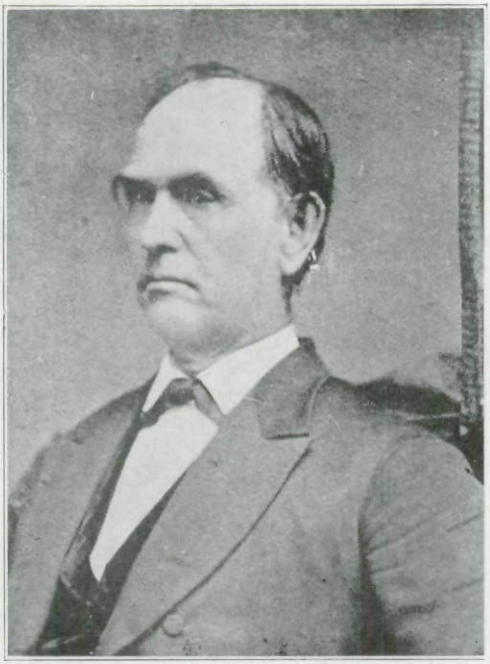

A. C. Dodge

SENATOR AUGUSTUS C. DODGE

Iowa Delegate to Congress, 1840-1846
United States Senator, 1848-1855
Minister to Spain, 1855-1859

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# IOWA, MY IOWA, FREE IOWA

By ORA WILLIAMS

Iowa, my Iowa, first free state of the west, was born of the travail of an economic and humanitarian problem as devastating as a prairie fire.

Just a century ago, on the date March 3, 1845, the birth certificate of the infant was signed. It was an unusual document that received the signature of the chief executive of the nation. The certificate was for twins. The mesalliance of the opportunists in the game of national politics had brought forth a strange progeny. Nothing like it had ever happened before; it would not happen again. The situation was somewhat embarassing, also; because the twins were of not quite the same political complexion. The doctors had to explain.

The man in the White House, hat in hand ready for departure, disbelieved in almost everything dear to the electors whose votes had given him the chance to become president. That tragic situation derived from the fact that nobody then sensed the character of the "irreconcilable conflict" that could not be disposed of by appeasement. It would be some time before a man with the soil of the prairie on his boots would drive home the terrible truth that a nation can not live "half free and half slave." One and all watched with composure the rise and fall of the teeter-board as first a free state and then a slave state was added to the roll of commonwealths. The statesmen were wont to take refuge behind other issues that could be magnified into importance. The retiring president would sign the certificate and once more put off the final day of reckoning.

So the twins were born and certificated—Iowa and Florida.

It is not of record that John Tyler called in the camera boys to witness the dipping of his goose quill into the dark ink that he might make his mark on the document. Probably he smiled faintly as he was told one of the twins was shackled and might not survive. But he would have one more chance to upset the "balance of power" and embroil his country with a promise that the over-size Republic of Texas would be taken into the family by adoption and with violence. Then the Virginian turned the keys over to his friend from Tennessee and remained in obscurity until time for him to reappear as a member of the Confederate congress. It would be up to James K. Polk to straighten out, if he could, the tangled mess he inherited from a misguided presidential accident.

The certificate was defective. It was unfair and biased. It gave indirect approval of the provision that was intended to make sure that Florida would never by any possibility be other than a slave state. In fact, there had been two Spanish Floridas, and the quit-claim title wrested from Spain indicated a half-way promise there would be two states of Florida. This promise was canceled by the eagerness to add another slave state and reach out for a possible half dozen more to be made by cutting up the realm of the Lone Star.

With all this considered in committee rooms, the planners would take the risk of admitting Iowa with an iron-clad rule that slavery should never be allowed. The keenest politicians of American history were dictating national policy at that very time. Call the roll and see if this is not so. They had planted what in modern parlance would be called a "joker" that might be fatal to one of the twins. It might serve to choke to death the Iowa that was not wanted, while giving air to the Florida that was wanted and the Texas on which such great hopes were placed.

## Conflicting Elements Confronted

There were new elements to be dealt with in the making of Iowa. The geography along the fringes of the frontier was not well charted. Soil and climate had dark problems. Indian trails ran over the hills and there were deerlicks in the low places. Local rivalries invited scheming and a crude form of diplomacy. Florida was to be a state 700 miles long; why not Iowa a state at least 400 miles wide! Texas had not been measured.

Almost by common consent the Iowa voters put away the slavery issue or hid it discreetly under a maze of other matters. What they were united upon was that of securing a state large enough, and not too large. If it was too large it would cut off the possibility of other free states. The plan to make Iowa just a strip along the river did not appeal to those who could see beyond the Skunk river. As to the "balance of power" muddle into which the eastern and southern statesmen had involved their country, these Iowans were willing to close their eyes, provided they could get a state of the size and shape that would match their ambitious hopes.

