

SUEL FOSTER

By DAVID C. MOTT

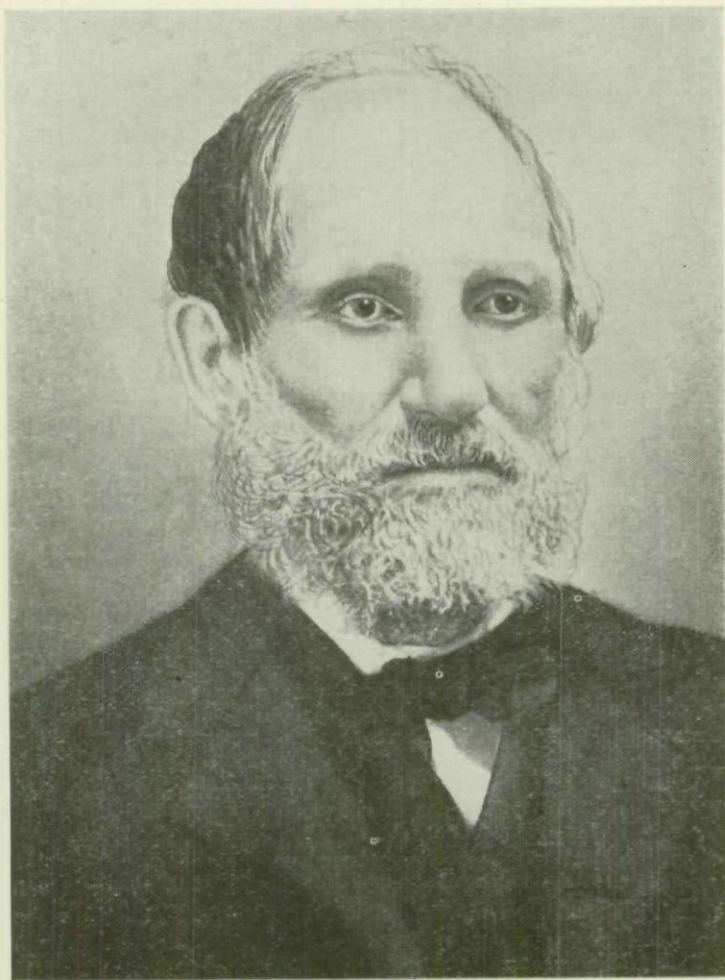
Suel Foster of Muscatine was one of those who rendered unusual service to Iowa in an early day, but has received rather scant public recognition of that service. His career was not glamorous or spectacular, but his work brought substantial benefits to the people of the territory and the new state.

He was born at Hillsboro, New Hampshire, August 26, 1811, was reared on a farm and educated in common schools. When twenty years old he went to Rochester, New York, where he worked on a farm for a year, when he invested his small means in a stock of goods and spent three years in the occupation of a traveling merchant. Mr. Irving B. Richman¹ in writing of this vocation of Mr. Foster's says: "To be a peddler in pioneer times in New England or in the South was not to descend in the social scale. Among peddlers of note in New England was the famed Bronson Alcott, friend of Emerson and father of Louisa M. Alcott, author of 'Little Men' and 'Little Women.' Alcott was both philosopher and peddler, and about equally successful in each calling."

In 1836 he, in company with his brother, Dr. John H. Foster, came west. At St. Louis they parted, the doctor going to Chicago and he to Rock Island. Later in the year, being joined by his brother, they proceeded down the river and in August they bought a sixth interest in the town of Bloomington, now Muscatine, for \$500. The town site contained 160 acres and had no improvements but two log cabins.^{1a} What is now Iowa was then a part of Wisconsin Territory. Muscatine County was not organized until the next year, indeed it had not then enough people in it to organize. Black Hawk and Keokuk with their bands of Sac and Fox Indians were near by along the Iowa and Des Moines rivers.

