

THOMAS GREGG, LOCAL HISTORIAN AND AUTHOR

BY DAVID C. MOTT

One of the fine characters who exerted a positive influence for good over the people who were forming the early settlements in southeastern Iowa was Thomas Gregg. He lived most of his life in Hancock County, Illinois, which is the neighbor of Lee County, Iowa, on the east. For a while he lived on the Iowa side of the Mississippi, at Montrose, and for much of his active life he was almost as well acquainted on one side of the river as on the other. Through the newspapers he edited, especially through the *Dollar Monthly and Old Settlers' Memorial*, he extended and kept up his acquaintance in Iowa, and exerted that subtle influence so often wielded by an accomplished writer.

Thomas Gregg was born near the village of Belmont, Belmont County, Ohio, December 14, 1808. His parents were Jacob and Mary Sinclair Gregg of Loudoun County, Virginia, members of the Society of Friends (Quakers), who emigrated to the wilderness of Ohio in 1804. His education was acquired in the common schools of the village, and in printing offices.¹ In 1828 he was apprenticed to Horton J. Howard, printer, and publisher of the *National Historian* at St. Clairsville, the county seat of Belmont County.²

In 1833 Mr. Gregg began the publication of the first periodical in the long series of periodicals, the most of which he founded, but none of which were financially successful. This initial enterprise was the founding of the *Literary Cabinet*, a monthly magazine which he edited and published at St. Clairsville, which ran to twelve numbers.³ In 1834 he with a Mr. Duffey began editing and continued for about a year the *Western Gem and Cabinet of Literature, Science, and News*, first as a semi-monthly,

¹J. A. Gordon, of Hamilton, Illinois, secretary of the Hancock County Old Settlers' Association, writes us that shortly before Mr. Gregg died he was induced to dictate a short autobiography, which was recorded by his daughter, Stella D. Gregg. From those all too brief and modest lines we glean the information about his parents and about his education.

²Coggeshall's "Poets and Poetry of the West," p. 238.

³Coggeshall's "Poets and Poetry of the West," p. 238.

⁴Venable's "Beginnings of Literary Culture in the Ohio Valley," p. 125.



THOMAS GREGG AND WIFE, SARAH D. (LAWTON) GREGG

then as a weekly. Mrs. Lydia H. Sigourney and Mrs. Julia L. Dumont were among the contributors.⁴ He says in his short and modest autobiography written in the third person that "in the fall of 1835 he left his native county to labor in Cincinnati." We now quote from a sketch of Mr. Gregg kindly furnished us by J. A. Gordon of Hamilton, Illinois:

We next find him in a print shop in Cincinnati, Ohio, getting out some pamphlets for Dr. Isaac Galland of Carthage, Illinois, entitled "Chronicles of the North American Savages." It was this work which led to an acquaintance that brought Mr. Gregg to Hancock and Lee counties where his life's work was done. He addressed a letter to Dr. Galland asking about Carthage, and what the prospects were there for a newspaper. Dr. Galland answered that he knew of no town with more flattering prospects in the northwest, excepting Chicago, then a village of 2,000 inhabitants. This was the winter of 1835-6, and the next spring Mr. Gregg came west, down the Ohio River and up the Mississippi, landing at Warsaw, Illinois. Referring to this trip, Mr. Gregg speaks of spending the first night in Warsaw under the dilapidated roof of old Fort Edwards. The press was landed at Warsaw and had to be transported to Carthage by ox power, so one Davy Runt was employed to make the transfer. The first experience was breaking down in a mudhole, seven miles from town. Mr. Gregg was left on guard against prairie wolves and other "varmints" while the driver went back to town for help. There was snow on the ground, although the month of May. The first number of the *Carthaginian*, the first paper published in Hancock County, was issued in June, 1836.

Speaking of the newspaper field at that time Mr. Gregg says, "There was being published *The Bounty Land Register* at Quincy. Mr. Edwards, afterwards of the *Fort Madison Patriot*, and the *Burlington Hawkeye*, was publishing the *Illinois Patriot* at Jacksonville, and Mr. Brooks was conducting the *Illinois Advocate* at the same place. Simeon Francis was publishing the *Sangamon Journal* at Springfield, and Samuel H. Davis was conducting the *Peoria Register*. About the same time, 'Long John' Wentworth came to Chicago and began the publication of his paper [the *Chicago Democrat*], which was so long a power in the land."

