

INCIDENTS CONNECTED WITH THE EARLY SETTLEMENT OF
MARION COUNTY.

BY W. M. DONNEL.

MOST noted among the notoriously distinguished persons who settled in the neighborhood of Red Rock village, at an early date, were William Blankenship and a family named Williams, with whom the former was connected by marriage. Of "Old Blank.," as he was generally called, we knew but little previously to his advent into this neighborhood. He moved from Illinois, and first settled in Iowa near Burlington when that place was in its infancy. Here he had a claim, and quarreled with other settlers. Afterwards he made claims near Fairfield, and there, in consequence of his belligerent character, he became a marked man; and the peculiarity of the mark that distinguished him from all other men was suggestive of the name by which he was most familiarly known. Having gotten into a quarrel with a man about a claim—as he never failed to do upon the least provocation, or no provocation—he challenged his opponent to a fist-fight, stipulating that "to the victor belonged the spoils." Old Blank. had been the victor in so many contests of this kind, that he had begun to deem himself invincible. But in this instance the battle went sorely against him, and he came out of it so much demoralized in feature, that it remains a distinguishing mark to this day. He might have been more fortunate but for his stubborn neglect to cry "enough," when he was whipped. Being the "under dog" in the fight, it was supposed he would surrender like a man. But this he failed to do, and in order to bring him to terms, the "upper dog" took a slice out of the side of his nose, in real dog fashion. This had the desired effect. Blank. cried "enough," got up, and said, "The claim is yours, sir," and walked away,

without uttering another word. Blank afterwards moved to this county, and settled on the north side of the Des Moines river, a short distance below Red Rock village. Here he manifested so much of the character of a desperado that he was not only a pest, but the dread of many peaceable citizens. A few anecdotes may here be introduced to illustrate this fact: In person, old Blank. was tall and lean, with thin, sharp features, the nose being especially so from having been sliced. Ordinarily, or when so disposed, he could behave like a gentleman, but the least offense would rouse him to a demoniac ugliness, and make him a dangerous customer to deal with. Having had a claim quarrel with a man named Alley, who owned a saw mill a short distance above Red Rock, he sought in a cowardly way to take revenge upon his enemy. One night, while Alley and his son, and another man, were at work in the mill, several shots were fired at them from across the river, some of which came so near them as to almost extinguish their lights, at which they deemed it unsafe to remain. At another time, Mr. Alley was there alone repairing his dam. Being below the dam, a slight noise caused him to look up, when he saw Blank. standing on the bank, taking deliberate aim at him with his rifle. The hammer of the weapon was set, and the savage expression that darkened the face of the marksman certainly indicated that he meant no sport. For some reason, however, on being discovered by his intended victim, he instantly desisted from his murderous purpose. Not a word was uttered by either party, and Blank. disappeared in a moment. Afterwards, on being asked by another person if he really meant to shoot Alley, he replied that if the latter had not looked up, he would never have known what hurt him. At another time he had a feud with a man named Johnson, who lived near him, in relation to some stock. Johnson had a number of beehives. One morning he found them robbed and destroyed, a valuable grindstone chipped to pieces, and a number of fowls killed. This was certainly exasperating, and the in-

jured man knew he had no enemy capable of doing him such mischief except Blankenship, and he immediately had a warrant issued for his arrest. The missive was put into the hands of J. H. Miksell, who went to serve it next morning before daylight. He found Blank. and his family in bed, and also Mat Williams, one of his brothers-in-law. Blank. kindly invited his visitor to take a seat, upon doing which, the latter, by way of introducing the object of his visit, said:—

“What’s the matter with this chair?—it appears to have been smeared with honey, or something else that makes it sticky.”

“That’s what it is,” readily answered Blank. “Mat and I took a fine bee-tree yesterday.”

“But this tastes like tame honey,” returned the officer, pretending to lick his fingers. “It tastes like Johnson’s honey—in fact, I think it is Johnson’s honey, and I am here to notify you to appear for trial at the office of Robert D. Russell,” &c., &c.

“I’ll be there without fail,” said the irate Blank.; “but I notify Mr. Johnson, that if he appears against me, I’ll kill him.”

This threat was soon conveyed to Johnson, and he, well knowing the danger of disregarding it, failed to appear, and the case was dismissed. Such being the dread of coming in conflict with this man, that one could suffer the wholesale destruction of his property and let the villain go unpunished.

An amusing instance of Blank.’s pugilistic character was related to me by his brother-in-law, Mat Williams, who was his opposing party in the little entertainment. He and Mat had a difference in relation to a claim, both claiming it; so, according to the prevailing custom among such roughs, they mutually agreed to arbitrate it by a fight. The time and place having been agreed upon, and seconds chosen to witness the affair and see fair play, the principals immediately set about preparing for the occasion. Important

among the items of preparation were to let the finger-nails grow long and shave their heads. These were to facilitate scratching and prevent hair pulling. Then, when the day of conflict arrived, each peppered his finger-nails and greased his body. These were to give as much effect as possible to the scratching and prevent as much scratching as possible. The day of battle was a cold, frosty one, and a sharp breeze made itself felt intensely. But the affair was too important to be postponed on account of weather, so the parties repaired to the designated spot in the thick woods, south of the river from Red Rock, where the seconds had preceded them and made a log-heap fire. Here the fighters met, and immediately made the final preparation, which was to strip themselves of all clothing, probably in order to prevent it from being torn or soiled. Now, all that was lacking was to begin the fight, and, once begun, there is no doubt but it would have been one worth seeing. But each combatant seemed disposed to await the other's attack, and so they continued to wait upon each other, all the while bantering and disputing about matters that the fight alone was intended to settle, till the breeze had settled their fighting temperature down to zero, when they concluded to compromise, put on their duds, and ran home to get warm.

