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SENATOR JAMES B. HOWELL.

BY HON. SAM. M. CLARK.

When Chauncey M. Depew said in his Grant oration at Galena that two thousand years hence Grant and Lincoln would be the only two Americans of this century whose names would be remembered, he also made recognition of the pervading desire of immortality in all of us, by saying that "This is hard on the rest of us." This intense self-consciousness expressed itself in the boyish epitaph composed by Keats for his own tomb, "Here lies one whose name was writ in water." The vastness of modern life with its multiplicity of vocations consumes brains and personalities, as the great smoking factories consume those black diamonds of coal that a future time will find priceless, unless science can invent a substitute dispensing with their need.

As we look about us and see how many men of great brains, character and attainments there are in all departments of life and affairs and compare with them the shallow, frippery character of many men in literature and government whose names history preserves, it seems difficult to give a reason for, or to satisfy ourselves with, the slight hold that many men of great ability have upon public memory. Of course, this is due mainly in America to the changing of the population and the immense emigration and immigration of the people, so that individuals are unknown and only the names of those

associated with lasting achievements in the great current of affairs get hold upon public knowledge.

Already James B. Howell is almost an unknown name to a great multitude of the people of Iowa. Yet there was a time, and that not long ago, when to the people of the Territory, and later in the young State, his name was a household word. Of all Iowa editors at the beginning his was the strongest and most dominating personality.

This is not the sort of a sketch that binds one to follow chronology very closely, and I dislike at the outset to be prisoner of even so much biographic detail as to say that Mr. Howell was born in New Jersey, near Morristown, July 4, 1816, and that three years later in 1819 his father, Elias Howell, moved with his family to a farm ten miles from Newark, in Licking County, Ohio. One might do a great deal of farming in seven years, and they counted for so much to Jacob as Laban's hired hand that they were thought worth putting into the Biblical record. But much depends upon the time of life they are a parcel of. And they did not go far to making a farmer of J. B. Howell, for he was three years old when he went upon an Ohio farm and ten years old when his father moved to Newark, where James immediately began his school life. It is easy for a young American to be drawn toward politics, and young Howell was to that manor born. The reason his father moved to Newark in 1826 was that he had been elected Sheriff of Licking County. After four years in that office he was in 1830 elected to the State Senate, re-elected in 1832, and in 1834 was elected to Congress. While the father was filling these public places, James fitted himself for college at an academy and entered Miami University in 1833 and graduated in 1837. He at once became a law student of Hocking H. Hunter, of Lancaster, and in 1839 was admitted to the bar. He opened a law office at Newark, but the great West drew him. In 1841 he visited Chicago, then an expanse of swamp and lake, but it did not fit his woodland likings and he went to Iowa. After visiting Muscatine and some other places he made his home at Keosauqua, Van Buren County.

George G. Wright, afterwards Chief Justice of Iowa and a member of the United States Senate, was already a young lawyer there. In some brief notes he has kindly furnished me he says :

J. B. Howell, on horseback, having so traveled, as I understood, from Ohio, first to Bloomington, now Muscatine, thence to Keosauqua, arrived at the latter place, say, May or June, 1841. I remember him well, as also our first meeting. I was keeping house (a sister, Mrs. Benton, with her two children, now Mrs. Judge J. C. Knapp and Mrs. Judge H. C. Caldwell, in charge before I was married). They being temporarily absent, I was taking my meals at the old Keosauqua House. Going to breakfast, I found this stranger who had arrived the evening before. I was attracted to him, got into conversation, and found that he was a young lawyer seeking a home in the new land. I invited him to my office and together we spent most of the day. That night I took him to my one room where I kept house, to sleep, and thus our friendship of years most intimate and close began.

Very soon he furnished abundant evidence of unusual ability as a lawyer and the promise of distinction as a citizen. He formed a partnership with James Hall, who was one of the proprietors of the town, but who was not bred a lawyer and yet was a gentleman of the most courtly and popular manners. He was a member of the First and Second Territorial Assemblies, of the Third and Fourth Territorial Councils, and afterwards Sheriff of the county. Very soon these two young men had a good business.

