

WHEN SPRING WAS IN FLOOD The Steamboat Came to Fort Dodge

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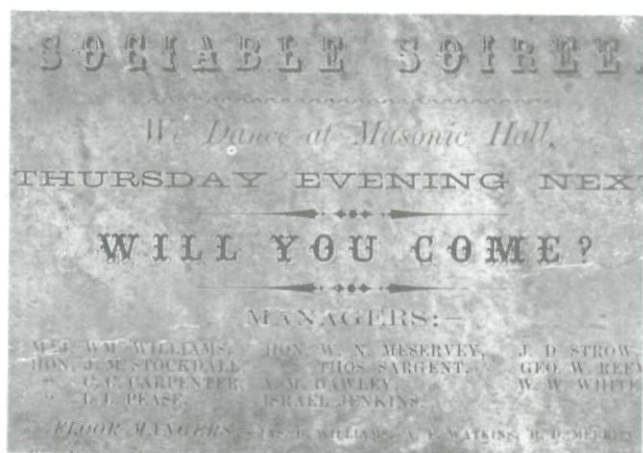
You never know what you will find in a manuscript box marked "Miscellaneous." It may be a pamphlet you can shift to the library collection or a paper fan tricked out in gilt cupids and advertising "Marlowe's Ice Cream Parlor — Tutti Fruitti Our Specialty." Or, once in a treasure-seeker's moon, a blackening oblong of glazed cardboard bearing an invitation to a "Social Soiree, Fort Dodge, May 23, 1859".

Last week, for instance, the intriguing Miscellaneous section was a part of the Dr. Joshua M. Shaffer collection. A sheaf of additional papers, newly organized and calendared by Jon Robison, manuscript assistant, was ready for the Shaffer file. The question was, should we add another box to the five already housing documents or delve into the unclassified odds and ends to see if we could make room for the additional letters. We delved and we made room. Furthermore, we unearthed an election ballot for the James B. Weaver file, a dozen brochures to be sent to other historical societies and a printed invitation, a reminder that long ago the Des Moines river was the highway to central Iowa.

Social Soiree, Fort Dodge, May 23, 1859 . . . In 1859 Fort Dodge was a kind of settlement king-pin on the upper Des Moines river. Established as a military post in August, 1850 and abandoned in 1853 because of the deceptive quietness of Sioux in the northwest, the fort site east of the river was purchased by Major William Williams and John Lemp. By the end of the decade of the 1850s Fort Dodge was a flourishing town, the land office and trading point for gaunt outlying hamlets and isolated farmsteads. It was the Fort that terrible winter of '57 which organized and launched the rescue party for the lakes. Fort Dodge and the Spirit Lake Massacre would ever afterward be linked in the folk-lore of the frontier.

We Dance at Masonic Hall Thursday Evening Next Will You Come? In 1859 the Fort was a prideful town, its sense of destiny already well-developed. It had, however, in common with other western communities a transportation problem. Wherever two or three men collected to wait for the mail carrier from down river, they *cussed out* the cost of store goods. Tobacco, molasses and gun powder were sky high. It was the freighting that did it. Everything brought into Dodge had to come overland from Des Moines or some other river port. Everything Fort Dodge had to sell went out the same way.

Some of them argued the railroad would make it to the Fort in their life time. Others said they'd be fools to wait for the railroad. After all, paddle wheels came to Des Moines. With all the talk about slack water navigation on the river, the building of dams to impound snow and rain water when the stream was in flood, why shouldn't Dodge be considering her own steamboat?



On the back of the *Soiree* invitation are written these words: "Arrived at Fort Dodge on the S. B. 'Charley Rodgers' . . . and the dance was given in honor of the first S. Boat from Keokuk to Fort Dodge. C. F. David Super Cargo."

The glory of Fort Dodge as a river port was brief but memorable. Tacitus Hussey, local historian, in his "Early

Steamboating on the Des Moines", *Annals of Iowa*, Third Series, Vol. 4, p. 371, provides a partial list of steamboat arrivals at the capital city in the spring of 1859. On April 4 he notes: "Charley Rodgers, with freight for Fort Dodge". E. G. Morgan in his *History of Fort Dodge*, 1876, carries the story further: "One dark night in April, 1859, Captain Blackshire came steaming up the river. He blew the whistle . . . long and loud . . . Before he could land at the levee . . . the banks of the stream were lined with men, women and children . . ." Years later C. F. Davis, super-cargo on a May trip of the "Charley Rodgers", was to recall that journey with a memory enriched by time. He spoke of the locks at Bonaparte and Bentonsport. He remembered the sound of the fiddle on spring nights when the "Rodgers" laid by at dusk and boys and girls from the countryside came romping in for a fling at "Money Musk" and "Ol' Dan Tucker". He did not forget the wooding above Boonsboro, the welcome at the Fort, the gold coins in payment and the *Soiree*. The *Soiree*? Well, he kept the invitation to the *Soiree* honoring the "Charley Rodgers" all his life.

"Tac" Hussey in his "Early Steamboating . . ." reports that the "Charley Rodgers" was credited with five round trips to Fort Dodge the spring of 1859. When summer shriveled the upper Des Moines to riffles and sand bars, the journeys were over. Next year was a low water season throughout the valley. Noone was tempted to try the far reaches of the river. Fort Dodge itself had no time for regrets. Whenever two or three men collected to await the arrival of the first *Fort Dodge Sentinel* on the streets, someone was almost certain to say: "How long d'you figger it's goin' to take that railroad to get here from Dubuque?"

We thought you might like to know that the *Social Soiree* invitation is being transferred from the Joshua M. Shaffer collection to that of Tacitus Hussey. "Tac", who came to town in 1855, had seen the "Clara Hine," the "Flora Temple," the "Colonel Morgan" wharfing at Campbell's Point where the Raccoon came down to meet the Des Moines. It seemed to us the dance card might be at home with the Hussey notes on steamboating when Iowa was young.

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