

LETTER 9,

FROM OUR OWN CORRESPONDENT.

Ottawa, Iowa, Nov. 23, 1867.

It was on a cold, wintry March morning, with the snow falling fast, that we left Burlington, once more bound westward. A long day's journey on the railroad brought us to Albia, where I first saw the inside of a Western country inn. Imagine a small, ill-lighted, and over-heated room, serving at once as hall, parlour, and office—bar-room there is none, for the "Maine Liquor Law" is in force in Iowa—fill this room with a crowd of ill-dressed, dirty-looking men—some chewing and spitting, others smoking; place the never-failing stove in the centre, and you will have a faithful, if not a pleasant, picture of a Western tavern. Few of the comforts of Eastern civilisation have travelled thus far west. Washing appliances are ~~only~~ ^{rarely} to be found in the bedrooms, and in winter they generally consist of a pail of water and one tin basin, in a corner in the common room; while in summer they are to be found out of doors by the pump.

The bedrooms are primitive and scant of furniture, but generally very clean; and, were it not for the practice of cramming two into one small bed, would be comfortable enough.

Next day we travelled west on the "construction train," over a part of the line yet unopened, to the small settlement of ~~Monroe~~ ^{Monroe}. One of the brakemen on the train was an intelligent young Dane from Copenhagen, who spoke English remarkably well, and said he knew four languages. He had, seemingly, been a sailor on the Lakes, and spoke of the good pay earned there—three dollars and a half a day and their board. At ~~Monroe~~ ^{Monroe} the cold was intense, and there, for the first time, I found boots frozen stiff at night, and the breath "frosted" on the bed-clothes in the morning. At sunrise we saw the curious phenomena called sun-dogs, a brilliant mock sun appearing to rise on each side of the true orb, and only fading away when he cleared the horizon.

Having here reached the end of the railway, we (for there were four of us) hired a wagon to convey our numerous instruments and articles of luggage to the scene of our labours, in preparing the way for the iron road to a point some forty miles further west.

It was a bitter day, the mercury being far below zero, though at first, while our road lay through sheltered and wooded hollows, the sun seemed to give some warmth and we hardly felt the cold; soon, however, we reached the open, snow-clad prairie, where the road was a mere track, and the icy wind soon froze the breath in large icicles on the hair about our faces. Sometimes the road descended into sheltered hollows, but only to rise again and make us feel the blast more piercing. Trees and houses were few and far between, and no man was out-of-doors where business allowed him to stay at home. Towards sundown we reached Chariton, where we found an inn much like that already described. In spite of all muffling up two of us got our ears frostbitten, the consequence of which is that the ear swells, gets red and painful, then the skin peels off, and leaves the flesh sensitive for a long time to the slightest cold; so severe was it that the very ink in our trunks froze in spite of the jolting of the waggon. Chariton is a straggling town of wooden buildings, with some few of brick, and, like all such towns, looked dreary and deserted in the cold weather. There is little that is attractive about a new western town; men seem to have combined to put up the ugliest buildings, and everything wears a half-finished air.

A public square, with a large courthouse in the centre, one or two good stores and a modest church or two in the background, completes the picture. Next day we again tramped westward across country like that of the preceding day, and in the afternoon reached the village of Ottawa, which was to be our home for many months; and most unpromising it looked, consisting of some ten or twelve houses, all small and built of wood, perched on a high ridge on the open prairie, with nothing larger than a rail fence to break the piercing winds which in winter sweep unceasingly across "the high prairie." By the roadside, in front of one of the houses, was a sturdy grey-headed old man, dressed in a sky-blue coat and high fur cap, vigorously engaged in chopping wood. This was the landlord of the village tavern, who, like many of the settlers in this State, was from West Virginia.

Here we took up our quarters in the snug little tavern, which consisted of a sittingroom, three bedrooms, and a kitchen, used also as the eatingroom. It was a model of cleanliness, but the food consisted chiefly of three staple articles—salt pork, coffee, and sorghum for breakfast; coffee, sorghum, and salt pork for dinner; sorghum, coffee, and salt pork for supper—these meals being served at sunrise, noon, and nightfall. Vegetables there were hardly any, but we had abundance of eggs, milk, and preserves.

The sorghum is the treacle-like juice of a kind of sugar cane which grows here, and is largely used as a substitute for sugar, tasting like molasses, but having a sort of acid flavour, which is not disagreeable. The railroad line lay a mile and a half to the south, following for eight miles the course of a stream called Brush Creek, till it reached its head waters on the high prairie.

The centre line had been already staked out, but there was still much more work to be done before all was ready for the contractors to commence work. Day after day we worked in the cold, snow-clad valley, sometimes in the timber, sometimes on the open bottoms, which were often slightly flooded and covered with a rotten crust of snow-ice, through which we would crush into a few inches of water, rendering our work tiresome and disagreeable in such places. We were seldom in sight of a house or cultivated land, and indeed rarely saw anyone during the day. Even birds and animals were scarce. Sometimes the tap-tap of a woodpecker on a hollow tree rang out with startling loudness in the frosty air; now and then we saw a large fox, squirrel, or heard the bark-like caw of a crow; rabbits alone were plentiful, but we saw many strange foot-prints in the snow, some of which we knew to be the tracks of minks and raccoons. There were wolves and deer also, but we never saw any of them. Some of the woodpeckers were lovely birds, with plumage of the brightest red, white, and black. The absence of evergreens, and the long, brown, withered prairie grass, gave a dreary aspect to the scene; but the bright sun and clear sky of the deepest blue, with the pure dry air, and our active life kept off all feeling of gloom. I shall try and tell you of the natives and their homes in my next.

F. E. P.