash just above its junction with White River.

Upon inquiring of the ferrymen, if there were any house in the neighbourhood at which I could stop, they informed me that there was only one, which belonged to a Scotch gentleman who had lately settled in this part of the country. "But although," said one of them, "I am certain he does not keep open house, yet perhaps as you are a stranger, he will allow you to stay there tonight."

As it was getting late I determined to lose no time, and accordingly, after a ride through the woods of about two miles, I found myself at the settlement.

The house, which was of a much better description than any I had lately seen, was situated on a gentle rise, overlooking the river, and surrounded with a large space of cleared land. I dismounted, and upon opening the door was delighted to see six or seven men in Highland bonnets, sitting around a blazing fire. I mentioned to the gentleman that I was a stranger, and should feel much obliged to him for a night's lodging for myself and my horse ; upon which he immediately, with the genuine hospitality I have so often experienced in his native land, said that I was welcome to stay there, and to partake of whatever his house afforded.

He had left Perthshire at the head of twenty of his countrymen, and had fixed himself on this spot ; and although he had only been here eight months, had already put everything into very good order.

My fare was sumptuous, compared to what it had been for some time past ; and moreover I had a good bed to sleep in, with a pair of fine clean sheets.

I am particular in noticing this luxury, because it was only in two other places that I enjoyed it, during the whole of my travels, in the States of Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri. In general the beds were altogether without sheets ; and the blankets had probably, since their manufacture, never experienced the renovating effects of a good washing. Sometimes indeed there would be one sheet, and occasionally two ; but cleanliness in this particular I had almost despaired of.

Many of my countrymen, because they have not met with much comfort in these out of the way places, have, upon their return home, most unjustly and ridiculously imputed the same want of comfort to every part of the United States. But let us consider, that from Vincennes to Louisville is a distance of 120 miles, and that from thence to Washington, by the ordinary route up the Ohio river and through Wheeling is 731 miles : so that one of these delicate travellers would be equally entitled to abuse the whole of Great Britain, because he might meet with bad accommodations in the Orkneys. Moreover, woods are not cut down, and good inns established, in a day, nor even a year ; and he who cannot put up with some inconvenience will do well to avoid travelling in a new country. [1]

This settlement is in a beautiful situation, surrounded by fertile land; but alas ! it has shared the fate of all the neighbourhood with regard to sickness ; two of the emigrants having died, and several others being very ill. I went away in the morning, after receiving an invitation from my worthy host to repeat my visit if I should ever pass again in that direction.

The path from hence to the Wabash, lies through a thickly wooded country, abounding in game. I expected to have had much difficulty in crossing the river ; for though there was a ferry boat, it had been drawn ashore and was frozen to the ground. Fortunately, however, I found a man going over in a flat boat with some cattle. The Wabash just above had closed up and frozen over, so that here, where the stream was very rapid, there was little or no floating ice. After crossing, I rode along the right bank to Palmyra. This most dirty, miserable little village was once the county town of Edwards County, Illinois ; an honour which is lost, in consequence of the superior healthiness of Albion.

After stopping a night at Palmyra, I proceeded along a road which was in a very bad state, and which was very difficult to find. About two miles before arriving at the Bon-pas river is one of the largest and worst swamps I ever passed through. I can form no idea of its length ; but it is full two miles broad where the road crosses it. At the Bon-pas, five miles from Albion, I found a wooden bridge, which is a great convenience to travellers, as they would otherwise often have to swim the stream, both the banks of which are steep and slippery.

On arriving at the far-famed settlement of Albion, I found that it by no means merited all the abuse I had heard of it in England. The town is indeed small ; but has at any rate a very pleasing appearance, as contrasted with most of those in the Backwoods.

I was hospitably received by Mr. Birkbeck and Mr. Flowers. They both have large houses. That belonging to Mr. Flowers is a peculiarly good one, and is very well furnished. One room in particular was carpeted, and contained a nice assortment of books, and a pianoforte ; all luxuries of great rarity in these remote districts. The inn is a well-built brick house, and might have been made very comfortable ; yet, although kept by an Englishman, it has none of the characteristics of an English inn ; but, on the contrary, partakes largely of those of the Backwoods ; so much so indeed, as to be a subject of remark even to the Americans. I stayed here several days without having clean sheets.

While at Albion I read all the books and reviews that have been written both for and against this settlement. One traveller describes it as an earthly paradise, another as a miserable unhealthy swamp ; the truth is about midway between these extremes.

