

Went as far as Saml Osburns. Went to look at a piece of land that [unites?] Boon river at the horse shoe bend.

17th Started to hunt land Took a few biscuit in my satchel and rolled up my corn for horse — in my over coat and tied it to the saddle travelled all over the country in T. 86. R 25. This is an excellent Township of land — And someday will be thickly settled.

Went through Township 87. 24 & 86. 24. These Townships are rather to wet except close to Skunk River.

Tried to cross Skunk and the outlet of Mud Lake but it was not fordable Stayed — all night at the house of Estelin, Sec. 36 T. 86. R 24. He came to this State with a six horse team. His waggon weighed 3,800 lbs and he had on it 4,000. He killed 3 of his horses and the balance were drawn nearly to death

18 Started afoot for Hardin Co. Went about 5 miles and found that I could not cross the streams. Went back — Got my horse and went to Fort Dodge. A very severe cold raw wind blew in my face all day with occasionally a gust of snow, rain and sleet. A very disagreeable ride. The sloughs I never saw worse Almost impassible. I am very tired tonight

19 Beautiful morning. I spend the day in my office I sell two nos. of land viz S.E.  $\frac{1}{4}$  sec 6. & S.W.  $\frac{1}{4}$  sec. 5. T. 86, R. 25 I sell Block 18 in my addition to Fort Dodge for \$350 — to Geo H Manlove. All is quiet

today. The Claim Club decide to remove the interlopers on James Williams Claim on Monday. That is right. The one who now occupies it is a great scoundrel — while James Williams right is undoubted as far as morality goes he having come here in a very early day and made his improvements and erected his house

Sunday April 20th 1856. Beautiful morning — but large body of fog in the river valley making it quite chilly.

Stayed in my office all day I got but little time to rest

☞ Apr 21st Beautiful day. This day I acted in the capacity of a bone fide rioter. I went with the Claim Club of Fort Dodge to dispossess old Busy & Smith Geo. H. Rogers brother in law. We tore down Old Busys house — carried his traps away — then after taking him and Smith prisoners we went at it to determine whether they should be whipped or tarred and feathered. It was finally decided to tar and feather them. I spoke and voted in favor of giving them a good thrashing, but the tar men beat us about 3 votes to two

It was some time before we could fully determine whether we could find the men to do the tarring. But finally it was done in good stile. The two claim jumpers had a good time of it

The reader may some future day wonder how I with some 100 others could do such an act. But it is no wonder to me. I look at a man who would jump a

## Claim Clubs: Protecting Settlers or Speculators?

Readers of John Duncombe's journal may be struck by the harsh treatment accorded local "claim-jumpers" by the members of the Fort Dodge Claim Club — and also by John Duncombe's strenuous effort to defend his club against possible charges of vigilante justice and mob rule. Comparing claim jumping with horse-theft, Duncombe emphasizes the family- and community-building aspects of the club's work. In his journal entry for April 21, 1856, Duncombe suggested that the club was necessary to protect the sweat equity of farmers who settled in the area before the federal government got the land surveyed and on the market for public sale — that is, between the closing of the garrison in 1853 and the opening of the U.S. Land Office in Fort Dodge in 1855.

In describing events at the Busy (Busey) and Smith residence on April 21, 1856, Duncombe holds himself up as a kinder, gentler club member in recommending that the claim-jumpers — in addition to having a house destroyed and traps removed — be whipped rather than tarred and feathered.

Unfortunately, when the issue was put to a vote among the 100 claim-club members attending the eviction of Busy and Smith, Duncombe reports, "the tar men beat us about 3 votes to two."

In time, the courts caught up with the claim clubs and, as Duncombe himself would find out in September 1856, punished those who took the law into their own hands. Historians, however, were slower than the courts to make up their minds about which side of the law to put the clubs on. Frederick Jackson Turner took a benign view, seeing the clubs as expressions of frontier democracy — ordinary citizens banding together to protect their wilderness homes in the years before official government agencies were established.

