



OLEY NELSON

Representative Twenty-first and Twenty-second Iowa
General Assemblies, 1886-1888
President Iowa Pioneer Lawmakers Association
1919-1920
State Commander Iowa Department G. A. R.
1927-1928
National Grand Commander G. A. R.
1935-1936

OLEY NELSON—AN UNFORGETTABLE CHARACTER

By JOHN P. HERRICK

One of the unforgettable characters I have met in the past decade was the late Oley Nelson of Slater, Iowa, one of the friendliest men I have ever known. Traveling together on a transcontinental train we found we had mutual friends in Iowa. One of them was my father-in-law, the late Lafayette Young, with whom he had served in the Iowa Assembly. They had been friends for fifty years. Oley Nelson was on his way to his Iowa home from an official visit to the few remaining Grand Army posts throughout the country, a circle trip of more than 6,000 miles. Some of the posts had only three members. Oley Nelson was then Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Army of the Republic and 91 years young; he did not appear to be a day over 70.

The story of Oley Nelson's life is worth telling to the youth and grownups of today. His father was a farmer in far-off Norway, his mother a village school teacher. When the young farmer proposed, the teacher said: "I will marry you on one condition—that we go to that great, free country of America, where the children, with whom we hope to be blessed, will have the best chance to succeed in life." Oley's father loved the homeland dearly, but he loved the blue-eyed, flaxen-haired school mistress more. So they were married in 1843, and the following spring embarked for America, a voyage of seven long weeks on a sailing vessel. They landed at Castle Garden, in New York, thence up the Hudson to Albany by boat. From Albany to Buffalo they traveled on an Erie canal packet, speed less than three miles per hour, furnishing their own bedding. It surprised them to learn that the western terminus of the canal was 500 feet higher than Albany. From Buffalo, they voyaged up the Great Lakes on a paddle-wheel steamer, and disembarked at the bustling little frontier settlement of Milwaukee. The 1840 census gave Milwaukee 1,712 popula-

tion; Buffalo, 4,470, and the great port city of New York, 391,114.

A drive of 90 miles west from Milwaukee in a covered wagon, brought them to a log house in Primrose, Dane county, Wisconsin, that Norwegian friends had ready for them. The day after they arrived in Primrose, Oley was born.¹ He just missed being born in a covered wagon.

When the Civil War began, Oley's father enlisted in the Union army. Oley, then seventeen, wanted to go along, but his mother insisted he was needed on the farm. The father died in 1862, while enroute home from the army on sick leave. When Oley was twenty, his mother agreed to his enlistment, and he joined the Wisconsin University Regiment, so called because every one of the thousand members was under twenty-one.

Two years after Oley came home from the war, a visitor to Primrose told them that the soil was richer, and corn grew taller in Iowa than in Wisconsin. The farm was sold, and Oley and his widowed mother loaded the household furniture in a covered wagon, and in company with two neighbors, trekked to Iowa, where Oley Nelson helped found the towns of Sheldahl and Slater.

In his time, Oley Nelson was a successful farmer and merchant; president of a bank; president of a Norwegian college; served two terms in the Iowa General Assembly; president of the Pioneer Lawmakers Association of Iowa; many terms as sergeant-at-arms of the Iowa Assembly; was one of the twelve organizers of the United Norwegian Lutheran Church; State Commander of the Iowa department of the Grand Army, and rounded out his career as Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Army of the Republic.

In his Iowa home in Story county, Oley Nelson reared a family of seven children, and knew and loved eighteen grandchildren and nine great-grandchildren. "Life has

¹Oley Nelson was born August 10, 1844. Although at the outbreak of the Civil war he organized a company of Wisconsin men to fight in that struggle, in his several enlistments he was mustered in the forces of three states, Wisconsin, Illinois and Iowa.

been good to me," he said in parting, "and my only unfulfilled wish is to at last sleep under Iowa sod."

Oley Nelson, the son of Norwegian immigrants, was an institution in Iowa. When he died April 15, 1938, at his home at Slater, at the age of 93, the daily newspapers of the state blazed his name across the front pages in tall, black type, and devoted much space to the inspiring story of his life. Thousands mourned the passing of the erect, slender little man, with snow-white moustache and goatee, keen sense of humor, and blue eyes that smiled and twinkled when he greeted friend or stranger.

OLEY NELSON'S LIFE INCIDENTS

(An extemporaneous talk by Former Representative Oley Nelson of Slater, Iowa, upon being called on for remarks at a meeting of the Pioneer Lawmakers Association of Iowa, held at the Historical building at Des Moines, on March 17, 1921, from a stenographic report of proceedings.)

MR. NELSON: I fully agree with what has been said in commendation of those great Iowa men who have been mentioned, men who during their life time helped make Iowa what it is today. In answering your request for reminiscences of my own life, I can only say that it has been more uneventful. Probably, as a starter, I was fortunate in getting started with one of the best women to hold up my hands and work with me in the common tasks of our life.

