

Old Fort Des Moines

by HARRY HERNDON POLK

The following is part of a speech given by the author at the annual meeting of the Des Moines Pioneer Club January 20, 1940.

The Des Moines River plays an important part in this narrative. The origin of the name is doubtful and is thought to be a corruption of the name of an Indian camp at Racoon Forks, "Moinguona." Early historians say it means "The Mounds," "The Monks," "The Middle" and "The Smaller" and you can just take your choice. The earliest maps obtainable show the River was called "River Moingona."

The first white men to set foot upon soil watered by the Des Moines River were Father Marquette and Louis Joliet. Paddling down the Mississippi River in a canoe, they landed on June 25, 1673 on the west bank of the Mississippi River near the mouth of the Des Moines. It is also recorded by General Sibley that in May, 1798, a young man by the name of Faribault with three others were sent by the Northwest Fur Company to a point called "Redwood" on the Des Moines River, 200 miles from its mouth which places it somewhere near the Racoon Forks. These men traded with the Sioux that winter and in the following spring dropped down the Des Moines River in canoes and delivered their cargoes of furs to the agents of the company at its post on the Mississippi River. The City of Faribault, Minneseota is named after the leader of this little party.

One hundred sixty-one years after the arrival of Marquette and Joliet, the first Fort Des Moines was established by the War Department in 1834 on or near the spot where Keokuk and Montrose now stand. Shortly after its establishment, Lieutenant Colonel Kearney, the post commander, for the want of a better name, designated it as "Detachment Hdqs. of the 1st Regiment of Dragoons, Michigan territory." Colonel Kearney frequently urged the War Department to give it a name and finally President Monroe's Secretary of War, Mr. Cass, in his own handwriting penned these few words on

the back of the request; "Let the post be called Fort Des Moines and let it be a double ration post."

What is now Polk County was included in the purchase of land from the Sac and Fox Indians. The treaty was signed at Agency City, Iowa, in 1842, the eastern section having been acquired by the treaties of 1832, 1836 and 1837. Under the treaty provisions, the Indians were given three years which to move from the vicinity of the Mississippi River to the interior, where it was thought they would be safe from the intrusion of the whites, at least for a time. The Sac and Fox being more less peaceful, the Government decided that they needed some protection from the warlike tribes of Sioux and Pottawattamies. Also the fact was not overlooked that the few whites in the region needed protection from all four tribes. The Great White Father and his counsellors decided that a military post should be established somewhere in the central part of the territory and the logical place seemed to be a point on the Des Moines River at or near Raccoon Forks, so river transportation could be used.

Consequently, the first Fort Moines was abandoned in 1837. With its abandonment, Iowa lost a unique residence which, if it could have been preserved, would have added to the romance of the Pioneer days. It was the quarters of Capt. Allen, built of willow logs which had been slightly "skotched" on the outside. In the spring the logs sprouted and the building was covered with green growth, causing Colonel Provat when he saw it, to say that "It was the prettiest house I ever saw."

Colonel Kearney was directed by the War Department in 1835 to reconnoiter the Des Moines River and Raccoon Forks, and accordingly he set out on a mounted expedition with three Companies of the 1st Dragoons, Company G, commanded by Captain Turner; Company H, by Captain Nathan Boone, son of Daniel Boone and Company I, commanded by Lieutenant Albert Lea, after whom the city of Albert Lea, Minnesota was named. On their arrival at the Raccoon Forks, Lieutenant Albert Lea was ordered to descend the river from Raccoon Forks to its mouth by canoe and report his findings. Lt. Lea had made a dugout from an old cottonwood tree, and taking one soldier and two Indians, departed

on his journey down the river. In his report he says, "I find this river to be 80 to 100 yards wide, shallow, crooked, filled with rocks, sandbars and snags. Yet it is certain that keel boats may navigate it." Although Col. Kearney most vigorously opposed the location of a post at Raccoon Forks, the War Department, by order of General Scott, assigned Captain James Allen of the Dragoons to select a site at or near the Agency buildings which were located some three miles below the junction of the Des Moines and Raccoon. In his report to the War Department dated December 30, 1842, he says, "I have selected a point at the junction of the Des Moines and Raccoon rivers. The soil is rich and wood, stone, water and grass are at hand. It will be high enough up the river to protect the peaceable Indians from the Sioux and in the heart of their best country. It is about equidistant from the Missouri and Mississippi. It will also be about the head of keel boat navigation on the Des Moines River." Consequently (by Order No. 6, Hdqs, 3rd Military Department, Jefferson Barracks) on February 20, 1843, Captain Allen was directed to establish a temporary post at or near the junction of the Des Moines and Raccoon rivers. On the 29th of April, with a small detachment of Dragoons, he left Fort Sanford, 65 miles west of Fort Madison, and proceeded up the river.