Historians Jesse Macy and Benjamin Shambaugh shared Turner's view, offering by way of example descriptions of Iowa claim clubs, including clubs operating in frontier Johnson, Poweshiek, Hamilton, and Webster Counties. Echoing Turner's comments about frontier democracy, Shambaugh also pointed to the role of the claim clubs in protecting the working farmer's



claim which was actually improved in the same light as a man who would steal a horse and when Mr Colburn our captain called for volunteers to go and take Smith I was the first one to seize him and another John — McLaughlin the second. This days performance is certainly a very marked Era in the history of Mr Smith and Busy as well as myself.

*Apr. 22d 1856* Warm pleasant day. The snow is all gone, except in a few places in the deep gulches. The grass just begins in places to look green.

The roads are drying very fast This day I attended the funeral of Mrs L S Coffin who died of consumption. I was one of the pall bearers — Nothing of particular note exists except that I am very busy and offer to loan for several years without interest one hundred dollars for the purpose of starting a full blooded Democratic paper. Mr White from Syracuse N.Y. is the man who proposes starting the paper. I dont like the locality of his position to be a real sound Democrat However I think we can put him in such a position that he cannot flinch.

*April 23, 1856* Remain in my office to day — This is a beautiful day — Nothing of importance happens to day —

24 Spend my time in the office — Beautiful day, the fields just begin to show a green tint as if the ~~bud~~ grass were starting and the trees to change their color

as if the buds were swelling — The last of the old snow in the gulches is just about gone

25 Beautiful day — the wind blows severely and the air is very damp The thermometer in the shade stands at 75° above zero. Maj Williams and I bind ourselves to give A.S. White \$600 — a bonus upon the issue of the first number of his paper in Fort Dodge, his paper to be started by the first day of August next \_\_\_\_\_

I buy a Gold watch — give \$43.75 A fools business — but I am going to give it to sister if I keep it till I see her

*Saturday April 26th 1856* I did not rest well last night. I was very feverish — It rained in the night and is raining this morning This makes the grass look green.

Remain in the office all day to day. I have a little spare time and I am glad to have it.

*April 27th* This is an extraordinary day The wind blows from the South all day terrifically. My hat is blown clear out of the town into the woods over the hill Occasional showers of rain with the wind. I read Judge Douglasses Report on Kansas and a good amount in the newspapers. Also in Butlers Analogy of Religion. I spend considerable time in reflection which I think will tend to make me a better man

28 This is a beautiful day — I spend my time in the office nearly all day. I take the Deposition of V P Van Antwerp in the case of J C Walker & Bros vs. Wm.

access to federal land against the price-gouging designs of land speculators.

In 1958, University of Iowa professor Allan G. Bogue took another look at the claim club records discussed by Shambaugh and Macy and came up with a more complex — and less flattering — portrait of the clubs' purposes and practices. In an article published in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* in 1958, Bogue reported that while each Iowa club had its own idiosyncrasies, the clubs' bylaws and proceedings revealed common features as well. First, though defenders of the clubs like John Duncombe talked about the need to protect homes, the clubs' bylaws make clear that the club's primary purpose was to protect land claims. Bogue found no mention of protecting homes in the official paperwork of any of the clubs he studied. Second, Iowa claim clubs often included absentee claimants who depended on the clubs to keep an eye on one or more claims. While some of these absentees undoubtedly bought and settled on their claims, the claim club apparently had no problem with

claimants whose goals were something other than farming Iowa land. Third, and perhaps most contrary to the clubs' traditional image, Bogue's detailed analysis of several clubs — including John Duncombe's Fort Dodge club — indicates the degree to which land speculators could enjoy the benefits of membership. Some club members held claims on more than one parcel of land; others held claims on a total acreage greatly exceeding what a single family could farm. Claims of various sizes were sold by their holders for cash — to buy a farm, to pay for a house and lot in town, or simply to make a real-estate killing later on.

Perhaps the claim clubs helped foster democratic political institutions, as Turner and other historians have argued, and perhaps not. But without doubt, as Bogue has shown, the claim clubs gave both small and large claim-holders an effective means for "extorting tribute from latecomers to the community."

— by Bill Silag

(For more on the Fort Dodge Claim Club, see the inside back cover.)



McKay Commissioner of the Des Moines Improvement — the first deposition that I ever took in any case.

