

Reminiscences of a Wayfarer

Some of the Important Events of the Pioneer Days of Richardson County and Southeast Nebraska, as remembered by the writer, who has spent fifty-one years here.

More of Aboriginal Folk Lore and Tradition.

In my last paper I made a brief summary of the Indian tribes inhabiting the Territory of Nebraska when I saw its great plains for the first time, in the early history of the country. I also indulged in some reflections on the mysterious origin of this singular race, but as the same reflections might be indulged in concerning all the races of men which now exist, or have existed in past ages, it is of no greater importance to do that in the case of the North American Indian, than it would be in the case of any other known subdivision of the genus homo. The circumstance that this continent, when discovered to the European nations by Columbus, was as thickly populated by human beings as the means of their subsistence would allow, is one of the insoluble secrets of creation, which has, and will always, engage the thoughtful attention of thinking men, but probably to no greater extent, than they have given the same attention to other unknowable things, with which the realm of nature everywhere abounds. To me, the Indian has always been a natural curiosity, and as such I have studied him as thoroughly as my means of doing so would permit; and what I shall say of him here will be rather my deductions from facts than a recitation of the facts themselves, for in no sense am I attempting to write his history, as, of himself, he has none.

In the order of nature there is nothing misplaced, or foreign to its surroundings,—no exotics, but everything possessing organic life is indigenous to the soil and climate as these exist in the place of its origin. I do not mean by this that environment makes the type or species of any genera, but that they tend to a modification of such, there is scarcely any doubt. That the Negro was not found in the temperate or colder regions of the earth is a sufficient reason that he could not originate there, and the same may be said of the aboriginals all over the world. It is now clearly established by reliable scientific research, that the Aryan and the Mongol existed at the same time and in about the same degree of north latitude, but the difference in the configuration of the earth in their several habitats, was sufficient to differentiate their physical characteristics into two essentially dissimilar races in the course of ages of which there is no written record among men. The North American Indians, unlike many other aboriginal races, were not builders, nor mechanical, beyond the art of constructing bows and arrows, and other implements of warfare, and probably some artificial means for catching fish, etc. Their habitations were mere temporary affairs, that could be taken down and carried with them from place to place in their wanderings, which was made necessary in order to obtain their wanted food supply.

These people, spread over the whole continent with the exception of Mexico, must have had possession of the country for untold ages, in fact so long that no trace of their origin is possible of attainment. They appeared to be as ignorant of their neighbors, the Toltecs of Mexico, and their successors, the Aztecs, as they were of their own predecessors, the "Mound Builders," and resembled those superior races in no particular whatever. We find only the faintest gleams of civilization among them, and no evidence of religion of any kind beyond a vague notion of a great spirit, and a confused belief that one who has slain many of his enemies in war and had their scalps as trophies, would after death, go to what they called the happy hunting lands; and to facilitate his fortunes in that other state, his friends, as a part of the funeral ceremonies, would kill his favorite horse over his grave, and bury all his warlike accoutrements with his body, that he might have them for use over there.

A ceremonial of the kind was performed over the grave of the head man or chief of the Omahas, Henry Fontenelle, who was killed by one of the half-breeds near old Aspinwall, up in Nemaha County, only a short time before I became a citizen of Nebraska; and a like honor was proposed for Bob White Cloud, an Iowa chief, who was pursued and shot to death by members of his tribe, down in the valley of the Nemaha near the house of William Simpkins, a little above the Falls, in the winter of 1861 and 1862. White Cloud had killed his associate and head chief, Laggarash, on the Iowa reservation, and the friends of the deceased Indian pursued the murderer, and overtook

him as related, made short work of him. The proposal to give him a warrior's send-off to the happy hunting grounds, had to be abandoned, as it was likely to provoke a war or at least riot in the tribe, among whom Laggarash had been exceptionally popular.

I have said that the Indians as generally known to our people, do not resemble those ancient people of Mexico, the Aztecs, in any particular, and I say it advisedly, for I have seen what is authoritatively claimed to be, the last of that historic race, in the valley of the Gila (pronounced Heela) river, in the Territory or Arizona. They are known as the Confederate Tribes of Pima (pronounced Pemo) and Maricopa Indians, but they are no more Indian, as we know such people, than they are English, French, Scotch or Irish. They are as distinct from the North American Indian as they are from any of these. I saw those people for the first time nearly forty years ago, and under circumstances favorable to a correct examination and fair estimate of their general appearance, habits, and manners, together with their mode of living, their housings, clothing, etc. They have been under the supervision and protection of our government since the negotiation of what is known as the Gadsden Treaty in 1853, under which the United States obtained from the Mexican government an irregular strip of country on the south side of the Gila, probably a hundred miles wide at its widest point and extending from the Rio Grande east to the Colorado on the west, in which is situated the reservation of those confederate tribes. This word "tribe" is applied to them for the want of some better conventional designation. It is not deserved, as that people have always been self supporting, and have never been dependent on the government for anything, though I think they figure in the records of the Interior Department, as do the Indians generally. There was nothing about them that reminded me of any class or tribe of Indians I had ever seen, nor a single characteristic in their physical make-up that at all resemble the blanket tribes with which I had been familiar, on the plains or among the mountains, between the Missouri and the Pacific

