

# The Origins of Iowa State College:

A Founder's Own Account

By BENJAMIN F. GUE\*

The first man in Iowa to advocate the establishment of a State Agricultural College was Suel Foster of Muscatine. As early as 1847 his attention was called to similar schools in Germany and he was so impressed with the benefits such institutions would confer upon the young people of the west, that he at once began by voice and pen to advocate the establishment of one in Iowa.

Some interest was awakened from year to year, and in 1856 a bill was prepared by the friends of the project and placed in the hands of R. A. Richardson, a young member of the house of the Sixth General Assembly then in session at Iowa City. It met with but little favor and failed to pass the house.

Two years later (1858) the Seventh General Assembly met at the new capitol in Des Moines. Mr. Richardson was again a member of the house. Ed Wright of Cedar county, who had been a member of the last house, was also re-elected. I was a new member from Scott county. We three were among the youngest members of the house. We took up Richardson's bill of the last session, carefully revised it and went to work systematically among the members to explain the benefits an agricultural college would confer upon the sons and daughters of farmers and mechanics of limited means who wanted to secure a college education.

On the 4th of February, 1858, Mr. Richardson introduced the bill. We wanted it referred to the commit-

\*From an unpublished manuscript in the files of the Iowa State Department of History and Archives. A noted historical writer, Benjamin F. Gue was also a prominent public figure in the state over a century ago. As a member of the Seventh General Assembly, he was one of the authors of the bill to found a state agricultural college, and led the movement for its passage in the house. This first-hand account of the origins of Iowa State College is especially pertinent during that institution's centennial year.—*Editor*.

tee on agriculture, but the opponents of the bill got it referred to the committee on ways and means. Parliamentary courtesy usually permits a bill to go to a friendly committee, but that courtesy was denied us. There was not a known friend of the bill on the committee to which it was sent.

We were indignant, for we saw clearly that the enemies of the bill had scored a great advantage, as we should have to fight a hostile report from the strongest committee of the house, on which were both the Republican and Democratic leaders of that body. Had we been older and more experienced legislators we should have probably accepted this defeat as final and lost all hope of success. But we were young and aggressive and did not realize how hopeless our case was judged from parliamentary possibilities. We got together after this first "knock-down" and determined to continue the fight.

Our bill was held by the committee until the 10th of March, when it was reported back with a unanimous recommendation that it "be indefinitely postponed." We were organized now and ready for the fray.

It had been arranged that Mr. Richardson should first take the floor and briefly explain the provisions of the bill. Then we would wait to hear all of the opposition, when I was to make the principal speech in behalf of the bill and reply to the objections. Ed Wright, who was a good parliamentarian, was then to make such movement as the situation seemed to demand.

We found the opposition as well organized as we were. James F. Wilson took the floor in behalf of the report of the committee and explained that this bill proposed an untried and expensive experiment, and the state finances did not justify the expenditure. This was the opinion of every member of the committee. William H. SeEVERS, chairman of the judiciary committee, followed in opposition to the bill, and John Edwards, chairman of the committee on expenditures, closed the debate against the bill.

With much trepidation I took the floor to answer the

objections and make a final plea for the college. It was my first effort before a legislative body, and a "forlorn hope." I had carefully prepared for the occasion and was familiar with all that had been done by other states in behalf of industrial education.

As I proceeded, I noticed that members of the house were laying down their papers and giving close attention. Encouraged by this first favorable indication, I spoke for half an hour with great earnestness, closing with a strong plea for one college where the sons of farmers and others of moderate means could be aided to acquire an education equal to that afforded to professional men at the State University. When I took my seat, Hon. Daniel F. Miller, a former member of congress who was an interested spectator, came over to me and whispered, "Young man, your speech has saved that bill."

Ed Wright sprang to his feet the moment I sat down and moved that "the bill be engrossed for a third reading." Wilson said if we would consent to reduce the appropriation to \$10,000, he would vote for the bill. We consented, a few unimportant amendments were agreed to and the bill became a law. Among the trustees named in the bill was Suel Foster..

Story county secured the location of the new college by liberal donations of land, money and bonds, and the first appropriation of the state was expended in purchasing an experimental farm of 649 acres and building a farm house and barns. The country was just entering upon an era of great financial depression which continued several years, so that the friends of the college wisely determined to ask for no further appropriation at the next session of the legislature.

But the opponents of the college were not idle. At the session of the legislature of 1860, McCullough of Lee county offered a resolution instructing the committee on agriculture to inquire into the expediency of repealing the act establishing an Agricultural College. The resolution was adopted. The committee was unable to agree and presented two reports. The majority report signed

by five members of the committee was strongly against repeal of the law, while the minority report signed by two members favored repeal and reported a bill for that purpose.

