



GEORGE WORTH SCHEE

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By J. L. E. PECK

George Worth Schee was born near Alexandria, Missouri, June 15, 1847, and died in National City, California, February 9, 1926. His parents were Arnold and Martha Schee. He became an orphan when a small boy, and was raised in the family of an uncle in Mahaska County, Iowa, coming to them in 1861. He enlisted in Company C, Thirty-third Iowa Infantry, March 21, 1864. On July 12, 1865, he was transferred to the Thirty-fourth and Thirty-eighth Consolidated Iowa Infantry, and was mustered out August 15, 1865, at Houston, Texas. He was married October 1, 1877, to Miss Lizzie A. Dunning. They had three children, William S., Aloha May, and George A.

He was a remarkable man with diversified talents and engaged in many pursuits. During all his life he was an extensive tourist traveler, and all the time hunting business. He "saw America first," and then "saw America last." Mexico, Hawaii, and Panama were the only foreign countries in which he traveled. He occupied tourist apartments, however, at periods in over half the states in the Union, until it was humorously said in his his own town that he resided in the United States. His earlier years were mainly occupied in farming, school-teaching, homesteading, and boring wells on the then prairie for the old homesteaders. He went through all the pioneer hardships and experiences of the prairie pioneer.

His county, O'Brien, had been farmed like many new Iowa counties, by a set of debt swindlers, and was submerged in fraudulent debts for pretended expenses in the sum of about \$175,000, not large for our older counties, was all but fatal for a pioneer county. Two-thirds of this debt had been put into judgment in the United States courts, where they could not be opened up or set aside. Many similar counties tried repudiation and contest, but for said reasons had to pay in the end.

In 1875 he was elected auditor of O'Brien County on this issue. He contended that while it was all very unjust, that for reasons stated payment was the only road out, and that repudiation would injure the future of the county.

He, with Reiniger & Balch, bankers at Charles City, Iowa, financed and managed its refunding in the issue of needed bonds of \$200,000, and by paying off the difference with other accumulated funds, and by contesting successfully the worst portions, and also reducing the rate of interest by one-third, and later by half. This brought him to public notice.

Commencing near the time he left this office of county auditor he engaged in the land business, not as a land agent but in buying, owning and selling on a large scale. In the quite early days he organized and became an official in some eight separate banks, and three large loan and investment companies, and was very successful in investments on various lines.

While he bought and sold many thousands of acres of land in his time, he at one time owned some 3,000 acres in Iowa and about 1,000 acres in Minnesota. At one time over forty years ago he farmed a large acreage in wheat in California. In fact during fifty years he has averaged over 1,000 acres in actual farming per year.

One of his loan and investment companies was in Idaho, and two in Iowa. At sundry times he was the owner of stores and stocks of goods and merchandise of various kinds which he conducted. He owned stock in a bank in Mexico City at one time.

In the pioneer schoolhouse lyceums he had taken a considerable part, and became very skillful in parliamentary law, not only in the lyceums but in the county conventions. This brought him into larger politics. He was elected from his county to the state legislatures in 1883 and 1885, and again in 1908 and 1910, serving in the Twentieth, Twenty-first, and Thirty-third and Thirty-fourth general assemblies. They all knew he was there, and many bills were passed or rejected on his organizations of members for or against. He occupied the speaker's chair far more than the average members. He was a scrapper in the all around sense.

While in the state legislature as a member, he introduced a bill to require every school board to keep a United States flag floating on every schoolhouse in the state. Curiously enough at that early day it was voted down. This roused the patriotic idea and ambition in his make-up to a very high tension, and later on to the high grade resolution that if the state of Iowa would not do it, he would carry it out himself, as teaching patriotism.

