

Des Moines 70 Years Ago

By THOMAS F. DRUMMOND¹

Des Moines in the early '80s was a mighty handsome little city. The population at that time was about 23,000, and always there was a tremendous amount of hustle. Each Saturday afternoon the whole town came downtown and paraded Walnut street, going east as far as Billy Moore's opera house at Fourth street, across from the Kirkwood hotel, and as far west as Foster's Academy of Music. This latter show house was at Eighth and Walnut, and as a youngster, there in its rather small interior, I saw some of the great stage celebrities of that era, one in particular being the pleasing young soubrette and comedienne, Fay Templeton. I remember the play was "La Mascotte," with Fay's father, John Templeton, as Prince Lorenzo, and Fay as Bettina. She sang her famous gobble song opposite Henry Clay Barnabee. He came to the Templeton company from the Boston Ideals. Fay was a turkey tender, and gobbled, while Barnabee was a sheep herder and ba-a-a-ed to Fay's gobble. Fay Templeton died in 1939 in the San Francisco area of California. She was plenty clever.

Another show I saw in Foster's and remember distinctly with pleasure, was "A Bunch of Keys," Charley Hoyt's first musical comedy. These comedies practically eliminated comic operas—such as "Pinafore," "The Pirates of Penzance," "Billy Taylor" and others. In this "Bunch of Keys" Willie Edouin was the star. He played the part of a bellhop, and his fast, nimble feet carried him swiftly through the play. In one scene he

¹ This article was written by Thos. F. Drummond at San Diego, California, three years before his death there in February, 1943. He was the son of Col. Thos. Drummond, who edited the *Vinton Eagle* in the 1850s, later a member of the Iowa legislature, and still later served in the Union army with distinction, suffering loss of his life near the close of the War of the Rebellion.—Error.

raced upstairs to the second floor (the stage was made up to show the office floor and the one above, of a hotel) at top speed, delivered a pitcher of ice water, whirled and ran to the stairs, and when he hit the top step the entire flight of stairs flattened and Willie slid to the bottom pronto!

I sat in the middle (first row) of the parquette and did I get a big evening's entertainment! So much that suddenly it dawned on me that most of those seated near me were getting a big show watching me, so we all laughed happily. Hoyt's comedies were tremendously popular through the '80s and into the '90s. He married Caroline Miskel, then said to have been the most beautiful woman on the American stage. Hoyt wrote a play especially for her, titled "A Contented Woman." I saw them all, and always his stuff was none such! It was my pleasure, also, to see the Jersey Lily and Freddy Gebhardt as they walked north on Fourth street from the Aborn to the Kirkwood, where a hack picked them up. Quickly there formed a mob to see this highly-publicized pair. And you can take it straight, the Lily was as beautiful as she had been touted. A theatrical star Des Moines loved was J. K. Emmet, whose yodeling enraptured the young folks, and whose stage presence won friends wherever he showed.

Among the famous stars Des Moines folks saw were Maggie Mitchell, Minnie Maddern, Modjeska, the Divine Sarah, Sir Henry Irving and Ellen Terry, John McCullough (Shakespearean actor), Mme. Gerster, Adeline Patti, Fay Templeton, and Florence Herbert, who was billed as "Des Moines' Own." Among wrestlers were Muldoon, the Solid Man, Clarence Whistler, Strangler Lewis, the original, a 156-pound giant killer, and Matsada Sorakechee (I can't vouch for that spelling); along with the Boston Strong Boy, John L. himself, who enjoyed a whale of a scrap with a "cullud gemmen" in the Aborn house barroom one gay evening in the long ago. Did Sully win? Huh, he

crowned the blackbird with one of those old-fashioned tin spittoons, just to pass the time away.

A CIRCUS AND THE STATE FAIR

One phase of Des Moines' amusement offerings during the months I lived there (from July, 1881 to October, 1882) was the circus. One day W. C. Coup's show came to the Hawkeye capital city, and it proved to be the first three rings to be shown there—two concert stages and surrounding these, a hippodrome track.

