From Oskaloosa in a Wagon

By Hoyt Sherman*

Just fifty years ago [1848] this bright 1st day of May, the writer reached the city of Des Moines, then known as Raccoon Forks and as Fort Des Moines.

Starting in the early spring morning from the then pleasant village of Oskaloosa, with its business and dwelling houses all clustered around the public square, there were sixty-five miles of solid travel to reach our destination on the evening of the same day. Our mode of travel then was a little different from now. An honest Irishman, Martin Monahan, was engineer and conductor, a couple of scraggy horses the motive power, a light spring wagon without cover was the mail car, the baggage car and the passenger coach. With due gratitude, I can say there was no sleeping car, conductor or porter to disturb my comfort.

Eighteen miles of travel over the almost level prairie carried us to the newly made village of Pella. On the road there an occasional distant view of a half-built log house and the black surface of broken prairie were the first indications of settlement by whites. At Pella a comfortable frame house had been erected the preceding fall for Dr. Scholte, the founder of the colony, and his family. The other improvements were what were called then sod-houses, constructed by digging the tough sod from the house site in cubic blocks like stone and building it up around the four sides of the pit, leaving a space for the door, making the walls solid and strong. Brush, in long and short pieces, was cut from a neighboring thicket, placed over the space reaching from wall to wall, and on that the loose dirt out of the pit was thrown so that the roof of brush,

*Hoyt Sherman became a leading citizen of Des Moines, its postmaster, assistant school fund commissioner, clerk of the district court, attorney at law, banker, paymaster in the U.S. army with rank of major, and third president of the Equitable Life Insurance company. Died June 25, 1904.

twigs and leaves covered with earth, was water-tight. Occasionally a little shed attached to the house, made of brush and dirt, afforded a comfortable shelter for the live stock. There were fully thirty such houses used by the colony to winter in that first season of 1847-8, and all, humans as well as horses and cattle, came through the cold weather healthy and hearty.

A twelve mile ride over the wild prairie carried us up to Toole's Point (now Monroe), where we were supplied with a substantial dinner, made up, as the two other meals of the day were, of fried bacon, fried eggs, hominy, either wheat or corn bread, and good strong coffee. At Pella, as well as at other stopping places on the road, a formal delivery was made of the mail bag to someone acting as postmaster, who handled it as he would some sacred relic of the olden time, unlocked and opened it, shook it up, peered into its mysterious depths, locked it up again, and returned it with some formality to Monahan.

A mile beyond Toole's Point we came to the home of the Shelladys—a comfortable looking place, even in that day. While the driver was delivering some message to the head of the household (who, by the way, was U.S. marshal of the state for many years afterwards) the old lady came to the wagon and asked if that was my first trip over the road. When told it was, she kindly notified me that it was fully eighteen miles to the next house and no chance for a drink between, and that I had better go to the well and fill up, preparatory to the long and tiresome ride, and I did so.

Proceeded Toward Des Moines

We then started off to the northwest, over the bare prairie, not a house, not a tree, not a piece of ploughed ground or other indication of civilization in sight. I became alert and watchful, following the vague suggestions of my driver made earlier in the day, and tried to discover in the dim distance some of the bloody Sioux, the buffalo, or the elk, which were supposed to roam over that apparently limitless waste. But there

were no bloody Sioux, no buffalo, no elk, within hundreds of miles of our locality, as I learned afterwards.

After that uneventful ride, we reached Mitchell's, called Apple Grove, because located in a thicket of crab apple trees, and then I met for the first time that genial, whole-souled, hospitable and well-informed man, "Uncle Tom Mitchell," who for so many years stood at the very portals of our county, and with his hearty, wholesome laugh and cordial handshake, welcomed all strangers to the new county lying beyond. Just at the time of our arrival, Mrs. Mitchell had finished a liberal churning, and she suggested that the fresh buttermilk would allay my thirst better than water. It needed no persuasion with me to adopt that suggestion. While the officials in charge were handling the U.S. mail, I drank fresh buttermilk, using an old style quart dipper to get at it from the churn, and I did not hurry the mail men at all. I drank it as I never drank it before; I drank it as I never have since. The flavor of that buttermilk still lingers on my palate, though fifty years have passed and gone.

