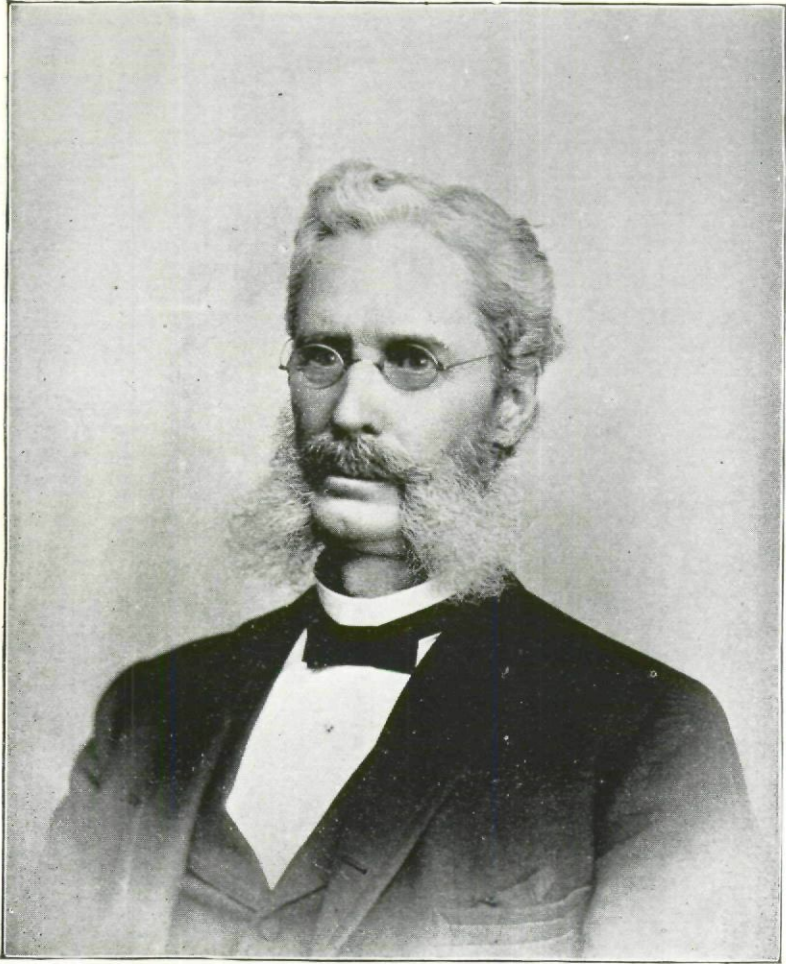


GENERAL ED WRIGHT.

BY CHARLES ALDRICH.

The writer prepared a paper on the late General Ed Wright, which appeared in the supplement to the proceedings of the Pioneer Law Maker's Association for 1894. That paper with sundry corrections is herewith presented as the tribute of a friend of almost forty years to the memory of this distinguished gentleman, who died on the 6th of December, 1895.

In August, 1856, the people of Cedar county elected to a seat in the Legislature a young farmer, who during the intervening thirty-nine years has come to be one of the best known men in our State. It was but a few weeks after that body opened its memorable last session in Iowa City, before the people of Iowa began to hear of Ed Wright, and they have known him well and in many useful capacities from that time until now. Few men anywhere have been more continuously in office, and yet there is nothing in his character, or in his daily walk or conversation, to suggest or countenance the idea that he was an office-seeker. There is nothing demonstrative in his action or methods. His ways are very quiet, his manners eminently genial and pleasing, as become a man with a Quaker ancestry. Any idea of management, or acting for effect, is wholly foreign to his nature or to a fair understanding of the man. Moreover, no one is more outspoken or positive in the expression of his opinions. None of his utterances are of a doubtful nature or admit of dubious constructions. But he has, all these years, been in active politics, and almost continuously in public office. There must be some reason unusual and extraordinary for such a successful career. But to those who know him intimately and



Ed Wright.

well there is no fog or mystery connected with his success. One simple rule has governed his course through life, and that is, to do well and with all his might whatever his hands have found to do. The belief in his integrity, and that he is a perfectly safe and always judicious and reliable man—adequate to the performance of any task that he would undertake or any responsibility he would assume—is universal. The man to whom that kind of reputation seems to attach as a natural consequence, to be part and parcel of his make-up, and who possesses the equally rare gift of contentedly biding his time, is pretty apt to be in demand, to be wanted. He will stand like a pillar in a community, while even greater men may fall by the wayside—“die and make no sign.”

