

THE EARLY HISTORY OF PERRY, IOWA

by Eugene Hastie

Mr. Hastie has been a resident of Perry for 80 years. He is the author of several books, one of which is The History of Perry, Iowa. The reader may consult this text for further information concerning the growth and development of the Perry community.

Accompanying photographs are courtesy of the author.

The history of Perry begins with the arrival of settlers in the surrounding area in the late 1840s. One Oscar D. Smalley, accompanied by two other gentlemen, left the Des Moines River area to explore the region farther west. They located along Beaver Creek at what they called Buffalo Grove.

The next people to settle in this area were members of the John Moore (a farmer from Delaware) and James Morse (a blacksmith from Rhode Island) families. An ancestral notebook relates the following account of their establishment:

In the year, 1849, John Moore and some of his relatives decided to move to Iowa. An ox team caravan was formed and they left Champaign County, Illinois, for Iowa in October. In the company besides Mr. Moore and his wife were five sons, three of whom were married, the oldest one having children. The younger of the married ones was married just before their departure, and this trip to Iowa was regarded as their honeymoon trip. In addition to these were Mr. and Mrs. James Morse, Sr., parents of the new bride, and three children, making a company of 17. The caravan arrived at Buffalo Grove, Union Township, Boone County, Iowa on Nov. 17, 1849.

What is lacking in the Moore account is supplied by Mrs. M. E. Fagen, a granddaughter of the Morses:

John D. Moore and wife (the newlyweds) and the Moore brothers (presumably the single ones) lived in a hut without a floor, door or windows, and a log heap in the center on which to cook their food until trees could be felled and cabins erected for the occupancy of the other families. (The other families, including the Morses, lived at Zenia, a little town near the Des Moines River southeast of the present site of Woodward.) The first winter was mild and pleasant, and the new settlers thought that they had found a paradise, but the next winter (1850-51) was exceedingly cold and with much snow.

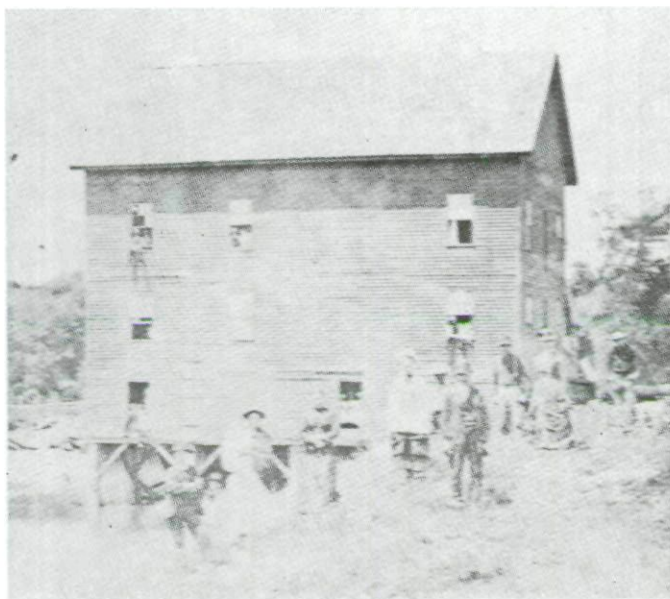
The following names are among those recorded as other early settlers: "Dutch" Henry, a Hessian, alias Henry Johns from Pennsylvania; Cornelius McKean; Mike Shiveley, an adventurous gold seeker who returned from California to settle in Iowa; John Roberts, another California gold seeker; Seth Dayton, owner of one of the first two-story brick houses which later became a tavern; Robert Hastie, a Scotsman and another goldseeker; David Hastie, brother to Robert, who left England, crossed the Atlantic by steamboat, descended the Ohio River and came up the Mississippi to Muscatine where he secured a stagecoach for Fort Des Moines; Joseph Phillips; Tilman Chance, a Kentuckian; Elijah Orman; Patrick Graney, an Irishman who established the present Graney bridge three and a half miles south of Perry; Levi Wilcox; Dr. Peter Mowrer, a physician from Pennsylvania; Francis Johnson, Decatur Potts, the fellow for whom Lake Potts is named; Mac Leming and Abraham Bennett.