ocean. They were distinctly dissimilar in all respects, in color, stature, shape of the head, and more particularly in facial expression, kind of hair and eyes—all different and of a decidedly superior order. There was an entire absence of that heavy, brutal expression of countenance observable on the face of the ordinary son of the forest, that insupportable stamp that great nature puts on the mirror of the soul, the human face, that proclaims the savage without audible speech. That people, so far as I was able to judge from what I saw of them, were free from all such disfigurements peculiar to the native tribes on this continent in its north temperate sections. It is claimed on the authority of the great German naturalist, Alexander Von Humboldt, that there are sufficient race characteristics common to all the American tribes, to make it probably, if not entirely certain, that they descended from the same ancestry, and are therefore the same people slightly modified by local and climatic conditions. This claim would have greater persuasive value, if it were a fact that the illustrious German had seen the tribes inhabiting that portion of the continent comprised within the United States and the Canadas, but it is not certain that he saw any of the people found in the western hemisphere, except those in South and Central America and Mexico; and there is nothing more certain than that they had nothing in common with the wandering nomads of our country.

At the time Cortez conquered Mexico in 1521, the dominant race, the Aztecs, had reached a degree of civilization in all its departments that amazed the European world. To them it seemed incredible that, in the wilderness of the new world, nations existed whose mechanical genius had enabled them to construct great temples and cities, adorned with a splendor rivaling the greatest in the older civilization over the sea. They couldn't understand it, and probably never did, but as I am restricted to statements of a general character, and have neither the space nor the inclination to pursue the subject in matters of detail, highly interesting though it be, I will confine myself to things coming under my own observation, which has been my sole purpose in writing these reminiscences from the beginning.

In the winter of 1870-71, I was officially located at the town of Yuma, on the Colorado river, in the territory of Arizona, that river being the dividing line between that territory and the state of California. The capital was located at Tucson, an old town on the Santa Cruz, one of the affluents of the Gila, some three hundred miles to the east. Official

duty required my presence at the capital, and there was no means of getting there except by stage coach. The route led up the valley of the Gila to a few miles east of the Pima villages, where the valley of the Santa Cruz intersects that of the larger river, thence southeasterly along the valley some fifty or more miles to the ancient Jesuitical Pueblo or town of Tucson. That is a curious river, as you do not always see its waters. It will be a flowing stream all right for several miles, and all at once will disappear, sink out of sight, to reappear again miles away, without anything to indicate that its flow had been interrupted in the least. It flows some of the time on top of the ground in its regular channel, and some of the time under the ground in an invisible channel. I have been told that the Humboldt river in Nevada plays tricks of a similar kind, but as I never saw that river, except from the window of a Pullman sleeper, I have had no opportunity to witness the phenomenon. Well, about the first of January, 1871, in company with the U. S. District attorney, Capt. Rowell, and a lawyer from Los Angeles, Cal., Frank Ganahl, we started on the long night and day trip through a wild, unsettled desolation, that would require not less than seventy-five hours of constant travel to accomplish, with such food as was to be had at stations established at intervals of many miles along the cheerless and dreary road (trail in those days), and with only such sleep as could be gotten between joints of the crazy old hack provided for the journey. The only compensation for the discomfort of the trip, was the keen appetite it furnished us for the beans and bacon and muddy coffee that were served to us with varied regularity at every meal station on the route.

Judge Tweed, like myself, was anxious that we go through the Pima villages before or about sunrise. We had both heard of the habit of those people of watching for the coming of the sun in the morning, as it is a tradition among them, that Montezuma, in some lost age of which they have no record, promised his followers to one day re-appear on the earth, and that he would come with the rising sun. It seems that story of Montezuma is not unlike that which the followers of Jesus Christ believe concerning him, as it is written in the 21st Chapter of the Gospel of St. Luke:

"And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring. And then shall they see the son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory."

The two ideas have much in common and strongly appeal to the imagination, which we know has a language of its own, that all the family of man know and understand. The driver of the stage was willing to accommodate us, and so managed his progress that we arrived among the cone-shaped huts of the village only a few moments before the sun showed itself above the tops of the mountains to the east. We had time to observe that on the roof of the huts or houses in our immediate vicinity there was one or two, never more, elderly people, sitting cross legged with their faces turned to the east, immovable and silent, their eyes fixed on the line of the horizon where the sun would shortly appear, and as oblivious of our presence apparently, as though we were not in the prospect at all. I noticed a solitary woman on the top of one of the huts keeping that vigil of the ages, alone. "That woman," said the driver, "is a widow. Her husband is dead, and she believes he will come back with the god of her people, and she will see him some morning at sunrise."