I was born and raised in Wisconsin. I have a picture of the log house in which I was born. I claim to be what you might call a thoroughbred. I don't know whether that explains what I mean—but both my father and mother came from Norway to this country in 1840. My father voted the Whig ticket up to the time of 1849 or 1850, when the Republican party was organized. He voted for Lincoln, of course, and the Republican party was his political choice. When the war broke out in 1861, and there was a call for 75,000 three-months men, father wanted to enlist, although he was past forty years of age. Then when the call was made for three-year men he did enlist and died while in the service; and when father died in the army I enlisted and took his place.

After the close of the Civil war I came to Iowa. I landed up close to where Slater is today, with my mother, a war widow. The grasshoppers came on and we didn't have the wherewith to pay for everything that we had gone in debt for; so I came down to Des Moines to work for S. A. Robertson, a contractor. The

job he gave me was to haul brick on this very street from around the capitol. The old capitol building was trying to fall down, and when I hauled the brick from around this beautiful capitol square, little did I think then as a boy, that later I should be added to those entitled to a seat in that capitol building.

As a baby, almost, I entered into politics, and there is THE MAN (pointing to the imposing painting of Hon. John A. Kasson)—John A. Kasson who gave me the incentive to enter public life. My work had been more along church lines. I was still working here for S. A. Robertson—and I had a team of large horses—and one day I had a load of 1,000 brick which I hauled to Mr. Kasson's place to use in fixing up his cistern. I drove my team into his yard, but it was slippery and I could not get my team to pull the load up to the cistern, so commenced to unload my brick. John A. Kasson came out and looked at me. He saw that I had on a soldier's old blouse, and a soldier's button and blue overalls. He asked me how many loads did my employer exact of me for a day, and I told him four loads. "Well," he said, "young man, you can't carry 4,000 of them over here from where you are unloading," and he took off his coat—I told him how to carry the brick, and together we carried two-thirds of them over.

Mr. Kasson was then running for congress in this district, and one day he came down to see me, and he said: "I understand, Mr. Nelson, you can speak the Norwegian, Swedish and Danish languages as well as English." I told him that I could. Then he asked: "Will you go up into Story county and the northern sections of this district and talk with the voters and get them to vote for John A. Kasson, and have them send down a delegation for John A. Kasson and against Palmer." I told him that I would gladly do so. I went up there, and what do you think was my political speech? My political appeal to those voters was that a man who would help a poor soldier in working for his bread to pay his way and keep the wolf from his door, and a widowed mother helping that poor boy to be what he is today, is surely worthy to go to congress. So I got that whole delegation to go to the county conventions for John A. Kasson.

Pardon me for mentioning these things, but in the soldier's life there are things perhaps too sympathetic for me to talk about. However, there is one thing that I will venture to mention to you old Pioneers. I was delegated to take out a detail of twenty men and got as far as Holly Springs, and when we came to Holly Springs the railroad tracks and bridges were torn up. I detoured my men and told them they were permitted to go around Holly Springs. I sauntered up to Holly Springs and one of the first men I saw was one in a rocking chair on a porch. He saw me coming along and beckoned to me, and I went up to where he was sitting. He said: "Young man, where are you

from?" I told him "from Wisconsin." "Ah," said he, "from Wisconsin. Are there many soldiers from Wisconsin?" I replied "I don't know how many are in the service now, but they had enlisted over 50,000." He said: "Not 50,000?" In the meantime, I happened to tell him that I had lost a good father to preserve this Union, and then I told him that I was a Scandinavian, and he commenced to scratch his head. "Well," he says; "a Norwegian—Norway, that country a way up where the sun never sets. Do you talk Norwegian?" "Yes," I replied. "Can you read and write?" he asked. "Yes," I replied. "Talk Swedish?" "Yes," I again responded. "And English as well as I hear?" "Yes," I answered. Then he said: "I will tell you something, my young man. I was a member of the Mississippi legislature. We voted to secede, and when we voted to secede, we made an argument something like this: That we in the southland could muster enough soldiers to lick all the Yanks east of the Rocky mountains, but the Mississippi valley, Ohio, Indiana, Wisconsin, Minnesota and Iowa have Swedes, Norwegians, Danes, Germans and others speaking four or five different languages, and we didn't suppose they were as patriotic as we believed those were that speak the English language, and if we are to fight all the English, Germans, Norwegians, Danes, Swedes, Scotch and Irish that live in those territories, we are lost."

I had a real fat idea when I was in the legislature. I thought I was going to have a great record, and I introduced a bill for what we now call in Iowa a "General Drainage Law." It was an early bill on that subject, and they made a lot of sport and fun over Nelson of Story county because of his drainage bill. They called it the "tile drainage of Muskrat creek," a Skunk river branch, and Mr. Nelson not quite rightly balanced in introducing a bill for general drainage.

I had another bill which I introduced in the legislature, No. 99, that passed the house, that would give every pupil in a district a text book. It passed the house, but I lost the bill in the senate. It was the first bill seeking to secure a law whereby a poor child could go to the district school—whereby a poor man's son could get his education—but I was too early. I had another little bill, which I thought was all right. It was a bill proposing the reduction of interest from ten percent to eight percent.

Now, this is merely reminiscent. Pardon me for consuming this valuable time. I am really glad to be here. I have met many times with the Pioneer Lawmakers and now happy that I have had the opportunity of addressing you.

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