While the bill was on file the friends of the college made a careful canvass of the house and found that a majority was likely to vote for repeal. It was a critical time in the history of the new enterprise. H. C. Caldwell, one of the ablest and most influential members of the house, led the attack on the college.

When the bill was called up, I stated that the friends of the college would like to have time to procure from the trustees a full report of what had been accomplished up to this time, so that the house could act intelligently, and I therefore moved that the bill be laid upon the table for the present. The motion seemed reasonable and prevailed.

Several weeks passed, and one of the friends of repeal asked leave to call up the bill. The friends of the college promptly objected. He then moved that it be taken up. We raised the point "that where objection was made it required a vote of two thirds to take up the bill." The Speaker so ruled and as they were unable to get two thirds of the votes, the bill for repeal remained on the table to the end of the session.

The Civil war came on and for four years the entire resources of the state were required to meet the demands of that emergency, but the friends of industrial education were not idle. By united efforts in July, 1862, they secured a grant of public lands from congress to the amount of 30,000 acres for each member from the loyal states for the support of agricultural colleges. Iowa thus secured over 200,000 acres of land under this grant, which was carefully selected by Peter Melendy from the public lands in our state. As there were more than 6,000,000 acres of government lands in Iowa at that time subject to homestead entry, the great problem was how to get any revenue from the liberal grant for many years to support a college.

At the session of the legislature of 1864 some of the most influential friends of the State University made a powerful effort to have the land grant diverted to the university upon condition that a department of agriculture should be established and maintained by that institution. The friends of the college by united opposition succeeded in defeating the scheme and the entire grant was secured to the Agricultural College.

A plan was now devised by Governor Kirkwood, myself and Senator C. F. Clarkson to lease the lands for a term of ten years, the lessee to pay eight per cent interest on the appraised value of the lands yearly in advance, with the privilege of purchasing at that valuation at the expiration of the lease. This was enacted into law and soon began to furnish a good income for the support of the college.

An appropriation was made by the legislature to begin the erection of a college building. In 1866 a new board of trustees was elected and an appropriation made for the erection of the main college building. I was elected president of the board. Hon. John Russell of Jones county was placed at the head of the building committee, and we proceeded to erect the main college building.

In 1867 a committee was appointed on organization, of which I was chairman, and Peter Melendy the other member. We spent several months visiting agricultural and other colleges, examining their plan of organization and work. We also selected Hon. A. S. Welch for president of our college and an able faculty of professors.

The question then arose—Shall girls be admitted to the college? A majority of the board was at first opposed to their admission, but before the college was opened we had converted several of the opposition, securing a majority of the trustees to vote for their admission.

On the 17th of March, 1869, the college was opened in the presence of a great gathering of the people of the state. Addresses were made by Governor Merrill, Lieutenant Governor Scott, the president of the board of trustees, the chairman of the building committee and

President Welch. For more than thirty-two years that institution has grown with the progress of the state until it has become a great industrial university surpassed by few in America.

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## Pioneer Salesman for Iowa

By M. M. MORRIS

The correspondence of J. S. Whittlesey, an Iowa pioneer at Durant, expressed a glowing confidence in the state's future. A letter dated May 19, 1856, and quoted in the Hartford, Connecticut, *Courant*, for May 31, 1856, advised his relatives in the East that there was no occasion to fight or steal in order to get any more territory.

"Iowa," he said, "has room for 17,378,600 people and there is room on each farm for at least 25 people." Indeed, he went on, there is enough room for all the idle people in the East. Idleness, of course, is unknown here for "he who comes to Iowa must work or starve."

Iowa is the 'beautiful land' according to the writer. The beauty of Iowa is beyond all description. "You might as well try to describe the glories of a beautiful summer's day to one who had never seen the light. If you can conceive of the vast waves of the ocean becoming stationary and turned into a deep, rich soil covered with green turf and everywhere black soil as rich as a Wethersfield onion garden—that is Iowa."

He ended his letter on a more serious note concerning land values. Land, he warned, was rising from one dollar twenty-five cents to two dollars per acre unless located close to towns where it was rising rapidly to ten dollars. The land speculation was a great game. "Very few," he advised, "can play it with safety. It is probably as demoralizing as any other species of gambling."

"If Uncle Sam now," he concluded, "would give every man a farm of one hundred acres on condition that he live on it, he would save thousands of his neighbors from moral and secular bankruptcy."

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