29th This is a pleasant day A great excitement gets up between the land agents and speculators from abroad They hold a meeting and some angry words pass — They call us "Sharks" and we call them "Gudgeons"

They are likely to outnumber the few of us that are present and we "Adjourn ourselves by going out." And then we give three hearty cheers The land officers decide that we shall hand in our applications at the window A great rush is made for the window. I have about 4000 acres on hand to enter. I get it entered or handed in no. 6. I get my hand in the window Window smashed

This evening read Judge Douglass speech in reply to Collamer from Vermont on the "Kansas Report This speech is in the Was-Union of April 17, 1856. It is one of the best speeches. Douglass is a great man. And I have no doubt a true patriot. I hope some day to live to see him President of the United States.

30 A rainy muddy windy day. A great many strangers in town I have about 5000. acres to enter to day. Shall not get it all entered.

I enter about 1500-acres. I am quite busy. I bought 14. 120 acre land warrants yesterday for men here.

Judge Messervy comes up here to Fort Dodge yesterday. And brings the County Seat with him.

May 1st 1856. Cool damp morning. The grass just begins to start finely. Not up enough yet to be good food. The roads are very bad. The sloughs almost impassible. This season, is about ten days behind last season — I mean later.

I spend this day in my office. I am doing the best I can for my employers I dont know what will be the next move. Mr Gower yesterday guaranteed 3 L.W.s one issued to Mrs Donaly which were entered to day also. A. Carpenter did the same with two that I bought of him and Willsons McBane & Co gave me written guarantees of six that I bought of them — All of which warrants are to be and were entered on lands for Robert Sherrard Jr.

2. Hard wind commenced blowing from the East. I spend my time in the office today

3 Hard wind blows from the East. Spend my time in the office and surveying out Lots.

May 4, 1856 Spend my time in the office. Read

Washington's farewell address. Read through the Book of Ecclesiastics. Take tea at Mr Vincents. The wind still continues to blow from the East.

May 5. A very severe storm of wind continues to blow from the East making the chip and gravel stones fly and the houses shake and crack Passed tax  $1\frac{1}{2}$  per cent to build [school House?]

6 The wind still continues to blow I think this has been the most severe blow that we have had in Iowa since I came.

7 I spend my time in the office I am wasting to much time I have not sufficient regularity in my habits. I will try to do a little better than I have been doing in this respect.

May 8, 1856. The sun shines out beautifully to day. It really seems like spring. I find this season is about 20 days later than the last was here.

Nothing of importance happens here to day. Thrift and Butterworth commence to lay out their addition to Fort Dodge for which they squandered the property of Allen and committed one of the vilest frauds.

Took a Deposition.

9. A lovely day. The trees just begin to show signs of

*A great many strangers  
in town I have about  
5000. acres to enter to day.*

approaching spring. The early plumb I think it is — just begins to blossom. Mr Tod raises the frame of his steam saw mill yesterday and to day. This will be a great addition to our town when it is erected. I hope that we may have his services for a long time but I fear we shall not get them, as I fear that he will give up the job before he gets through with it.

I pitch a game with \$20 pieces to day with Thos Rees, W.O. Ruggles and Mr Oakerson. The first in my life

May 10th, 1856. A very warm pleasant day. I go out and finish surveying the out lots in Duncombe & Morrisons addition and have the stones set.

I am very tired in deed



11 I spend my time in the office, sleeping a little and reading a little. Mr. Skinner gives the claimants gass about tax and [?]. Mr. Robbins & I go up to Mr Vincents and we have a very pleasant time with Misses Amaret & Nelly Curtis.

12 It is a dark gloomy rainy morning I get cut out of my numbers by the Register setting his time ahead. I feel mad all the forenoon and I have not fairly got over it yet I cant help myself though, so there is no use of grumbling. I dont feel just right tonight. This day has been of very little account to me yet. I mean to try to do better in the future

13. Wet rainy day. I commence entering lands. I have about 10,000 acres to enter for other men. No particular news, except there has been a great Riot at Erie. Johnsons printing office. attacked by a mob and torn down. Tracy and Walkers house attacked

14. Wet cloudy day. Am still entering land. Great talk about president. Hard to tell who will win. I feel certain that the Democratic Party will undoubtedly succeed.

15 Pleasant day. I feel a little unwell. I have a bad cold. I finish entering lands for our office. I feel a little dul, nothing new. Nothing stirring I sell an out lot to Benjamin [Hellere?] of Pa.