¹We asked Hon. Irving B. Richman of Muscatine for information concerning Mr. Foster and his response came in the form of a delightfully written sketch. But before it came our article on Mr. Foster was already in type, which prevents us from using his sketch entire, but he has kindly granted us the privilege of quoting from it.

^{1a}*History of Muscatine Co., Ia.*, Western Hist. Co., Chicago, 1879, p. 561; also see *Transactions Ia. State Hort. Soc.* for 1885, pp. 208-09.



SUEL FOSTER

Pioneer citizen of Bloomington (Muscatine). Prominent in early horticulture in Iowa. The first to publicly advocate an agricultural college for Iowa. Member and president of the first Board of Trustees of the Iowa Agricultural College and Farm. From a photograph, 1885, presented in April, 1885, to the Aldrich Collection of Autographs in the Historical, Memorial and Art Department of Iowa.

The next two years brought a number of new settlers so that on May 6, 1839, the town of Bloomington held a corporation election "at the house of R. C. Kinney."² Judge Joseph Williams was elected president of the Board of Trustees which consisted of three members. In 1841 Suel Foster was elected as one of the trustees and served one year. Doubtless Mr. Foster was doing a full share in the activities of the new town and community. He spent considerable time traveling over the surrounding country till 1842 when he settled down with J. W. Richman in the grocery business. The following year he was married to Sarah J. Hastings, a sister of Hon. S. C. Hastings, who was later judge of the Supreme Court of the territory of Iowa, and afterward of the Supreme Court of California.³ It is evident Mr. Foster was interested in town property for we find the trustees of the town entered suit against him for possession of certain portions of ground needed for streets, and for access to the wharf on the river, which the trustees claimed belonged to the town, but which Mr. Foster claimed belonged to him.⁴

Following the legal publication in the newspaper of the notice of suit was an article reflecting against the honor and integrity of Mr. Foster in making such claim. Mr. Foster, having learned that Theodore S. Parvin was the writer of the article in criticism of him, contributed a rejoinder which was published in the following issue of the newspaper, and for some half dozen of the following issues the controversy proceeded with considerable bitterness. We do not know of the final disposition of the matter, but it must have been amicably arranged, for Mr. Foster and Mr. Parvin were friends in later years.⁵

Further concerning Mr. Foster Mr. Richman says: "In the way of personal appearance and of personal characteristics it may be said of Mr. Foster that he was, perhaps, nearly six feet tall and weighed about 150 pounds—a brueque, angular man. The boys about town used to say that there was but one home-lier man in the place, and that was Theodore Parvin."

In 1849-50 he accompanied Judge Hastings' family to California where he remained a year, filling a clerkship in the

²*Hist. of Muscatine Co., op. cit.*

³*Transactions Ia. State Hort. Soc., op. cit.*

⁴*Bloomington Herald*, January 26, 1844.

⁵ANNALS OF IOWA, First Series, January, 1872, p. 22.

Sacramento post office and also assisting in taking the state census.⁶

Returning to Bloomington, which had now become Muscatine, in 1852 Mr. Foster began to plant a nursery and the result was the "Fountain Hill Nursery" in one of the most beautiful suburbs of the city, where he made one of the finest tree-embowered homes of the place.⁷ Thus at the age of forty years he entered on the main business of his mature life. He became more and more interested in the education of those who till the soil. In the February 1, 1856, issue of the *Iowa Farmer and Horticulturist*⁸ appeared the following article from his pen:

BOOK FARMING

Messrs. Editors: To many it would seem hardly necessary for this subject to be presented for the consideration of the intelligent farmers of Iowa. But this is a subject which must hereafter be constantly presented to the slack and careless, to the industrious, good farmer, and to the most thorough and scientific of farmers.

