

The Evening Mail

AND PACKET.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 9, 1868.

FROM A CORRESPONDENT.

Ottawa, Iowa, Dec. 7, 1867.

In the earlier stages of our work, before the contractors had put up their shanties, and while the sod was yet unbroken, we were often employed on nearly the same spot for several days, and at such times made the nearest farmhouse our home, though our line followed the course of a creek along which houses were scarce—so much so that in ten miles we only crossed three fenced fields.

Iowa is too new a State to claim many natives, and the settlers in this district come chiefly from Indiana, Ohio, and Virginia, each possessing distinctive characteristics. The Indians are known as "Hoosiers," a term used chiefly in an absurd sense, and their dwellings, food, and manners are generally below the average. (Indiana was originally settled by the "mean whites" from the Northern Slave States.)

The Virginians I have found generally well off, but with lazy, thriftless habits, and an Irish way of taking the world easy; while those from Ohio are hearty, sturdy men, with open hearts and busy hands. Hospitality, in one sense of the word, is little known; a meal or a bed can be had anywhere by asking and paying for it, but a free invitation to stay and partake is rarely offered to a stranger. Many of the settlers live in comfortable log or frame houses, but they are small and scantily furnished; while luxuries are scarce and the women slave at housework from morning till night. The barn is the most imposing building, while the stable is a mere cage of logs or boards, in which the horses and cattle withstand, as best they can, the rigours of an Iowa winter.

An Iowa settler leads a hard life, summer and winter being each extreme, while the year's work has to be crowded into a few months in summer; still everyone is independent and owns his farm, and want and begging are unknown.

We live here near the county line, where settlements are thinnest and the settlers least polished. Nor do I know a single instance of any one settler not an American, except one or two who came from Europe at so early an age as to be practically natives, though there are large Irish, Dutch, German, and French settlements in some parts of this State which, it must be remembered, has a population of nearly one million, and a larger area than Ireland, being 300 miles in length and about 200 in breadth.

This is eminently a prairie State, and there is little timber except on the rivers, the constant prairie fires destroying the young timber. The "high prairie" is the table land, which here is some 500 feet above the Mississippi, Ottawa being about half way between that river and the Missouri, and about 150 miles from either. The creeks are streams flowing in depressions, the high land between them being termed "divides." The lowlands through which these creeks flow often spread out into large open flats called "bottoms." These are rich natural meadows, on which the grass grows shoulder high, but they are subject to floods, and are unhealthy. With such free natural hayfields as these and the open prairie, as both meadow and pasture, but little tame grass is cultivated.

The course of a creek is marked by the growth of timber, and in spring it is delightful to trace from some neighbouring bluff the windings of the creeks by the lines of leafy green. The timber consists of oak, elm, hickory, black walnut, cottonwood, and a few other less important trees. The cottonwood is a peculiarly western tree, of rapid growth, and graceful form, but the wood is poor and soft. It has glossy dark-green leaves, rugged bark, and, from its rapid growth, is in much request for groves round farmhouses, forming in a few years quite a respectable tree. In appearance it is something like the Canada poplar.

Except at the head waters of the creeks the timber rarely extends on to the high prairie, whose broad expanse is often unbroken for miles by tree, house, or fence; and in spring and autumn, when the grass is long and dry, the prairie fires often sweep across it, leaving a bare, blackened waste behind, till the fast-growing grass again sprouts up.

In this neighbourhood there is no stone, except in the shape of boulders scattered here and there on the hillsides, forming a curious feature in a stoneless district. Fences are made of rails, plank, or osage—the latter a thorny shrub said to be a native of Texas, its stiff thorny stems forming in a few years an impenetrable fence. It has dark green leaves with thorns on the back rib, bears an orange-like fruit, grows to a considerable height, and has only been recently applied to useful purposes. The rail fences are simply made of trees split into rough bars about ten feet long, which are laid on top of each other in zigzags, and steepled at the ends by uprights set in the shape of an X, the top rail being laid over the fork. They are unsightly, and require much space and timber, but last several years, and make a strong fence. The prairie is well so called, being a natural meadow, which only requires breaking to be ready for any crops, the rich black soil varying in depth from a few inches to several feet; but it seems too rich for wheat or oats; and corn—i.e., Indian corn—is the staple crop. After the ground has been well ploughed and broken, the corn is planted either by hand or machine in regular rows, three to four feet apart, several grains being planted at the intersection of each row. As soon as the corn is well up, ploughing between the rows with a shovel-plough is commenced, and continued till the plants are about knee high, after which their rapid growth outstrips the weeds, and they soon attain a height of seven or eight feet—often more. Then long, silken brown tassels appear on the ends of the cobs, and the latter gradually fill and swell out into long, fat ears. The corn is left to stand and ripen in the field till the frost comes, when it is either cut and brought in, or stooked till it is convenient to bring it in. Only the ears or cobs are brought in, and are put in a large crib, very slightly protected from the weather. Forty bushels to the acre is an average yield, and corn sold here last summer at 40 to 50 cents. About 10 ears are given to a horse for a feed, and he is left to strip the grains off the cob for himself. A field of ripening corn, with its tall stalks and long, bright green leaves bending to the fresh prairie breeze on a fine summer day, is a splendid sight, the polished leaves glistening in the sun. Then when harvest time comes it is pleasant to watch the fat cobs, of every hue from pearly white to bright yellow, red and dark maroon.

Once last summer three of us attempted to cross a corn field diagonally. The stalks were about eight feet high, and before we had gone many paces we all got separated, and finally came out on different sides of the field.

The rapid progress of this western country was well displayed here to-day, where a few months ago there was no sign of the presence of man except a long line of stakes indicating the course of the future railroad. Though the track only reached this point last week, a considerable town has been already laid out, and its streets staked off by the county surveyor, a large warehouse and three shops been put up, and if the place "takes" a town will soon be formed, possibly to become a city at some future day.

To-day there was a busy scene, two locomotives and two trains, one bringing sleepers, rails, and bridge timber for the further extension of the line; the other freighted with plank and framing for the new buildings.

Railroading in the Western States is pushed forward very rapidly to get the rails laid at the earliest moment, and as soon as the earthwork and bridges allow, bricklaying is commenced.

First come the engineers, who set stakes indicating the exact position of the rails, then the ties or sleepers are hauled on to the road bed and tied at one side, next come the tie men, some of whom keep in advance, and place sleepers accurately in position every eight or ten feet, while another gang follows placing the intermediate sleepers, lining and levelling them by those already in position. Then two rails are laid down, and a small truck laden with rails is drawn by horse-power over the pair already laid. As soon as it reaches the end, another pair of rails is slid off and placed in position, and this is continued till the rails are exhausted, when the truck returns for a fresh supply. A gang follows, spiking down the rails to the sleepers, another gang following to straighten the track before the locomotive runs over it. All these gangs work simultaneously, though at different points, and the locomotive moves westward on its march of empire at the rate of half a mile a day, its goal in this case being the Missouri River, there to form a junction with the Pacific Railroad, whose iron arms will soon join the Atlantic and Pacific States.

F. E. P.

track

There are lots like these to be seen here. ! F. E. P.



TEAMSTERS.