Albion is situated on a dividing ridge, as it is called, which separates the waters of the Little, from those of the Big Wabash. On this account it is more healthy than most of the neighbouring country, though it is not at all times free from the prevalent autumnal disease an ague, accompanied with fever. The year I was there the settlement had been remarkably healthy ; which surprised me the more, as wherever else I had travelled, the people complained of illness.

Albion and Wanborough, of which Albion is by much the most thriving little village, are about a mile and a half distant from each other, and border on the fine tract of land called the English Prairie. All the prairies in the neighbourhood of Albion are remarkably beautiful. These large natural meadows, when not too extensive, remind one of a nobleman's park in England. Surrounded by forest, which juts out into them in points, and occasionally diversified with clumps and belts of wood, they form a most agreeable prospect, especially after one has passed through such an interminable wilderness of trees.

Albion seems to be greatly in want of good water ; for though many wells have been dug, in which this most necessary article has been found, yet the village itself is still without an ample supply during the dry season.

The settlement has been considerably benefitted by having been lately elevated to the rank of a county seat ; and it will, no doubt, some day or other, become a place of importance.

The farms in the neighbourhood are increasing in magnitude and number. The year I was there the settlers had exported produce for the first time. The way they effected this, was by loading several flat boats with corn, flour, pork, beef, sausages, etc., and floating them down the Wabash into the Ohio, and from thence down the Mississippi to New Orleans, a distance of about 1,140 miles. The mere length of this navigation proves that the settlement is capable of great efforts. But the grand objection is the general unhealthiness of the neighbouring country ; for if the Illinois were as healthy as England, it would soon equal, or even surpass, all that Mr. Birkbeck has written in its favor.

One of the principal inducements to settle at Albion, in preference to any other place in the State, is, that there is a very clever English Surgeon there, who having had a regular education under Abernethy, and walked the Hospitals in London, must be a great acquisition to families in the neighbourhood. Persons who have not visited the Western States cannot have any idea of the general ignorance of the practitioners of medicine. A young man, after an apprenticeship of a year or two in the shop of some ignorant apothecary, or at the most, after a very superficial course of study at some school or college, is entitled to cure (or rather kill) all the unhappy Backwoodsmen who may apply to him for advice. It would be well if they were all as harmless in their practice as Dr. Elnathan Todd, a person described in the *Pioneers*, an American novel, and whose character, drawn to the life, gives a good idea of one of these physicians. Indeed, to become a doctor in the Backwoods, it is only necessary to have a cabin containing 50 or 100 dollars' worth of drugs, with a board over the door, affirming that this is Dr. M. or N.'s " Store."

What appeared to me to be one of the great drawbacks to settling at Albion, was, that there were two parties who were in open hostility with one another, and whose eternal prosecutions enabled two lawyers, even in this small settlement, to thrive upon the dissensions of the community. Mr. Flowers was the person, against whom the greatest indignation of the opposite party was pointed ; but, although I was at the time informed of their mutual grievances, yet I have since so entirely forgotten them, that I cannot take upon me to say which party was in the right. I must confess, however, I was greatly mortified at seeing these foolish people, after having left their country, crossed the Atlantic, and travelled 1000 miles into the wilderness, quarrelling with one another and making each other's situation as disagreeable as possible. The hostile parties do not even speak ; and thus the respectable inhabitants, who might constitute a very pleasant little society, are entirely kept apart from one another.

The lower class of English at Albion, that is, the common labourers and manufacturers, have, I am sorry to say, very much degenerated ; for they have copied all the vices of the Backwoodsmen, but none of their virtues drinking, fighting, etc., and, when fighting,

“gouging” and biting. In England, if two men quarrel, they settle their dispute by what is called “a stand up fight.” The by-standers form a ring, and even if one of the combatants wish it, he is not permitted to strike his fallen antagonist. This is a manly, honourable custom, which the people of England have good reason to be proud of. But fighting in the Backwoods is conducted upon a plan, which is only worthy of the most ferocious savages. The object of each combatant is to take his adversary by surprise ; and then, as soon as he has thrown him down, either to “gouge” him, that is, to poke his eye out, or else to get his nose or ear into his mouth and bite it off. I saw an Englishman at Albion who had a large piece bitten out of his under lip. Until I went into the Backwoods, I could never credit the existence of such a savage mode of fighting. I believe something of the same kind was once customary in Lancashire ; but it has, since the days of pugilism, been totally exploded. This abominable practice of gouging is the greatest defect in the character of the Backwoodsmen.