A magnanimous character of those early days was Judge Henry Thornburg. He came from Indiana in 1855 driving a herd of cattle. He settled about four miles south of what was to be the actual Perry site and on the east side of the Racoon River. His first home, quite temporary, was a hay house, without windows. Some mornings the family would awaken to find wild deer eating the hay. As soon as a log cabin could be completed, the Thornburgs changed living quarters.



Judge Thornburg

A man of wealth, Judge Thornburg was able to buy a sawing outfit with which he began harvesting virgin trees for lumber. With this lumber, he built a three-story grist mill on the river bank near his house. Power was furnished by water impounded back of a dam built across the river. Millstones were used for grinding. For many years the old mill served a wide area for the grinding of wheat, corn, rye and buckwheat.



The Thornburg Mill

In 1864 Thornburg built a two-story house with 14 rooms. He and his wife reared 22 children, only one of which was their own. The others were children of relatives and friends. Mr. Thornburg was the second of three Dallas county judges that served from 1851 to 1861, hence the title, "Judge."

As with many Iowa communities, Perry really had its beginnings with the coming of the railroad. The first railroad to reach Des Moines in 1866 was a line running up from Keokuk known as the Des Moines Valley Railroad. Soon there was a desire to extend it on to Fort Dodge. Prior to this expansion, however, two brothers, Harvey and John Willis, acquired land in the northern area they anticipated the railroad to go. They were anxious for a new town to be developed on this land. Harvey also bought some timberland south of Des Moines, at a place called Summit. Here he operated two saw mills to help repair ties and provide fuel for the new road as it was to proceed.

The railroad officials consented to start a town on the Willis land provided they be given five acres of ground and 32 lots. This was granted. The line became known as the Des Moines and Fort Dodge Railroad and the town was dubbed Perry in honor of an official in Keokuk.

Regular train service began on July 4, 1869, an unforgettable day for the jubilant settlers. The timetable in the first issue of the *Perry Chief* (Sept. 19, 1874), the first regular weekly paper issued, shows that two trains ran each way. One was a passenger-freight train, which took two and a half hours to go from Des Moines to Perry. The other was solely a passenger train that made the same distance in one hour and forty minutes.

During the winter of 1868-69, when construction work was well along, the Willis brothers began platting the new town. The entire area was 220 acres. Harvey owned the northern part while John possessed the southern. Consequently, and most fittingly, the street that divided the area was given the name of Willis Avenue. (Today this is Hiway 141 across Perry east to west.) Harvey named two streets on the north side after his daughters, Lucinda and Edna. John did likewise on the south side with the names of Evelyn and Estella.

The first country schoolhouse of this general area was built in 1856 on land owned by John Carnes in Buffalo Grove. Every man interested in helping to establish the institution furnished from one to three logs and aided in the actual construction. It was a typical schoolhouse — 20 x 26 feet in size, two and three windows on each side and a door at the end of the room nearest the road. It also had the customary stove in the middle of the room and a blackboard across the back end.

There was a school board of three farmers who hired teachers, brought in fuel and supplies and repaired the premises when needed. The teacher was expected to perform all the janitor work, including starting the fires. The first teacher in this schoolhouse was Miss Caroline Palmer who received \$1.75 a week in addition to board. A regular

school in Perry was not built until 1874. It was a frame building that also housed other businesses. Two years later, it was replaced by a 50 x 60 foot brick building that had a tower and belfry.

The first religious gathering in Perry was a Quaker meeting at Ben Campbell's carpenter shop. Thereafter, numerous denominations became organized and established regular church services. The following churches are accredited with having provided a place of worship for Perry residents and were first established in the accompanying designated years: First Baptist, 1869; Presbyterian, 1869; Methodist, 1869; Christian, 1871; Catholic, 1871; Congregational, 1883; Unitarian, 1890; Latter Day Saints, 1893; Assembly of God, 1906; Christian Science, 1907; Zion A.M.E., 1914; Bethel Baptist, 1922; Church of God In Christ, 1926; Trinity Lutheran, 1929; Church of God, 1940; Jehovah Witnesses, 1950; and Mt. Olivet Lutheran, 1957.