What is book farming? It is simply looking into newspapers, pamphlets, and books to learn something of whatever belongs to the farm, garden, the barn or the household. And that which belongs to all these departments is the *world at large*—markets, commerce and internal improvements; political affairs, civil and religious; wars at home and abroad; mechanics and all the sciences. Farmers, these subjects are ours, and they all bear directly upon our occupation. It is impossible we should have a proper knowledge of these things unless we read. What would we think of the lawyer, doctor, engineer, or surveyor who would attempt to practice his profession without first having studied it from books? Study and practice are necessary in these professions. And so it is in farming.

* * * *

The day is coming—soon coming—when every farmer's son and daughter must be educated for the science of farming—the *greatest of all sciences*. It is high time the state of Iowa was laying the foundation for this education. The state has already in store thousands of acres of land, and thousands of dollars, for a State University, and for common schools, but who expects agricultural work will be taught, or five volumes of farmers' books be put in any of the schools or public libraries? These things ought not so to be. *We must have a Farmers' College*, with a large experimental farm attached to it. I hereby pledge my influence, small as it is, for book farming and book knowledge for the farmers. Next comes the voting. Who will join me in selecting men

⁶*Transactions Ia. State Hort. Soc., op. cit.*

⁷Gue's *History of Iowa*, Vol. IV, p. 94; also *Ibid.*, p. 209.

⁸See files of *Iowa Farmer and Horticulturist* in Hist., Memo. and Art Dept. of Ia.

who, among all their minor qualifications, are qualified to carry out our wishes in this respect?

The above was followed by another in the March, 1856, issue of the same journal arguing along the same lines and at more length. In the June, 1856, issue he took up the cause of a Farmers' College and argued for it, and presented specifications for such an institution.

In the August, 1856, issue appeared another article by him advocating farmers' schools and model farms. He advocated in this article that plans for such schools and model farms be drawn up and petitions circulated for them.

In the November issue of the same year he published a brief article urging the State Agricultural Society, when they hold the next State Fair, that they have printed and circulated a large number of petitions to the legislature asking for appropriations sufficient to buy a section of land for a model farm and to build college buildings, and to appoint a committee to circulate the petitions, while in the December issue he had another article advocating industrial education for farmers.

In the April 1 issue Mr. Foster relates there was introduced in the Iowa House of Representatives in the recent legislative session a resolution enquiring whether it would meet the approbation of that body to establish an experimental farm and farmers' college, and that the resolution passed the House, but was defeated in the Senate. He stated the subject of industrial education for farmers is making progress in the East, and urged that it prevail in Iowa.

In the August 15, 1857, issue of the *Iowa Farmer and Horticulturist* Mr. Foster sets out his philosophy of industrial education for farmers as follows:

How shall we educate our children so that they will love to be stout, robust and healthy, and love useful occupations?

There is a very general prejudice against the above appearance and practice in all our cities and larger towns, and this waste of health and time and talent, and lasting happiness is rapidly spreading through the country. Its effects in the city are to ruin the constitution and enfeeble the mind. Hence we find that nearly all the active, business, wealth accumulating men of the city were country born and educated to health, industry and usefulness. If our cities were not thus supplied with men and women, we should see them fast going into decline, like the once great and powerful nations of the earth that reached their

climax of wealth, luxury and profligacy, like Rome, and Greece, and Spain.

So we see in the older states occasionally a family, and sometimes a whole neighborhood, where one or two generations of the family have been prosperous, that they catch the fashion of the city, study refinement and gentleness, and that alone, having a dislike for good, healthful exercise, and as for useful occupations, there is no need of that. Their lives are like a dinner of oranges, sweetmeats and candy—very good in their place—I am exceedingly fond of them, but my constitution requires other food. I like refinement and genteel, polished manners, but we must also have the more weighty affairs of life.

* * * *

Since the days of Adam the world has been filled with folly, and has it not also had its reforms? The present age is full of reforms, and where is reform needed more than in health and fashion, and popular educated industry? It is my opinion that agricultural schools is the opening wedge to this reform. I am not alone in this opinion. Nearly every state in the Union is adopting this branch of education, which, if rightly carried out will assist in directing the young to healthy, good and useful pursuits. Let us try such a school in Iowa. Let us send up petitions from every county, and from our State Agricultural Society, to our legislature.