With regard to Mr. Birkbeck’s letters, every one who has lately been at the settlement, must allow, that the description he has given of the advantages of the situation, is somewhat exaggerated. But I also believe, that every one who knows Mr. Birkbeck, must be perfectly convinced that his exaggerations were unintentional; and this I am sure would be granted, even by those who have found to their cost, that it is much more difficult to increase one’s capital in Illinois than in England.

When Mr. Birkbeck first arrived in this State, land, and particularly produce, bore a much higher price than it does at present. Hence this Gentleman, being rather an enthusiast, and viewing only the bright side of things, described the country in a manner, which, even at the time, was not literally correct. But the transition from war to peace, from an annual expenditure of 33,000,000 dollars to 13,000,000, combined with the opening of so much new territory, and with other fortuitous circumstances, has now reduced the western farmers to great distress. Indeed the agriculturists of all the Western States have suffered nearly as much as the same class of people in Great Britain. Mr. Birkbeck has participated in the general calamity, as it is well known that he does not possess as many dollars at this moment, as he did pounds sterling when he left England. But for this, which was his misfortune, and not his fault, he has been greatly and unjustly calumniated in several publications.

I must however beg to be understood, that I by no means advise my countrymen to emigrate to Albion, or indeed to any other place whatsoever. On the contrary, I am convinced that any one, who has even a prospect of making a decent livelihood in England, would be a fool and a madman to remove to the Illinois.

To the family-man, who finds his property and his comforts daily diminishing, without any prospect of their changing for the better, the English settlement may be an object worth attending to ; though, for my own part, should I ever be obliged to emigrate (which I trust in heaven will never be the case), I should give a decided preference to the State of New York, or to Canada, or Pennsylvania, for reasons to be mentioned hereafter.

A bachelor has no business in the Backwoods ; for in a wild country, where it is almost impossible to hire assistance of any kind, either male or female, a man is thrown entirely upon himself. Let any one imagine the uncomfortableness of inhabiting a log-cabin, where one is obliged to cut wood, clean the room, cook one’s victuals, etc., etc., without any assistance whatsoever ; and he will then feel the situation of many unhappy young men, who have come to this settlement, even from London, and quite by themselves. To a family-man the case is different. When isolated from the world, as every one must expect to be who goes to the Backwoods, he has an immense resource in domestic enjoyments, and particularly in the care and education of his children. How different from the solitary inhabitant of a log-cabin in this most solitary country !

But even the married emigrants cannot be perfectly happy. How often have I observed the love of their native land, rising in the hearts of those of my exiled countrymen, whom I have met with in different parts of this vast continent ! When I have spoken to them of England, and particularly if I had been in the countries or villages where they once dwelt, their eyes have glistened, and their voice has been almost choked with grief. Many a one has declared to me, that it was with the most heart-rending anguish, that he determined to abandon his home and his relations. But what could he do ? poverty stared him in the face. Many a one has told me, over and over again, that were the tithes and poor-rates taken away, or were they even only diminished so that he could make a shift to live, he would return to his native land with the most unfeigned joy.

I recollect that some time after this, I met, at Harmony in Indiana, one of our fine English yeomen who had emigrated with a considerable sum of money. He told me that the desire of returning home had of late preyed so much upon his mind, that he would have gone, but for the receipt of some letters that stated the terrible agricultural distress in England. “ If, sir,” said he, “ I could only make shift to live at all, I would certainly go back immediately. My old woman is pining to revisit her relations and her long lost home, and she entreats me to return, if even we should work for our daily bread. I have been making arrangements, and have even sold most of my stock ; but now this letter tells me I could not live. I have but little money, and if I could not rent a farm upon which I could gain a subsistence, I should at last become a pauper. It is only the shame of this that detains me here. I assure you, sir, I have never ceased to regret the hasty step I took in leaving my country ; but the fear of losing my all drove me away.”

I do not pretend to understand the mysteries of government ; but I am sure no one could have heard this man, and could then have laid his hand on his heart, and said that he sincerely believed, the happiness of the English people was properly attended to. Can it be politic, setting aside all thoughts of justice, to drive away the hardy peasant by depriving him of his well earned pence ? And to whom is this money given ? To sinecurists, who are often already enormously rich, and to churchmen, whose primates live in a state of more than princely luxury, and the aggregate of whose revenues is nearly equal to that of all the other protestant clergy in the whole world. Surely we may say with Goldsmith :

“ Princes and lords may flourish, or may fade,
A breath can make them, as a breath has made ;
But a bold peasantry, their country’s pride,
When once destroyed can never be supplied.”