First effort of the map makers was a poor job. Their early draft was for five-cornered state reaching up to the St. Peters river. They sent the map to Washington and the revisers cut it down at the north and excluded all the rich lands of the Missouri slope. Iowa territory had embraced Pembina on the Red river of the north. It had included a part of what on the maps was marked the "Great American Desert." Iowa people did not want everything—but they could not subscribe to the doctrine that the "Hills of the Prairie" were fit only for the Indians. They scorned the argument that everything west of the Mississippi should be left for the red men and the buffalo. The jig-saw pattern for the Iowa map as it was patched up in congress was promptly rejected by the Iowans.

The twin birth certificate, as amended and brought back to Iowa by Delegate Dodge, was canceled after a spirited battle. The story of that struggle between conflicting emotions and interests has never been told in an understandable way. But the Iowa people made it known they could wait for statehood rather than have a little state. Another year would be well used in effecting a compromise that would give Iowa an area equal to its southern twin and a shape in which the people could take just pride. The good sense of the frontiersmen prevailed over the machinations and scheming for political advantage of the arrogant slave power.

But for this jockeying over boundaries Iowa might have become the twenty-seventh state. Florida took that number, and Texas claimed No. 28; so that Iowa's star is No. 29 in the constellation.

The Iowa map was to be of fine proportions for a class room chart or a calendar adornment. President Polk signed the final or secondary certificate, Dec. 28, 1846. The new map inspired the later boast that—

"Iowa, her affections like the rivers of her borders flow to an inseparable union."

That is the way the Iowa folks wanted it. To want it that way meant they would so have it. Did they not cross the big river, every one of them, chiefly that they might be free and independent? They only laughed when they heard that some of the congressmen from the old colonies had denounced them as robbers for having plowed up public lands before the corner stones were set by the surveyors. A half dozen years were enough to change a wilderness into an organized territory. Almost before they had located roads and authorized river ferries, while the ox-cart trails showed deep ruts in the black fertile soil, the Iowa men began to agitate for statehood. It would cost them something, but they had the price.

## Ends the Era of Compromise

Iowa was first free state carved out of the Louisiana territory that Spain had held so loosely and that Napoleon sold for a song. Iowa was first born of the spirit that fathered the "Missouri compromise." The men of that day did not realize it, but when Iowa took her seat at the family table in the council of American states, the event signalized an approach to the end of the era of compromise and evasion and the ushering in of the epoch of humanitarian action and national expansion.

The making of a nation is much more than a revision of geographical lines and adopting by-laws for the regulation of society. Many hard problems had to be solved in early American days. Washington had to crack down on the exuberant spirit of personal independence brought over with the key to the bastile. Jefferson put away some cherished principles and kept his eyes closed as he signed the check for purchasing half a continent. Madison had to use a sharp sword in making good on some of the most sacred promises of the Declaration of Independence. John Quincy Adams wrote out the order that has ever since kept the hands of kings and greedy dictators off both American continents. Jackson shunted away from the lace ruffles and shiny buckles to welcome at the seat of government the cowhide boots and buckskin shirts.

Compromise commenced in the constitutional convention over the one unsolvable problem. Some there were who held the black men were both chattels and humans, to be counted whichever way certain white men might choose. The plan that they were to be regarded as at least partly human, for political purposes only, lent itself to the later absurd policy of pairing off the states, slave and free, to keep what they called the "balance of power" tipped just a little southward.

So there they were, when Iowa knocked at the front door, ready and willing to assume responsibility for state-

hood. For fifty years, slavery had been a festering sore. For fifty years, the beneficiaries of slavery had stood guard at the gateway to statehood equality. For fifty years, the timid souls who dimly sensed the wrong and the economic palsy of the slave system had been busy with finance, roads, ships and corn. But a climax had been reached.

Iowa broke the chain that had been forged with such skill and clear design. The day of the compromise had ended. All attempts to put off the inevitable were doomed to failure.

Iowa was the last product of the ox-team frontier. The only routes into Iowa were by steamboat or the ferry. All the remainder of the west would wait for the iron rails. The covered wagons that rolled into Iowa were of a kind not at all unlike those used by the colonists of ancient Greece and Rome. In these the tide of immigration had been sweeping westward ever since General Harrison smashed the Indian end of the axis that had been planned to curb American expansion. The tide had rolled up the Mississippi from the fur factories of the Spanish traders. An Indian chieftain named Black Hawk had found that liberty was not for the red man any more than for the black man. Courageous explorers had traversed the great valleys and crossed over the high mountains. Far away there was California and Oregon. The Mormons were seeking freedom at the edge of a salty desert. Bundles of furs and heavy pieces of lead were being sent east. But one thing was certain, that one and all who had come into Iowa desired freedom of opportunity, independence of action, and the right to build with their own hands the social and political structure they deemed best suited to their needs.