Coup was pursued that year by rotten luck, "Jupe Pluve" raining him out for three straight weeks. He moved just in time to run into another storm. If I remember correctly, one of his star equestrians was Frank Melville, and he was billed to do a double back-somersault aboard a loping horse. Well, he did it, for I saw him perform that amazing trick. Robert Stickney was another famous bareback rider of those days.

And I sold score cards at the Iowa state fair and watched that show unreel in those summers. At one of these the big track attraction was Jay-Eye-See, and he was all that the advance notices touted him to be! J. I. Case owned Jay-Eye-See, along with a factory in Wisconsin that turned out fine agricultural implements.

The Clarkson Brothers owned and published the *Iowa State Register*, and if ever a Hawkeye newspaper had an immense political drag with a big field of readers, it was the *Register*. Ret Clarkson's copy was as bad as Horace Greeley's, and I have seen sheets of each famous editor's copy. George Wright then was the *Register's* star reporter. At that time Frank Mills was state printer, his brother being a partner in the printing plant, with offices in the Exposition building at Eighth and Walnut. Frank Bradley was foreman of the composing room and his brother, Tom, was a star tabular hand picker. Of course, all these folks are dead now.

One Iowa newspaper item that attracted nationwide attention was the cyclone that smashed Grinnell in 1882 (if I correctly remember the year). The *Register*

covered that disaster splendidly—considering how far newspaper reporting had NOT advanced then; and Wright, the star reporter, wrote the story, if my memory is accurate.

The Wabash railroad was building into Des Moines at that time, and one day Tom Given (his father was Judge Josiah Given) and I got an idea—we'd have a look-see at the new capitol building, in course of erection. So, over we went, arriving at the noon hour. The workmen were gone to lunch, so we explored and soon were up at the foot of the great dome. The giant steel ribs were in place, and in the center of the rib circle was a big timber, with boards nailed on to serve as a ladder. Up we went, and at the top of the highest point that would support our weight, we rested and looked. Plainly to the southeast we saw smoke from the locomotive on the Wabash, a few miles away. I left Des Moines in the fall of 1882 and never since have seen the capitol building or the city.

EARLY POPULAR HOTELS RECALLED

The Aborn house and the Kirkwood were the finest hostelries in Des Moines then. The Aborn faced on Court avenue at Fourth, and the Kirkwood a block north, on Walnut street. Later in Iowa City I met Iowa's famous war governor, Samuel J. Kirkwood, and onetime member of President James A. Garfield's cabinet (secretary of the interior).

The post office stood at the corner of Fifth and Court avenue, the avenue at that time ending against the iron fence on the east side of the courthouse yard. I have forgotten whether this street began again west of the courthouse.²

By the way, there was a popular newsboy³ in Des Moines at that time who used to stand at the corner

² Court avenue continues one block west from the Polk county courthouse, at Des Moines, but this block is called Plum street.—EDITOR.

³ Mose Jacobs was the widely-known Des Moines newsboy, devoting his time, both as boy and man, to the sale of newspapers and magazines, mostly on Walnut street, at the Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth street intersections, and meeting trains at passenger depots.—EDITOR.

of Fourth and Walnut, in front of Billy Moore's opera house. His name was Mose, and sometimes he was called "Mosey." I never knew his last name.

The late Judge John C. Sherwin of Mason City, one-time chief justice of Iowa's supreme court, was my uncle by marriage, he having married my mother's sister. His widow still is living there.

And speaking of Mason City, here's a bit of Hawk-eye history you folks may not have heard much about. It was that ever memorable day when that wonderful Nez Perce Chief Joseph came to town. He and his people came in from the west over the C., M. & St. P. in 1878, and I was there to see the show. How well I remember when Chief Joseph stepped from the coach, and, walking between two cavalry officers, went to the depot restaurant for a snack! Every window offering a view of this truly celebrated war chief had as many boy noses flattened on them as there was room.

