

“Rat Row” in Keokuk

By R. J. BICKEL

The first habitation built by a white man within the present limits of Keokuk was the log cabin erected by Dr. Samuel C. Muir in 1820. The cabin stood on the right hand corner of Main and Levee, as one ascends the street. Dr. Muir had been a surgeon in the United States army and was stationed at Fort Edwards (now Warsaw, Illinois). He married an Indian girl, and when the government officials issued an order that all soldiers having Indian wives should abandon them, he resigned his position as surgeon. Circumstances then compelled him to practice medicine elsewhere, so he leased his claim at Puck-é-she-tuck to John Culver and Otis Reynolds, of Saint Louis, who employed Moses Stillwell as their agent to open a trading house there.

Stillwell, accompanied by his two brothers-in-law, Amos and Valencourt VanAusdal, took possession in the spring of 1828. During the preceding winter, he had visited the claim and erected two cabins, one of which near the foot of Main street, he occupied with his family—the first white family to take up residence at the foot of the rapids on the Iowa side of the Mississippi river. A little further up the hill he cleared a small patch of ground where he raised some corn and potatoes in 1828. A short distance below the cabin, he built a stone building about 15 by 40 feet, using the stone bluff for the back wall. This building was used as a warehouse for Culver and Reynolds until it was carried away by the great ice gorge in 1832.

Shortly after Mr. Stillwell established himself at the foot of the rapids, the American Fur Company erected a row of five houses at the junction of Blondeau and Levee streets and installed Russell Farnham as resident manager; Joshua Palean, Mark Aldrich and Edward Bushnell, clerks; Paul Bessette with John Shook and

Baptiste Neddo as trappers and hunters. John Connolly, John Forsyth, James Thorn and John Tolman were employed by the company as itinerant peddlers and in the collection of furs. The buildings of the American Fur Company were of hewed logs and for many years were known as "Rat Row."

This was a project of John Jacob Astor, and was established about 1812. Through his competent management and political influence he was able to establish one of the first American monopolies. Small competitors he "ground out of existence" and large operators like Maurice Blondeau, George Davenport and Russell Farnham, he induced in one way or another to join up with the American Fur Company. It was this same Russell Farnham who was made resident manager of Keokuk's "Rat Row."

The lease of Culver and Reynolds expired in 1830, when Dr. Muir again took possession of his claim and formed a partnership with Isaac R. Campbell, the firm succeeding to the business established by Moses Stillwell. Dr. Muir had a thriving trade business on an island opposite Dubuque and died of cholera in 1832, and at the breaking out of the Black Hawk war in that year, the American Fur Company sold "Rat Row" to Isaac R. Campbell and abandoned the field, leaving Mr. Campbell and thirty-four employees as the entire male population in Keokuk.

There has recently come to light an old day book of accounts kept by one Robert E. Mott, located in the American Fur Company's "Rat Row," just 122 years ago. Most of the pages are dated 1833, only four years after the settlement was given its name of "Keokuk" by a group of rivermen killing time while lightering over the rapids, and one year before it was formally christened in George Gaines saloon during September of 1834.

THE HALF-BREED TRACT

At that time, according to one story, a group of half-breeds and their agents met to petition congress for the

right to dispose of their titles in the Half-Breed tract, now southern Lee county. After the business had been disposed of, the group adjourned to the "Rat Row" saloon, where Gaines emphasized the merits of his friend Chief Keokuck and proposed that the town be given his name; thereupon, he is said to have placed a decanter of whiskey on the bar and invited everyone in favor of his name to step up and have a drink. Isaac Campbell, tee-totaler, is said to have seized a glass of water, but the others took their whiskey "neat" in toasting Keokuck as the new name for Puck-e-she-tuck. That there was even one who refused whiskey is difficult to believe after thumbing through the pages of Mott's day book, because spirits was one of the principal items of trade and almost as cheap as water. It was listed at 12½ cents a pint, 25 cents a quart and the price for a gallon varied from 50 cents to a dollar.

Among those shown by the record as having charge accounts at the post were Peter Bauseau, Samuel and Thomas Briarly, William Bratton, Paul Bipette, Charles Bagenal, Baptiste Blondeau, J. Blonget, R. H. Cresap, John Campbell, Joseph Charpentier, Isaac R. Campbell, Henry Debuts, William Edermand, Joseph Frexer, Jack and John Godfrey, Isaac Galland, John Gaines, Joseph Gannion, C. Hurley, Betsey Horner, William Jordan, Black John, Chief Keokuck, Baptiste LaRocque, Charles LaFaivre, Robert Legette, William McBride, Madam Muir, Jean Baptis Naddo, Archangle Palean, P. Parsons, Paul Prefette, Moses Stillwell, John Shook, Samuel and Flora Thompson, William and Valencourt VanAusdal, James M. Wells, James White, Jacob Weaver and John Waggoner.

As an example of accounts, we take that of Samuel Thompson, which seemingly indicates that he was setting up housekeeping, because after renting a room on April 22, 1833, at \$1.50 a month, he started paying house rent, bought a broom and bedstead for \$4.00, 21 pounds of bacon for \$2.10, a pair of pantaloons for \$2.62, a pair of socks for 50 cents, and other items including, as most

of these accounts show, tremendous quantities of whiskey, often three or four quarts at a time. Thompson apparently bought no powder and lead, but Baptiste La-Rocque purchased five pounds of shot and a pound of powder on October 7, 1833, for \$1.12, four yards of calico, some thread and whiskey for 35 cents, a cotton handkerchief for 75 cents, a pair of socks and a flannel shirt for \$21.00, six yards of check goods for \$1.50 and a pair of stockings for 87 cents.

MERCHANDISE FOR INDIAN TRADE

In almost every case the customers, in fact, all but one or two of them, were men; they bought large quantities of buttons, cloth, nails, thread and such merchandise, undoubtedly for trading with the Indians. This trade quite possibly accounts for their heavy purchases of fire-water also.

The pages of this book have a very definite bearing on the early history of Keokuk, in fact it could almost be called the first directory in Keokuk's history. At the time the American Fur Company abandoned its holdings here, there were only 35 men at that time comprising the entire adult male population. This day book, started in 1833, shows that there were 42 men dependent on the trading post for supplies. Twenty-three years were to lapse before the first formal city directory was to be published in 1856.

Of the names found in this book, those of Muir, Stillwell and VanAusdal will forever be symbolized with the founding of Keokuk. Blondeau and Palean are perpetuated by streets named after them. Isaac Galland, the founder of Nashville, now Galland, Iowa, a little hamlet fast disappearing with the advance of modern times, but long to be remembered as the site of the first school house in Iowa, will be immortal; but of the others, many of them half-breeds, who helped to carve Keokuk out of the wilderness, they will be brought to mind only through the accounts in this day book shown herewith as kept by Robert E. Mott, in the old "Rat Row" trading post.

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