This matter of teaching patriotism, and actually carrying it out, was a growth of the years. As early as 1880 he expressed his ambition to the writer hereof, both then young men, that he hoped sometime to be able and well enough off to place a United States flag on every schoolhouse in his own county of O'Brien. This he accomplished about three years thereafter. He hired a man with team and wagon loaded with flags, poles, rope and tackle, and instructed him to put up a flag on each schoolhouse, two miles apart. This he could do. It was a practical thing, that far, the first time around, with flags. At the end of eight years he had taken in three other counties in a similar way, and it was still practical. At the end of twelve to fourteen years he had a string of counties across the state from Lyon County at the northwest, to Burlington, with the schoolhouses all covered with United States flags. Thus far it was still practical and workable, in each case done by a man and team as first carried out in his own county.

In 1916 he reached his climax effort, to extend this ambition to the whole state of Iowa. In this, however, he did not measure the full practical size up. On July 3, 1916, he organized a corporation known as the Iowa Patriotic Fund, under management of three trustees, to carry the plan into effect. He then, his wife, Lizzie A. Schee, joining, deeded to this corporation 4,202 acres of clear, high priced land, located in Iowa and Minnesota.

The articles of incorporation uses these words, as expressing the purpose of Mr. Schee: "This corporation is formed to promote patriotism among the children and inhabitants of the state of Iowa, by the equipment with flags, poles, and furnishings, of a United States flag for the public school buildings and schools of the state of Iowa." And yet it must be regretfully stated that this laudable program and ambition of Mr. Schee failed and became impracticable. It was not that the funds were insufficient. It was seriously and conscientiously tried out by very able business men as trustees. The funds were ample. It was much of a disappointment to Mr. Schee.

The failure of the plan may be attributed to several causes. In the first place a recent legislature in Section 4253 of the Code of Iowa passed a law, curiously enough, in almost the identical words of the bill he had himself introduced when a member thirty years previously, but which then was voted down.

This later law required all school boards to keep a United States flag floating on all school buildings in the state. This law, while all done properly, had the effect to largely nullify his efforts. Other items, however, contributed. It was found in putting up flags that in the second time around one flag was whipped out by the wind in one year, and that another flag would last five years. This caused uneven work in replacement of flags. But added to this was the fact as developed that in such a statewide problem, there were 14,000 schoolhouses in the state, and 14,000 school boards to deal with. As is known a school board of three to five members with additional persons as secretary and treasurer, officials receiving no pay, and coming and going in their personnel, made the task unworkable. The added fact also that Iowa has nearly two and one half million people to keep organized in such a matter added to the difficulties. Another curious item playing a part was the very price of the flag itself, about \$10.00 equipped and placed, though Mr. Schee purchased them by wholesale and got them cheaper. It was found that even where a school board desired and needed a flag, and with the question up it would be remarked, "We hear there is a man in the state putting up flags free." "What is his name?" "We don't know." "Where does he live?" "We don't know." "What does a flag cost?" "About \$10.00." "Oh, pshaw! Let's buy a flag and be done with it." While it was all extensively advertised in the papers and through school conventions and by county superintendents, yet it was doubtful if one man in 2,000 in the state could intelligently answer these questions. At the times needed the whereabouts of the trustees or Mr. Schee were not available.

This Iowa Patriotic Fund was well managed. Mr. Schee was a good judge of men, and attracted to his board such able business men as P. J. Shaw of Plover, for many years connected with the Insurance Department of the state, and A. J. Shaw his son, an attorney of Pocahontas; W. K. Herrick and E. C. Herrick, his father, able attorneys of Cherokee; O. F. Schee, a cousin, of large business experience of Des Moines; T. B. Bark, a banker of Sutherland, and Frank Patch, banker of Hartley, all ably assisted by Miss May Stinson, secretary.

In addition to this effort in teaching patriotism Mr. Schee organized a second corporation known as the Thirty-third Iowa Infantry Regiment Iowa Patriotic Fund, covering three coun-

ties, including Oskaloosa. This will be continued, and being on a smaller scale can be and is made practical, and will commemorate this regiment and its Civil War services, of which regiment Mr. Schee was a member.

The writer hereof makes this statement as giving authenticity to his knowledge of Mr. Schee's activities and life. The writer hereof has known Mr. Schee intimately for fifty years, lived in the same town, joined with him in many enterprises and public questions, bought much land in joint ownership with him, counselled with him in business, assisted him in hunting up new purchases of land and investments, and examined with and for him the titles to same.