*May 16th 1856.* Warm pleasant day. In the evening it rains a little. I go with W.O. Ruggles and make a tender of \$530, to G.H. Rogers for Henry Williams of Knox Albany Co. New York. He said he supposed I knew what his answer would be, that he intended to law that matter as long as he lived or words to this effect. I told him that the money was ready for him anytime that he would call on me at the office of Williams Henn & Co. that it was deposited with me, for him. Mr Ruggles counted the money and knows that there was \$530.

I today traded watches. Gave 76\$ to boot. This made my present watch cost me \$130.75. But in my trade my present watch cost me only \$49.75. It is a splendid heavy cased hunting gold watch. I never saw one that I liked any better.

*May 17, 1856.* Warm pleasant day. I spend my time in the office.

18 Warm pleasant day. I spend my time in the office.

19 Warm pleasant day I spend my time in the office. Get the news of the R.R grant to Iowa.

20 Warm pleasant day. Spend my time in the office

21. Warm pleasant day Spend my time in the office. This begins to look like spring. Great excitement in regard to land. Preemptors begin to rush in.

*May 21st A.D. 1856* Beautiful day. I never saw a finer day.

22 I start up the river to preempt Sec 24, T.91. R. 29. I get Hiram Foster, Washington Clark & Morgan Kelley to go and lay a foundation for me and for Mr Gaylord.

I go to old man Mitters He is very cross at first but he soon gets over it. I take a good swig of his "old rye" as I am very tired and it has been a very hot day The thermometer indicated 90 degrees above zero. This evening the land office closed up on account of the grant of lands to the State of Iowa

The news just reaches us of the shooting of Jones, sheriff in Kansas Territory. The traitor Topeka Constitution is ratified by a vote of only about 700 while there are about 7000 in the Territory

23 This is a pleasant day — very hot. We had fine shower last night. The roads are getting very fine indeed. I cross the Des Moines river just oposite Albers farm. My horse almost swims. I meet Ruggles with his four breaking teams going up to break on his preemption

24 Very hot day. I go up and finish surveying Hintons land making out the 30 acres for him. I today figured out the exact size of the piece, but both parties are perfectly satisfied that it is right and agree to let it go so.

*May 25th 1856.* A very hot but pleasant growing day. I spend my time in the office

26. Hot pleasant day.

27 Hot pleasant day. I attend suit for Stevens & Phinney, before A.M. Dawley Esq. Phinney gets change venue for prejudice against him. By filing his affidavit to that effect.

This prosecution is made by Geo B. Sherman, J. Allen Spencer & Kelley. Under the prosecution they have seized my clients whiskey; and Jno Garaghty & I are to see justice done. The venue is changed to John P. Van Cleave, over the river.

28. Warm pleasant day.



# **FREEMEN ATTEND CIVIL WAR IN KANSAS! LAWRENCE IN ASHES!**

By late reliable accounts from KANSAS, we learn that the FREE STATE MEN have been attacked by

## **BORDER RUFFIANS!**

from Missouri, under Gen. WHITEFIELD, and that Gov. SHANNON supplied the invaders with U. S. Muskets and Ammunition, with which unarmed men have been shot down in the streets of Lawrence, and innocent women and children driven from the town; their husbands and parents murdered and their houses destroyed. The U. S. Troops not permitted by the authorities to interfere.

While these outrageous tragedies are being perpetrated in Kansas, by authority of the U. S., a UNITED STATES SENATOR is brutally attacked and beaten till almost dead by a

## **Slave Bully of South Carolina,**

in the United States Senate. Such outrages unparalleled in the history of our Government, call upon all who love their country better than the chains of bondage, to speak in tones of thunder, that shall cause the SLAVE OLIGARCHY to tremble. The North should arouse! The cause is ours! Shall the bloody tyrant "subdue us?"

## **THE CRY IS FOR BLOOD!**

In view of this sad state of affairs, there will be a Meeting of the Citizens of Iowa City, at the

**STATE HOUSE, ON SATURDAY, MAY 31, 1856,**

At half past Seven o'clock, P. M.

**COME ONE! COME ALL!!**

S. N. WOOD, Esq., whom Sheriff Jones failed to arrest at the time he was shot, has just arrived from Kansas, and will address the meeting.

