

EARLY COMMERCIAL TRAVELLING IN IOWA.

BY FRANK M. MILLS.

In 1868, while employed on the old *Iowa State Register*, I suggested the formation of the Old Settlers Association, and called a meeting at the Des Moines House for the purpose of organization. It so happened that I could not be present. There were a goodly number of first settlers there, so they constituted themselves charter members, and limited the first-class members to those who came prior to January 1, 1856. This cut out many prominent citizens who came in 1856. (After '56 hard times came on and there was not much more immigration here until after the war.) I was out by about ten days. Those who had been here fifteen years were allowed afterward to join.

When I arrived first in Des Moines it was a village of less than two thousand people, but about the liveliest village you ever saw. I came early in January of 1856 on a voyage of discovery, crossed the Mississippi on the ice at Burlington, and took the stage coach there for Fort Des Moines in about the coldest of weather.

When the coach reached Oskaloosa, I was met by an old Indiana friend or two, the versatile "Linkensale"¹ of later newspaper fame, and Ed Alvord, scion of the head of the Western Stage Company, who insisted I should abandon my visit to Raccoon Forks and settle in Oskaloosa, as the Fort was a dirty, sickly hole which never would be more than a struggling hamlet. I told them I would see Des Moines first, but that if I did not like it, I would come back to Oskaloosa.

I decided the future capital was good enough for me, and went back to Indiana to arrange for moving out. In the early spring I came by boat from Cincinnati, arriving at

¹Lurton Dunham Ingersoll.

Keokuk, Iowa's greatest city at that time, on April 4, 1857, my twenty-fifth birthday. There with my wife and ten-weeks' old baby, I took the coach for Des Moines where we arrived after six days and nights constant going, as the frost was just coming out and the roads breaking up. There were twenty in and on our coach. Some of us walked and carried a rail part of the time. In the early morning of the tenth we arrived at Uncle Tom Mitchell's stage station² and waited for daylight and breakfast. There were ten coach loads of us for the same purpose, meeting from Burlington, Iowa City and Des Moines.³

When we got to the village the river was up and the float bridge swung round and no crossing. Fort Des Moines was a very lively point just then. The Capital had just been voted from Iowa City. The commissioners were in town and had located the site and there was great rejoicing on the East Side and much indignation on the West Side of the river. Land seekers, town-lot speculators and settlers rushed to the new seat of government. Building was rampant, shanties were going up by the hundred, and the noise of the hammer and the saw waked you in the early morning and kept you awake until midnight.

I came here intending to open up a shoe store, but it was impossible to find a vacant room, so John Daugherty, a brick-maker, who came when I did, and I joined forces and started a brick yard. S. A. Robertson arrived the next day after I did and was at once offered the superintendency of the erection of the Savery (now Kirkwood House). Conrad Youngerman had arrived shortly before with but a dollar and a half in his pocket, as he told me, and had started a brick business. Mr. Robertson also started one and we three good friends, although in a sense competitors, made our impress on the season's building. I furnished the brick for the Sherman block on Court avenue, for the big Methodist church

²Now Mitchellville, Polk County.—Editor.

³The travel from Keokuk on the Old Dragoon Trail was joined usually by the Burlington travel at Agency City, Wapello County, but often at Brattain's Grove, near Utica, Van Buren County, or above that point. The travel from Davenport, and Iowa City, Dubuque, Marion and Marengo joined the Old Dragoon trail usually near Mitchellville, Polk County.—Editor.

where the Iowa Loan & Trust Building now stands, for the three-story Jim Campbell building for steamboat supplies on the point, for the Jones Hotel on the East Side, and many other buildings, beside piecing out the Savery House, the Exchange Block, and other buildings, mainly supplied by my competitors. Near the close of the season Mr. Daugherty said the prudent thing was to stop as the weather might block us. However, I was ever optimistic so bought his interest in the plant and hired him to burn another kiln, which proved a success. I sold the kiln to A. Newton to build his fine home on Fifth street, and cleaned up \$800 profit, which, with what I brought with me and my share of the summer's business, gave me a capital of \$3,500 to start my shoe business. I also sold eighty acres of land adjoining Isaac Cooper's farm on Four Mile Creek, which I had bought a year or two before at five dollars per acre, for \$800, with which I bought a lot next the Baker Drug Store on Court avenue.⁴

I graduated in the brick business in the fall, but Robertson and Youngerman continued, and each of them accumulated in it at least a half million dollars, and were to the last among the city's most prominent and progressive citizens.

To secure a location, I was compelled to buy a building on Court avenue for \$1,200 cash. Not to encroach on my store capital, I borrowed of Col. J. N. Dewey the necessary sum for six months at forty per cent interest per annum, the standard rate then, which I was able to pay at maturity. Col. Dewey always was a good friend, but seemed to consider himself thereafter a sort of benefactor and sponsor for my success.