When he took his seat in the legislature the first subject to which he gave his attention was that of parliamentary law and the rules of the House. There were plenty of old, cultured, professional men in that body—men who, like Col. Crockett, could speak eloquently upon any occasion or upon none whatever!—but in a very short time Ed Wright possessed a better knowledge of the rules and precedents governing deliberative bodies than all the old stagers combined. When knotty questions arose during his long legislative career even Speakers would appeal to him to straighten out the kinks. He was listened to as one who spoke by authority, and he generally had his finger upon the section or clause in Cushing's great Manual of Parliamentary Law which rendered his position unassailable. He easily acquired the confidence of every body—those with whom he was associated intimately as well as the public at large. When he was chairman of the Committee on Claims, in the House of Representatives of 1860, he personally acquainted himself with the merits of every account brought against the State. If he recommended or opposed the payment of a claim, that settled its fate at once and finally.

But with all his great but quiet popularity, he is far from being an easy going person, without opinions or prejudices. He is one who does his own thinking. He has never been any man's man. In fact, he has at times provoked the deepest hostility in influential quarters because he would submit to no domination. His standard of justice and right is his own, and from this, mere outside influence never swerves him. And now, at the age of nearly sixty-eight, and close upon the time when the infirmities of years, and the exposures of a soldier's life, will necessitate his abstention from all responsibility and care, he is still in the harness, at a post of arduous duty to which he was called because his services were needed, looking as carefully after every detail, and as scrupulously guarding the public interests, as at any time in his long, laborious and most useful career.

Ed Wright—and that is his whole name—not Edwin or Edward or Edgar—was born in Salem, Ohio, June 27, 1827, and is therefore at this writing (September, 1894) fairly entered upon his 68th year. His ancestors were Quakers. He was raised on a farm, acquiring his education at a district school, with a short term at the Atwater Academy, Portage county, Ohio. Upon leaving the Academy he taught school winters up to 1849, spending the summers of 1846 and 1847 in acquiring the trade of carpenter and mill wright. He was married in 1848 to Miss Martha Thompson, a lady of good education and unusual good sense and intelligence, who is remembered with great kindness and respect by hundreds of people in Cedar county and Des Moines.

He resided in Ohio until 1852, when he emigrated to Cedar county, Iowa, where he became a farmer. He was elected a member of the Iowa House of Representatives in 1856-57 and '59.

In 1862 he was commissioned Major of the 24th—"Methodist"—regiment of Iowa Infantry Volunteers, serv-

ing until the end of the war. It would afford the writer, who confesses to a high admiration of General Wright, great pleasure to follow his military career somewhat minutely, and narrate many incidents of his service, but the limitations of space will not permit.* He participated in the memorable battles of Champion Hills, Port Gibson, Winchester, Fisher's Hill and Cedar Creek. He was severely wounded at Champion Hills and slightly at Cedar Creek. At Winchester his favorite horse, "Old Jack," was killed under him by a solid cannon shot, while he sat upon his back, hurrying to the front with a box of cartridges. When the old horse fell, "the Major" shouldered the box and hurried to the advanced line where the cartridges were badly needed.

He won the reputation of a brave, efficient, vigilant, steady, resourceful officer, and was there, as everywhere, a favorite of those with whom he was associated. Returning from the war with the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel and the brevet of Brigadier-General, he resumed his avocation as a Cedar county farmer.

