

## *Iowa People and Events . . .*

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### Pioneers Celebrate the Fourth of July

The early settlers of Iowa observed few holidays. But one that was respected and observed with much enthusiasm even during territorial days, was Independence Day. Accounts of some early Fourth of July celebrations in Iowa, brought to light by Mrs. Edith Webber may be of current interest. Has the popular regard and attitude toward our nation's birthday changed substantially during its growth from a struggling thinly populated republic to a world power?

Mrs. Webber found that one of the first Independence Day celebrations in the new Territory of Iowa was held at Iowa City in 1839. The stars and stripes were raised and unfurled by attaching the flag staff to the top of a tall young oak tree that had been stripped of its branches. A cavalcade of about 100 settlers brought the dinner from an Indian trading house four miles down the river. There was a program of toasts and speeches after the dinner with Colonel Thomas Cox presiding. The Declaration of Independence was read and an oration given by John Frierson. The wagon used to bring the food was used as a rostrum, in the back of which was placed a barrel of Cincinnati whiskey and a tin cup. The speaker, a man with a sandy complexion, tall, square, raw-boned, hard-featured, stoop-shouldered, knock-kneed and pigeon-toed, held forth eloquently with one foot elevated upon the barrel of whiskey.

The only living witness of this scene 120 years ago is a massive oak tree. Though pioneer observances of the Fourth usually involved long speeches, the occasion was a popular one because it provided an opportunity for scattered settlers to gather socially at least once a year to relieve their otherwise lonely, isolated existence. Firecrackers enlivened the festivities. Sometimes, anvils from the neighborhood smithy were

charged with powder and fired, either singly or in volleys, accidents sometimes causing more than one casualty.

Old Chief Blackhawk participated in patriotic ceremonies at Fort Madison July 4, 1839, marking the first birthday of the territory. He told those in attendance, "A few winters ago I was fighting against you; I did wrong perhaps, but that is past; it is buried."

The *Iowa News* carried an essay apparently designed to reduce marital fireworks during and after these pioneer Independence Day festivities. Entitled "Avoid contradicting your husband in describing the Fourth of July Celebrations," it instructed the ladies to "occupy yourself only with household affairs; never take upon yourself to be a censor of your husband's morals; command his attention by being always attentive to him; never exact anything and you will receive much; appear always flattered by the little he does for you which will incite him to perform more; all men are vain—never wound his vanity; choose well your female friends, have but few; cherish neatness without luxury and pleasure without excess; dress with taste and particularly with modesty; vary the fashion of your dress especially with reference to colors; such things may appear trifling but they are of more importance than is imagined."

Much excitement attended the planning of the "Glorious Fourth" in Bedford in 1860. The German barber had organized a Sax Horn Band, and it was slated to head the procession and furnish music throughout the rest of the day. Couriers on horseback carried the news of the proposed celebration throughout the county. At an early hour on the morning of July 4, 1860, there was a steady stream of wagons and horses on the roads leading into Bedford. There were young men on spirited mounts, boys on trusted mares, fathers dressed in homespun, and mothers and daughters wore their best calico. The little town was soon thronged with a good-natured pleasure-seeking crowd.

The three local doctors, acting as marshals of the day,

formed everyone into a procession on Main street, headed by the Sax band and a color bearer followed by veterans of the war of 1812 and the Mexican War. The Sunday school children marched behind ladies and their attendants, and in the rear came the carriages and wagons. All moved in good order to the grove northeast of town where preparations had been made for the occasion. After appropriately patriotic orations the entire company found places around a table five hundred feet long, loaded with all the food the pioneers could provide.

A flag made by Bedford ladies was presented to Clayton township for having the largest delegation present. The climax of the program came with the cutting of the cake. Baked by W. F. Fuller, at a cost of \$25, it was four feet high, and among other adornments had 56 flags around the base, each bearing the name of a signer of the Declaration of Independence. Every one of the estimated 2,500 people present received a small piece of the cake.

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### Restoration of Capital Punishment

One of the more controversial subjects of discussion in Iowa during the spring of 1878 was the prospective re-enactment of capital punishment by the General Assembly. The death penalty had been abolished six years earlier, but by early 1878 there was a strong public feeling that it should be restored.

Crime seemed to be on the increase, several particularly heinous murders receiving wide publicity. There had been several recent instances of mobs taking the law into their own hands. Law-abiding citizens and communities throughout the state demanded that something be done. The most obvious and ready solution in the minds of most people was to increase the severity of the punishment.

The question came up early in the legislature session. Several bills, differing somewhat in detail, but all designed to restore hanging for murder, were duly intro-

duced, enrolled, and referred to the judiciary committee in both the house and senate. However, re-enactment of the death penalty encountered strong opposition when the proposed bills came up for discussion. It was argued that capital offenses were just as frequent in states which exercised the extreme penalty as in those where imprisonment was the only punishment. Some members of the legislature, as well as many other respected and articulate men, believed capital punishment to be morally wrong, and fought against bringing it back. Petitions and memorials supporting both sides of the question arrived to influence the lawmakers' deliberations.

As the Seventeenth General Assembly heatedly debated the issue at the end of February, the *Des Moines Register* reported it a subject of intense general interest and that it was the topic of discussion all over the capital city. Despite the pleas of Senators Dows, Larrabee, and Meyer that the question be treated in a serious manner without the element of sympathy entering into consideration, others such as Senator Miller and Senator Rumble remained utterly opposed to all attempts to restore the death penalty. Senator Arnold offered an amendment providing "a Judgment of death must be between sunrise and sunset by decapitation by the guillotine." Senator Russell thought the state had the same right to protect society by hanging a man for murder as to take money from his pocket.