At the same time I started my shoe store my brother Webb⁵ and my older brother J. W. and myself each put in two hundred dollars to start a small job printing office, that Webb might have something to make a living at until he got ready to go into the practice of law, he having already been admitted to the bar. When I opened my shoe store in the fall

⁴The Baker Drug Store was on the southeast corner of Third Street and Court Avenue.

⁵Noah W. Mills enlisted May 4, 1861. Appointed Second Lieutenant. Promoted Captain June 1, 1861. Wounded in battle of Corinth, October 4, 1862, "while fighting with the most conspicuous courage and coolness." Was promoted Colonel October 8, 1862, and died of wounds October 12, 1862.

there was but one other shoe store, that of Stacy Johns. B. H. Corning and Jim Kemps made boots and shoes but kept no general stock. Charley Kahler was an apprentice to Corning.

The next spring there were seven shoe stores. In the meantime, the job printing was successful, and having a good opportunity, I sold my shoe business and building and invested the proceeds in the printing concern, and Webb and I undertook to boost the printing and publishing business to the limit of our capacity. Soon we had Tac Hussey, who had come a few months before I did, as our chief artist. We started a blank book and stationery and county supply department, and by dint of hard work and persistent canvassing we acquired an extensive clientage.

When the Civil war broke out, Webb, having been Captain of the Wide Awakes in the Lincoln campaign and an officer in the local military company, insisted that I should waive my right as elder and allow him to go into the field, and that I should remain and look out for the business and our little families. We owed a large sum of money, had much money coming to us, and a considerable stock of merchandise on hand. Things looked pretty blue for the business. In addition to this every man in our employ able to bear arms enlisted. Business was poor. I spent a large part of my time the rest of 1861 in raising the Tenth Iowa Regiment, which I recruited and swore into service and transferred to the State government. I also raised afterward some two hundred recruits for the Second and Tenth regiments.

The loss of my brother at the battle of Corinth left me with the entire responsibility of the business and our families. I had to hustle. I boomed the business to the extent of my capacity, and incidentally, I boomed and boosted for Des Moines to such an extent that for years our business became known far beyond the boundaries of the State, reaching into Missouri and Minnesota, and covering Kansas, Nebraska, the Dakotas, Colorado, Wyoming and other territories, even bearding the lion in his den and making a good customer of Brigham Young himself, selling him and his Zion Co-Operative Mercantile Institution several thousand dollars' worth

of our products in the course of a few years. The first engraving of his portrait was done by us to go on their certificate of stock.

Ours was about the only concern which caused the outside world to pay tribute to Des Moines. In the early days before we had railways, every stage coach which left Des Moines was loaded in its boot with our shipments of orders filled. The United States Express Company reported by Billy Quick that we were their largest customers in the State.

In the meantime our business had grown so that larger quarters were necessary, so we built on Fourth street the building that is the present Munger European Hotel. We added lithographing, wood engraving, map engraving, coloring and mounting, law book and other publishing, stereotyping and electrotyping, we did the State binding and printing for years, published the *Register*, the *Homestead*, and sundry weekly and monthly publications. All of this required some two hundred hands and much money. We found an able and willing helper in Des Moines' first great banker, Frank Allen. We owed him at one time through his three banks here and his two outside ones, over \$150,000. Bad banking it would be called now, but we were depositing much of the time near a thousand dollars a day. He had no other security than his faith in us, yet when he afterwards failed and final settlement was made there was a balance in our favor.

To keep up the volume of business persistent effort was necessary. We kept out from four to a dozen travelers. In the earlier days I went out a good deal myself, in all sorts of weather and conditions that now would not be undergone by any rash traveler. Orders were for much smaller amounts than now, except for county supply for their first outfit. We had aggressive competition for this, and we kept our men on the frontier. We invaded Denver, and our traveler Charley Cranston took an order from a Denver bookseller for several hundred volumes of octavo sheep-bound standard poems. This necessitated a hurried trip to Chicago, where I ransacked wholesale and retail book houses, and then could not half fill

the order. The poets were wanted by the miners and prospectors for company in their lonely mining shacks.

I made many trips over the State and elsewhere, some days driving a whole day for forty miles between houses, and now I frequently find myself wondering how I happened to escape dire disaster in storms encountered. I had often to stop for the night at homesteaders' cabins where the food was only corn bread and sorghum molasses, with parched corn coffee or hickory bark tea. I noticed one thing which seemed rather peculiar; where there was the least to eat there were more fervent thanks for the bounties spread before us. Often too the meal did not seem worth that price.