Supposing a man intends to emigrate, he should contrast the good with the bad, and will then, from his own sentiments, be able to determine what course to take. A man in England enjoys numberless little comforts which he does not appreciate. Moreover, with moderate temperance, he has the certainty of enjoying good health. But when he goes to the Backwoods of America, he has everything to do for himself ; he has a difficulty even of obtaining shoes, clothes, etc.; and he then begins to call luxuries what he once considered only as necessaries. He lives in a log-cabin, cut off as it were from the world, and in all probability suffers from the prevailing diseases of the country. As to the specious accounts and calculations, that he is to increase his capital, and make his fortune ; so far is this from the truth, that if he once invest his money in land, he is compelled to remain, out of inability to dispose of it. Money and land are not, as in England, convertible ; and it often happens, that land in the Backwoods, cannot be disposed of at any price.

Nevertheless, I must allow that emigration offers some great advantages. In the United States a man, instead of renting a farm, can, for a small sum of money, become a respect-

able landholder. He will no longer be pestered every quarter-day, for rent, and tithes, and poor-rates. There is indeed a land-tax, but it is so trifling that it may be left out of any calculation, not being annually more than one farthing per acre. The emigrant becomes here independent : he is even considered as a member of the great political body ; for, as is the case in the State of Illinois, after residing six months he is entitled to vote, and at the end of five years, by becoming a citizen, is eligible to any office or place in the whole United States, President only excepted. Though the gain of the colonist be but small, his mind is at ease. His fortune cannot well diminish, and with moderate industry may slowly increase. At all events he can look forward without anxiety to the establishment of the family.

As, however, every one views things in a different light, I most earnestly recommend all persons intending to emigrate, to visit the country before they move their families to it. Indeed it is a duty which the emigrant owes them, to see the place he intends to remove them to. The whole expence of a journey from England, even to Illinois, and back again, might, by taking a steerage passage across the Atlantic, be easily included in 100£ ; a sum, which a man with even a small capital could not grudge, in so momentous a concern as that of emigrating. I have, moreover, no hesitation in saying, that the 100£ would be well laid out, even should he afterwards determine to emigrate. By going through the country, he would have an opportunity of seeing several States, and could judge which would best suit his ideas of comfort and profit. He would inform himself accurately about the life of the American farmers, and about the value of land as connected with the healthiness of its situation, and of its proximity to a market or a navigable river. He should also inform himself concerning the methods of cultivation ; for it must be considered, that although an English farmer may know very well how to raise wheat and oats, he is perfectly ignorant of the culture of cotton, tobacco, and particularly of Indian corn, which is the grand staple of the Southern and Western States, and of which 500 bushels are raised for every bushel of any other grain. Indeed most of the small Backwoods farmers do not cultivate anything else.

If four or five families from the same part of England wish to emigrate, they would do well to send first of all one of *their own* number, a poor man, but upon whom they could rely. His journey would cost much less than 100£ ; perhaps only 50£ ; for, on arriving at the other side of the water, he might travel on foot, and yet go as far in three days as a horseman would in two.

By adopting such a plan the emigrant may become independent of books, which at most are but fallacious guides ; every one, in his views of a strange country, being influenced more or less by his former mode of life.

A poor man would, I think, if willing to work, live more comfortably in the State of New York, or in Pennsylvania, than in the Illinois ; but then he could not so easily become an independent landholder.

There is one class of people, however, whom I must on no account dissuade from emigration, I mean the poor Irish. Never, in all my travels, have I seen any set of people who are so wretched as these. The poorest Swiss or German peasant, is rich and well off compared to them. Persecuted, and put almost out of the pale of the law, on account of their faith ; obliged, when almost starving, to stint themselves in food, in order to support a religion they abhor ; living on roots ; often not having enough even of these ; and probably not tasting bread or meat once a year ; surely such men cannot but find any change advantageous. I verily believe, that the poorer class in Kerry are no better off, and no more civilized, than when Ireland was first conquered by Earl Strongbow. If they could emigrate en masse, they would become superior beings, and I would strongly advise every one of them, who possesses the means of getting to the sea-side, to work or beg his passage over, and go where he may, so that at all events he may quit his native land—that den of human wretchedness.

Before concluding the subject of emigration, I must say, though with bitter feelings of regret, that it is the intention of the people of the Illinois to constitute themselves a slave-holding State. So powerful is avarice, and so weak is patriotism, that many inhabitants, to whom I spoke upon the subject, acknowledged that it would ultimately be a great curse to the State ; but this was indifferent to them, as they intended going away. These wretches think, that if their State can be made a slave state, many of the wealthy southern planters will emigrate to it, and that thus the price of land will be increased. As they wish to sell theirs, many will on that account vote for slavery.

