

# ANNALS OF IOWA

---

## EDITORIAL DEPARTMENT

---

### TOWARD CORRECT LANGUAGE IN EARLY IOWA

---

Some words not now current, used 1850 to 1860 in the William Savage settlement (roughly the southeast township of Jefferson County, and those contiguous in Henry and Van Buren counties, Iowa) are by the student to be considered at least in the following lights.

Born September 2, 1833, William Savage, an orphaned boy in England was taken into the family of his late father's brother, William. The deceased father and the Uncle William were Quakers. Therefore the earliest vocabulary of the diarist was formed of Quaker usage in England in an intelligent, if humble family in the tailor trade.

Migrating to Cayuga County, New York, the diarist in 1847, still in his Uncle William's family, as an apprenticed tailor extended his contacts, hence enlarged his vocabulary, with his trade and through the country school, until he was fourteen years old.

An apprentice to any of the trades in the 1840's currently employed not only that trade's facilities, including its tools, devices, methods, but its nomenclature. A dextrous, apt and needy boy adapted other trade processes of practical aid in getting on in life, with those neighboring trades' particular nomenclature.

Prior to and in the 1850's, frontier settlers in eastern Iowa as often as not had been apprenticed workmen in a score of trades such as weaver, sailor, cooper, millwright, rope wainer. So that Savage's first Iowa country school in Cedar Township, Van Buren County, Iowa, of the 40's and 50's drew into it the trade-language of all. The babble was further affected by such variation of words and their pronunciation, of trade-, tool-, and use-nomenclature as the respective family antecedents had brought into Iowa, as Savage's neighbors had, from the older states of New York, Virginia, both Carolinas and their com-

monwealth-children, Kentucky, Tennessee, Ohio, Indiana and Missouri. Therefore William Savage, as a patron, slowly shed his peculiar usage (see his diary where he drops the use of the solemn Quaker style on Friday, September 17, 1858). His neighbors dropped their oddly applied or differently pronounced ancestral words, though these may have been current as of the time and place they were acquired. Each pupil in the Savage settlement had to rid his child-mind of its habitual, faulty words and faulty pronunciation as he found it false by example of teacher in the schoolroom or by snubs and sneers of playmates in their merciless mocking at play. The authority of Webster's "blue-backed speller" was the standard of synonymns for ideas and for correct utterance of words.

Unfamiliar words of William Savage will nearly all be found in Webster's New International Dictionary, 1920 edition, as ordinary, provincial, archaic or obsolete. Other standard dictionaries in current use today by scholars carry most if not all save one: "Dykes" as it occurs in Savage's diary for April 6, 1859, is not so found. But even this exception may be as a provincialism recalled by Iowa "scholars" of sixty years ago and workers on farms or in trades in that time.

We are often ungracious heirs to the social achievement, through use by our folks of these and much other defective language. The all but obsolete words that William Savage used in his diary touched talent, valor, integrity, faith, hope and work. The fruits of all this came down to us cost free. We should and do enjoy a view of his unspoiled or faulty usage. The diary is a retrieval of what may fairly be termed evidence of original Iowa culture. By contrast with today's corresponding words and experience, it is a true basis for admeasuring this gift, and of our own improvement, if any. The trend outward and upward through the country school and home life, during and before the Civil War, in the Savage settlement, and to a degree in all older Iowa settlements, is intimated if not clearly proved.

---

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.