There was a little Trading Post at this time at Red Rock in Marion County. The stone in this house was quarried from these bluffs. On this particular day of which I speak, six or seven men were sitting out in front of the Trading Post smoking their corn cob pipes and trying to decide if it was worth while "carrying on" in this country. They had just about decided to take the back track for home, when suddenly, a shrill steamer whistle startled them and in a moment or two they saw a little stern-wheeler rounding the bend packed with soldiers. It was the steamship "Agatha." As it came to its mooring, Capt. James Allen, 1st Regiment Dragoons, U. S. Army, came ashore and told the little group that he and his command were en route to Raccoon Forks to establish a Military Post. Needless to say, the six or seven men stayed on at Red Rock. The "Agatha" tied up to take on water and fuel wood. In the late afternoon after the good-byes had been said, the whistle sounded again and the Aga-

tha, swinging out into midstream, resumed her eventful voyage to the Racoon Forks. However, the machinery broke down and repairing it delayed its voyage up the river. It also was stranded on a sandbar at Rattlesnake bend, just a few miles east of here. They did not arrive at Racoon Forks until nearly a month later. Her paddle wheel churning up the water and her little whistle echoing from the distant hills scaring the little "Papooses" nearly to death, the "Agatha" came to a proud and historical landing at a point just above where Court Avenue meets the Des Moines River.

There the post was established and Capt. Allen reported to the War Department that he had named the new Post "Fort Racoon," saying in his recommendations that "the place already has a great notoriety for a great distance as the Racoon river, Racoon Forks, etc." The Adjutant General of the Army, General Jones, replied "But Racoon would be shocking, at least in very bad taste" and General Scott ordered that the name of Fort Des Moines be given to the post.

Capt. Allen immediately disembarked his troops. The command pitched camp and settled down for the night, after a hilarious celebration. It was an eventful moment in their lives.

While the soldiers were making merry, Capt. Allen observed a group of Indians silhouetted against the crimson glory of the setting sun. Three chiefs mounted on ponies had appeared as if by magic on the edge of the wood. Capt. Allen hurried out to meet them. The chiefs dismounted and extended their hands in welcome. Then beckoning to a young Indian lad, who had learned to speak some English while employed at the Agency down the river and could interpret, one of the chiefs said, "He Keokuk's son." The young Indian said the chiefs wanted the Captain to know that they had received daily reports from their runners as to the progress the boat of the Great White Father was making up the river and that the friendly purpose of the coming of the troops was deeply appreciated by the Chiefs Keokuk and Appanoose and the rest of the Nation. They had deputized Chief Pash-e-pa-ho to welcome them and to pledge the friendliness of the Sac and Fox nation. Pash-e-pa-ho in his younger days had earned the nickname of the "Stabber," but was now a very old man

bent with age and mellowed by time as are all of us. With much solemnity he remarked, "I know what he say. He say true. I say welcome. Good Bye." He and his warriors departed toward the setting sun and a new hunting ground.

At that moment the red man's rule ended, and so far as he was concerned, peace reigned in Fort Des Moines. Later, the white man assumed his role as the disturber of the peace. It is not as tranquil today after all these years as Captain Allen, looking into the future, had hoped it would be. During the Pow Wow, the soldiers had brought from the wooded bank of the Raccoon, a white birch tree stripped of its branches which they promptly erected, and in a few minutes the stars and stripes floated proudly from its peak and Fort Des Moines was officially established.

The next day the 1st Dragoons were joined by E Company of the 1st Infantry under command of Captain Gardenier who had marched from Fort Crawford at Prairie du Chien.

