

Documents

A NEW HARMONY LETTER OF 1851

The writer of the letter printed below, Robert Dale Owen, is well known to students of Indiana history, as is the recipient, Mrs. Sarah T. Bolton, wife of Nathaniel Bolton an Indianapolis editor. Mrs. Bolton was a notable woman in her day, the author of many poems. Almost anything from Robert Dale Owen is worthy of publication, but the letter here published for the first time has an especial charm. In a most natural manner, the writer reveals his appreciation of New Harmony and his admiration of some of the characters who lived in the village. The original copy of the letter is in the possession of Mr. Benj. D. Hiltz of Indianapolis. For the use of a photostatic copy, the *Magazine* is indebted to Miss Esther U. McNitt of the Indiana State Library.

[ROBERT DALE OWEN TO MRS. SARAH T. BOLTON]

New Harmony Inda
July 6, 1851

The "Home Journal", which you were good enough to send me, and which I had not read when I last wrote you has come to hand. Nothing could be more flattering than the notice it contains. I send you by this post a Vincennes paper, containing my address entire, with an editorial notice. Have you yet received the pamphlets from Kent? I am glad you liked the [word blurred] style in which they were got up.

It must be confessed, that the whole affair has been eminently successful and promises to leave behind it important results. To whom the credit is due of effecting this, I at least, know, if the public does not. I think it will always be a pleasant reflection to you, that, by dint of perseverance through many obstacles, you have so efficiently contributed to the good cause of the property rights of your sex.

We have had quite a spirited Fourth of July celebration; an oration, which I was called to deliver; then a picnic in the woods, got up in a most creditable style—upwards of 300 persons being seated to a handsomely laid out dinner; & in the evening a ball, at which upwards of 150 were present. Nothing could have passed off more harmoniously or decorously or pleasantly than the entire proceedings. We are truly a social people in our little village, & never let slip an opportunity of social reunions on easy & pleasant terms; & as we have few who are rich among us, & [two words missing] ostentatious display has reached us yet. We get up such celebrations simply & economically. On this occasion, ball, supper & all, it did not cost each of us over a dollar; I mean the gentle-

men; for it is a rule with us never to charge the ladies. In this way, we can afford to have frequent amusements; & we don't enjoy them the less, because of their small cost. It is customary for many of our neighbors, from Mount Vernon, Evansville, Princeton & the neighborhood, to attend our celebrations; & they all admit, that nowhere do they find as pleasant social gatherings as at Harmony.

I have a mind, by way of offering you additional inducement to come and see us—& also that when you do make out that promised visit, you may not feel as if you were coming among strangers—to send you a few sketches of the more notable personages, who make up the society of our little village. I am bent, you may see, upon securing that visit, if I can.

Let me begin with the Flowers, who keep the principal tavern in the place; & a most comfortable, tidy, *home-atmosphere* sort of house it is. They migrated from England, some thirty years ago; wealthy farmers on a large scale. Mr. Flowers having won, for several successive years, the highest prizes for the best Merino flock of sheep in England; prizes which still appear, on his tavern table, in the shape of handsome pieces of plate. He brought with him the ideas of an improved system of agriculture inconsistent with the then state of the country; run [*sic*] through much of his property in unsuccessful attempts to introduce expensive improvements; lost many thousand dollars by going security for an idle, worthless, dissipated son-in-law; and finally the family, having thirty thousand dollars invested in Bank stock, lost the whole by the failure of that institution. Throughout all these reverses George Flowers never lost the open-hearted, generous spirit of a hospitable English gentleman. He kept almost open house long after he could ill afford it. And, for a long term of years, there was not a stranger visiting Albion (the name of the settlement he made, in Illinois, about 25 miles west of this) who was not invited to make his house—beautifully situated on the edge of a lovely prairie—his home, so long as he saw fit to stay. Chiefly to pay his security debts, one piece of property after another went, at a ruinous sacrifice. And at last, after a long struggle to save it, the favorite homestead, too, went with the rest. The sole remaining consolation was, that, by such sacrifices, he paid up every debt he owed in the world, and stood, at last, a free though a landless man. I ought not to say the *only* consolation, for he had one which might well support a man under worse reverses than these; the unwaning love of a high-minded, warm-hearted, spirited woman. Mrs Flowers is quite a character. Even now, at sixty, or near it, the mother of six or seven children, all of adult age, after a life of continued labor & renewed disappointment, she retains the vivacity, & almost the cheerfulness, of early youth. To the remains of great beauty, she still joins a raciness of wit & a sprightliness of fancy, which make the life of any society in which she happens to be. I am sure she will amuse and interest you. You must expect to see an extraordinary looking person; a somewhat short figure, inclining to *em bon point*, not bent with age, though the hair is silvered; an aquiline nose & Eastern looking face; the head often surmounted by a most voluminous & uncommon looking turban, with lace depending from its folds; altogether a figure & character, anything but