I went once with a two-horse covered sleigh with a load of county supplies. This trip lasted two whole months, all the time on runners. I went through all the southern part of Iowa, crossing the Missouri River on the ice into Nebraska City, driving on the river and crossing back and forth on the ice all the way up to Sioux City.

Returning, I passed through Shelby county. There was only one house at the county seat, Harlan. I went on to the home of County Judge Tarkington, three miles farther. The Judge was a superannuated Methodist preacher, about seventy-five years old. I was given a bed and being tired slept the sleep of the righteous. The next morning before breakfast, the Judge, taking up the big family bible, said: "Mr. Mills, I am almost blind, won't you please read for me?" I assented, of course, * * * Then we went down on our marrowbones and for awhile silence prevailed. I looked around, and saw that he and all in the house were looking right at me. I suppose they thought I was wrestling with the spirit and having a hard time. I nodded at the Judge who was still looking over his spectacles at me, but he was too blind to see, and as he was deaf as well as blind, I called out at the top of my voice, "Go ahead, Judge," and he did. I presume he had not had an audience from the outside world for some time and he made a wonderful effort. He took me right to headquarters, prayed for me fervently, and asked that I might be spared long in the good work I was doing, and

that I might go on my way securely and safely over the slippery roads, that there might be no accident to myself or team, and that I might have a successful trip, to which I silently added a fervent "Amen." After breakfast, the old gentleman and I talked business, which resulted in an order for something over two thousand dollars for county supplies. It was the quickest answer to prayer in my experience. Only a night or two before, I had accompanied Judge Whiting of Monona County to a dance at Onawa City given to raise money to fence in the graveyard. It was a festive time for a grave purpose, and I danced my best.

No one who did not go about in the early days can have an adequate idea of the discomforts and hardships. The houses were either cabins or shacks built of the native cottonwood lumber, in which the festive bedbug was incubated, and often sleep was impossible in the summer time. Houses were often, in fact generally in the country, of but one room, and when strangers or company came, three or four had to occupy one bed. The feeling of hospitality which was prevalent then did not allow the settler to refuse food and lodging to any one who came along. The houses were too far apart to justify sending the wayfarer to the next house.

I slept more than once in a one-room house where there were fifteen or twenty of us and only two beds. One night when I was on my way to see Judge Morris, who was then county judge of Carroll County, night came on when I was still miles away from my destination. I came to a little cabin where there were four or five rough-looking men about the shed stable, and was allowed to stop for the night. I had over six hundred dollars with me which I had collected, and I was a little nervous. Not long after supper, the old granddad, a veteran of seventy-five or eighty years, got down on his knees, said his "Now I lay me," and rolled to the back of the bed which I was also to occupy. When he got on his knees, my fears vanished.

The man of the house with his wife and four of the children at the foot, took the only other bedstead. A shake-down was made on the floor where four of the men were accommodated.

Boosting in the fifties was altogether another thing from that of the present day. Now it is principally done in the newspapers or speeches, in town meetings and commercial clubs, or somebody goes out with a subscription list. Then we just went out and did things ourselves. It was hard, every-day, constant work. It was work, not words alone. I will present an instance:

About 1868 or 1869 there was a great exodus from the states east of us of land seekers passing through Iowa for homesteads, with "Kansas (or Nebraska) or bust," painted on many of the wagon covers. I thought it a shame they should pass through fair Iowa to so much worse things beyond. We sent one of our *Iowa State Register* force out to the Sioux City land office to make a map of all the vacant land of that land district, and to give a full write-up of every county in the northwest. We published the map and the county write-ups in the *Register*, daily and weekly, and in a pamphlet under the title of "Free Homes in Iowa" and scattered them broadcast. We turned the tide of immigration and before the season was over nearly every quarter section in northwestern Iowa was covered with homesteaders living in cabins or shacks, in tents or wagons. We got the credit of settling up that section, but two or three seasons later when they experienced the great grasshopper raid the settlers anathematized us as much as they had before praised us. Those who could get away did so, but many could not go, and stuck it out, and were well rewarded for remaining. You cannot in all that country now buy a farm for less than from \$150 to \$250 per acre.

When I came to Des Moines the real pioneers were still here, Judge Casady, David Bush, Tom McMullin, Ed Clapp, Wiley Burton, the Lynns, Busicks, the Griffiths, the Doctors Grimmel, and that quartette of Christian pioneer evangelists, Ezra Rathbun, John A. Nash, Thompson Bird and Dr. Peet, followed soon after by Father Brazil and Dr. Frisbie, the latter still with us. This city owes more for the morality and solid character of its people to these six sainted men than to almost every other interest combined.

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