



View of the Valley of the Mississippi

Read and Comprehend

Reminiscences of Pioneer Life

by J.W. Spencer

I was born in Vergennes, Addison County, Vermont, on the twenty-fifth of July, 1801, and after spending the early years of my life there, started, on the fourth of September, 1820, for Illinois, driving a two-horse team for a gentleman by the name of Brush.

Having an uncle in St. Louis county, Missouri, I went there, crossing the Mississippi River on the twenty-fifth of October, at St. Louis. This place had about five thousand inhabitants at that time. My uncle, and many more of the early settlers, were about leaving where they had settled, on account of Missouri becoming a slave state.

He and several of his neighbors had, early in the Fall of this year, visited the Illinois River country, and made some selections for farms, about thirty miles from the mouth of the river, at a settlement now called Bluffdale. In order to hold the lands they had selected, they were obliged¹ to make some improvement on them, which, having done, they returned to Missouri.

About the first of December, in company with my cousin, who was five or six years my senior, with his wife and two children, we started for the Illinois River, where my uncle and his party had made their claims the Fall before. On arriving there, we found on one of the claims a log cabin,



about fourteen feet square, about half built; it lacked a roof, a floor, and a door, which we soon added.

About the year 1826, there was great excitement in regard to the lead mines of the upper Mississippi. In 1827 I thought I would try my luck one season at the mines. I passed Rock Island, on my way up the river, about the last of March, returning late in the summer. This practice of going up the river in the spring and coming down in the fall, was so generally observed by the first settlers of Illinois, that they were called "Suckers."



In the fall of 1828, I removed² to Morgan county, about twelve miles from Jacksonville, on the Beardstown road. Mr. Rinnah Wells, in passing from the mines to the southern part of the state, stopped with me over night. In the course of the evening he told me that the Indians had left their old village at Rock Island³. Having seen the country along the Rock Island rapids, in passing to and from the mines, and being much pleased with it, in less than a week, accompanied⁴ by Loudon Case, Sr. I was on my way to ascertain⁵ if the Indians had left.

When about ten miles from Rock River, we met a Mr. Prince, who had brought a load of corn from his farm near Peoria, to feed Judge Pence's team, who was just then moving to the old Indian village at Rock River. We reached Rock River on the 9th of December. The river seemed alive with ducks. I do not think I have ever seen as many at one time since.

Getting on the track of Judge Pence's wagons we crossed to the Big Island. Here we found Judge Pence looking for a place to ford, which we found about sundown, between the upper bridge and mill dam, on the main stream.

Here we found several wigwams⁶, and took shelter in a large one for the night. Early in the morning Judge Pence started out, and returned about breakfast time, saying he would not unload his wagon here, as he had found a better wigwam, which proved to be Black Hawk's⁷.

These wigwams are very much the shape of a New England barn, sixteen or eighteen feet wide, and from twenty to fifty or sixty feet long. The largest were calculated for from two to four families. They were built by setting posts in the ground, and siding with bark from elm trees. This bark, cut about seven feet long, varied in width from two to four feet, according to the size of the tree taken from. They had rafters, and on these were laid small poles, upon the poles was placed the bark, making a roof that turned rain very well. These wigwams made a very comfortable Summer house.

Their wigwams for Fall and Winter use were very different, being of flags woven into matting, which could be rolled up, and enough to cover a wigwam carried on one horse. They made a frame of small poles, one end sharpened and stuck in the ground, the other bent over so as to form a circle of ten or twelve feet. Then they placed the matting around and over the poles, leaving a small opening in the top for the smoke. A little fire in the center would keep the wigwam warm. The Indians say "the white man makes a great fire, and stands a great way off, the Indian makes a little fire, and gets very near it." On our arrival here we found no Indians, it being the season of the year when they were absent on their winter's hunt. The settlers, as well as the officers of the garrison⁸, thought they would not return.

Spencer, J. W. *Reminiscences of Pioneer Life in the Mississippi Valley*. Davenport, IA: Griggs, Watson and Day, 1872.

1. required; 2. moved; 3. Sac Indian village; 4. in the company of; 5. to find out; 6. dome-shaped Indian dwelling; 7. Sac Indian leader; 8. military post