Speaking of this venture, Mr. Gregg says it terminated as might have been expected, Carthage then being a town of a dozen houses, with prairie grass a foot high in the streets through which the prairie wolves roamed at night. The paper died during the first winter.⁵ Dr. Galland having purchased a majority of the stock [of the *Carthaginian*],

⁵In April, 1837, Mr. Gregg established at Carthage *The Western Emigrants' Magazine and Historian of the Times in the West*, a monthly, being "a guide to those who might be lured to the new bounty land district." See "Newspapers and Periodicals of Illinois, 1814-1879," by F. W. Scott.

the equipment was moved in June, 1837,⁶ to Fort Des Moines, Wisconsin Territory (now Montrose, Iowa), where was started the *Western Adventurer and Herald of the Upper Mississippi*. This paper was published in rooms forming a part of the old military fort which had then been abandoned. While conducting this paper as editor and publisher, Mr. Gregg found time to furnish weekly letters to eastern papers under title of "Letters from the Occident." In this paper was first published the poem of Mrs. Lydia H. Sigourney upon the death of the Indian maiden Ka-la-we-quois, who died in the wigwam of her mother near Fort Des Moines [now Montrose], August 10, 1836. In sending the poem to Mr. Gregg for publication, Mrs. Sigourney wrote as follows:

"Hartford, Connecticut, Sept. 12, 1837.

Mr. Gregg.

My dear Sir:—

The notice in the paper which you conduct of the funeral obsequies of poor Ka-la-we-quois was truly pathetic. In sending you some poetry which arose from it, permit me to express the deep interest I feel in the growing literature and great prosperity of that beautiful region which we in the old states have been accustomed to call the 'Far West.'

Very respectfully,

L. H. Sigourney."

Scattered scrap book clippings show the *Adventurer* in editorial controversy with other newspapers as to the treatment of the Sac and Fox Indians by the general government, Mr. Gregg taking side with the Indians. Also Mr. Gregg had controversy with the Missourians over their attempt to extend their northern boundary line straight through to the Mississippi River, which would have placed the lower half of what is now Lee County, Iowa, in the state of Missouri.

Speaking of his acquaintance with the Indian chieftain, Black Hawk, Mr. Gregg says, "I had the honor of forming his acquaintance in 1837 on the banks of the Mississippi. Indeed I can boast of having dined him and Mrs. Black Hawk at my table, and visited them in their wickiup. But as they conversed in the Sawkee, or the Musquakie, language of the united tribes they belonged to, and I in my native English, our chat cannot be said to have been very edifying, or to have taken a very

⁶In Gue's "History of Iowa," Vol. I, p. 178, it is stated "It was during this year, 1836, that Dr. Isaac Galland established the second newspaper in the limits of Iowa, at Montrose, and called it the *Western Adventurer*." Mr. Gordon substantiates his statement above that the *Western Adventurer* was not started until June, 1837, in a recent letter to the writer, in which he says "In the Carthaginian, published by Mr. Gregg in Carthage, under date of May 27, 1837, I find the following: 'According to notice, this is the last sheet we shall issue from this place. The office will be immediately removed to Fort Des Moines, Wisconsin Territory (at the head of the Des Moines Rapids of the Mississippi), where a paper will be commenced by the same editor and publisher, with the title of the *Western Adventurer and Herald of the Upper Mississippi*.' While conducting the paper at Fort Des Moines, Mr. Gregg wrote a series of letters to the *New York Daily Express*, under title of 'Letters from the Occident.' In letter No. 1, dated Montrose, Wisconsin Territory, June 28, 1837, I find the following: 'A printing office has just been put in operation at Montrose from which is issued a weekly newspaper called the *Western Adventurer*.' These items seem to fix the date of commencement of the paper at Montrose as June, 1837."

wide range. I remember, however, that the two ladies—our better halves—had quite a lively conversation, discussing the gossip of the neighborhood, the style of dress, etc. The old gentleman always wore a hat of a dingy stovepipe look, the gift of a friend among the pale faces, probably when on his Washington trip four years before. This was an innovation on Indian custom which his proud and haughty enemy and rival, Keokuk, always frowned upon and disdained to imitate. He always wore feathers of the latest style. A blanket, once white, a breechcloth, leggins, and a plain pair of moccasins completed his toilet. Madam's dress was also quite economical. She wore—well, a description of her dress as well as the general ensemble of the wickiup, must be postponed indefinitely. Some of my readers have seen her, and that must suffice. They rest beneath the soil of Iowa, while the scanty remnants of the tribes to which they belong have retired before the march of civilization toward the setting sun."