Mr. Schee in fact was a genius financially, especially in land investments, and understood its principles and dangers, and also understood the fundamental reasons why so many people failed in their efforts in land purchases.

The writer also drew his will, settled his large estate in court, and spent three months in each year of three years on the many questions arising in the close up of this flag program, and with aiding in the proceedings necessary to have these lands regained and transferred back to his wife, Mrs. L. A. Schee.

Mr. Schee began to be doubtful as to the practicability of this flag program about three years prior to his death, and so expressed himself. About fourteen months before his death he sent for the writer hereof and repeated his fears and conclusion, saying in effect that it was not functioning and fulfilling itself according to his expectations, and expressed himself that he wished to have such proceedings made as would return the properties to him. This we could both see would involve not one transaction, but a long series of proceedings. The writer drew up a document reciting his ambitions to teach patriotism to the school children and citizens of the state, and the fact that he had deeded 4,202 acres of land to the Iowa Patriotic Fund, the rents from which, or the interest on the proceeds, if sold, should carry it out financially, but that in its actual working, in his judgment, had proved impractical and nonworkable, and asking that the Board of Trustees of this corporation deed the property back to him, and asking that the courts and all public officials acting for the public take action in accordance therewith. This document he signed and acknowledged before a notary public,

which document became an item of material evidence in the District Court at Des Moines later on.

This writer at his request made a trip to Iowa during his lifetime to engage attorneys, to start matters in motion, and to do all necessary to test the questions involved, and in fact spent three months in each year, 1925, 1926, and 1927 for these purposes. Suffice it to say, the proper legal action in equity was brought to dissolve the corporation holding these lands, and to require the trustees to deed it back to the proper parties, to Mr. Schee had he lived, and to his wife otherwise. His death occurred February 9, 1926. This cause of action was tried in the summer of 1926, and in February, 1927, Judge Thompson presiding, a decree in equity was rendered directing the trustees to execute the deeds to Mrs. L. A. Schee.

This decision was had in its proceedings, in the main, on the legal proposition that when any serious property transaction fails to function and becomes impractical and nonworkable, that it becomes the duty of the court to reinstate all parties to the original title situations. Sundry incidental questions arose. A court is loath to hand back a gift to a donor unless that donor asks for it himself. This as shown by the document he had executed was timely done, which document proved a very definite item of evidence in the case.

The title to all the properties was therefore established in Mrs. L. A. Schee, free of encumbrance, from four sources: 1. The decree of the District Court at Des Moines. 2. By the deeds to her from the Board of Trustees. 3. By the will of Mr. Schee. 4. By the decree of the District Court of O'Brien County. The question whether it was a revocable or irrevocable trust was tested and argued out. It was no small proceeding. It was a proceeding of hundreds of details.

It is doubtful whether another similar case, either in business or litigation, ever existed in the whole United States, though the principles of a gift would apply to much other litigation. It all possessed a high grade ambition and idea to teach patriotism to the children of the state. His idea rose to the occasion as it were, in all the sentiments leading to loyalty and love of country. But we think it can hardly be classed as a failure. We must conclude that while the immediate item of the flag program as a business or public transaction proved impractical, yet in the large, in his

fifty-five years of effort and continual agitation, and in the actual covering of twenty-seven counties with Old Glory, as likewise in his own act when a legislator of introducing a bill for a law requiring all boards of education to keep a flag so floating in the breeze, and keeping before the minds of the masses, in the continued pressing the Stars and Stripes into the presence of the school children and citizens, and in his persistent presentation of the question through the offices of the county superintendents of the state, all to such an extent that the legislature in the later years actually enacted his idea into law, that in result and effect he advocated thirty years before, that his ambition in fact has been accomplished, and that he has rendered a great service to the state and to its children and citizens.