Now the present constitution of Illinois (Art . 6 .) says : “ Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude shall hereafter be introduced into this State, otherwise than for the punishment of crimes whereof the party shall have been duly convicted : nor shall any male person arrived at the age of twenty-one years, nor female person arrived at the age of eighteen years, be held to serve any person as a servant, under any indenture hereafter made, unless such person shall enter into such indenture while in a state of perfect freedom, and on condition of a bona fide consideration, received, or to be received, for their service.”

The legislature of Illinois meets only once in two years, and by the constitution, if any alteration be required, all that can be done by the legislature, in which the proposition for an alteration is brought forward, is to advise the people to enable the next legislature, to call a convention of the whole State, for the purpose of making the said alteration. In order to give this advice, there must be a majority of two-thirds. I grieve to say, that when I was there this majority had been obtained. As, however, the convention cannot be called for two years, there is some little hope that the emigrants from the Northern and New England States, who are all strongly opposed to slavery, may increase so as to make head against the proposition. There is also some little chance, that the General Government of the United States will, as it ought, interfere. Neither, however, of these chances appeared to me to be very great .

Those who have been the cause of this convention, are the men who have come from the slave-holding States. On their success in getting the votes of two-thirds of the legislature, the Conventionalists assembled at two or three public dinners, at which they drank, among other toasts, “ The State of Illinois — *give us plenty of negroes*, a little industry, and she will distribute her treasures.” “ *A new constitution, purely republican*, which may guarantee to the people of Illinois the peaceable enjoyment of *all species of property*.”

What mortified me the most, was to find that many of the English at Albion were in favor of the iniquitous plan. Some few indeed of the more respectable are opposed to it ; and Birkbeck and Flowers have even declared, that should it be carried into effect, they will leave the State. It remains to be seen how far they are sincere. There are, on the other hand, certain miscreants, who have fled from their own country, to avoid, as they tell you, the tyranny of tithes and taxes, and who have yet no hesitation in giving their vote for merciless personal slavery, and the consequent entailing of endless misery and degradation, upon tens of thousands of their fellow men. It is the conduct of such unprincipled wretches as these, that gives a handle to the serviles of Europe to declaim against liberty, by showing that there are some men utterly unworthy to enjoy it. It always annoyed me that any person in a free country should uphold slavery ; but I felt it doubly mortifying, to discover, that among such wretches, there were Englishmen.

Upon leaving Albion, I determined to “ strike” the road leading to St. Louis in the State of Missouri, by taking a North-west course of about forty miles across the country. The road, or trace as it is more properly called, leading to Cat’s Ferry on the Little Wabash, is through a wild country, and is somewhat difficult to find. For a considerable distance it runs through some beautiful little Prairies, which appear to be very fertile, if one may judge from the lofty

stalks of Indian corn, which continue standing, during the winter, round the cabin of occasional settlers.

In travelling through these Prairies, every one must be struck with the vast number of a species of grouse, called "Prairie Fowls." These very much resemble the Scotch grouse, both in color, and in being feathered to the feet ; but are somewhat larger. They differ however in this particular, viz., that when disturbed, they will settle upon a fence or tree, if any be near. They are delicious eating, and are killed in great numbers by the unrivalled marksmen of this country. After driving up a flock of these birds, the hunter advances within fifteen or twenty paces, raises his long heavy rifle, and rarely misses striking the bird on the head. I have witnessed over and over again this surprising accuracy, and have fired away numberless pounds of lead in trying to imitate it, but without success. I contented myself therefore with shooting the birds in the body, by which I rather tore and spoilt them. But, however difficult I found it to hit the bird anywhere with a single ball, the Backwoodsmen regarded my unspoutmanlike shooting with as much contempt, as one of our country squires feels, when a cockney shoots at a covey of partridges on the ground.

I have seen at one time, several hundreds of Prairie fowls in a flock. They would afford excellent sport to any one who could procure a smooth-bored gun an article, which, unless brought to Albion by the English settlers, is unknown throughout the whole of the Illinois. If a person with this sort of gun were an adept in shooting flying, he might easily kill a hundred birds, or even more, in a day. But shooting flying is an art wholly unknown to the Backwoodsmen. Indeed I have often been amused, when speaking to them on this subject, to see with what scepticism they have received my accounts, gravely asking me, whether I really meant that any one with a double-barrelled gun, could kill two birds on the wing, one after the other.