### Ready for Self Government

The fibre had been well tested of these men who rushed into "Scott's Purchase," and re-named it after the heroic

figure of Black Hawk, then made the grand push across the "Red Rock Line" into the rich central valley of the new state. Greatly as they yearned for self-government, they spurned the first gesture as possibly too expensive for their slim purses and turned thumbs down again because they had been offered a state not of the size or shape to match their ambition. They had brought their political leanings with their axes and plows. Many there were who had voted elsewhere for General Jackson, and they continued in that frame of mind. There was a leavening layer of Henry Clay Whigs. There was a feeling of relief generally that as citizens of a territory they would not have to make choice between Van Buren, the master political organizer of York state, and Harrison, the brilliant liberator of the west. Among these aspiring Iowans there was General Jones, who was a chum of Jefferson Davis. Then there had been General Street, who was the editor first to open up the Aaron Burr scandal. The scholarly son of General Dodge, who caught Chief Black Hawk, was of rising prominence at the political capital of the territory. The first governor had been governor of Ohio and the second was a Kentucky congressman. They had a chief justice who came out of West Point in the same class with Robert E. Lee. They would choose a stage driver for their first elected governor. Nearly all the leaders were politically-minded, with strong convictions, liberal in their thinking, generally tolerant in actions. There never was a ballot-box murder or an election-day riot in Iowa. The citizens carried their political responsibilities much the same as they faced the wild blizzards and defied the floods.

The bent of mind of these resolute builders had been fixed by the traditions based on the supreme law of human equality. The arguments at the corner store forum did not follow any classroom pattern, but they were sometimes as hot as the stove around which the debaters clustered, and they were always understandable. Newspaper

reports of the speeches of Webster, Clay, Benton and others, were familiar. The Fourth of July orators had memorized quotations from Washington, Franklin and Patrick Henry, a few knew what had been said by Burke and Pitt, and others could quote from Rousseau and Locke. Then there were the weekly editions of big city newspapers filled with informative articles on every phase of life. It was dimly sensed, right out on the frontier, that the world from which their grand-parents had fled was in a ferment, that kings were having a hard time keeping their crowns on their heads, and that the long struggle for the rights of man was making progress. Copies of the New England Primer and of Poor Richard's Almanac came from the bottoms of the leather bound trunks, but not a single pamphlet defending the argument that the state owes every man a living. Economic independence as a result of industry and thrift was deemed just as vital a part of the old American creed as political independence bottomed upon representative government.

## The Circuit Riders Also Came

The pilgrimage into the new lands was, after a fashion, a crusade as well as a conquest. The jump in population, in the territorial period, from 20,000 to five times that total, might have been dangerous but for the religious zeal that steadied all the currents. The work of Preacher Edwards and of Editor Garrison coalesced at the camp meeting. The bible had all the texts for support of the editor who risked the burning of his papers by printing his promise:

"I will be as harsh as truth and as uncompromising as justice . . . I will not retreat a single inch, and I will be heard."

What mattered it to him that a sovereign state had formally offered reward for the "arrest and conviction" of the editor who thus defiantly prefaced his crusade for human equality! The fruits of the Great Awakening were

not all consumed, and after the Second Awakening the frontier camp meeting in the shade of a native grove was a natural. Under the power of fiery eloquence the listeners, some of whom had come many miles, easily slipped off the hard benches and rolled to the ground in a frenzy of religious emotion. The Sacs and Foxes had heard the pleas of the Black Robe who had journeyed from St. Ignace and surely the souls of tall woodsmen were equally worth saving. The circuit riders followed the blazed trails and held their first prayer meetings by the light of the bright fireplaces. The colonies of free-thinkers were undisturbed, but their leaders had to meet the challenge of the rude pulpits to open debate at the log schoolhouse. Then came the "Yale band" to the very fringe of society, and Andover sent its famous "Iowa band" into the very wilderness with commission to build churches and establish academies. This was the practice, not preachment, of the dominant note of the American revolution.

Oh yes! It is entirely possible to make out a good case for Iowa as the child born of some one dominant stream of colonizing influence. There are clever historians who even now follow this line. But Iowa was never a colony. The home seekers just moved in from everywhere. The southern idea of gathering about the county as the central unit of government was adopted. Then this was overlaid by the New England idea of the town meeting. There was criss-crossing of all the creeds and dogmas. All shades of political opinion flourished. Racial differences were easily lost by the mating of the tall blonds of the north with the dark haired southrons. Iowa, my Iowa, had many origins; and its genealogical tree is lost in the mists of the rocky shores that bind and protect America.