Mr. Gregg says that the *Western Adventurer* was the second or third newspaper published west of the Mississippi and north of the Missouri River. It lived about one year. From 1842 to 1856 Mr. Gregg and Mrs. Gregg's brother-in-law, Judge Thomas C. Sharp, alternated in publishing the *Warsaw Message* and *Warsaw Signal*. Each would carry the financial load as long as possible and then transfer to the other, opening with the expressed hope that certain changes would make it possible for the paper to succeed, closing with the statement that the burden was too great. During these years Mr. Gregg was the leader in all the public activities for the betterment of the town. He was a subscriber to all the best in literature in that time. This matter was freely used in his papers and his home was always open to hungry readers of the books and magazines then so scarce. In this work he was ably assisted by his wife, Sarah D. (Lawton) Gregg. Mrs. Gregg taught private schools in Hancock and Lee counties, carrying into the school room the same spirit of helpfulness that her husband was extending through his papers.⁷

In 1857 we find Mr. Gregg publishing the *Plymouth Locomotive* in Plymouth, Hancock County.⁸ In 1858-9 he [established and] published the *Hamilton Representative* in Hamilton, Hancock County. In 1873-77 he [established and] published in Hamilton the *Dollar Monthly* and *Old Settlers' Memorial*. In addition to all these papers he issued under

⁷In 1853-4 a strong temperance wave swept over Illinois and the county of Hancock, and in January, 1854, a small monthly sheet was begun at the *Express* office by Mr. Gregg, called the *Temperance Crusader*. In a few months this paper reached a circulation of 1,700 copies, mainly through the agency of the Sons of Temperance. But it came to an untimely end. In an evil hour, an offer to merge with a similar sheet in Chicago was accepted, the united paper to be issued from that city. The *Crusader* subscription list was sent on, but for a year nothing could be heard from the paper or its publisher, when it was learned that he had gone east and abandoned the enterprise. The list was gone and the paper could not be revived.—"History of Hancock County, Illinois," by Thomas Gregg, 1880, p. 394.

⁸July 24, 1858, two young men, Gregg and Lambert, started the *Nauvoo Democratic Press*. It remained in their hands but a few months, when Messrs. Yates, Chapman, Bauer and Swartz took the concern. Finally Mr. Yates took it and employed Mr. Grove, a school teacher, to conduct it. After Mr. Grove it was conducted by Mr. Abraham Yates, son of the proprietor, until his death in 1860.—"History of Hancock County, Illinois," p. 392.

date of January 1, 1845, a proposal for publishing at Keokuk, Iowa, a new Whig paper to be entitled *The Iowa Morning Star*. We have no record of this paper being published. As historian Mr. Gregg published "The Prophet of Palmyra," a history of the Mormon Church in the East, Missouri, and Nauvoo, Illinois. He also published in 1880 a "History of Hancock County, Illinois." He was secretary of the Hancock County Pioneers' Association for twelve years.⁹

Second only to his interest in newspaper and historical matters, was Mr. Gregg's interest in horticulture. In 1858 he settled on a small fruit farm in Hamilton and remained there the last thirty-four years of his life. He brought from the East the finest of fruit trees, vines, shrubs and flowers, to replace the seedlings of early days. The result of this work, and the pioneer history gathered during many years, were given to his readers in the *Dollar Monthly* during the four years of its publication. His active newspaper work in the two counties covered a period of forty years.

Pioneer days have passed in Lee and Hancock counties. Our traditions of these days grow dimmer with each generation. There is a wealth of written and printed history hidden in out of the way places, and subject to the inevitable erosion of time. If the people of this generation will make record of tradition and give to the many newspapers the pioneer history they are so eager to publish, they will give to Mr. Gregg a more fitting memorial than the words upon the simple stone which marks his grave, "He lived, He died."

It is seen from the foregoing that, besides establishing one periodical at St. Clairsville, Ohio, and being for a while joint editor of another, from 1836, when Mr. Gregg removed to Carthage, to 1876, when he ceased publication of the *Dollar Monthly*, he founded or assisted in founding eight periodicals, and was editor of one other, all in Hamilton County, Illinois, and Lee County, Iowa. It is seldom that the three needful qualifications of a successful newspaper editor and publisher, good printer, good writer, and good business man, are combined in one personality. Mr. Gregg had the first two, good printer and good writer. He modestly says in his autobiography, "As a publisher he was a failure financially." Indeed, but few men succeeded financially in the publishing business in those days and upon that far frontier.