Again, our train was started for the last run into the town—the road was more up and down—there were frequent indications, as we followed the timber line, of settlement and cultivation. We passed the beginning of a large farm of Jacob Frederick; crossed Four Mile creek at the exact point that the state road now does, over a substantial bridge; leaving the timber and turning around a short curve of the bluff, we passed the point where Stephen Harvey was then making a first start of his fine farm.

Lying before us, stretching to the North, West and South, was Agency Prairie, then an almost tenantless waste, except for the wild flowers, the cluster of cabins away to the southwest, being the remains of the old Indian trading houses, the residence of the Indian agent two miles west and on the bluff, at that time occupied by Dr. Thos. K. Brooks, and the new farms

of Uncle Tommy Henderson, Peter Newcomer, Mr. Lamb, and Mrs. Turner, to the southeast, near the mouth of Four Mile creek, and on the site of the Indian village abandoned two years before. Now this same territory is covered with vigorous life and stir, factories with hundreds of operatives, sending their products to all parts of the world; state fair grounds with fine buildings and all needed accessories, steam and electric railroads, crossing at all angles, paved streets, and thousands of residences occupied and indicating a large city.

Forded Des Moines River

Taking up and finishing our journey, we travelled over the then unsettled Agency Prairie; passing Dr. Brooks' house, which stood near the present site of the Redheads, our road took us through a piece of low, sloughy ground, filled with swamp willow, water elm and other like growth, 'till we came to the mouth of a lane (at what is now East Sixth street and Court avenue) dividing Scott's and Meacham fields. We drove through the lane to the river bank, and then turned north to a point near Locust street, stopping in front of the dwelling of Squire Meacham. The old man, learning that I was coming to stay, gave me a hearty welcome, the first upon reaching the town.

We forded the river, landing on the west side at the foot of Walnut street. The water was of uniform depth, (about two feet) from bank to bank and as clear as crystal. Starting from the west end of the ford at the foot of Walnut street, we drove directly and in a straight line over the Parade Ground, as it was called, to the postoffice, then located in a room in "Coon Row," about the foot of Third street. Mr. P. M. Casady held the responsible position of postmaster, and I can recall the dignified manner in which he received the mail bag, and retired to his office to overhaul and distribute its contents. The usual gang was there, too, hanging around, waiting for the letter that never came, and criticizing the passengers, if any. As I was the only

one on that trip, of course I came in for my full share of comment, but was too tired to care for it, and hurried off to my allotted stopping place and took a rest, thus ending my May day of 1848.

The following day after a refreshing rest and a good breakfast, I started out to perform one of the first duties of a new arrival, which was to become acquainted with my fellow citizens of all ages and both sexes. That duty required the full half day, as there were then between 130 and 140 resident population, and after greeting all, I was recognized as entitled to full privileges of citizenship. There were then but two beverages, water and whiskey, the usual greeting was "Come and take a drink," but my repugnance to the latter liquid soon became known, and was respected. Besides taking drinks, there were other privileges, discussing the details of the last case of horse stealing, and whether the thief, if caught between his point of operations and the Missouri state line, could be tried and disposed of in some convenient grove without the aid of court and jury; inquiring into the prevalence in certain neighborhoods of the fever and ague; wondering how the conflicting claim lines between two neighbors would be adjusted; and many other topics of general interest in this quiet village, cut off from the distant and busy world.

Declined to Take Drink

As stated before, there were but two parties among the men in the matter of temperance—one set who refused all invitations "to drink," and the other set, who never missed a chance to indulge in whiskey. It seemed hard to the temperance men that they should be deprived of the privilege of celebrating the glorious Fourth by using some mild beverage while the others indulged in liquid of a more firey nature, 'till one thought of a way out of it. That was, to order from Keokuk, the source of all our supplies of that kind, a small package of ale, then classed as a harmless temperance drink. When the order reached Keokuk the latter part of

June, the merchant there informed the teamster who had to haul the load that ale, subject to the hot summer sun and the shaking up over rough roads, would certainly ferment and burst the package, and perhaps kill him (the driver); but by drawing off half of it and filling it with whiskey, which cost the same per gallon in those days, it would be perfectly safe.