The Seventh General Assembly convened in Des Moines January 11, 1858, and on March 22 of the same year an act was passed providing for the establishment of a State Agricultural College and Farm which became a law by publication March 27. The act provided for a board of eleven members, who, with the governor and the president of the State Agricultural Society as ex-officio members, were to carry out the provisions of the act. The General Assembly included in the act the names of the eleven members of the first board. They were as follows: M. W. Robinson of Des Moines County, Timothy Day of Van Buren County, John D. Wright of Union County, G. W. F. Sherwin of Woodbury County, William Duane Wilson of Polk County, Richard Gaines of Jefferson County, Suel Foster of Muscatine County, J. W. Henderson of Linn County, Clement Coffin of Delaware County, E. H. Williams of Clayton County, and E. C. Day of Story County.⁹ Clement Coffin and E. H. Williamson declined to serve and Peter Melendy of Hardin County and John Pattee of Bremer County were appointed to their places.

In accordance with the act creating the board, at its first

⁹*Laus of Iowa*, Ch. 91.

meeting the members drew cuts for the short and long terms, five being for two years and six for three years. Mr. Foster drew a two-year term. However, he was re-elected in 1860 and again in 1864 and served until 1866.

The first meeting of the board was held at the Capitol at Des Moines January 10, 1859.¹⁰ Perhaps the most difficult problem that confronted the board at the beginning was the selection of a location. Proposals for the sale of lands for the College Farm were received from Hardin, Polk, Marshall, Jefferson and Tama counties. The selection was not made until June 20, 1859, when the present grounds were decided upon. It appears that Mr. Foster enacted an important role in the final selection of the now beautiful location at Ames. When Dr. Charles E. Bessey who was professor of botany at Iowa Agricultural College from 1870 to 1884, delivered the "college day address" October 20, 1908, on the fortieth anniversary of the opening of the college, he spoke concerning Mr. Foster's part in that transaction as follows:

It is a matter of history that when it came to selecting a site for the college the committee was divided between those who favored this site, and those who preferred another a few miles east of the city of Des Moines, and Suel Foster told me that it was his vote that brought the committee to favor this location. For many years it seemed that the other would have been the better site, and there were many who ridiculed and denounced the selection, for no place in the state seemed to be more hopelessly isolated. Think of planning to set down a college in a thinly settled part of the state, away from the railroad, and separated from a miserable little village by almost impassable "bottoms" of an uncontrollable prairie stream. It required a faith like that which can move mountains, to see in this remote site the beauty which now greets the eye. And no doubt Suel Foster's prophetic eye saw as in a vision the beauty of this scene today, as it is given to some while still in this life, to catch glimpses of "the sweet fields of Eden" in the world of hereafter.¹¹

We found but little evidence that Mr. Foster took any active part in the great political movements that were fomenting the country at the period around 1860 and jarring the foundations of the old party organizations. However, we find that he was a delegate from Muscatine County to the famous state convention in Des Moines on January 18, 1860, which selected dele-

¹⁰*Second Rept. of the Secy. of Ia. State Agric. College and Farm*, p. 1.

¹¹*ANNALS OF IOWA*, Third Series, Vol. IX, p. 27.

gates to the Republican National Convention which met May 16, 1860, and nominated Abraham Lincoln for president.¹² That state convention marked a place in history. Suel Foster was evidently awake to the situation.

At the meeting of the Board of Trustees of the State Agricultural College and Farm in January, 1862, Mr. Foster was elected president of the board and chairman of the Executive Committee, positions which he held during the following four years. Owing to the state of Iowa devoting its energies from 1861 to 1865 to doing its share in the preservation of the Union, the development of the Agricultural College and Farm was necessarily retarded.^{12a}

Progress was made in the development of the farm and some progress was made in erecting buildings. Mr. Foster's service on the board terminated in 1866. The College was formally opened March 17, 1869.