Chief Joseph was far and away the greatest war chief America ever produced. His strategy, and fierce fighting qualities, his amazing march of more than 800 miles in 1877, across an unmapped terrain, making Gen. O. O. Howard and his strategy board look foolish, is the biggest, most outstanding hegira ever staged by any nomad—not even Dull Knife's famous flight from Fort Sill, in Indian territory in 1878, equalling Joseph's unbeatable performance. I remember Joseph did not look his age, and that he smiled pleasantly at us boys, as we crowded eagerly forward so not to miss a bit of that wonderful opportunity.

Chief Joseph was caught by Gen. Nelson A. Miles, not because Joseph was overtaken or outsmarted by Uncle Sam's pony soldiers, but because this wily red man thought he had crossed the line into Canada and was safe. Even then he and most of his braves might have faded out of the picture, leaving their women and children, but Joseph wasn't built that way. He stayed and fought it out. And a year later I saw this splendid character in Mason City, Iowa. The *Mason*

City Republican had a story about it. The *Republican* was owned and edited at that time by W. V. Lucas, who later was auditor of the great state of Iowa. Maybe you've noticed I haven't been modest about using the word "great" in describing Iowa. She's worth it!

Well, history-minded Iowa folks, I must tell you about the amazing pontoon bridge that spanned the Father of Waters, and over which our C., M. & St. P. train rolled very slowly one rare fair day in June, 1878. I was thirteen and a half years young, and absolutely nothing worth looking at escaped my keen vision. But, first let it be chronicled we entrained at Mexico, Oswego county, New York, for Iowa, and when our New York Central train got to Buffalo we were picked up by a Grand Trunk outfit and away we went, past the magnificent falls, over Canada to Windsor, across the Detroit river on a ferryboat to Detroit, and then on to Chicago. Of course we stopped at the Sherman house for lunch, then entrained for Mason City over the C., M. & St. P. railway.

REACHED IOWA AT MCGREGOR

When we reached Prairie du Chien, wonder of wonders, there was no bridge—just a semi-circle of boats, with sleepers, and ties, and rails, and over that flimsy layout we were destined to travel. My head was as far out of an upstream pullman window as I could lean without falling into the river. Then we hit the pontoons, and as the train slowly crawled along I waved enthusiastically to the fireman. What a fascinating crossing—almost unbelievable! The river was high, the June flood on in all its muddy majesty, swinging that long-ago pontoon bridge in a big semi-circle. Then all too soon we hit solid earth again. Soon our car wheels were click-ity clicking on Iowa rails and ties, over rich soil. McGregor was our first stop in Hawkeyeland.

An item of Hawkeye interest is that my father was a delegate from Vinton, Benton county, Iowa, to the

first National Republican Convention in Philadelphia, 1856. I have his delegate card admitting him to the floor of the convention. It will be remembered that Col. John C. Fremont, Uncle Sam's famous "Pathfinder," was nominated for the presidency at that long-ago meeting.

An occurrence in Des Moines worth recalling happened one winter evening. A groceryman named James had been slugged and robbed in late afternoon. It so happened a housewife looked out of her window just in time to see the holdup operate. She phoned the police and from her description the man was picked up. That evening in Billy Moore's opera house, as the performance was nicely under way, a nameless something stirred the audience, an influence that made men look inquiringly, and that finally almost depopulated the show house of the males there that night. I joined the crowd not knowing what was up—then someone said, "A mob's goin' t' lynch the man who killed groceryman James!" You may rest assured I soon had a ringside seat, along with other enterprising young fellows, but the sheriff outsmarted the mob. With some deputies he had smuggled the holdup out of the jail and into a baggage car, which a fast engine pulled swiftly to Atlantic. The best part of this reminiscent episode in old Des Moines is that Groceryman James not only did not die from that blow on the head, but in a very few days was okay again. The prisoner was given a pen sentence, with ample time to think it over.

And, may I register just one more Des Moines historical event of note? It is that Charley Rogg had a drugstore on Walnut facing south between Fifth and Sixth, and one night in 1881 (I think) he turned the switch and the first electric arc light blazed forth in all its blue-white glory. Snowflakes were falling softly as we stood admiring that great sight—a light so powerful one could read the *Register* or the *Leader* with ease from across the street!

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