All this, added to that natural intuitive patriotism existing in the very hearts and souls of our people, so well carried out in Fourth of July and Decoration Day celebrations and services and programs, and in public parades and day school exercises, will all reach up in parallel lines to that patriotism intended by this great effort, and actually carried out statewide for so many years in fact and in expense by George Worth Schee, and all of which together with other qualities of hand and heart, class him as one of the remarkable men of the state of Iowa.

But Mr. Schee did not limit his public benefactions to these United States flag programs. He expended \$50,000 in public libraries in the sundry town libraries in northern Iowa, running from \$300 to \$1,500 per town. In addition he placed a teachers' library costing \$500 in each county superintendent's office in twenty-five counties in northwest Iowa, on condition that the county superintendent in each case raise a like amount by subscription in the county.

For three years he brought about contests in fifteen of the schools of O'Brien County for the student in each school having the best grades for the year, and then sent the fifteen selected students with a guide or chaperon on a sight-seeing trip, one year to the World's Fair at Buffalo, another to the World's Fair at Saint Louis, and a third year to Washington, D. C., and paid all expenses.

He erected a soldiers' monument at his own expense of \$3,000 at Hartley, Iowa, with the names of all old soldiers of his post carved thereon.

In 1909 in connection with O. H. Montzheimer, a townsman and an attorney, compiled a book entitled, *Biographical Data and Army Record of Old Soldiers Who Have Lived in O'Brien County, Iowa*. This was a book of 200 pages giving as stated the army record of 579 old soldiers, nearly all of whom were also old homesteaders in that county. He presented each old soldier with a copy. This involved a large amount of research at Washington.

It is believed he made a contribution to the construction of every church building in his county, as well as to others elsewhere.

Mr. Schee was equally public spirited on sundry other personal lines, particularly with the sick and suffering. In numerous cases, perhaps a score or more known to the writer, where long time sufferers needed medical or surgical aid, he took them to hospitals and paid all expenses. In many cases also where a worthy family became sick in an epidemic, he cared for the whole family during the entire seige, with provisions, physician, or nurse, as needed. He did many of these items that never got into print.

One peculiar instance occurred. In one of his campaigns for the legislature, one man was going from man to man, on the farms among voters, electioneering against Mr. Schee. The man's team ran away, threw him out, and broke his shoulder and three ribs. Mr. Schee heard of it, started for him, took him into his buggy, landed him in a hospital, and furnished a nurse and surgeon and hospital service and paid all expenses.

The settlement of Mr. Schee's estate and family moneys showed he had accumulated the net amount of \$700,000. This would be after all this flag expense, and would be outside of all other expended benefactions and family outlays, and his own large traveling expenses. On the theory that a man must always first earn a sum of money before he can spend it, Mr. Schee in his fifty-five years of business life must first have made approximately one and one half million dollars. It could not be a less sum.

The writer must mention one other remarkable feature of his life. In all this vast business necessary to organize and carry out all this in the earning, saving and managing, equal as it was to at least three banks of the size of those in his part of the

state, he personally never kept either a day book, journal, or ledger. His banks as banks did so for the bank's business, but not for his personal part of the business. He had a powerful memory and he carried all this in his memory. It must be concluded that this item of his life accounts in large part for some of the peculiarities, and which so many people could not and never did understand. Sundry people said, "Why, I can never get acquainted with Mr. Schee. Often when I pass him on the street he don't even notice me." The explanation was that many times as he walked the street he was solving the problems in this large business in memory, and he could not both do that, and stop and talk to people. He has often said to the writer, "Burn up your account books and ledgers and come with me. We can make more money looking up new business than we will lose by not keeping books. Life is too short to spend keeping books."

Based upon the fact that this writer in his more limited land ventures, in fact owned and held and sold 9,000 acres of land from period to period, in his best judgment Mr. Schee must have owned, held, farmed or sold about 60,000 acres during his career.

While he had a powerful memory as stated, this vast business in its multitude of details was a tax upon him at times, and continually. This often made him appear eccentric, and at times even inconsistent with himself. It was not even a fault of memory. He had too much business for one head. A person who even knew his habits and methods would have to know the slant of his mind from his standpoint to be able to size him up correctly. The brief vest pocket memorandum books with a dozen words in and relating to one item, would not be sufficient for a stranger to interpret it. He was much misjudged. We often misjudge our best friends. Mr. Schee has often spoken to the writer on these subjects.