Howell had a natural and impulsive taste for politics. The very next year, 1842, was in Van Buren County the well known contest between the so-called Union ticket and the Democratic; the controlling elements of the campaign being the *religious ideas* of the candidates. The Whigs charged that the opposition were controlled by *infidel* men and ideas, while they had the "religionists," and elected Elbert, Whig, and Jenkins, Democrat, to the Council; and Lewis, Whig, and Barton and Swearingen, Democrats, to the House—the first time the Democrats were defeated in that county. Howell, though a young man, took a very active part in that campaign and as ever was aggressive, bold and courageous, arousing enthusiasm wherever he went. He had one personal encounter and barely missed many others, such was his defiant and courageous manner and the caustic nature of his speeches. He for the time was cordially hated by the opposition and as much loved by the party for which he fought.

As a lawyer he had the same elements and yet was the soul of honor, trustworthy under all circumstances; and court and bar relied upon him as one whose word was his bond and his convictions sincere and always ably pushed to the front. Few men had better promise in the profession, and if he had continued therein he would have taken the highest rank.

He was a candidate against Cyrus Olney for the Judgeship in 1846, the first election under the Constitution, but was defeated, although running ahead of his ticket, the district being large, extending to Marion, and it and all the counties intervening being overwhelmingly Democratic. About this time or soon there-

after he and J. H. Cowles started a Whig paper in Keosauqua—gradually drifted from his profession into journalism—culminating as you know into the Keokuk *Gate City*, “ever staunch, safe and popular.” His after life in journalism, United States Senate, member of Southern Claims Commission, you know all about and I need not repeat. He was a most impressive and positive man. Often this led to the impression that he was haughty, dictatorial and dogmatic, and yet few men have had a kinder or nobler heart or nature. He was a Whig and Republican in whom there was no variableness or shadow of turning. I think he had less patience with modern or old Democratic notions or ideas than any other man I ever knew. He thoroughly believed that Clay and old-time Whigs were right, forever right, on protection and all the ideas of Whiggery. And of Whiggery, so of Republicanism. He most cordially hated rebels and every one who was not for the Union all over and all through. He never admitted that there could be any half-way allegiance to the flag or to the Union.

He was married, say, in 1843 or 1844—you will know—joined the Congregational Church under the ministry of that man of precious memory, Daniel Lane, and was, with his wife, a leading and most valuable member of that little church until he removed to Keokuk.

Mr. John G. Brown, of Keosauqua, was a boy during Mr. Howell's residence there, and writes to me :

I first became acquainted with Mr. Howell in the spring of 1844. He came to Keosauqua, I think, the year before. He built a residence that summer and moved in with his family in the fall and lived there until the death of his wife in March, 1847. In the summer of 1848 Mr. Howell, together with James H. Cowles, J. C. Knapp and Frank Bridgman, came to my mother's to board. At that time Howell & Cowles were publishing the *Valley Whig*, and in the spring of 1849 they moved to Keokuk with press and fixtures and established what is now the *Gate City*. I was quite young then and used to enjoy the mental encounters between Howell and Knapp, occurring generally at the table, and they most always managed to differ, no matter what the subject, and when Howell would get through he would let off a volley and leave the field. Howell and the Rev. Daniel Lane were warm friends and he attended Mr. Lane's church regularly. He was rather moderate in religious matters while here. I have heard him say he liked to go to church and get all the good poked into him that he could. He was sociable and pleasant with persons that he liked and respected, and those he did not like thought him brusque and haughty, and I have no doubt they were correct as far as they were concerned.

The religious phase of the campaign in Van Buren County in 1842 to which Judge Wright alludes deserves a chapter of its own in Iowa history. The Eastern States and a part of Europe were teeming with socialistic experiments and schemes for ideal commonwealths about 1840. Abner Kneeland of Boston planned a socialistic commonwealth in the Des Moines.

Valley and went with that view with some colonists and settled Farmington, in Van Buren County. Mr. Kneeland was a free thinker and his was to be a free-thinking state in which dogmatic Christianity was to have no foothold. He was a man of very considerable ability and the enterprise seemed substantial enough under his leadership to challenge a very eager contest with the ministers and leaders of the various Christian denominations who had come into the same territory. The election of 1842 was a coalition without regard to politics of those who were opposed to Kneeland's free-thinking commonwealth and those who favored it. The former won and Mr. Kneeland gave over his experiment. He died about the year 1844 and was buried near Farmington. From that campaign on Mr. Howell impressed his personality on public opinion so that he was thought and spoken of as a man of peculiar and distinctive strength. I do not know when the first Whig paper was started in Keosauqua. I think *The Des Moines Valley Whig* had been published some two years when Mr. Howell and J. H. Cowles bought it in 1845. Mr. Howell's force in political management when supplemented with a paper to express his views soon made him a power in the Des Moines Valley and throughout Iowa that had to be reckoned with. I was born in Van Buren County and his was one of the first names I heard and remember. I never saw him until I went to Keokuk as a law student in the fall of 1863, but his name had been for years a household word in our Van Buren County home. One of our nearest neighbors during my boyhood was a Democratic "Squire" who was continuously Justice of the Peace for the township and who felt it a supreme duty put on him by the Constitution of the United States and the universe that he should return Des Moines Township solid every time for General Jackson and the Locofofo ticket. In every campaign a hickory pole stood at the roadside in front of his house and against its rough bark his razor-backed hogs, the leanest lot on Indian Creek, scratched their concave sides into what comfort they could. If I had not known the names otherwise I should easily have remembered Horace Greeley