Without the radio, the movie screen, the comic strip, the pin-up sex appeal, or any tax-supported propaganda for giving some special slant to the organization of the community or the state, the atmosphere was surcharged with an emotion that linked together the political, social,

economic and religious thoughts of the people in a way that spelled freedom.

### Fearful of Iowa's Prairies

Soon the restless masses, yearning for elbow room in which to think, to work, to fight for freedom, would hear the clarion command to "Go west, young man, go west"; and the command would be heeded. But the dominant note of the time was expansion. The explorers, the adventurers, the scientists and the canny politicians were all pointing toward the Pacific. The makers of Iowa well knew that eighty-five per cent of the area was without timber or trees, and they honestly feared these great expanses of the open places. They were familiar with the trees, but did not know what demons hovered over the rolling hills. Bryant was to write of these prairies with unfeigned enthusiasm.

> These are the gardens of the desert, these
> The unshorn fields, boundless and beautiful,
> For which the speech of England has no name—
> The Prairies. I behold them for the first,
> And my heart swells, while the dilated sight
> Takes in the encircling vastness. Lo! they stretch
> In airy undulations, far away,
> As if the ocean, in his gentlest swell,
> Stood still, with all his rounded billows fixed
> And motionless forever. Motionless?
> No, they are all unchained again. The clouds
> Sweep over with their shadows, and beneath
> The surface rolls and fluctuates to the eye;
> Dark hollows seem to glide along and chase
> The sunny ridges . . . .

This was the country of which Artist Catlin wrote after his visit to Iowa to paint the portraits of Chief Keokuk and others. "The whole country," he wrote, "that we passed over was like a garden, waiting only cultivation." The Iowa pioneers came to give that cultivation and to build upon the abundance of the soil the kind of a state that they wanted.

These men with coonskin caps and women with linsey-woolen skirts, needed only the open air, the wide expanse of the prairies and the bright flowers of the springtime to give them inspiration and understanding of the nature of man and his relation to his Maker. When they prepared their first tentative constitution for a state they wrote into it this clause:

"Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, unless for the punishment of crimes, shall ever be tolerated in this state."

The meaning was clear. The freedom here demanded was like the freedom of the great prairies of the state. The wise men at the national capital had this before them when they framed the twin birth certificate. President Tyler took only a hurried glance at it as he signed the certificate while his valet was packing his bags on his last day in office.

James K. Polk also had this clause before him when on December 28, 1846, he signed the revised certificate that admitted Iowa "on an equal footing with the original states in all respects whatsoever."

The expansionist urge of the sod breakers and trail blazers had run its course and they were to have a shapely state large enough to be a rival to its neighbors, small enough for the growth of the community spirit.

## Rich In Traditions

Iowa, the free state, the unwanted twin of the compromise era, youngest scion of the unholy amours of arrogant chivalry and pious meekness, was rich in the traditions that stemmed from the age long struggle of mankind for the unrestraint of the fields, the steppes, the plains, the boundless prairies. Deep within the hearts of Iowa pioneers there were lingering bits of remembrance of the happenings at Lexington and Valley Forge, of what happened at Naseby and Runnymede, perhaps an echo of Marathon or far beyond. The most modest community

may shelter a social structure that is a complex creation of the ages. Here in the land between the rivers whose waters flow to an inseparable union, the melting pot of humanity was white hot and the mixture bubbled violently as the new state was moulded into acceptable shape and its makers were testing their voices in the world forum.

Iowa was the handiwork of the ox-drivers and rail-splitters who jostled each other on the ferries and blazed crooked trails in the wooded valleys. An enduring social fabric was woven by them and their women, who brought spelling books and garden seeds with their wheels and looms. They wrought better than they knew. Later generations were to learn that it was at the fringe of the woodlands where the upland flowers bloomed brightest, that there was in the process of making a new and sturdy race with distinctive qualities and a rugged concept of human relations.

The making over of a trapper's reserve into a populous commonwealth was in the already familiar American way, with an accelerated tempo fed by an abundance of raw material for the kind of state that Iowa was destined to be. There was no blemish on the fair name of the state in the first century. The watchword and motto was, and continues to be, "Our liberties we prize and our rights we will maintain."

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## EARLIEST IOWA RAILROAD CHARTERED 1836

In "A Brief History of the Chicago and Northwestern Line" recently circulated by that railway company (1942, 19 p.), the histories of several early western railroads that consolidated in 1864 to form the present system are reviewed. The earliest of the group, the Galena and Chicago Union Railroad, was chartered in 1836, according to this account. The illustrations form a most interesting feature of the pamphlet, including views of the line's early stations, pictures of early types of locomotives, and views of the interiors of dining and parlor cars of the 1870's.