It was intimated that the legislature in 1872 had been overly influenced by the intense agitation of the day against capital punishment, and the public overly wrought up over a hanging at the state capital. Senator Nichols of Benton said he thought the General Assembly did not believe this. They had abolished capital punishment because they believed it the right thing to do, but "if any senator on the floor should produce any argument to show him that society would be better protected under the influence of the death penalty, he would agree to vote for the bill."

The senate judiciary committee reported favorably on the measure. Senator Stoneman apparently wondered if Senator Arnold's amendment to insert the guillotine was in good faith, and he also questioned whether the General Assembly would ever have repealed the death penalty in 1872 if the question had been brought before it in its cooler moments when no feelings of sympathy could have been brought to bear. Senator Foster believed the object of punishment to be reformation, and not revenge, and impressed upon the minds of his fellow senators the fact that so large a number of innocent men are judicially murdered by warrants of the law. A large number of the members of the house were absent listening to the excited debate in the senate chamber and the closing remarks of Senator Kimball saying it was a plain demand of the people of the state for the resoration of capital punishment. A vote was taken and the bill passed 28 to 19.

An editorial in the *Register* the following day exorcised the Senate for its action, commenting that secret hangings certainly would not terrify incipient murderers. The logic of the bill was held to be completely erroneous because to effectively deter capital crime the punishment should be public and as horrible and brutal as possible. However, senatorial advocates of the rope even voted against the guillotine.

The bill was expected to pass the house, but again there was formidable opposition when it came up for discussion a week later. Crimes of violence were probably more numerous in 1878. There had been a considerable influx of people into Iowa as a result of hard times and unemployment in eastern urban centers. But capital to provide work was also scarce in Iowa, and the emigrants being a relatively unskilled laboring class of people, there naturally was an added element of disorder and unrest in the state. And there, no doubt, was an insistent clamor from the older established classes for some sort of protection.

One house member, Mr. Rickel, complained that the



"ministers of our Christian churches are placing their printed sermons on our desks, in which a clamorous appeal is made for Blood!" But other religious groups fought bitterly to prevent what they considered a backward and barbarous step in civilization. The legislative session came down to the last day without a decisive vote either way. The sifting committee recommended throwing out all bills relating to capital punishment. This was voted down, and finally on March 25th in the closing minutes of the session, the bill passed 57 to 35. It differed from the senate version in that it provided for an optional verdict of death or imprisonment by the jury, but the senate concurred the next day by a vote of 30 to 16. The new law went into effect July 4, 1878.

Thus, did Iowa restore capital punishment after a six-year experiment without it. Many citizens at least felt more secure at that time. The Ottumwa *Democrat* commented that "the good people of the state will breathe easier and fewer of them will have their skulls split open this year than there were last."

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### Historical Activities

Historians from Iowa were very much in evidence at the annual meeting of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association in Denver April 23-25. Three of them took part in the program. A paper by Allan G. Bogue of the University of Iowa, "Social Theory and the Frontier," was well received. Elbert B. Smith of Iowa State College also presented an excellent paper, "Nerve Center of the Jacksonian Democracy: Francis P. Blair and the Globe." And an able commentary at the session on Conservation and the American West was given by Samuel P. Hays of the University of Iowa. Other historians in attendance from Iowa were Leland Sage of Iowa State Teachers' College, Keech Johnson and William Houlette from Drake University, and Miss Mildred Throne, editor of the *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*.

The Iowa Society for the Preservation of Historical Landmarks elected new officers at a meeting in Des Moines May 27, 1959. Mrs. R. B. Engelbeck of Des Moines succeeds Charles Chappel of Keokuk as president. The organization named Mrs. Otha Wearin, Hastings, vice-president; William J. Wagner, Dallas Center, secretary; Simpson Smith, Des Moines, treasurer; and Lawton Patten, Iowa State College, recorder. Mrs. Carroll Mitchell, Grundy Center; Mrs. Addison Parker, Sr., Des Moines; Leonard Wolf, Iowa State College; and Mrs. Glenn Greene, Newton were chosen as directors.

All appointments have been made to the Iowa Civil War Centennial Commission as provided by a resolution of the 1959 legislature. Governor Herschel C. Lovell named William D. Houlette of Drake University, Amy Noll of Des Moines, William J. Petersen of the State Historical Society at Iowa City, Dale Ahern of Decorah, Willard D. Archie of Shenandoah and Ralph Evans of Davenport to the commission which will plan appropriate observances from 1961 to 1965 befitting the State of Iowa's part in the most trying period of American history.

Other members of the commission include State Senators Eugene Hill of Newton, George Weber of Columbus Junction, Representatives Joseph Flatt of Winterset, William Bohi of Havelock, and Fleming Fraker, Jr., of the State Department of History and Archives.

Drake University held its third Conference on State and Local History July 2 under the direction of Prof. William Houlette. The speakers included Mrs. Florence Engelbeck, president of the Iowa Society for the Preservation of Historic Landmarks and Mrs. Leota Edson, president of the Chickasaw County Historical Society. J. S. Russell described the Granger Homestead Project, and Dale Kramer of Sigourney discussed the late Milo Reno and the farm holiday movement. Fleming Fraker, Jr., of the State Department of History and Archives told of the establishment of the Iowa Civil War Centennial Commission.

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