**SEATS RESERVED FOR LADIES.**

Presented by J. S. Templin  
March 31<sup>st</sup> 1883.

IOWA CITY REPUBLICAN PRINT.

**MANY CITIZENS.**

SHS: (IOWA CITY)



29 Warm pleasant day. I attend a suit for John Hipple in which Wm Hodges is Plaintiff I beat Beecher and get a non suit.

30 Warm pleasant day. I spend my time in my office Hold meeting tonight and nominate delegates to our Democratic County convention.

May 31, 1856 Hot day — but yet very comfortable. D. Oakeson John M Stockdale & W. H. Ringland & myself go to Homer to attend the Convention. We have a most splendid dinner. Best I have had in the State of Iowa. Took dinner at Smiths Everything passed along quietly Our convention passed off harmoniously. Stockdale & self made speeches.

Had plenty of Brandy to drink. In fact I rather think a little more than it is ruleable for me to drink I guess I better stop drinking entirely.

June 1, 1856 Sabbath. I have spent my time in my office reading nearly all day

June 2 A warm pleasant day. I start to go to John Speers to collect a note I hold against him in favor of Evans. I see him. I show him the note. He says he wont pay it. I ask him if we cant make some arrangement in relation to the note. He said he could not pay it at present at any rate, as he had not the means. He said he would like to see Mr Evans. Made particular inquiries about where he lived inquired the distance &c Said he would get his post office address of me at the first opportunity.

I told him that I would write to Evans and should be obliged to follow his directions. He said he would see me at any rate by the time I heard from him. That he could not secure the matter now. The foregoing is the substance of our conversation

3d Warm pleasant day. I spend my time in my office bringing up my business and writing letters. We get the news of the burning of Lawrence I think the President of the United States ought to have every man hung who resists the United States laws in the Territory of Kansas. Reeder, Robinson Lane, and all the leaders at least ought be hung unless they cease to resist an actual existing government which is a government until it is legally overthrown. The action of the Black Republicans as a mass in relation to Kansas is nothing less than moral treason, and those who are actually engaged in rebellion against the government of Kansas

are guilty of the crime of treason This is my candid opinion And unless the Strong arm of the Laws quells this state of thugs, in a few years perhaps less "our glorious country" and our "model Republic" will be a sordid mass of ungovernable Elements, pregnant with Strife and civil wars A shame to our race, and a damning crime committed by us against the heritage left us by our fathers. May heaven avert the blow.

But the popular prejudices of the masses — led by designing demagogues — will overlap the mark and the "sober second thought" will not have its proper effect until cruel experience has taught a severe lesson

June 4, 1856. Beautiful summer day Everything looks finely. I spend my time in my office reading the news — politics and attending to my law business. Last evening I forgot my supper — but I will try and recollect to night as I pay high for board and dont get more than half the worth of my money at any rate.

5 Warm pleasant day. I spend my time in my office reading and in hard study.

6 Warm shower — Rather cool in the morning. In my office I am studying hard I buy extracts from Punch, and "s[?] Cut Corners." I feel a little [?] and W.C. Safford as strong a man as we have in our town & I have a chi[?]. We tear each others breeches nearly off and I lay him on his back and he lays me on our back. So we are even damages and all considered and "quit" like honorable men. I have a very long talk on polotics with C C Carpenter I am keeping myself posted.

7 Warm pleasant morning. I rise at about 4 oclock I go over to John Van Cleaves to attend a law suit. The suit comes off. Garaghty & I bore Richards awfully. One of the greatest lawsuits! We are for the Defendants 2 barrels of liquor We get the liquor restored. Richards is completely fuddled never saw the like in my life. Emphatically a mix [?] we have

June 8, 1856 A fine rain this morning I feel a little gloomy. I read about 15 chapters in the book of Job. Sleep till about ten oclock after breakfast then write home, a whole sheet, & write 5 other letters which I have this moment finished. I also send prospectuses around the County for subscriptions for the first County paper published in the North Western corner of the State of Iowa, including our full quarter of that state. Maj Williams & I bend ourselves to make the Editor a present of \$600 as soon as he shall publish the first No. of his paper

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Broadside for Iowa City rally after the burning of Lawrence.



