

Camels Gave a Name to Iowa

By ORA WILLIAMS

Place-names in Iowa, as elsewhere, sometimes come from the far way places and often by strange journeys through the mazes of history. A quiet and prosperous Hawkeye county seat has a name that came directly from an interesting adventure in American history involving an effort to solve the long distance transportation problem on an oriental concept.

The Warren county seat will always carry a name that recalls the strange effort to preserve the waning remnants of slavery by the use of camels. At first suggestion it seems difficult to see any connection between slavery, the desert camels, and naming an Iowa town Indianola—but the connection is real and interesting. Of course, the facts are in the books, but scattered far and wide, and the actors in the drama are all gone. It is well to recall that the formative era of Iowa history coincides with the tragedy of the downfall of slavery in its last world stronghold. The naming story is easily told.

One of the last acts of the territorial legislature of Iowa was to authorize the organization of a dozen new counties, among which was the one named after Gen. Joseph Warren of Revolutionary fame. He was a prominent physician of Boston and lost his life at the battle of Bunker Hill, June 17, 1775, which for a long time was referred to as "the place where Warren fell." Having waived his rank he was serving in that engagement as a volunteer under Generals Prescott and Putnam. Only 34 years of age, he had the distinction of the title of chairman of the committee of Public Safety. It was General Warren who sent out William Dawes and Paul Revere to warn the people the night before the battle of Lexington.

At first Warren county was attached to Marion

county for judicial purposes. Judge Olney named Paris P. Henderson to organize the new county, and the first election was held in December, 1848.

Henderson was elected sheriff. There were a bare two dozen voters scattered around—a small group near Ackworth and another near Parmelee's mill over by Carlisle. There also was an Irish settlement somewhere northwest. County business was done in a school house near Ackworth. Not until 1851, was a court house built. Indianola had been laid out and named two years before.

A committee to locate and plat a town for the county seat consisted of William Ware of Polk county, Alfred D. Jones of Madison, and William Ferguson of Jasper. The last named seems not to have acted. They found a good place near the center of the county, chiefly on land owned by one H. Nelson, who lived in Indiana. Eighty acres of land were bought for \$100, and later more land was purchased.

The locating committee, with Sheriff Henderson, met at the home of Alfred Ginder near Ackworth; then, after deciding on a location, they paused for lunch at the home of Thomas Blackford. There had been some talk about a name for the new county seat, but no decision. The locaters had brought a picnic lunch. As they were munching their sandwiches, Sheriff Henderson read the newspaper that had been wrapped around his lunch. It was a copy of the *New York Sun*, and he read an account of the landing of a cargo of camels in Texas, by the U.S. navy, and what was going to be done with these camels. The landing place was at the then chief seaport of Texas, a place called Indianola.

Mr. Jones, who was a surveyor, caught the name and suggested that Indianola would be a pretty good name for the new county seat. It was at once adopted. None of them had ever heard of Indianola, nor of the plan to divert western travel to the south in order to enlarge slave territory, and to checkmate the trend to go straight through regardless of mountains. So the

name of an unknown Texas town was given to a county seat in Iowa. The naming was in June 1849, a court house was built in 1851, and the city was incorporated in 1863.

Now, as to the Texas seaport of Indianola and those camels, "Operation Dromedary" in the modern way, and the desert caravan route to the gold rivers of California. First: the great Texas seaport of Indianola is no more. It didn't last as long as the camels. The dust of its streets soon were swept out into the gulf to cover the oil about which there was to be much fussing at a later time.

The camel idea was not new. Spaniards tried it in Peru. Camels were brought to Virginia a century and a half before. A major general urged the use of camels for military action against the Seminole Indians. When he was in the United States senate, the camel idea was impressed upon Jefferson Davis and he did not forget when five years later he became secretary of war in the Pierce cabinet. A lot of political muddy water had run over the dam since Davis set up a sawmill in Iowa to get out timbers for Fort Crawford over in Wisconsin. The daughter of Zachariah Taylor, with whom he had eloped, had died early and Davis was a wealthy planter. But all the time he had been keeping in mind that the fate of the beloved institution at the base of the plantation culture of the southland was in the channels of western expansion.

Despite the grumbling of those who did not want the United States ever to go farther into the barrens than the Mississippi river, the men with heavy boots were taking over the west. The issue thus raised troubled the congressmen when they discussed Abraham Lincoln's "spot" resolutions asking President James K. Polk to name the precise spot where Mexican soldiers had violated American soil, which was Polk's excuse for starting the war against Santa Ana's soldiers. Davis stepped out of congress to help in the Mexican war. He and other men of the South like him

very much wanted Texas. They wanted all they could get. Jeff Davis even proposed that they take Yucatan. They got the "Gadsden purchase," which opened a southern route to the Pacific. They insisted that the only way to go west was over the staked plains.

So it was, that on May 14, 1856, Admiral David D. Porter brought the United States store-ship "Supply" into the port of Indianola, Texas, with 33 dromedary camels, one more than when they started from the port of Smyrna, for while one had died on the voyage, which commenced in February, two had been born on the ocean. On a second trip a larger number of camels were brought over. They were dromedary or one-humped animals, such as are now used in Arabia and North Africa. The whole procedure caused much excitement. Army officers, especially those from the south, were enthusiastic. Other camels were brought at private expense. A caravan route was laid out through Texas, Arizona, New Mexico to Tejon in California, a place about 100 miles north of Los Angeles. The camels made it all right, but it was rough going. The American sands were sharp and flinty. In all, several hundred camels were used for transportation, and finally for road building and other work. When it became certain that railroads would reach the Pacific, even over the snowy passes, "Operation Dromedary" ended. Circus men bought some of the animals, and some were turned loose to go wild and forage for themselves. Many years later, small herds were seen roaming over the Southwest, but they fared badly.

Once again, not for the first time, it will be seen that a historic place-name in Iowa connects up with the long time American struggle over the extension or containment of slavery, for the county seat of one of the best of Central Iowa counties will always bear the name of the now vanished great port of Texas, where the camels were landed that were to direct westward expansion to the South and restrict it in the North.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.