On these occasions I have been asked, when they discovered what country I belonged to, whether it were really true, that a man in England might not kill deer, if he found them in a forest. They were much astonished, and seldom gave me full credit, when I told them, that not only a man might not kill deer, but unless he possessed land of a certain value, and were also provided with a license, he could not kill even the partridges and pheasants which lived upon his own wheat. Such flagrant injustice, appeared to them impossible ; and I was sometimes obliged to explain, that the English game-laws are the remains of a Feudal oppression which formerly punished the killing of a hare by death, while homicide could be atoned for by a fine.

While I was passing through a point of wood running into one of the Prairies, two racoons, who had come out to enjoy the fine weather, ran up a small tree, so near me, that had I been inclined I could easily have killed them both. These animals are very numerous, and their fine and soft skins are worth about 20 cents (10*d*) each.

I was much amused by a story told me about these skins. "Money was at one time so scarce in Indiana, that racoon skins passed current, being handled from one person to another. But some Yankees (New Englanders) forged these notes, by sewing a racoon's tail to a cat's skin, and thus destroyed the currency." This, like many other good stories about the Yankees, is no doubt a fiction ; and was only intended to perpetuate the dislike of the New Englanders, who nevertheless excel all the settlers, in industry, education, civility, and morality.

I found Fox river quite frozen, except in one place, where the ice had been broken, in order, apparently, that the stream might be forded by some cattle, the marks of whose hoofs were visible upon the snow and earth. I had been told, before leaving Albion, that the ford was a very bad one, and that I should perhaps have to swim. But, in addition to other difficulties, I found the banks uncommonly steep and slippery. However, as it was getting

dark, I made up my mind for an immersion, and was just preparing to plunge in, when three hunters coming out of the wood on my left, shouted out that the river was not fordable. When they came up, they addressed me as usual, with, "Stranger, where are you going ? where did you come from ? etc., etc." Having answered their questions, I began asking them about the ford, the trace, etc. They told me, I could not possibly go that night to Cat's Ferry, as it was twelve miles off, and the pathway very difficult to find, even during daylight, when the "*blazing*" [2] an the trees was visible. They added, there was no house in the whole distance. "But," said one of them, "my house is only four miles off, and although it is out of your road, you had better go home with me, or you will lose your way ; and you will find sleeping out very unpleasant, as it will freeze sharply to-night." The men who addressed me were all in hunting-shirts, and had with them their rifles, tomahawks, and knives. From this formidable appearance, I at first almost hesitated to trust myself with them ; but upon reflecting that if they intended me any harm, they could shoot me at once and throw me into the river, I perceived the folly of my suspicions. They very civilly helped me to take off my saddle and saddle-bags, which two of them assisted me to carry, till we came to some drift wood, fixed in the ice, and upon which we crossed. The third man remained behind, and when we had returned opposite to the ford, drove in my horse, who swam over, and mounted the bank, though not without some difficulty. The man then went down the river, crossed the driftwood, and joined us.

It was now quite dark, and as I accompanied these men through the belts of wood, and over the prairies between the river and their house I could not help reflecting, that they might, without even the possibility of suspicion, dismiss me from this best of all possible worlds, and afterwards appropriate to themselves, my saddle-bags, watch, money, and horse.

As I was a perfect stranger, no one would have inquired about me ; and indeed if I had been an inhabitant of an adjoining State, and had had friends who could have made a search for me, the murderers could have never been discovered, or even any trace of the murder have been obtained, in so wild a part of the country. Yet these fears were entirely groundless, for I have been alone, in the woods and Prairies at all hours of the day and night, and never met with anything in the shape of danger.

In the Atlantic States, indeed, I had heard a great many stories about the danger of passing through the Backwoods, but I could scarcely, when there, hear any authentic accounts even of robberies.

It may not here be amiss to say something about the manners and characters of the back settlers of the country.

The first who penetrate into the woods, and who dwell on the very frontiers of civilization, are the Hunters. These men lead a wandering life, much resembling that of their occasional companions, the Indians. They subsist almost entirely on game ; and what little money they make is obtained by the sale of furs, etc. As soon as the country begins to be settled, and when, consequently, game becomes scarce, the Hunters break up their habitations, and move further off. It has been the fashion in the United States to speak ill of these men, but, I think, without reason. There are no doubt among them very bad and profligate characters, who, having fled from justice, have adopted this mode of life ; but such persons are not very often heard of. And indeed they have no right to the title of Hunters ; for, of course, they are not very skillful in killing game, using the rifle, etc. It is requisite for a Hunter to have been accustomed to this from his earliest infancy ; and it may easily be imagined, that a man who has fled from some city for committing forgery, or any other crime, would make but a bad Hunter ; in the same way as in England, an engraver, if obliged to quit his trade, would make but a bad gamekeeper.

