

ANNALS OF IOWA.

VOL. XII, NO. 3. DES MOINES, IOWA, OCTOBER, 1915 3D SERIES

SCIENTIFIC STUDIES OF DR. ASA HORR.

By JAMES O. CROSBY.

After the capital was removed from Iowa City to Des Moines, it was a long journey from Clayton county to attend the sessions of the supreme court. In December, 1857, Elijah Odell and I attended the first term of the court held at Des Moines, and our journey by stage took five days, including three all night rides.

Later the general assembly established argument terms to be held at Davenport in April and October, for the presentation of cases from the eastern part of the State, and in 1868 established similar terms at Dubuque. These argument terms were discontinued in 1872, when all cases were transferred to Des Moines. I attended all the Dubuque terms. About the first term Judge Murdock accompanied me and introduced me to Dr. Asa Horr,¹ the eminent physician, surgeon and scientist, at his office. In our conversation the judge stated that he had recently read that at this particular season Saturn was making the finest show of the year with its rings.

In the rear of his office Dr. Horr had built a private astronomical observatory in which was placed a meridional telescope. With a watch, by use of the telegraph, he kept Washington time. By the Nautical Almanac he found the meridian time of the planet, and said if we would arrange with a policeman to wake us at 2.00 a. m. and would go to his house and wake him, we could come with him to the office and interview Saturn with the telescope from the observatory, At 3.00 a. m. we were all on hand, and while Saturn crossed the object lens of the telescope we each had time for a good look

¹Dr. Asa Horr was born at Worthington, Franklin County, Ohio, September 2, 1817. He studied medicine and surgery at the town of Baltimore and city of Columbus, Ohio, and spent his professional life at Dubuque, Iowa.

at the planet in a clear sky, with its rings bright and plainly to be seen.

After Saturn passed the range of the telescope, the Nautical Almanac gave the meridional time of other stars at which we gazed till daylight obscured them. Then we left the observatory and in the office took up the microscope and played with it until breakfast time. It was of good size and had six sets of object lenses of different magnifying powers.

One slide he had prepared from fine sand, swept from rocks on the coast of Florida. To the naked eye it seemed like buckwheat flour; magnified, it was a collection of beautiful, conical sea-shells, about a quarter of an inch long, with spines beginning with a light burnt-umber color at the shell and deepening to black at the points.

Another object he had prepared was an itch-mite taken from the person of a patient. An enlarged picture of the animal is an illustration in the Century dictionary.

At another visit Dr. Horr told me something of his early history, and as I, too, had had an early history, I was very much interested, so much so that it is very clearly retained in my memory and I will give it as of his own statement:

At the age of 19 I was working about 20 miles from Columbus, Ohio, learning the carpenter's trade. One day I rode horseback to Columbus to purchase a text book on botany for beginners, as I had a desire to study plant life. I called at a bookstore and made my purpose known to the proprietor, and he laid upon the counter a number of books.

After an examination of them I was unable to make a selection, and I asked the advice of the merchant, who said he couldn't tell, but pointing to a gentleman seated in the room, said that that man could advise me. Turning to the gentleman, he said: "Mr. Sullivant, will you step here? Here is a young man who wishes to purchase a Botany for beginners. Please advise him which to select."

The gentleman came to the counter and asked if I wished it for myself. I answered that I did, and he very soon made a selection. Then he asked if I felt an interest in such matters. If I did he had a collection that he thought would please me, and if I liked he would take me in his buggy, which was standing in front of the store, and show it to me.

I very gladly accepted his kind offer and I found his home and collection of plants large and interesting. The plants in

quantity and variety were larger and finer than I ever had seen, and his explanations and descriptions gave me an increased interest in botany. He took me back to the city and I returned to my carpenter work.

About three weeks after that, Mr. Sullivant sent to me a messenger on horseback, with a letter stating that a party of his friends, ladies and gentlemen, at a time named, were going with him camping on a week's outing for pleasure and research, and extending to me an urgent invitation to join their party, and requesting an answer by the returning messenger. I was a great awkward boy, and knew from my former visit to his home that his company would be of a class with which I had not been accustomed to associate. Bashfulness came over me like a blanket. If he had sent his letter by mail, I could easily have answered it by mail, declining the invitation with thanks; but he had sent a messenger specially to bring it and there could be no mistake. The invitation was not merely formal and he surely desired me to join the party, doubtless for my benefit, and I could not do otherwise than send an answer of acceptance.

At the appointed time, at his home, I joined the company of cultured ladies and gentlemen by whom I was politely and kindly received. Though it may have been imaginary on my part, I thought I detected a slight air of condescension on their part.

After we had been out a couple of days, a discussion arose respecting some action related in the Iliad. The controversy was growing somewhat heated when, to avoid unpleasant feeling, one of the gentlemen proposed to end the discussion by referring the matter to "our young friend" and letting his decision end the matter; to which they agreed unanimously. It so happened that I had just finished reading a translation of the Iliad the week before, and very much to their surprise I promptly related Homer's account of the matter. The imaginary condescension disappeared and their cordial treatment made me forget that I was ever bashful.

One day as Mr. Sullivant² and I were alone in a boat on a lily pond, gathering lilies and searching for other water plants, he related to me the incidents that led him to the study of botany. He said: "When a young man, by inheritance, I became the owner of the farm on which my present home is situated. I had no plan of life and was rather inclined to be gay and associate with young men fond of a good time. One day I had four of them at my home for dinner and a little jollification. Looking out of a window that showed the pasture in the landscape, I saw a man walking slowly along, closely watching the ground,

²William Starling Sullivant was born near Columbus, Ohio, January 15, 1803, and died there April 30, 1873. He was an American student of nature who became distinguished as a bryologist.

occasionally stooping down as if to pick up something, stopping to examine it and then putting it in a tin case which was suspended by a shoulder strap at his side.

I wondered what the man found of so much interest in the pasture, and said to my company: 'Boys, excuse me for a little while! I see a man down in my pasture and I must go down and see what he's doing there.' So I left them and went to the pasture. I found a man somewhat advanced in years who explained that he was studying the flora of the state, and had already found in my pasture some new plants not yet described, that he would add to the list. I staid with him till near dinner time, asked him to take dinner with me and he consented. I wanted to see more of him, and if he were not accustomed to our style of living, it might be some fun for the boys as his clothing was suited to his work. When seated at the table, his dignified bearing and intelligent conversation kept my other guests as attentive listeners, with no thought of making fun at his expense. I asked his permission to accompany him the rest of the day, and adjourned the frolic with my gay young friends. That afternoon opened a new world to me and led me to become a student of nature."

The week's outing was a delightful one and opened wide to me the book of nature of which I became an earnest student. After I had acquired the profession of medicine and surgery and came to form a plan of life, I resolved to be a faithful student in the line of my profession, and in addition, to study and keep up with the growth of the natural sciences; that if days of leisure came after my professional labors were ended, I would have the love of nature to cheer my declining years.

In 1847 Dr. Horr came to Dubuque and entered upon the practice of medicine and surgery and successfully carried out his plan of life.

He died in his seventy-ninth year at Dubuque, leaving a wife, a son, Edward W., of Blandville, Ky., and a daughter, Mrs. Charles G. Stearns, of Waterloo, Iowa, all of whom are still living.

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.