Although Mr. Foster gave considerable time and much thought to his work on the College Board yet he drew no salary from that position, as the members served without pay. His business was that of nurseryman and fruit grower. In a paper on "Fruit Growing as a Trade," which he read at the January, 1868, meeting of the Iowa State Horticultural Society held at Des Moines, he said:

I have had fifteen years' experience in the raising of fruit, and I now see what wonderful improvement I could have made, had I learned the trade in my youth. My mistakes would have been still greater, had I not at the age of forty placed myself in partnership with a man of experience, he having learned the trade of nurseryman.¹³ I would not say that no one ought to try to raise fruit until he had learned the trade, but every farmer should raise his own fruit of all kinds, though he can not succeed as well as the professional fruit grower, but I do say that a few more might be very profitably employed in raising fruit.

At the meeting of the Iowa Horticultural Society in January, 1869, Mr. Foster was elected vice president, and was continued in that office three years. At that meeting he read a paper entitled, "Beautifying Our Homes," which was practical and sug-

¹²See "Republican State Convention," Des Moines, January 18, 1860, by F. I. Herriott, in *ANNALS OF IOWA*, Vol. IX, pp. 278, 414.

^{12a}Mr. Foster's part in 1864 in helping prevent the diversion of the proceeds from lands granted by Congress for the benefit of agricultural colleges from the State Agricultural College and Farm to the State University will be treated in an article on Benjamin F. Gue to appear in an early issue of the *ANNALS*.

¹³Isaac Negus of Salem, Henry Co., Iowa. See *Transactions Iowa State Hort. Soc.*, Vol. 17, p. 318.

gestive of his sense of beauty. He was an advocate of deep plowing, and of setting out hedges, and lots of trees, both fruit and ornamental.

In 1872 he was elected president, served one year in that position, and in 1873 declined re-election. In 1878 he was made honorary life member, and also was elected as a director and was retained in that position during the remainder of his life. For eighteen years, from 1869 to 1886, he attended nearly every one of the annual meetings of the society, and, besides taking part in most of the discussions, at nearly every meeting presented one or two formally written papers on horticultural topics, and also made written reports of his county, or section of the state, on fruit conditions, and on fruit crops of the previous year.

Experimental horticulture was, in Mr. Foster's mind, the most important work the members of the society could do, and by collating the results of their experiments, he contended they would be able to aid the people of Iowa in selecting for planting those varieties best suited to the new state. Concerning apple culture, his conclusion was that only a very few kinds of apple trees were worthy to be planted, as so many kinds were unprofitable. Several of his papers were on this subject. Like a schoolmaster, by repetition he was trying to teach the fruit growers to plant only those varieties that had been tested out in Iowa and found best, and not listen to every tree peddler who wanted to sell new varieties.

He presented several papers on pear culture, and became somewhat of an authority on that subject. Home adornments was a theme he treated several times. But where he felt most exultant was when he spoke of native trees and their contribution to the beauty of the new state and to the uses and comforts of its people.

In his address as president of the society in January, 1873, he said:

How beautiful to study and contemplate a tree. A tree is a living thing, an active agent with its moving power within itself, extracting its food from the rays of the sun, the atmosphere, and the air in the earth around its roots, with a very small portion from the soil. It must contain a chemical laboratory, for it analyzes the air and uses chiefly oxygen. How beautiful, that the plant has power to form such beautiful

leaves, flowers and fruits. Its language is by signs; when thirsty, it tells us; when hungry and starving with coarse and unsavory food, it tells us by its feeble and sickly appearance. This coarse soil should be worked over, and finely pulverized, and mixed a little with manure to assist its chemical apparatus.

Let us give Him the praise who created all things, and clothed this earth in its beautiful green, and causes each plant, flower and fruit to grow. Although we cannot fully comprehend the life and moving power of growth, we can understand that no plant dies without a cause; like human life and disease, we cannot remedy all defects and save the life of all, but these plants are given to us, and we know their nature in part, and can assist their nature, health and growth by supplying them with proper food and protection for their health and comfort.