For the first five years, Perry was just a small country village of friendly neighbors, but no one had any position of authority. They were under the jurisdiction of county officers. In December 1874, a petition was presented to Judge Mitchell of Adel, asking for an election to see if the majority of the citizens favored incorporation. Accompanying the petition were affidavits indicating the village had a population of 540. The Judge appointed A. G. Webster, L. D. Gamble, G. H. Rowley, Ed Lunt and P. C. Rude as commissioners to hold an election. That election was held on Feb. 27, 1875, and of the 120 votes cast, 63 favored incorporation, while the remaining 57 opposed such a move. In a following election, J. H. Conley, a blacksmith of "excellent reputation," was elected mayor. The original townsite was bounded by Estella, Eighth, Edna (now Dewey Ave.) and W. Third streets, consisting of the previously mentioned 220 acres. From those earliest times, Perry had a unique triangle instead of the customary town square. This was enclosed with a large log chain run through holes in the tops of large posts. It served admirably for a hitching place during the horse and buggy days.



Pattee's General Store

D. J. Pattee has the distinction of opening the first store of retail business in Perry. It was a typical general store as was the one a Chinese merchant, Ar Shong, had later on in the 1890s. Both merchants handled dry goods, groceries, jewelry, lumber and feed as well as operated somewhat of a hatchery. Among other early business enterprises were a hardware store started by two brothers, Edwin and Will Miller; a grist mill built by William Otis and two Selby brothers; a sawmill operated by John Shively; nurseries begun by George Baxton but later sold to Frank Edmondson; a cigar factory owned by R. H. Culbertson; and an ice house maintained by Will Petty. Other manufacturing enterprises were Conley & Payton who made plows and mining tools; S. A. Carpenter & Son, who made carriages and wagons; and Kurtz & Co. who made spring beds. In 1883 Henry Moody opened a creamery and in 1887 Blank & Rosenbolt started a bottling plant.

The first post office within the Perry area was established in 1858 with James Morse chosen as Postmaster. However, with the actual founding of the town, the office was moved to a small corner in David Pattee's general store. Pattee then assumed the Postmaster duties. His "salary" consisted of a certain percentage of the stamps he sold.

The first bank in Perry was of a private nature, conducted by George Blakeslee in 1873. He loaned "Eastern" money and exacted a two per cent interest a month from his patrons. However, David Pattee and O. Mosher officially opened a Citizen's Bank to provide the needed competition, thus forcing Blakeslee to form a National Bank (Aug. 14, 1883). But Blakeslee was investigated by the Comptroller of Currency because "things were not going well," and was forced to sell out his bank to Pattee and Mosher in 1885.

As previously mentioned, the first newspaper publication was the *Perry Chief*. The first five years it was published by J. W. Jones and Ed Lunt, both formerly of the *Des Moines Daily Register*, but they sold their firm to A. C. Newton in 1879. When money was scarce during those initial years, the publishers were willing to take most anything in payment for subscriptions. The following is an example of the type of notice that appeared in early editions:

Those of our readers who prefer to pay for the *Chief* in potatoes, flour, butter, eggs, coal, etc., will find us ready to receive all such articles at the regular market price. A few live chickens are wanted as soon as possible.

Among other pertinent information found in that first edition of the *Chief* in 1874 are the Perry market prices paid for farm products. The items listed were:

wheat, 68 cents; rye, 69 cents; oats, 35 cents; barley, 50 cents; corn, 50 cents; potatoes, 60 cents; beans, \$1.25; onions, \$1.00; butter, 12 cents a pound; a dozen eggs, 10 cents; and a 49 pound sack of flour, \$1.45.

In 1870 Perry's population was 70; ten years later it had reached 999. But the town's greatest boom was "just around the corner." In 1881 the main line of the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul railroad aided in the development of this community. Perry became a division station. The result was a great influx of workers, business and professional people. The State census of 1885 records 2,573 persons living in Perry. It has been a steadily increasing population to this day.

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