In the autumn of 1865, he was again chosen to the Iowa House of Representatives and elected Speaker. He was a very successful presiding officer—the equal of any man who has ever occupied that position in our State—and the superior of most of them. I was that winter Clerk of the House, and I do not recall an instance in which he was disconcerted or baffled for a single moment. He was thoroughly informed upon every point of parliamentary

*A history of Gen. Wright's Regiment, the 24th Iowa Volunteer Infantry, was commenced in the first number of Vol. I. of this Series of THE ANNALS, and completed in No. 1. of the present volume. It was partly written by Mr. Thad. L. Smith, who died before he was able to complete his task. The work was finished by Mr. Chas. L. Longley. These gentlemen served as private soldiers in that regiment—comrades-in-arms with Gen. Wright. He also commanded the regiment in the battles of Sabine Cross Roads, Opequan, Winchester, Fisher's Hill and Cedar Creek, and his reports were printed in full in the Report of Adjutant General N. B. Baker, for 1864-5—pp. 1144-63. To these sources the reader is respectfully referred for full particulars of Gen. Wright's military career.

law, and kept the House and himself well in hand. In the autumn of 1866 he was elected Secretary of State, which distinguished position he filled six years. In this, as in every other place to which he has been called, he won the most universal commendation. Retiring to private life in January, 1873, he was chosen Secretary of the Board of Capitol Commissioners, and Assistant-Superintendent of Construction, serving until 1884, when he became Custodian of the new edifice. This is a laborious position, requiring a man of good business habits, who, to be practical and efficient, should come very near being "Jack-of-all-trades." General Wright discharged its duties so satisfactorily that he was reappointed for each succeeding biennial period, as a matter of course, until the election of Governor Horace Boies. He was then succeeded by a Democrat.

The Executive Council, almost immediately after he was relieved from the duties of Custodian of the building, placed him in charge of the improvement of the Capitol grounds, for which the legislature had made an appropriation of \$100,000. He served until the following winter, securing plans for the work and getting it fairly commenced. He then resigned, recommending that the engineer who had been in his employ should be placed in charge of the work. This recommendation was adopted by the Executive Council.

When the Columbian Fair was in progress a chief of the bureau of information was needed—and who so well qualified as General Ed Wright? If he did not have an answer to any possible question at his tongue's end, he knew where to find it promptly. He was invited to take this place, remaining till the close of the Fair, and as usual winning "golden opinions" from his large and hourly changing constituency.

In April of the current year (1894) he was appointed Member of the Board of Public Works of the city of Des Moines, which place he occupies at this writing.

During the summer of 1895 it was noticed by the intimate friends of General Wright that his health was gradually failing. But he continued to discharge the arduous and often perplexing duties of his position as a member of the Board of Public Works of the city of Des Moines, until about four months before his death. When the end came after a lingering and distressing illness, which was borne with his characteristic patience and fortitude, the Executive Council adopted resolutions expressive of the deep sense of loss which filled the public mind, asking that the remains of the citizen, soldier and statesman should lie in state in the rotunda of the Capitol, and that the funeral should be a public one. The family acceded to this request which was conveyed to them by Gov. Frank D. Jackson. It was most fitting that he should be buried from this magnificent edifice, not only because of his long and most honorable public service, but because of his connection with it during the time of its construction and as its custodian for many years. Private funeral services were held at his late residence Sunday morning, December 9th, after which the casket was borne to the State House where the remains were viewed by thousands of the people. At 2:30 the public funeral services concluded these tributes of respect. It was the first instance in the history of Iowa in which such distinguished public honors had been paid to the memory of any man. The action of the State authorities met with universal approval. From the addresses made at the funeral we select for presentation here the remarks of his long-time friend, Ex-Governor Cyrus C. Carpenter, which have not hitherto appeared in print:

I suppose the reason I have been requested by the daughters of General Wright, to make a few remarks on this occasion, is because I had known him for many years, and for four years was very intimately associated with him. My first acquaintance with General Wright was in January, 1858. I came to Des Moines as a member of the first General Assembly which met in this city. He was also a member of that Assembly, and had been a member of the previous General Assembly which met at Iowa City. We were both young men, I perhaps two or three years the younger. During that winter I saw much of him and learned to respect his character. For the next ten or twelve years I only met him occasionally. But in January, 1872, I became associated with him as a member of the Executive Council, and during the following two years, which were the closing years of his administration as Secretary of State, my association with him, in official life, was

constant and intimate. I learned in those two years, more than ever, to respect his judgment and admire his character.

