

THE NORTHWEST CORNER OF INDIANA IN 1834.

A LETTER OF SOLON ROBINSON'S.

[Solon Robinson was one of the first and most prominent settlers of Lake county, sometimes called "The Squatter-King of Lake." He founded Crown Point, and was for a time postmaster, and was generally active in public affairs. He was a fluent and entertaining writer and seems to have exercised his talent. See T. H. Ball's "Lake County, 1834-1872," pp. 22 ff. and "Lake County, 1884," pp., 465, 483.]

From the Madison, Indiana, Republican and Banner, January 15, 1835.

ROBINSON'S PRAIRIE,
OAKLAND COUNTY, IA. [INDIANA],
DECEMBER 16, 1834.

MESSERS. LODGE & PATRICK*: I avail myself of the privilege of addressing you, and through you, some information, not only of myself, but of the country that I hope will be interesting to my friends and acquaintances and many of your readers.

Your first inquiry will be, "Where is the place you date from?" It is the territory which forms the northwest corner of Indiana, lying west of Laporte county and between the Kankakee river and Lake Michigan. Being one of the first settlers, I have named it "Oakland county," as descriptive of most of the timber in it. This prairie having no other name, and I having moved the first white family onto it, it has been called "Robinson's Prairie" by way of distinction. My location is thirty-five miles southwest of Michigan City on the old Sioux Indian trail leading in the direction of Peoria, Ill., and about the same distance southeast of Chicago, and on the dividing ridge between the lakes and the Mississippi. I can not give you an adequate idea of this country. To say it is rich and beautiful is not sufficient. It is the first fine country I ever saw. I am now speaking of the north part of the State generally. You have heard the Door Prairie described. Description gives you no idea of the

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real splendor of the green when it first breaks upon the view. I had seen many prairies before, but never such an one. My intention, when I left Madison, was to have settled upon it. Knowing that it was only two or three years since it began to settle, I expected to find much vacant land. Instead of that it is nearly all claimed and already wears the appearance of an old settled country. Good frame houses and barns built and building, with such a multitude of stacks of hay and grain that it looks like the great storehouse of the world. And yet, with all this abundance, grain is already becoming high and scarce. The influx of "newcomers" is beyond calculation. Land is rising in value most wonderfully, and yet when compared with some other countries it never can reach a value sufficiently high to compare with its real worth. "Congress improvements" are frequently sold on the Door Prairie from \$500 to \$2,000 for quarter-sections. Every emigrant's desire is to get upon the most valuable location he can find, so that his improvements will rise in value before the land comes into market, which will not be until next summer or later.

Not finding a situation in Laporte county that suited me, I was at some loss what to do, when I accidentally met with the surveyors just returned from their survey in this territory. They informed me that there was a large tract of country entirely unsettled which was not only equally as fertile as the Door Prairie, but in other respects better. I immediately procured an Indian pony, furnished myself with provisions and a blanket, took notes and a plat of the country from the surveyors and in company with one other person started out on an exploring tour. I soon found the spots pointed out to me as first rate on my plat, and upon one of them made my pitch, returned to Laporte and procured hands to help build a cabin and moved my family on directly, some fifteen or twenty miles beyond "the last house," and in one week after we camped upon this spot I had a comfortable log cabin eighteen feet square, as well finished off as could be expected thirty-five miles from a saw-mill. I came onto this prairie the 1st of November, at which time I could have said with the poet of Juan Fernandes—

"I am monarch of all I survey.
My right there is none to dispute."

but now there is about a dozen houses in sight, and numerous claims made for others, though as yet I have but one white neighbor within ten miles. This is an arm of the "Grand Prairie" and is most beautifully interspersed with groves of timber, which consist of white, black, yellow, red and burr oak and great quantities of shellbark hickory and some other timber. Lakes, streams and springs are also plenty. In the grove where I have built there is an abundance of crab-apple, plum and cherry trees, and, above all, there are a great number of "honey trees" in the country. The soil on this prairie is composed of twelve to eighteen inches of dry, black vegetable matter on top, then from one to two feet of loose, clayey loam, under which is a hard pan of limestone and pebbly clay. Stone is not plenty, though enough for the most necessary purposes can be obtained easily. Soft timber is scarce; rail and other timber abundant and excellent, and fuel the best I ever saw, particularly oak, which when perfectly green will ignite as easily and burn as well as I ever saw seasoned hickory or sugar tree do in the south part of this State. As to the healthfulness of the country, I can only say that everybody says it is so, and everybody's personal appearance warrants the belief that the say-so is true. The badness of my own health was my inducement for leaving the Ohio river, as then there seemed no prospect of my ever recovering it. Here I have become as hearty as ever I was in my life—completely restored. I most earnestly wish that many of my friends could partake of the benefits of this country. The north end of Indiana will most certainly become the garden spot of the State. A very erroneous impression has been long impressed upon the public in regard to the country purchased of the Pottawattamies in 1832, lying within this State. It has ever been represented upon the map of the State as one immense swamp, but instead of that being the fact, it is directly the contrary. Ten thousand acres of fine, high, dry prairie to one of swamp is more correct. Nearly all the streams are bordered with marsh, on which grows the most luxuriant crop of grass, which affords the greatest abundance of good hay