Another great qualification he had was an intuitive knowledge of what the law is, and of business and how it should be carried out. He has on more than one occasion said to his attorneys whom he had hired, "Now see here. You follow this business or question up on this line. I tell you I know it is the law. I know that the business and morality of it is right, and I know it is all good common sense, and I know that when a thing is right, and corresponds to good common horse sense, it is good law."

Another great quality he had was that of cleaning every item

up as he went. This is evidenced in the fact that in the settlement of his estate, not a single claim was filed against it except for the funeral expenses. He never disputed a just claim. He has often said to this writer, "Always either lick out a claim in court or pay it." Still he was an inveterate scrapper for his rights. He has at times even carried a one-hundred-dollar claim he thought not just clear to the Supreme Court of the state. He scarcely ever hesitated on an item of possible cost, as he said, "We will figure up the expense when we get to the other end." When building his main residence in 1888, and his Sioux Falls stone for the basement did not arrive when it should, he ordered and had it sent by express.

He created a fund in his own town to promote art and an art league was organized, and like unto a lyceum, met regularly for about ten years, and continued for discussion of many general subjects.

He was ever alert with keen judgment, a good judge of human nature, accurate in his business conclusions, quick in action, and swift in execution, and seemed always to be able to do more work than any other six men for a day's work. He was abrupt, decisive, and shrewd. He was positive and to the point. He had the fine faculty of obtaining the opinions of others without their knowing it. He was a man with strong friends and equally positive enemies. He was never neutral and could not stand neutrality in others. When he asked a man to vote for him, and the man wavered, he said to him, "See here, you get on the other side where you belong. Get on one side or the other so I will know where you are." His campaigns for office were always fights, will the frills all on.

In the land business Mr. Schee was a genius. He knew its dangers, and it is true that the land business is very dangerous. When land goes flat as it has in recent years, it becomes a dead weight, and will not move. It may be curious to note that in this late 1919-20 land inflation, he never bought or sold a tract. He called it a frenzy at the time. He never went hunting for land snaps on a loaded train of land seekers, or on an excursion of land buyers or land promoters. His adage was, "Never buy land in a boom," or "when or where the crowd goes to buy land." "Buy where and when people are sick of their land. The tendency of a crowd is to follow the most optimistic and enthusiastic

man." Another principle he followed, "A man should never invest more than one-third of what he is worth in land at one time. Keep the other two-thirds to make safe and protect that third." "A man can buy too much of even a good thing. Even if his price is right, if he buys too much, and can't handle himself with the finance part, he will go broke even in good times, even if the purchase is desirable." That in the late land drunk of 1919-20, many purchasers bought with only one-tenth down, when it was impossible to hold it long enough to get a profit. In this last excitement optimism became rampant, thousands bought with no idea whatever of its dangers or the need to be able to hold long enough. It became an epidemic, the force of the mass mind on each individual, like unto the smallpox without any quarantine, and with results which Mr. Schee, from his long experience, avoided.

One other faculty he had, he knew his surroundings, measured carefully his own strength, and credit, and knew his hand as it were at all times. He had pioneered on the raw prairie, and understood the old soldier and the old homesteader. He had fought prairie fires, and knew that a back fire was the best way to fight one. He had eaten prairie chicken dinners in the prairie sod shacks with the common people and secured their votes. He had hunted and measured out the government corners across the prairie grass by tying his handkerchief to the buggy spoke, then counting the revolutions of the wheel and then figuring it up. He had accumulated all he had as a result of actual dealings and work with actual things in his own northwestern Iowa.

He had his faults. One serious lacking he had. He had no diplomacy. His tendency was rather to get into the scrap. Had he had this quality of diplomacy—a little more of the yielding—he would certainly have attained higher political honors. On this subject he has said to this writer,

"To my virtues be a little blind,
And to my faults and failings, be a little kind."

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