9 Beautiful day. I spend my time in the office. I am reading law, politics & the history of Russia. To day bought a good deal of land at tax sales. The first investment of that kind I have ever made.

*June 10th 1856* Beautiful day. Spend my time in my office.

*11th* Beautiful day — in my office — in the afternoon go over to Webster City with Willson & Salsbury.

*12th* Start horse back to Eldora Hardin Co 50 miles to see if I can get Willson nominated for the legislature. Get to Eldora. Stay at the house of Elsworth. In the evening see J.D. Thompson who is the leading Democrat there.

*June 13, 1856* See Smith, Thompson & J L Hough. They talk all right. They are Democrats. Get on our way for Webster City about 1/2 past 3 o'clock P.M. Go 50 miles to that place by one o'clock A.M. I have a talk with Willson — the first man I have mentioned it to in relation to acting as District Judge in the new district that we hope to form. This is a profound secret with him & with me. See whether ever this ambition will be satisfied!

*14* Stay at Webster City. They today raised the frame for a hotel 60 by 30 feet. They are driving things to a great rate. Bot my first horse for \$130 cash. A gray mare. Good little beast

*Sunday 15* Start for Otis Grove in Franklin Co. All right. Craigh shot a plover on the wing riding in a lumber wagon at good gate. Stayed all night at Reys on East side of the Iowa where Willson & Craig is laying of a town to be called "Canterbery".

*16* Start with Willson for County seat of Franklin Co. Get things all fixed. Run our horses about 6 1/2 miles in 1/2 hour through the rain. Stay with Dr. Mitchel at Mains Grove.

*17* Start for Otis Grove — Thence to Franklin Grove. Find few good democrats. Stay all night with W.E. Rogers on Sec 36 T. 93, R 24.

*18* Go to Liberty in Wright Co thence to Newcastle or Webster City here meet Provost the Engineer who is running the R Road out to Dubuque

*June 19, 1856* Bring Provost to Fort Dodge  
Maj Williams is away to Ft Des Moines. I show Provost the crossings of the Des Moines river at the Fort.

*20* In my office — All quiet Hot weather.

*21st* Hot day. I am in my office most of the day. I go down to Tolmans to show my land to a German. Hot ride. Kansas War Civil War has commenced to rage. What the result will be God only knows. Mr Buchanan

## Bleeding Kansas

John Duncombe's faith in the Democratic Party was surely tested during the 1850s. That he remained a Democrat at all through these years of sectional political strife — to be followed by the Civil War, Reconstruction, and Republican hegemony of the late 19th century — indicates the depth of his commitment to partisan tradition and party leadership. In the prewar period covered by his diary, no issue aroused the ire of this party loyalist more than what he saw as the lawless tactics of antislavery forces in frontier Kansas.

In the early 1850s Congress was beginning to feel pressure from railroad promoters, land speculators, and western politicians to officially organize the territories of Kansas and Nebraska. In response, Illinois Senator Stephen A. Douglas introduced legislation that evolved into the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which provided for the organization of the two new western territories. Addressing the key political issue of the era head-on, Douglas's bill specified that "all questions pertaining to slavery in the Territories ... are to be left to the people residing therein."

Antislavery forces, Free Soilers, and other elements of

the just-forming Republican Party were livid. The Kansas-Nebraska Act would allow voters in these territories, if they so chose, to establish slavery on Louisiana Purchase land lying north of latitude 36°30' — which runs along the northern border of Arkansas — thereby negating the Missouri Compromise of 1820. By the terms of the 1820 agreement, states formed north of the 36°30' line were to enter the Union as free states; states to the south were to be slave states. (Missouri had been an exception to this rule, entering the Union as a slave state in 1821.) In the view of Civil War historian James M. McPherson, by its wholesale affront to northern sensibilities, the Kansas-Nebraska Act "may have been the most important single event pushing the nation toward civil war."

Once the bill was passed in 1854, the political drama moved from Washington to Kansas, where proslavery and antislavery forces engaged in electioneering techniques that ranged from level-headed speechmaking to armed violence — thus "Bleeding Kansas." Iowa historian Leland Sage cautioned against exaggerating the extent of the violence, attributing to sensationalist reporting much of the hysteria coming out of Kansas in 1854