and J. B. Howell by the ardor of the Democratic 'Squire's dislike of them. He was really a kindly man, but those two editors gave him many a "bad quarter of an hour." What Greeley was to Whig journalism in the United States this Democratic 'Squire evidently rated Howell as to Whig journalism in Iowa.

Iowa's early settlement antedated railways. The movement of migration was along the rivers, for the early settlers took to the streams like fish and to the woods like squirrels, and the rivers and woods were together. The Des Moines was chief of Iowa rivers and its beautiful valley was a main line of settler advance. From 1845 to 1865 J. B. Howell was the most potential maker of newspaper opinion in the Des Moines Valley and in Iowa. He took his paper to Keokuk in 1849 and as the wave of migration and settlement moved up the Des Moines Valley and to the westward Howell's *Whig* went along with it, preparing the popular mind for the political change that came to Iowa when James W. Grimes was elected to the Governorship in 1854.

Mr. Samuel B. Evans of the Ottumwa *Sun* said in 1870: "The election of Mr. Howell as United States Senator recalls to our mind the early history of this State. At the time alluded to Ottumwa was an obscure trading post, Wapello County was a wilderness, while the portion of Davis County which was then our home was inhabited principally by the Saukee tribe of Indians. We were but a boy then, and a small one at that, just beginning to read. Mr. Howell published a paper at Keosauqua which was then called the *Des Moines Valley Whig*. It is the first paper we remember ever to have read. We recollect with what pleasure this herald of civilization was greeted at our pioneer home in the woods, and how eagerly its columns were perused for the news of the outside world. Our boyish heart was then inclined to Whiggism and we believed every word Mr. Howell would say." That was the relation he and his paper and his opinions held to a multitude of Iowa homes.

The period of his active editorial life, from taking charge of

the *Des Moines Valley Whig* in 1845 to his election to the Senate in 1870, was the most fertile and creative period American journalism has had in its entire history as an organ of public debate and an exponent and leader of public opinion. No editor has, nor probably ever again will have, the importance to American thought that Horace Greeley had. The same can be said as to Prentice in Kentucky, Brownlow in Tennessee, Medary in Ohio, Howell in Iowa, and others, all of whom were exponents for their State or section of a condition that has passed away. Then the chief and prime feature of a paper was the editor's name at the head of its columns. The absence of that everywhere now shows the changed conditions.

While Mr. Howell was always a man of large reading and delighted in books he did not use many of the graces of literature nor give much wealth of learning to his editorial writing. He knew his fact and stated it with great clearness and power; he knew the weakness of the other man's fact and assailed it with relentless vigor. He was a man of intensely strong convictions, and in the great battle of American politics, from the rule of Andrew Jackson through the anti-slavery conflict and the war for the Union until the accession of Grant to the Presidency, when he ceased his active editorial work, he took an active part in the discussion of every question of American party politics. He was always a partisan. His power of statement and clear directness had a good deal of the strength of Horace Greeley. He was not a paragraphist. He did not nibble at subjects. He took them in Horace Greeley's way and wrote his subjects out, until he had knocked the other fellow down and made the reader either his convert or his antagonist. While never an office-seeker for himself he was as indefatigable a politician as if he had always been a seeker for place, but he gave his services to the other man. From 1842 to 1870 there were few men who held political place in Iowa who did not in some way find their place largely related to Mr. Howell either as supporter or antagonist. He was always more effective in the support and advocacy of the other man than he could have been of himself, for he was of a