Soon after the close of his official career as Secretary of State, a vacancy occurred in the Secretaryship of the Board of Capitol Commissioners. By virtue of my office I was a member of that Board. Upon consultation among the Commissioners it was their unanimous judgment that General Wright was the man for the position. He was accordingly appointed, and was also made assistant Superintendent of Construction. His thoroughness in every thing he undertook, together with the fact that he had been a mechanic in his early life, made his appointment a most fortunate choice. I have frequently said, and it was scarcely an exaggeration, that he saw every brick and every stone that went into that immense superstructure. I see Mr. Dey and Mr. Finkbine, who were members of the Commission sitting upon my left—Mr. Finkbine being the Superintendent of Construction—and I know that he will bear me out in saying, that General Wright was his right arm in the great work of his superintendency; and I am glad to bear witness that he was both hands and feet to the Capitol Commission.

I need not speak of his career as a soldier. The records in the Adjutant General's office tell that in camp and on the battle-field he showed the same fidelity to duty, and the resolute manhood that characterized him in civil life. And the monument crowning the hill above us, will preserve his portrait to future generations as one of the heroes of the war of the Rebellion.

Before closing I must speak of another element in his character. I refer to his domestic life. He was a prince in his home. He probably never saw a well day after coming to Des Moines. But he never took his illness or his head-aches into his home. Notwithstanding his shattered health I doubt if any member of his family ever heard

him utter a peevish word, or a fretful word, or a complaining word. He had a wife worthy of such a husband. Between General Wright's family and my own, there was a sincere and unchanging friendship. It afforded me opportunity to see him in his home. I have often wondered how two such strong characters, with such absolute self-control, happened to become husband and wife. This was an ideal home in its simplicity and its genuine Americanism. General Wright was never spectacular in private or public life. With him it was all plain business. I remember many years ago, after I left Des Moines, coming back upon a brief business visit. It was while Mrs. Wright was upon her death-bed. Before leaving the city I was invited into the room to take her by the hand and bid her good-bye. As I took her hand I knew it was the last time I should ever look into her face this side the grave. But notwithstanding the dark shadow hanging over that household I was the only person in the room unable to talk. I have frequently thought that if any person who had not known me personally while living, should feel sufficient interest in me, after I am gone, as to imagine what manner of man I was, I should like to have my friends able to say: "That he was a sincere man, he was a faithful man, he was a patriotic man, in brief he was in all respects a true man." All this can be said of General Wright. What need I say more?

We copy the following articles for the reason that they so tersely and fittingly express the popular estimate of the deceased.

The death of General Wright removes one who was long a familiar and important figure on the streets and in the life of Des Moines. No man in the State was more highly esteemed and none more deservedly so.

His years in Iowa stretched over the long span which extends from 1852 to 1895, but six years less than the existence of Iowa as a State, and during this long career if he did aught ill either in public or in private the most rigid scrutiny never revealed it. He was one of the men

who made Iowa. As a member of the legislature, as one of the volunteer soldiers of the Union, as brave as he was patriotic, as speaker of the house, as Secretary of State, as one of the builders of the beautiful capitol building, whose erection was without extravagance or scandal, as custodian of the building for many years, and, finally, as a member of the most important municipal board in the city of Des Moines, it was given him during nearly all his life to serve the public in some capacity. He came to these various offices not because he was a vulgar seeker after official position, but because his fitness for the public service was patent and because demand was made of him. His character was of that sturdy, honest type which is the best claim of America on the attention of the world. Faithful to every trust confided to him he passed away at the end of a long life full of honor and leaving the blessed heritage of reputation which was without blemish. He was a simple and manly man who did well his appointed part and the end was beautiful and serene.