There was no levity in the speech of the driver, nor anything approaching ridicule or a disposition to make light of the sorrowful devotions of that poor ignorant devotee of a faith that had been the inspiration of her people through many weary centuries, and will continue to be, till they disappear from the earth forever.

All this was new and strange to me, though I had heard of the ceremonial many times, as I had heard of strange performances of people professing religions with which I was unacquainted, but to see something of the kind in my immediate presence impressed me as nothing ever did before, and was an experience I can never forget. The place where it occurred added materially to its solemn and unique character,—an universal desolation, walled in by mountains as old as the world, rockribbed, verdureless and as lonely as the ocean itself.

It struck me that these people were sun worshippers as well as the followers of Montezuma, and if so, I was ready to forgive them freely and entirely, for what is there in all the vast realm of nature that does not worship that glorious luminary—the source of all life, and all that supports it. The scene was sublimely instructive, and in that presence I felt like bowing to those lonely watchers on the housetops, as they, in the faith of a glorious coming, were bowing in spirit and hope, to that higher than all in heaven.

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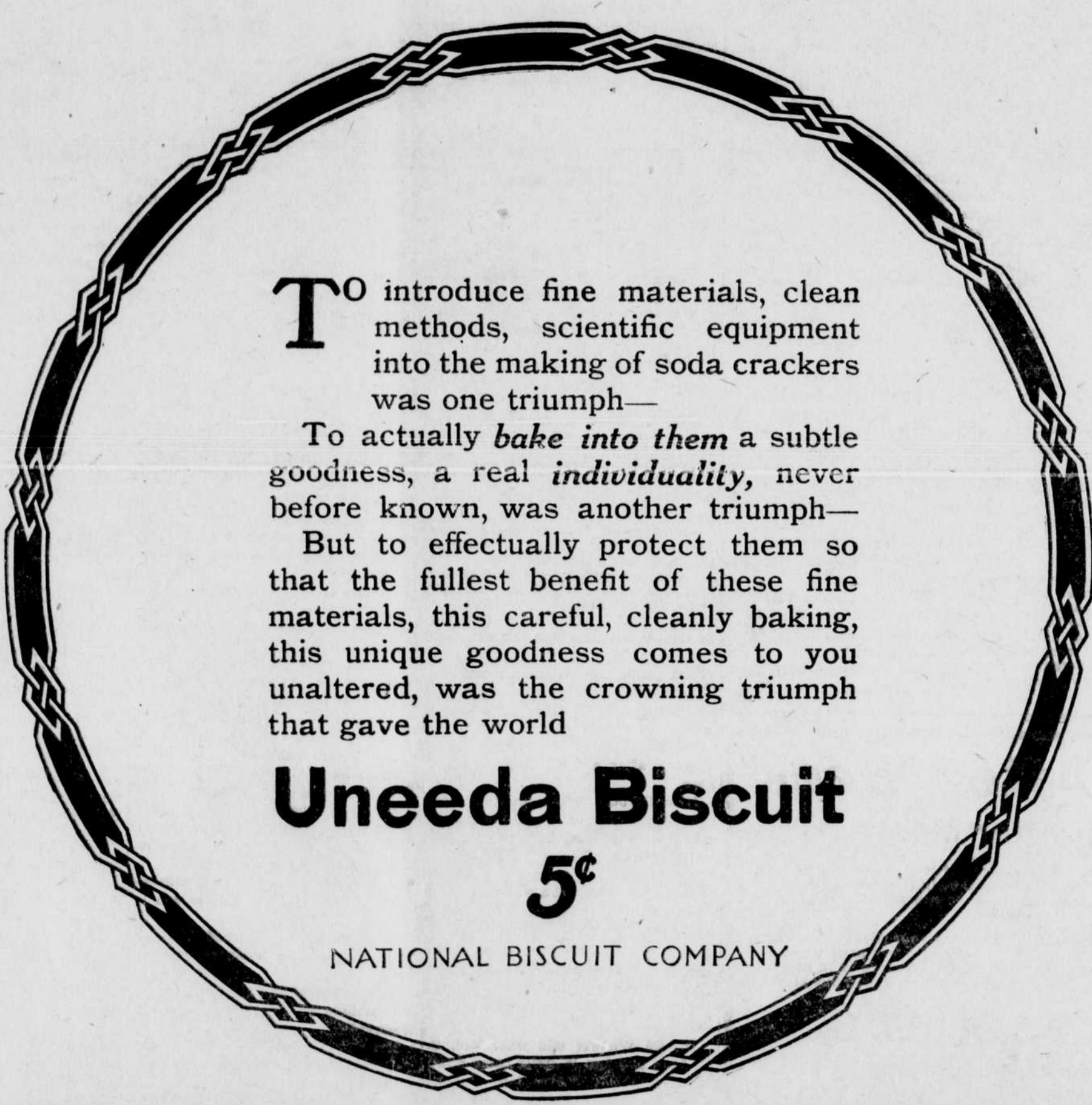
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