For my own part, and as far as my own observations go, I shall always speak well of the real Hunters ; for I have invariably found them open-hearted and very hospitable. Their manner of life, indeed, makes them, in some degree, partake of the Indian character, though they by no means have the same nobleness of sentiment, and high sense of honor.

The next in order, after the Hunters, are the Squatters. Some of these men have been Hunters, who, from the increase of their families, can no longer pursue their former mode of life. But whatever the Squatters may have originally been, they kill a great deal of game, and are fond of hunting, though they do not depend upon it for subsistence.

Lastly come the farmers and more substantial settlers, who buy their land, either from the government or from individuals, clear away the woods, break up the Prairies, and carry on their operations on a large scale. These are the men, who, assembling together on particular spots, found small villages, which not unfrequently increase into populous towns.

Almost the first thing done, after making a road to one of these *towns*, as they are always called, however small they may be, is to establish a newspaper; which probably is at first only issued weekly, and is small in size. Besides matters of local interest, it contains abstracts of the debates in Congress, most of the new laws, etc ; but always has a considerable portion filled up with extracts from books or magazines concerning scientific and useful inventions.

But to return to my guides.

Upon arriving at our place of destination, I found it a miserable log cabin of only one room. What grieved me particularly was, that there was no shelter for my horse, who was wet and cold from his bath, and whom I had to tie for the night to a tree.

A log cabin of the smaller sort is a curious object when first seen. Each wall is made of large rough logs of wood, laid one on another, and which are notched at the ends to let in those of the other walls. As there is always more or less space between the logs, small pieces of wood are driven in to stop up the interstices. This operation is called *chinking* ; and before it has been performed, the cabin, in winter, would be uninhabitable from the cold, were it not for the great fire that is always kept up. The whole, or nearly the whole of one side of the cabin forms a huge fire-place, the wall being protected from the flames by large flat stones. When, of a winter's evening, the back of the fire-place is filled with a great log called the " back-log," and is piled up with large billets of wood, it forms a very comfortable and cheering spectacle. The environs of the cabin appear very extraordinary to an European ; for it is generally built in a small clear spot in the midst of a forest, and surrounded with large trees which have been *girdled* [3] and blackened with fire, till they resemble huge pillars of charcoal.

After supping upon venison and hommony, I wrapped myself in my saddle-blanket, and making a pillow of my saddle, as I had often done before, laid myself down before the fire, and fell asleep.

The next morning, my host, who would receive no recompense for his hospitality, walked a mile with me, to put me into the proper direction for " striking" the path leading to Cat's Ferry.

After seeing an immense number of deer in my ride through the wooded flats of the Little Wabash, I crossed the river, and came for the first time into the large Prairies, which, from their size, almost entirely lose their beauty, and present nothing but an immense sea of grass. From hence, indeed, to St. Louis they are but seldom intersected by belts of wood, which are confined to the water courses.

I am at a loss to account for the formation of those extraordinary meadows, and all the theories I have read upon the subject appear to me very unsatisfactory. The wood, wherever it intersects them, or runs in at points, does not gradually decrease in size, but remains as lofty as elsewhere, and gives the ground an appearance of having once been cleared. The fertility of the soil renders it still more astonishing that the wood should terminate so abruptly as sometimes even to resemble a wall. Those who are of opinion that the Prairies are artificial, maintain that they were caused by the fires, which the Indians make in the autumn and winter. But these plains increase in magnitude as one advances west ; and, after crossing the Mississippi, the whole country, between that river and Mexico, is, with very little exception, one immense Prairie.

I came upon the St. Louis road, near a house kept by a Mr. Fitch, where I got better fare, and a more comfortable bed, than I had had for some time. There is a considerable piece of forest around this place. In most of the Western States, the farmers and tavern keepers possess large droves of hogs, which they seldom or never feed, but suffer to run at large in the woods, where they subsist upon mast. In winter the owners generally try to collect and drive them up for a short time, for the purpose of marking them. The sows just before pigging do not return home, but make a bed of leaves and grass in the hollow of a tree, or in some other sheltered spot, where they bring forth their young, and protect them as well as they are able from the wolves, bears, and their still more formidable enemies, the wild cats and catamounts. I have known settlers that possessed several hundred hogs, none of which were ever driven home, except when their owners wanted to kill them, either for home consumption or for sale.