The following days were busy ones for all and with the completion of the stables, mounts for the Dragoons arrived. The officers' quarters, barracks for the men, and other necessary buildings were completed. It seems that one of the most perplexing problems to overcome was to find the proper material with which to construct the chimneys for the various buildings. The logs were easily obtained from the woods nearby, but the proper clay and lime was a different matter. A civilian by the name of Trullinger came to the rescue finding suitable clay in the nearby hills and a very excellent grade of limestone near Four Mile Creek, which when burned made splendid lime. Kilns were built and soon bricks were in production. By fall the smoke was coming out of the Post chimneys. This was the first brick industry in Des Moines. Raccoon Row and Des Moines Row came into being and then the families began to gather and the welcome voices of women and children were heard. As the summer neared its close, Captain Allen and Lieutenant Woodruff made a hurried mounted trip down the river to purchase draft animals, wagons, and supplies for the winter. The supplies were loaded on the wagons at Burlington and sent on up to the Fort. They also purchased a complete saw mill out-

fit, employed mechanics to run the mill and again the little "Agatha" made her torturous trip up to Fort Des Moines.

A contract was made with J. B. Scott to supply the post with forage and beef. By the terms of this contract, he was permitted to select one section for a farm "not nearer than one mile from the Post." He selected 640 acres directly opposite the Post on the east bank of the Des Moines River. Adjoining Scott's farm on the north, a half section had been assigned to Messers. George Washington and Washington George Ewing of Fort Wayne, Indiana, who had been granted a trading permit. Then came the Phelps Brothers, also authorized traders. With the start of spring there was quite an influx of white settlers, good and bad. The bad causing the soldiers much trouble, selling whiskey to the Indians and continually trying to jump claims in advance of the treaty. The necessity for watching these vagabond whites and at the same time endeavoring to restrain the restless instincts of the Sac and Fox gave Captain Allen and his troops much work. As the time for the termination of the treaty approached, the duties of the garrison increased. Hundreds of settlers were squatting along the boundaries ready to jump the minute the Indians left. In fact, many did not wait, but made raids over the line shooting one or more Indians. The shootings were followed by acts of reprisal. It was becoming more evident each day that the Indians were more and more disinclined to leave their country and many of them did not go until removed by force. This all resulted in the necessity of the Dragoons to be in the field constantly.

On August 29, 1845, Captain Allen wrote the War Department disapproving its intention of abandoning the Post at the expiration of the treaty and recommending that the garrison be continued at Fort Des Moines until the following spring. On his recommendation, the War Department decided to continue the troops at Fort Des Moines throughout that winter. However, on October 12, 1845, most of the Sac and Fox left the country peaceably for their new hunting grounds, on land set apart for them south of the Missouri. Captain Allen reported on January 1st, 1846, that between 100 and 200 Indians remained, and were causing considerable trouble. The garrison then consisted of only three officers and 52 Dragoons.

The Infantry had left for Jefferson Barracks on September 22, 1845.

Midnight on October 11, 1845, was the date fixed by the treaty when the Indian occupancy of the land was to expire. The agreed signal was the firing of a musket at the Post relayed from hill to hill until the signal was passed on for miles around signifying that the empire of the red man had ended forever and the civilization of the whites had begun; October 11, 1845, stands out as the beginning of the City of Des Moines.

The order for the abandonment of the Post was dated at St. Louis, February 23, 1846. After rounding up the straggling Indians on March 8, 1846, Lieutenant Noble, with a detachment of 25 Dragoons, left for Fort Leavenworth with 110 Indians. On March 10, Lieutenant Grier, with the balance of the garrison, marched out of town and Fort Des Moines ceased to exist as a military post.

The first settlers came from many states. Northern Iowa drew its early settlers from the New England States, Southern Iowa from Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky and Tennessee. Polk County drew from all of these States. Missouri was a slave state while Iowa was a free state. Consequently, the tide of the anti-slavery-minded turned to Iowa. Many who were southern born and opposed to slavery came because they regarded the system as injurious to the whites themselves as well as to the negroes. These people came to Iowa because they knew that to enslave a human being could not and should not exist. My father and mother came to Iowa from slave-owning families in Kentucky. My father did not and could not subscribe to such a state of bondage and decided to go west to practice law. In 1855, shortly after their marriage, taking with them a young slave girl 17 or 18 years old who had been given to them by my Grandmother Herdon as a servant, they came to Iowa with the avowed intention of freeing Mary on their arrival. They sailed down the Ohio River, up the Mississippi to Keokuk and thence by stage to Des Moines. They stayed at the stage house at Iowa City on a certain night. Early the next morning there was a knock at the door. Father asked what was wanted. A woman's voice said, "You must get up." He answered, "Why

should we get up at this hour? The stage doesn't leave until 8 o'clock." The landlady's reply came back through the door, "I want to set the breakfast table." Father told her to set the breakfast table so far as he was concerned. She replied, "Yes, but I can't until I get them sheets." Mother said that she was going back to Kentucky, that she would not live in such an "outlandish" country, and father had to almost forcibly put Mother and the little slave girl on the stage bound for Des Moines. On arrival at Des Moines, they immediately set Mary free and employed her. She remained in our family for a great many years.