But it is apparent that his prime qualification was that of writer. His was the era of the cheap family magazine. The conditions of society on the frontier made the financial returns from the publishing business very uncertain. The rapid develop-

⁹Mr. Gregg was elected secretary of the Pioneers' Association, organized June 15, 1869.—"History of Hancock County, Illinois," p. 464.

ment of the country, and its unknown possibilities, as well as the unknown and undeveloped possibilities of the local newspaper, and the family magazine, all these appealed to the imagination of Mr. Gregg, gifted with prophetic vision and with the power of expression struggling for a medium through which to work. So no wonder he founded magazines, and newspapers, and dreamed dreams of success, and was disappointed.

Mr. Gregg was a true patriot, and a citizen of the highest type and character. He said in his few lines of autobiography that "as an editor he conducted his papers conscientiously, and always claimed he had issued no sheet that he could wish to recall." He also said that he was a Whig while that party lasted, and afterward a Republican, and that "the two things he most hated as national evils were human slavery and the liquor traffic."

Mr. Gregg's greatest success as a publisher was achieved with the *Dollar Monthly*. Its publication began with the May, 1873, number. The full name was *Gregg's Dollar Monthly and Old Settlers' Memorial*. The word "Gregg's" was dropped from the title in 1875, and in 1876 the name was changed to the *Dollar Rural Messenger*, which was continued to April, 1877. The magazine was issued simultaneously at Hamilton, Illinois, Keokuk, Iowa and at Plymouth, Illinois.¹⁰ This habit of issuing a periodical "simultaneously" from two or three places was somewhat prevalent at that time. The publisher did it for business reasons, we presume. Of course the editing and printing were done at Hamilton. The fact that one place of "issue" was Keokuk shows that Mr. Gregg was continuing to cultivate his acquaintance and extend his influence on the Iowa side of the river. He frequently attended old settlers' reunions in Lee County. On August 20, 1874, he attended the fourth annual gathering of old folks of Lee County, held at the fair grounds near Keokuk, was one of the speakers, and "delivered a short address and explained the nature and object of his publication."¹¹ We presume he attended many other meetings of Lee County pioneers, and we have record of his presence at at least one other, the one held in the park at Fort Madison, August 24, 1876.¹²

The *Dollar Monthly* contained sixteen four-column pages. A reproduction of the title page was given as an illustration in the

¹⁰F. W. Scott's "Newspapers and Periodicals of Illinois, 1814-1879," p. 195.

¹¹"History of Lee County, Iowa," Western Historical Co., 1879, p. 490.

¹²"History of Lee County, Iowa," Western Historical Co., 1879, p. 502.

issue of the ANNALS of April, 1921. The magazine was devoted according to its own prospectus to "the interests of the home and the family circle, home economy, household affairs, hygiene, horticulture, floriculture, home adornment, pure literature, choice original and selected poems, and miscellaneous news in the departments of art, science, and education." Quite a field to cover! But as we have said, this was the age of the family magazine, which was largely local in its constituency, and general in its subject matter. The *Dollar Monthly* announced it was the "organ of no party, advocate of no creed but truth, devoted to free discussion of all subjects of human inquiry."

The great interest people of today have in this magazine is principally because of the historical value of some of its articles, and of the literary quality of some of them. The Historical Department of Iowa a few years ago came into possession of a file of the first three volumes of the *Dollar Monthly*, extending from May, 1873, to December, 1875, and we have published in the ANNALS from time to time a few of the articles relating to local history of southeastern Iowa. Mr. Gregg was one of the best historians of his period and section of the country. He was observant, had judgment, had the language to relate events attractively, and had the essential quality of truthfulness. He saw events in true relation to each other, and told them without exaggeration. We suspect his Quaker ancestry and training did him no harm in this respect.

As to his literary ability, it is harder for us to judge. Throughout his long life he was under the necessity of devoting himself to the hard task of financing his enterprises and making a living for himself and family, so that the leisure so necessary for the creation of real literature was encroached upon. Even as it was he was recognized as among the writers of standing in the West by such authorities as "Poets and Poetry of the West," by William T. Coggeshall, published at Columbus, Ohio, in 1860, and by "Beginnings of Literary Culture in the Ohio Valley," by W. H. Venable.

The following poem illustrates Mr. Gregg's love of nature, and his poetic composition, as well as a prevalent style of versification of three-quarters of a century ago. We take it from Coggeshall's "Poets and Poetry of the West."

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