At one time, during the early part of his residence here, Blank's circumstances were so limited that his family subsisted on slippery elm bark fried in deer's tallow. In due time, however, he accumulated some live stock, and took a small drove of cattle to California, where he still lives. On the way there, in 1849 or 1850, his propensity for shooting people came very near resulting in an end to his own career. In a quarrel with a young man about some cattle, he shot him dead, was arrested, and sentenced to be hung. In the absence of a tree or any other substitute for a gallows, a wagon tongue was elevated, and a rope prepared to suspend him from the end of it. Here, however, through the influence of money, aided by his few friends, his case was put into the hands of the authorities of Utah, and he finally es-

caped a just atonement for his wicked life. It is said that he accumulated an estate in California worth more than a million of dollars; but this may not be true, as a late and authentic report informs us that he is under arrest for burglary.

* During the early settlement of the county, a family named Bell lived in the neighborhood of Red Rock, consisting of the father and two or three sons. A great deal of petty pilfering was being done at this time, and the Bells were not alone suspicious. Hogs were missing, and a man named Flanders had lost an ox that he had spent much time in vain search for. But he who experienced the most serious loss by these lawless transactions, was 'Squire Russell. He lived quite near the village of Red Rock, and had three fat hogs in a pen near his house, intending them for his own use. One morning he found them absent, evidently having been driven away by some person or persons. The loss was truly aggravating, and the 'Squire determined to recover his property, if possible, by legal process. So he issued a search warrant, and, with one or two others, went to see it executed. To the Bells they went, as the place most likely to be the hiding place of the missing porkers. A strict search of the surrounding premises revealed no evidence of their presence there, dead or alive; and it was decided to give the interior of the cabin an overhauling before leaving the place. Here, however, as elsewhere, no signs were visible at a first glance; but a pile of corn in one corner of the room looked suspicious enough to justify an invasion of its interior. And to the delight of the 'Squire the search revealed three dressed hogs, minus the heads. Here the owner was nonplussed again, for he could not prove his property without the ear-marks, and, of course, the ears were with the heads. But it was hoped the heads could be found, and the searchers went out to make a tour of the surrounding premises in quest of the important testimony. Observing a flock of crows some distance from the house, flying up and down, cawing and making much ado about something, as crows

do, the searchers congratulated themselves with the belief that the heads were the subject of their discussion, and went for them. Instead of the heads, however, the cause of the crows' counsel was the half-dried hide of Flanders' long-lost ox. It was identified as such; and the 'Squire, after having abandoned the search for the only proof he might be able to bring of his ownership of the hogs, took it home and hung it on a shed near his house, till Flanders could be sent for to identify it also. But that same night the hide disappeared again, and was no where found.

Horse-stealing was frequently practiced in this country at an early day; but Judge Lynch made it a risky business to those who dared to engage in it. Hanging, whipping, or shooting were the penalties for this crime. Even suspicion subjected one to severe trials. One incident and we close this paper: A stranger—whose name, with those of others connected with this incident, has been forgotten—being a loungeur about Red Rock, was strongly suspected of being connected with the horse-stealing business; and it was determined to get rid of him on the easiest terms possible, without violence. So one day he was arrested for horse-stealing, and his trial was appointed to come off before 'Squire Russell that night. Though possibly innocent, he was unable to prove himself so, and knew the critical situation of persons even suspected of guilt. In a word, he was frightened at the prospect, not knowing that the proceeding was a sham. Quite a company collected to witness the trial, many of them with guns in their hands, giving the prisoner to understand by the vigilant guard they seemed to be keeping over him, that they intended to shoot him if he made the least attempt to escape. In justice to him as a stranger, however, he was admitted to the privilege of having counsel, and one of the company kindly volunteered to conduct his case. The state having already been provided with an attorney, the trial proceeded. Witness having been sworn and examined, to the surprise of the poor, trembling prisoner, the testimony went sorely against him. His at-

torney, with apparent sincerity, tried to rebut this evidence, but all in vain. At length, despairing of success, he whispered to his client that he could not clear him; that if he wished to make his escape he would advise him how to do it. Readily agreeing to anything to save his life, he assented, and the attorney gave him the plan. Then, in behalf of the prisoner, he asked the court to permit him to step out for a moment. Permission being granted, the prisoner walked out, accompanied by his lawyer, and closely followed by the whole squad of armed men. "Now," whispered the lawyer, "run for your life, and, as you value it, never be seen in this neighborhood again." And he did run as any man would run for his life. The night was intensely dark, but it seemed to offer no obstruction to his speed. Indeed it was rather accelerated by the numerous shots that were fired behind him—not at him—and the yells of the crowd as though in pursuit. He was never seen again; but a day or two later an Indian came to town with a wallet he had found, containing nothing more valuable than a love-letter, addressed to the escaped prisoner.

IOWA: HER RESOURCES AND ATTRACTIONS.

IOWA was organized as a territory June 12, 1838, and admitted into the Union as a state December 28, 1846. In 1838 she contained a population of twenty-two thousand eight hundred and fifty-nine; in 1840, it had increased to forty-three thousand one hundred and sixteen, and in 1850, to one hundred and ninety-two thousand two hundred and four. In 1860, the population had advanced to four hundred and two thousand and forty, and in 1870, to one million one hundred and ninety-one thousand eight hundred and two. At the present time it is but little, if any, short of one million and five hundred thousand.

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