No better wish for the Iowa of the future can be expressed than that the conditions of its citizenship shall be such that men of the type of General Wright will be those to whom the people will unconsciously turn for public service.—*Des Moines Leader, December 7, 1895.*

The corner stone of the new Capitol was laid November 23, 1871, and formal possession of the building was taken by the State in January, 1884, when an inauguration address was delivered before the assembled legislators and state officials by Honorable John A. Kasson, in the course of which he said:

Our first prayer beneath this high dome is that here the moral and political foundations of this imperial State may be so deeply and so wisely laid that remote generations shall recall and celebrate the wisdom and the virtues of their ancestors who in the nineteenth century erected and occupied this solid mansion of the State.

It is for us all a source of profound gratification that from the day when the present commissioners assumed control, with their accomplished superintendent of construction, the legislative bodies have

never withdrawn from them their confidence. Not one act of speculation or spoliation, not one coin wasted or vainly spent, has defaced the bright record of their administration. It shall be a part of the legacy we leave to our children that all these vast and durable walls have been laid in the cement of honesty and built by the rule of fidelity. More proud of this legend are we than of all these classic columns and brilliant domes which please the eye and gratify the taste.

These noble words were true at the time, and they are true to-day, for the capitol building was practically finished quietly and without ceremony, and the commissioners who had watched over the interests of the State in this great undertaking for many years turned to other duties of this life without any self praise or ostentatious display. The part that General Wright took in this work was larger than is generally known. He had served his State and his country faithfully, and the board of capitol commissioners secured him for secretary and assistant superintendent of construction. He took personal charge of the office of the commission on the grounds and was, in fact, during all the period of the building in personal charge of the work. Every contract and every bill came under his personal inspection. He almost saw every stone turned before it was put in its place. He knew the thickness of every wall, the length of every pipe, the size of every window, the history of every column and decoration. After the commission had been discharged he was continued by the governor as custodian for several years. In all this General Wright was ever mindful of the interests of the State and the commissioners under whose direction he acted gave to him the confidence which he so well deserved.—*Sioux City Journal*, December 8, 1895.

At the close of their regular biennial reunion on the 13th of February, the Pioneer Law Makers' Association of Iowa, adopted the following resolution.

Resolved, That in the death of General Ed Wright this association mourns the loss of one of its founders and most eminent and beloved members, who was greatly distinguished through forty well-spent years in Iowa—as a

heroic volunteer soldier, who carried to his grave the scars of many battles; a conscientious and influential legislator, who left his impress on the laws of our State; a state officer of rare efficiency, whose name was a synonym for integrity; a pure and upright man of whom in life and death only good could be spoken.

VAN CALDWELL.

BY THE LATE HON. GEORGE G. WRIGHT.

Solicited to give my impressions of some of those prominent in Territorial times—not especially in political circles, but plain men and entitled to deserved praise for their work in the development of our commonwealth, I have selected for this brief paper my long-time and esteemed friend whose name appears at the head of this article.

Van Caldwell was¹ born in Ohio county, Virginia, March 5, 1799, and died at his home on the Des Moines River in Davis county, October 8, 1856. He was the son of John and Sarah (Mulligan) Caldwell—the former a native of Scotland, the latter of Ireland. So it will be seen that he was of as pure Scotch-Irish stock as any Wallace, Scott or Cassady, or of any one either of Ulster or elsewhere. And sure I am that neither Scotland, Ireland, Virginia, or any land, need be ashamed of him or feel otherwise than complimented by the blood of this man who was a very nobleman in appearance and deportment—for he was six feet, two and one-half inches in height, turned the scales approximately at two hundred pounds, had a carriage to his last days as straight as an Indian, perfect in his proportions, with an air of manhood and inexpressible dignity which denoted the truest nobility of nature. In any assembly he commanded attention, and with strangers and friends alike that involuntary respect which such a bearing inevitably and always exacts. With him often in political

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