Promptly on the morning of the Fourth the temperance crowd repaired to the grocery and began on that fearful mixture, so as to work up early the proper degree of patriotism for the occasion. They did not drink little portions, as the topers did of whiskey, but by the glassful. It required but a few glasses of the compound to make them very tipsy, and then each man started for his home as his only refuge in such a condition. You would see one of the victims lean against a fence, utter a fearful heave and lurch, a long drawn oh-h-h! and wish for someone to come along and kill him. It is sad to say that by 11 o'clock of that glorious day of freedom, every temperance man in the town was at home in bed, or under it, fearfully drunk, while the old topers were just warming up to the occasion.

Among the many important personages of our village was the Tucker family, who conducted the affairs of the leading hotel, named after them. The landlord, Martin X. Tucker (the X standing for "his mark," as his early education in the way of writing had been neglected) looked after the guests in the front part of the house, and also the stable, while the landlady, Mrs. Tucker, took charge of the much more important part of the household—the kitchen and dining room. Her skill and ability in making up new dishes was widely advertised, though not of the highest order.

At one time, having a high regard for the writer, though he never patronized the "Tucker," she sent to his boarding house for his personal gratification a mince pie. On its arrival the question was, what should be done with it? It had all the outward semblance

in size and shape of an ordinary pie, though the crust had a leathery appearance. After due consideration, it was decided to analyze it, so a section of the upper crust was removed and the contents disclosed. A very careful examination showed them to be dried apples, dried peaches, boiled potatoes, pork side meat, in equal quantities, thoroughly hashed, and the mixture moistened with a dash of crab apple vinegar. We thought of trying it on the dog, but decided that if the effect proved unfavorable, it might create village talk. So in the quiet of a starlight night we removed it to the garden and buried it.

Election for State Officials

The first election held after my arrival was in the following August, voting for state officials. The law of that day allowed voters to cast their ballots at any election precinct in the county of their residence so that nearly all country people voted in town. The polls were opened in an unfinished frame building instead of a dry goods store—the sides, the roof and the floor were in—but no doors or window sash or plastering, and the officials sat at the open window and received all ballots offered. In the crowd were the members of a small hunting party of Musquawkie Indians, and they saw for the first time the machinery for choosing officers in our great republic.

Some wag suggested to their leader that if he would get a scrap of paper and offer it to the judges of the election as the white men did, and have it accepted, he would be entitled to a drink of whiskey. It did not take long for him to secure the paper and present it to the judges. They asked his name, age, place of residence, etc., enough to impress him with the importance of the event, received his ballot and stuffed it in a convenient crack in the floor. He received his drink of whiskey, and was soon before the judges with another scrap of paper to deposit as his ballot, with all the grace of a "city bum"; and then another drink, following up the routine till he was well filled with

bad whiskey, and fully impressed with that institution of our government.

Life in a new country, though very quiet, at times dull, was a real luxury, surrounded as it was by growths and conditions of nature which have existed for centuries; where each one took a kindly interest in his neighbors; where there was no keen and active competition in the affairs of life; where the newcomer received from all alike that warm, generous welcome, usually accorded only to close family membership; no streets, no obstructions to passing in any direction, nestled down in a basin watered by two beautiful rivers, surrounded by the eternal hills, with the free and fertile prairie beyond. All the little incidents of daily life, births, deaths (of which there were but few) sickness, the advent of a preacher to hold Sunday service in the unfinished little church, the hearty welcome given to him, no matter what denomination he belonged to, and other like events, were of common interest. There was no newspaper to publish local information, and the particulars of such went the rounds of the village by "word of mouth."

And when the night came on, and darkness enveloped the little settlement, and all human sounds were quieted, the stars came out, and the voices of nature seemed to take up the anthem sung for thousands of years—"Glory to God in the Highest, Peace on Earth, Good Will to Man."

The following persons, who were residents of Des Moines, on May 1, 1848, still live at this writing in or near the city: Mr. P. M. Casady, Mrs. P. M. Casady, Dr. James Campbell, Hoyt Sherman, Mrs. Dr. Brooks, L. H. Bush, James Holcomb, Resin Wilkin, Edwin R. Clapp, Diantha Rathburn, H. C. Jordan, Mrs. Louisa Bird, J. H. Dean, Elizabeth Cady, Guy Ayers.

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