

Polo on the Prairie and Cricket and Fox Hunting, Too: British Sports Brake or Boost to Assimilation in Iowa

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From 1870-1895 there was a sizable colony of British gentry which flourished in a rich agricultural area in Northwestern Iowa, LeMars. These immigrants, "second son's" and graduates of England's public schools, formed a closely knit colony. Family wealth enabled them to purchase large tracts of land on which they soon were raising crops and livestock.

Just as important to them as profits from their enterprise were the maintenance of their sporting life. William Close, founder of the colony, had captained the British crew that participated in Centennial Regatta at Philadelphia in 1876. He was a fancier of fine racing horses, played polo, and cricket. As the number of immigrants increased, teams were formed and matches were a regular community feature on the community social calendar. Known to have the best ground for hunting in the world, the fox and 'paper' hunts attracted riders from other states. The Le Mars Prairie Club hosted elegant grand balls following the sporting event. Sport reinforced the traditional English lifestyle the colonists brought with time.

During the early years of settlement, the British both extended a friendship of a formal type and purposely distanced themselves from the native Americans. By 1885 they were encouraged to be less aloof and while the 1887 Jubilee was a grand celebration of the British Empire it was also somewhat of a swan song for the colony.

An assimilation took place that meant the gradual disappearance of the very qualities of specialness that made it unique. The gentlemen emigree who remained in Iowa became joined with the less well to do settlers from other areas. The desire to be American rather than British became more pronounced and, so gradually, the assimilation process was completed.