to the new settlers. So that instead of being a detriment to the settlement of the country, it is the greatest advantage—and as the water of these marshes is generally pure spring water and no decaying timber on them, they are in no way unhealthy. In fact, there is no decaying timber here (the great cause of miasma) even in the timbered land. It is all burnt up annually, as the Indians make it a point to fire the prairies every fall, and all of the timber here is so combustible that it burns so entirely as to leave no trace even of the stumps. Perhaps this is the way that the prairies are first made.

There appear to be but few Indians now in the country. There are three wigwams on the bank of a most beautiful lake abounding in fish, geese, ducks and muskrats, about four miles from my house. The wigwams are built of sticks and covered with long grass and flag matting, and are about ten or twelve feet in diameter, with a small fire and a great smoke in the center, around which the family sit or lie on a few skins or blankets. * * * And yet these are a cheerful, happy people. Their dress usually consists of moccasins, broadcloth or buckskin leggings, a kind of kilt, and sometimes a shirt, and over all a blanket loosely thrown. They are frequently at my house to “swap” *suc-se-we-ors* (venison) for *buck-we-an* and *quass-gun* (flour and bread), or *po-ke-min* (cranberries) and *musquas* skins for *sum-ma* (tobacco) and *daw-mien* (corn). They are quiet and civil, but not quite so neat as might be. Their besetting sin is a love of whisky—an awful curse that white men have inflicted upon them. I blush to say that there are men in Indiana that will strip an Indian of his last blanket by whisky. They are fast falling before the sweeping pestilence of drunkenness. One of the coldest nights of this winter one of the poor wretches lay out upon this prairie, having pawned his best blanket for whisky enough to murder him.

Some persons who would like to emigrate to the Pottawatamie country are deterred from it by fear of the Indians. Such, if once here, would dismiss their fears. They are by no means unpleasant neighbors—besides it is probable that they will all leave the country in the course of the next summer for their new home west of the Mississippi. Others are deterred from emi-

grating in consequence of the land not yet being in market. No difficulty is to be apprehended from making improvements before purchasing. Congress provided for all of the settlers of 1833 at the last session by a removal of the pre-emption law. No doubt the same favor will be extended to those who have settled since that time at the present session of Congress. If not, the claims of settlers are most singularly respected by common custom. For instance, a person comes here and looks at a piece of land that suits him. He will perhaps lay the foundation of a cabin, is "claimed" or located, and no person will interfere or presume to settle upon it without first purchasing the first claimant's right. There is a vast body of most beautiful country yet unclaimed in this purchase. Thousands of "first rate chances" may yet be had on this prairie and in the groves adjoining. I have no doubt but that the rush of emigrants into "Oakland county" will be as great for three years to come as it has been into Laporte county for three years past. The growth of this country to an Eastern or Southern man is most wonderful. The majority of the inhabitants are Yankees, and those, too, who are not only comfortable, but "well to live." One good evidence of the good quality of the inhabitants is to be seen in the numerous schoolhouses and the scarcity of grog shops. There is a great demand for mechanics. The communication of New York by the lakes is so easy that merchandise is not high, but labor and provisions of all kinds are quite so, when compared with the prevailing prices on the Ohio river.

Michigan City, which is the only landing place at present on Lake Michigan in this State, presents one of the most singularly rapid growths I ever knew. It is now in reality a small city. One year ago it contained only three log cabins. There is much fine white pine timber near the city, and Trail creek affords good mill privileges, on which are several mills.

Although this is a very level country, there are an abundance of mill privileges on never failing streams, which possess the singular feature of never rising or falling except a mere trifle.

If you think my present sketch may be interesting to your readers, I will probably give you a continuation of it hereafter.

Yours, etc.,

SOLON ROBINSON.