fierce and dominating temper, imperious in disposition, and could not bear opposition. At the least opposition to his will he stormed like a cyclone. This would have alienated men from his own support had he been a self-seeker, but he made himself potential in serving others, for his great ability and sagacity were everywhere recognized and the very fury of his advocacy of another man's nomination or election constrained the judgment of others. He angered the man to whom he was talking; he stormed at him, and the man in most cases would conclude that if so wise a man as Howell was so furiously in favor of having a certain candidate taken, then there must be some urgent political reason for it, and most men would yield their own views to the stormy convictions of J. B. Howell. This made him unusually successful in getting his man nominated, in the long years he was in Iowa politics, but it stood in the way of his own advancement, so that the first office that ever came to him by election was in 1870, when he was nearly 54 years old. He was then chosen to the United States Senate to fill the unexpired term of James W. Grimes. Short as his service was, from January, 1870, to March 3, 1871, he made a noteworthy Senator and was useful to the Republican party and the Nation. His first speech in the Senate was in support of a resolution he offered that the Government should cease the making of land grants to railroads. The resolution which he offered and in support of which he made a speech of much tact, strength and wisdom, and which was widely published throughout the country, was substantially incorporated as a plank in the national platforms of both great political parties at the succeeding Presidential election. An incident of the personal strength and power he gained in his relation to the Senators may be given. Congress passed a bill for the relief of a Mr. White who claimed the original invention of one of Colt's firearms then in the use of the regular army. President Grant vetoed the bill. Usually a vetoed private bill would have no life in it. Mr. Howell moved that the Senate pass the bill over General Grant's veto, made a plain talk stating the facts and in advocacy of his views, and

the Senate with scarcely a dissenting vote of either party passed the bill.

At the expiration of his Senatorial term in 1871 President Grant appointed Mr. Howell one of three Judges of Southern Claims, which position he held up to March 10, 1880, when the court expired by limitation, thus shortly preceding his own death, June 17, 1880. Through the larger part of his maturer life Mr. Howell was never able for physical reasons to put forth the protracted and sustained effort which would have brought him the real power and distinction that were within his great abilities. On the 4th of July, 1860, he met with an accident making a double break and fracture of one of his legs, which kept him an invalid all the rest of his life. Before that time he had been a man of abounding strength and vitality. That accident kept him in bed many, many weary months. He refused to have the limb amputated and a slow blood poisoning set in, destroying his vitality and gradually deteriorating all his organs, diminishing his power for protracted endurance, until in the end he died from the effects of this accident, near the end of his 64th year, but a quarter of a century before his time.

I have known many great men, in Iowa and out. I distrust all attempts at parallels and comparisons between men. Plutarch has made many generations of readers his debtor for such parallels on the score of interest, but I doubt whether any man's real rank has been drawn by later readers from his admeasurements. I do not care to make parallel or comparison between James B. Howell and the other able men I have known as to intellectual rank, but I doubt whether any man I ever knew was so wholly wise and had the like wisdom in forecasting events. In his political judgments he was the wisest man I have ever known, the one who saw the farthest and with the most unerring accuracy. Towards the end of his life his strenuous fighting quality yielded to the utmost placidity and resignation. It was a pity that those who had known him and many who had been angered by him in the "*sturm und drang*" period of his political life when he was a

stormy political warrior did not know him in those closing years and find how under a coat of mail of battle there was the tenderness and gentleness of a child and the utmost kindness, sensibility and forbearance. In the later years of his life his health had become so frail that he was in relation with only a few people. We have never seen any one of our friends ripen into death with more gentleness and beauty and Socratic wisdom than he. He was a just man, too. Looking back over the years of his strenuous political fight in Iowa, he said, in a conversation with us near the end of his life: "One thing I can say of those territorial and early state Democratic leaders, hard as I fought them, is, that as men nearly all of them were nobly honest and they would have scorned to steal or plunder."

THE DES MOINES RIVER LAND GRANT.

BY COLONEL C. H. GATCH.

FIRST PAPER.

The history of the grant so long and familiarly known as the "Des Moines River Land Grant" may fittingly have a place in the Annals of Iowa. Covering, from the date of the grant—August 8, 1846,—to the termination of the last possible legal controversy with respect to the title to the lands embraced in it, by the decision of the Supreme Court of the United States in January, 1892, in the case of the United States vs. the Des Moines Navigation & Railroad Company and others, a period of over forty-seven years, very few citizens of Iowa have not heard and read of the grant and the many interesting questions and bitter controversies that grew out of it, and not a few have suffered losses, hardships and grievous wrongs in consequence of them. Depending upon the facts themselves, rather than their treatment, to interest the readers of the following sketch, little more than their statement in narrative

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