commonplace. She took to the toils of tavern-keeping for a living—& you know what they are in a country like this—,without a murmur. It was not a great deal more labor or trouble, she said to me one day, than to keep open house at “Park-place”, as she had been used to do: the only difference which grated on her feelings was, the making out these odious bills, & demanding so many dollars & cents from each guest, before they departed. Amid all the cares of the tavern, which sometimes fall on her without any help whatever, she preserves her spirit unbroken, & still finds time for a thousand touching little attentions to her husband, helpless rather from habit than age, & in part from a degree of deafness which renders an ear-trumpet indispensable. She has usually with her her youngest daughter, Mary Flower, with a face as pretty as her name, & a disposition corresponding to both. Mary, with her bright eyes & her real auburn hair & her nineteen or twenty years, is an excellent, true-hearted girl, without much literary cultivation, but devoted to her father & mother, inheriting a spark of her mother’s spirit, but unluckily not her mother’s bodily strength; or she could more effectually assist her, in her household cares. A married son, good like the rest of the family, but somewhat rough in his exterior, with a pleasant girl for a wife, has lately been added to the household. They have a large commodious dwelling, rent free, & I believe they are making an humble but comfortable living. The family have maintained their honor and integrity unblemished, through all reverses, & are, in consequence, treated with every respect, and in their fallen fortunes I often spend an agreeable evening with them.

July 7. My Fourth of July oration, it seems, had great success; every one, I am told speaks well of it. It is more than I expected; for I had not even began [*sic*] to think about what I had to say, until the afternoon of the third. Until then I had been very busy—you cannot, I am sure, guess at what. In this village of ours, we have to learn all kinds of trades; & I had been spending a couple of days, with a young man who did not know a great deal more about it than I, in papering our entrance hall & staircase. I think, when all trades fail, I can now set up for paper-hanger. I have been repairing, renovating & enlarging this old, rambling house of ours; & though nothing can ever make it handsome, it is now very comfortable. Your room has been newly painted and I hope you will find it fresh & pleasant.

What have you been writing lately? I have not seen a line of yours for an age. Cannot you spare me a duplicate now & then?—so as to give me some idea of what you are thinking & feeling. I am very sure, that nothing but such a quiet st[e]ady life, as you are now leading, is necessary, to make every year’s productions more true & effective and artistical than those of the preceding. Nothing pleases me more in you, than the consciousness you have so often expressed to me, that you have powers yet undeveloped, & can write better than you have yet done. There is no true genius without the continued striving after excellence. I always sympathize with those who are imbued with it, even in the everyday business of life; far more, in the higher departments of art. In truth, what would the world be without it? But I am sure I must have said all this to you, many times already.

Have you heard from good Professor Larrabee? I am ashamed to say I have not written to him yet, but shall do [so] in a day or two. He ought to have a least 20 or 30 copies of the pamphlet, when it comes out. Do you think he has ever repented accepting a position, which exposed him to bigotry, as a mark to be shot at? He ought not to repent. He has aided in a successful effort to advance a great and good cause.

I send you a number of an English paper which my father occasionally sends us—the “Leader”—ably edited. You will find (p. 494) an address to my father; and, at pp. 490 and 494 (2d column), articles worth reading. Believe me, ever, My dear Mrs Bolton

faithfully yr friend

Mrs Sarah T. Bolton

Robert Dale Owen

THE FIRST STEAMBOAT ON WHITE RIVER

Some time between 1870 and 1880, John Scott Elder wrote an account of his experiences as a river pilot. Born in Lexington, Kentucky, in 1802, this colorful character had many adventures as he guided steamboats up and down mid-western rivers. In 1906, Emma Carleton contributed a portion of the old pilot's story, that relating to a trip on White river, to the *Indiana Magazine of History* (II, 95-96), which is reproduced below.

In 1829, I continued on the steamboat “Victory”, running up and down the Ohio river until near the last of August; then the “Victory” laid up to repair. I then went aboard of the steamboat “Traveler,” William Sanders, master, bound for New Orleans. Yellow fever was raging in New Orleans at this time. After our safe return from New Orleans, I asked Captain Sanders for my discharge: he would not hear of it, and went up to Louisville—our boat was lying at Shippingsport. When he returned he said: “I have got a full load to go up White river to Spencer.” White river empties into the Wabash river near Mt. Carmel, though on the opposite side of the river; Spencer is in Indiana. So we loaded the boat with salt, and went on our way. Henry Christopher was still my pardner, and neither of us was ever up White river, but we went on our way up the Wabash to Mt. Carmel, then up the White River. White river is a small stream and very crooked; we went over mill-dams, though the water was high, and we finally arrived at Spencer. The steamboat “Traveler” was the first steamboat that ever turned a wheel on White river; William Sanders, master.

The water commenced falling so we had to hurry out our load of salt, and go out of the river as soon as possible. Saptain Sanders, said we would run down the river about thirty miles, land some passengers, and stay there all night, as we had told him we could not run in the night. It was Christopher's first watch. We went on down White river and landed the passengers, some time in the fore part of the night. The