And again at the society's meeting in January, 1876, he said:

In my boyhood I loved a tree, and used to stray alone into the wildwood among its most darkened recesses, where the moss on rock and tree was the thickest and longest, and where the beech, the birch, the rough hemlock, the noble pine, and the symmetrical spruce, towered the highest. My love for the wildwood seemed inherent, and I soon knew every tree by name; and the lessons I read from them were more impressed on my mind than those I learned from the school books. And almost equally I loved the noble sugar maples I helped my father and brothers plant by the roadsides. And the venerable elms, giving record of plantings of a former generation, were equally objects of interest and study. And the sugar maple, and the elm, I am glad to find, are about equally thrifty and beautiful in our broad prairie state.

Turning to the practical side of the subject, we are too careless in handling these trees when we take them from the woods for transplanting around our homes. We cut the roots too close, and abuse them in such a general way that many of them cannot help dying. An animal may live when wounded and lacerated, but it is bad policy to do it. Let us keep in mind that a tree is a living thing, and must be treated as such; every root and every branch is essential to its life and growth. In transplanting we necessarily deprive the tree of many roots, even when the work is well done. As a remedy to offset this loss of roots, the top and branches should be cut to correspond.

Mr. Foster presented to the society in those years ten or more papers on trees, dwelling on the qualities of the different species, their desirability, usefulness, etc. He was disturbed by the destruction of the natural forests. He noted the high and low tides of the Mississippi at Muscatine and predicted with prophetic vision the dangers awaiting the country if the destruction went on. He was among the earliest conservationists of Iowa.

Mr. Foster is thus described in the Muscatine County History, 1911, edited by Irving B. Richman:

He figured largely in Muscatine in the Agricultural Society, the County Grange, and the Farmers Alliance. He was a great moral force. His name is well known throughout the state, but greater than all else is his fame as a western pioneer. His views on slavery, temperance, court abuses, monopolies, and other wrongs of the day were forceful and always right. He early became a member of the Congregational church.¹⁴

The same history quoted above says of Mr. Foster that he was a New Englander, and the "best sample of the Yankee ever seen in this section, always outspoken, and ready to share anything for the public good, and was always found at the head of all important public improvements."¹⁵

Mr. Foster was not able to attend the meetings of the State Horticultural Society which met in Des Moines January 19 to 22, 1868, but had forwarded to the secretary two papers to be read. His death occurred on January 21, the day before the adjournment of the sessions, and the announcement produced a profound impression. Several of the members gave expression of their sentiments concerning him. Hon. J. B. Grinnell, then at the height of his notable career, spoke as follows:

Our lamented friend and associate was the first to take me by the hand when I entered the state. From his grounds I obtained the first trees and plants put out on the new prairie home at Grinnell. His name was a household word with all readers of the Industrial Press, and with those in the habit of attending conventions looking to industrial progress in the West. Before the idea of industrial colleges had taken shape and form in the minds of our people Suel Foster was writing and talking of the need of such training. He was the head and front of the first moves in founding the Agricultural College of our state, and was chairman of its first board of trustees. He was an exponent of this society and an honored director of its work for many years. In industrial progress of every kind and class he has been a lecturer without pay, and a fearless expounder of the right irrespective of party or public favor. I have visited him at his beautiful home, slept under his hospitable roof, plucked clusters of luscious fruits from his vines, and we have bowed our heads together in grief as death had invaded our families. Truly I feel impressed with a personal sorrow. Unitedly the members of this society will cherish his memory as the clear-headed leader for half a century, who always worked with might and main for the true, the beautiful, and the good in our home surroundings, and our social and political life.¹⁶

¹⁴*History Muscatine Co.*, S. J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1911, Irving B. Richman, Ed., Vol. 1, p. 204.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 421.