New buildings, mostly one story frame, were erected for homes and places of business. In the beginning and for several years, the business centered around old Fort Des Moines and the lower parts of 1st, 2nd and 3rd Streets. Mother and father occupied the building at 2nd and Vine Streets, the front of which was his law office. A few years later, stores began to appear on Court Avenue and Walnut Streets. The town was not yet incorporated, although the lands comprising some 143 acres of the Military Reservation had, by an Act of Congress, been ceded to Polk County on which to establish the County seat of Des Moines.

Coincidental with this Act of Congress, the Territorial Legislature created Polk County and fixed its boundaries. In April an election was held and Benjamin Saylor, W. H. Meachem and E. W. Fouts were elected commissioners; P. L. Crossman, County Clerk; W.M. McKay, Clerk of the Board; W. F. Ayres, County Treasurer; Thomas McMillan, Recorder; A. D. Jones, County Surveyor; James Phillips, Coroner and Thomas Mitchell, Sheriff. The population of Polk County at this time was 1,301.

The Indians were not the first residents of this region. A pre-historic race of mound-builders roamed these prairies as is proved by the many mounds located along the Des Moines River, several being found in and around Spirit Lake in Dickinson County. The historians tell us that the present Court House now stands on land once occupied by one of these mounds. Another mound was on the site of Uncle Billy Moore's Opera House at 4th and Walnut.

Ten years later in the vicinity of the mounds at Spirit Lake

occurred the Spirit Lake Massacre. Early in March, 1857, news of this massacre, by a band of renegade Sioux, under the leadership of Ink-pa-du-ta filtered into Des Moines. Immediately the citizens organized a troop of cavalry to go to the whites in the northwest section of the State. Calling for volunteers to act as scouts to precede the troop, three men offered their services. They were Jefferson S. Polk, my father, Brax D. Thomas and W. A. Scott. These three men rode all night, frequently changing to fresh mounts at isolated cabins on the way, arriving in Fort Dodge only to find that the Indians with their captives had left the country and that the U. S. Cavalry was hot on their trail.

The Star was the first newspaper to be published in Des Moines, a little later followed by the Gazette. These papers were on the streets in 1849. Many grist and saw mills appeared in Des Moines and throughout the County, playing a most important part in the building up of the town and country. The first marriage occurred March 1st, 1846, John Beard and Mary Jane Wellman, the contracting parties. The first hotel, the "Demoine House," was operated by Martin Tucker. The first preacher was Ezra Rathbun of the Methodist Church. The first lawyers were Thomas Baker, W. J. Frazee and P. M. Cassady. Judge Cassady formed a law partnership here with Marcellus M. Crocker, who had just recently graduated from West Point and had resigned from the Army, and my father, Jefferson Scott Polk. The firm's name was Cassady, Crocker and Polk. Here an interesting fact comes to mind. My father and Marcellus M. Crocker had ridden to Adel to try a law suit. My father, in the midst of his argument, was interrupted by a boy suddenly bursting into the Court Room and calling out "Fort Sumnter has been fired on." This announcement immediately broke up the Court proceedings, the Judge, the Jury, the plaintiff and the defendant, their attorneys and other hangers-on rushing out into the streets. Father and Crocker mounted their horses and rode back to Des Moines immediately and that night the first volunteers were raised for the Union Army in Des Moines. Marcellus M. Crocker became its Captain and served throughout the War with great distinction as a General.

The first doctors were Doctor Fagen and Dr. Kirkbride.

There were no railroads here. The mail was delivered by Pony Express, then later by the two horse hack, followed by the 4 horse stagecoach. The railroads later made their appearance. The changes in the mode of transportation were very rapid and many.