Where the forests are rilled with underwood, it occasionally happens that some hogs make their escape, and, becoming quite wild, must be shot. Indeed, most of them follow the mode of life of wild animals, as far as consists in lying quiet all day, and feeding at night. While hunting in the woods, I have often come upon ten or twelve of them, asleep, and almost buried in the leaves which they had collected together, and made into a bed.

In the neighbourhood of Fitch's tavern, as there had been an abundance of mast (by which word is meant beechnuts, acorns, chesnuts, etc.) the settlers had all congratulated themselves upon its being a plentiful year for their hogs ; but one of those amazing flights of pigeons, of which I have already spoken, suddenly came into this part of the woods, and devoured not only all the mast that had fallen, but even that which remained half ripe upon the trees. Consequently numbers of the hogs were starved to death.

Twelve miles after leaving Fitch's, the road enters the Grand Prairie. This immense sea of grass reaches from Lake Michigan nearly to the Ohio, and is about three hundred miles in length. The breadth however is very irregular, being only twenty-four miles, where the Prairie is crossed by the St. Louis road. I do not know anything that struck me more forcibly than the sensation of solitude I experienced in crossing this, and some of the other large Prairies. I was perfectly alone, and could see nothing in any direction but sky and grass. Leaving the wood appeared like embarking alone upon the ocean, and, upon again approaching the wood, I felt as if returning to land. Sometimes again, when I perceived a small stunted solitary tree that had been planted by some fortuitous circumstance, I could hardly help supposing it to be the mast of a vessel. No doubt the great stillness added very much to this strange illusion. Not a living thing could I see or hear, except the occasional rising of some prairie fowls, or perhaps a large hawk or eagle wheeling about over my head. In the woods I have often observed this silence and solitude, but it struck me more forcibly in these boundless meadows.

In the middle of the Grand Prairie, a man of the name of Houston has fixed his habitation. When I was there his improvements were not finished, and he was particularly in want of a well, one he had dug before having fallen in. The house, which has only been built a year or two, is a great convenience to travellers ; as before they were sometimes obliged to bivouac

in the Prairie, which in winter is a very cold place to sleep in, and in summer swarms with horse-flies and mosquitoes.

These horse-flies, which are larger than a hornet, are so exceedingly troublesome, that I have been informed by those who have often crossed the Prairie in summer, that they have been frequently obliged to dismount, light a fire, and stand in the smoke of it for hours. Horses can with difficulty be induced to leave the smoke ; for they have a great dread of the flies, which not only cover their bodies, but get up into their nostrils, and would, if the poor animals were left by themselves, soon torment them to death.

Once during the summer time, when I was near a marsh in the western part of the State of New York, I saw a horse literally covered with mosquitoes, which were swollen into the appearance of little transparent blood-vessels. When these were brushed off, their unfortunate victim bled almost at every pore. Were it not much too cruel an experiment, it would be curious to ascertain in how short a time they would kill a horse, which was tied so that he could not roll upon the ground.

In the Great Prairie, as in all the others, there are numbers of small grey-coloured wolves, called “ prairie wolves,” which are not taller than a pointer dog. They are exceedingly troublesome ; killing sheep, pigs and fowls. The common black wolves are also very numerous in the Illinois ; and this obliges the settlers to shut up, every night the few sheep they have. There was a small patch of Indian corn just at Houston’s door, into which several prairie wolves entered during the night, and kept up a continual barking. As soon as one begins to bark, another, as it were, answers ; and it is quite curious to hear them all begin again at once, in every direction, when just before they were perfectly quiet.

[1] In many places where I have met with execrable accommodations, future travellers will find good inns ; for the whole country is so rapidly improving, that what is true of the Backwoods one year ceases to be so the next.

[2] When a road is first of all made through the woods, and before many of the trees have been cut down, someone gives every fifth or sixth tree in the intended line, two or three chops, with an axe. which marks are essential to finding the way. This is called “ blazing.”

[3] Among the most laborious occupations of the settler is the cutting down the trees. Some of these are so gigantic, that the labour of chopping them down would be immense. He therefore cuts off the bark in a belt about four or five inches wide, and this is called girdling. The tree dies, and the year after, when it is dry, it is set on fire, and continues to burn slowly until gradually consumed.

Pictures of Illinois one hundred years ago (1918)

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