¹⁶*Transactions Ia. State Hort. Soc.* for 1885, p. 205.

Henry W. Lathrop, former editor, historical writer, and prominent citizen of Iowa City, said:

Brother Foster was truly the father of this society, and the father of our Agricultural College. To many of us whose heads are now silvered with gray, he imparted lessons from his ripe experience when we were making our first attempts at home making on the prairies. In the eastern part of the state he has been looked up to as an oracle. His hobbies he believed in with an earnestness which was a part of his being. Often we thought him wrong, but time and development usually proved him in the right. He came to our state and was established as a leader in 1836. For a full half century he has been the head and front of many of the most important moves for the development of the state of his adoption. Long prior to the advent of railways he helped pry the old stage coaches from the mud in attending conventions and meetings where a few pioneers got together to talk of the fruits, the trees, the flowers, the affairs of the farm, or of education, morals, or religion. Truly it will be said of him by thousands outside of this society, as a leader he was without guile, who was always found in the advance ranks of the army of progress.¹⁷

The aged Adonijah S. Welch, who had only a few years before closed his notable career as the first president of Iowa State Agricultural College, gave this tribute:

Very briefly I must add my mite, but words fail to express just what we would wish to say of the life and works of such a man as Suel Foster. I have believed that I knew him well as an associate worker in our college organization, as a worker in our early farmers' institutes, as a leader in your society, and as a promoter of every movement which had in view the development of our homes, or our social and material interests, as builders of a new State on the "unshorn prairies" of Iowa. He was a pioneer leader when the West was without form and void. That his work has been well done we can all unite in believing.¹⁸

Prof. J. L. Budd, noted horticulturist, then at the head of the Horticultural and Forestry Department at Iowa State Agricultural College, and also secretary of the State Horticultural Society, spoke as follows:

When a boy in New York I first became acquainted with the name of Suel Foster from his frequent items in the old *Albany Cultivator*. When I first came West he took me by the hand in the meetings of the old Northwest Horticultural Society, and encouraged me to aid in the good work of adapting the fruits, the trees, the shrubs and flowers to

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 206.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 206.

the boundless prairies. His tendency to encourage young men has not been overrated here. It was a part of the daily work of his life. In my old home, in Benton County, he often visited me, and to a greater extent than was exercised by any one man he molded and shaped my life work. When visiting with him at his home, fifteen years ago, he even urged the desirability of investigating the fruits from the home of the Oldenburg, for the benefit of the parts of the Northwest where only the crabs could be grown.

His last work seems to have been for the society. The director's report, and the paper on "Forestry," were forwarded by Mrs. Foster, in incomplete form; and the direction of his last thoughts is indicated by the fact that he requested Mrs. Foster to forward the reports and to state some facts in regard to a pail made from catalpa wood, which he had donated to the museum of the Horticultural Department at the College.¹⁹

The funeral of Mr. Foster at Muscatine was very largely attended. One of the impressive features was the large attendance of old settlers who marched to the church in a body, and whose members filled nearly an entire row of pews from the pulpit to the door. At a meeting of the Old Settlers' Society, held the day after his death, in the report of a committee appointed to present suitable resolutions appears the following:

His presence, his activity, his energy will be missed in every good work. Who will fill the void occasioned by his absence? Time alone can answer the question. Feeling that his death is not only a private but a public calamity as well, we must not, while recording his public, omit to mention his private virtues.

He was a religious man.

He was a punctual man.

He was a faithful man.

He was an honest man.

He obeyed his highest convictions in all things.

He was a model man in his domestic relations.

He was unselfish, and spent much of his time and energy in promoting the public interest, not only of his own town and county, but of the state, and especially were his labors conspicuous in the agricultural, horticultural and educational interests of the state.

Such was the estimate of the character of Mr. Foster by his neighbors, some of whom had known him for almost half a century.²⁰

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 208.

²⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 209-10.

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