Soon after the soldiers left in 1846, Des Moines was proposed as the site for the State Capitol as it was located in the geographical center of the State. It was not until Dec. 28, 1846 that President James K. Polk approved the act admitting Iowa into the union as a State. The larger part of the population, however, was in the eastern part of the State, and at that time all that part of the country to the west of Des Moines was supposed to be a barren waste with no timber, and many lakes and sandhills. For this reason, the first Capital was located at Iowa City. By 1854, the population of the State had tripled and it was discovered that the western part of the State was very fertile, with much promise. At that time began a strenuous effort on the part of Des Moines to have the State Capital moved from Iowa City to Des Moines, one resident becoming so enthused as to suggest moving the National Capital to the banks of the Coon. The first bill for the removal of the Capital was introduced in 1854 in the 5th General Assembly, although it had been proposed in many other sessions. This bill was passed, one of the conditions of removal being that a Capital building be built without cost to the State. The legislature appointed a committee of five men to select the site. The meeting was held in Des Moines in April, 1856 and the committee, after giving due consideration to the matter, selected the spot where the Capitol now stands. Several Des Moines citizens formed a Company and began the construction of a building 100 feet long and 50 feet wide on the site of the present Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument. The cost was \$50,000 and in the end the State paid for it. The moving of the records, etc., from Iowa City began in the fall of 1857. It was a big task. There were no railroads west of Iowa City and the wagon roads were only trails. The big treasurer's safe was stalled out on the prairie for several days and was finally brought in on a bob sled drawn by 10 yoke of oxen. This building served for a period of 26 years, and was replaced by the new

building costing \$2,871,000, the cornerstone having been laid November 23, 1871 and the building dedicated January 17, 1884. The lot for the first Court House was purchased in 1848 from Thos. McMullen for \$35.00 and on this lot, which is now the site of the Union Station, 5th & Mulberry, was constructed a two story brick building with four offices on the second floor. The first floor was the Court Room and was also used as a public hall. Religious service was held there occasionally. John Saylor was awarded the contract for \$2,050.

It is said that John Brown of abolition fame crossed the Des Moines River on a ferry at Des Moines in charge of a body of fugitive slaves, thus making Des Moines a part of the "Underground Railroad" of pre-civil war days.

Phineas M. Cassady, grandfather of Phineas M. Henry of Des Moines, took up his residence in Coon Row in 1846 and was one of the first lawyers to practice in Iowa. He later became Des Moines' first Postmaster and "first letter carrier of the town." Another resident of Coon Row was Major Hoyt Sherman, brother of General William Tecumseh Sherman. He also served as Postmaster under an appointment by President Pierce.

To quote from one historian, "In 1855 a young man from Kentucky came to look over the town and decided to make it his home. That man was Jefferson S. Polk, who became one of the most prominent lawyers in the State. He was mainly responsible for the completion of the railroad from Des Moines to Ames and from Albia to Des Moines and was equally active in the building of the Des Moines Water Works, Des Moines Union Ry. and with Mr. F. M. Hubbell organized the Equitable Life Insurance Co. of Iowa."

On August 29, 1866, the first train arrived from Keokuk and on September 9, 1867 the first train arrived from Davenport on the Mississippi and Missouri Railroad, now the Rock Island.

January 11, 1868 saw inaugurated the first street car system, horse drawn, Dr. M. P. Turner, its president.

Judge Wm. M. Stone was the first District Judge, serving until 1861.

George M. Hippee was Des Moines first druggist.

The Circuit Court was organized in 1868 and John Mitchell was elected 1st Judge. He was succeeded by Josiah Given, who served on the bench until 1887 when the Court was abolished.

The first fire company, the Hook and Ladder, was organized in 1865.

Iowa's first electric automobile was made in Des Moines in 1887, having been invented by William Morrison, and won the first automobile race in America in 1891.

The first electric lights were in 1885.

The first appropriation for the establishment of Fort Des Moines No. 3, south of Des Moines, was for \$50,000 made March 4, 1896. The buildings were dedicated in 1903.

Old Fort Des Moines had an eventful career and its development was rapid. All of the many changes played a necessary part in that migration which has civilized a great nation within a century. At the time of its establishment it was the extreme outpost on the northern frontier in a very little explored part of this great country. It gathered around it a little colony of sturdy men and women determined to "win through" and to "carry on" in this promising land. Today our fathers' children and their children are continuing the work of building a thriving, peaceful city here. You too have had the forward "look of the eagle," the courage to do and the confidence that at the junction of the Des Moines and Raccoon rivers lays a destiny that is worthy of high effort. The result today is the prosperous Capitol City of the great State of Iowa with its 160,000 inhabitants.

"He was the first man to venture;
He was the first man to find;
Trusting his fate to his rifle;
Groping ahead in the blind."

"A little brown in the greenness, an empty tin by the trail,
Smoke wreaths sinking to leeward, as the dying fires fail,
Pattering paws above him, hungry eyes that peer,
Is the end of a gallant venture, the pay of the pioneer."

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