

## “We Have Beaten Homer” — County Seat Wars

Legend has it that the relocation of the Webster County seat from Homer to Fort Dodge in late 1856 was determined by the outcome of a wrestling match. The story has been repeated several times in print. A 1922 *Des Moines Register* article by Harold Andrews gives a detailed account of the event, in which Homer lawyer John D. Maxwell challenged John Duncombe to a fight to settle the county seat issue. The story also appears in Jacob Swisher's extensive review of Iowa county seats in the *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* in 1924, though Swisher downplays the fight's significance. Roger B. Natte's *Frontier Foundations: Creating an Iowa County* disputes the legend altogether, noting that Duncombe's own detailed journal (transcribed by Natte) makes no reference to a wrestling match. Still, even without the fight, the story of the rivalry between Fort Dodge and Homer is a remarkable tale of political intrigue and conspiracy.

When the original boundary lines of Webster County were drawn up in 1853, Homer was selected as county seat because of its central location. At the time the county was twice as big as present-day Webster County, extending several dozen miles to the east across much of what is now Hamilton County. The county was sparsely settled, but there was plenty of activity in the county seat among the lawyers, outfitters, and land agents who formed the core of the local business community. Especially important was the presence of the U.S. Land Office in Homer, for at this stage of the county's development, the land office business sustained the commercial life of the community as a whole.

Twenty miles northwest of Homer was Fort Dodge, established in 1850 to protect white settlers from Indian attack in the territory surrounding the fort. During the three years the garrison operated, the fort was home to about 125 people, including officers, soldiers, and a few civilians employed by or trading with military personnel. William Williams was the sutler, or chief supplier, at the fort, and in 1853 when the fort shut down and the troops moved on, Williams stayed behind to take advantage of the commercial head-start the military supply trade had given the place. In January 1854 Williams purchased the fort site from the federal government on behalf of the Fort Dodge [Townsite] Company, whose principals included big-time Iowa land speculators Bernhart Henn and Jesse Williams (no relation).

The Fort Dodge town site sat astride the Des Moines River, about 75 miles upriver from Fort Des Moines, which the army had abandoned in 1846 and which had since grown into a thriving frontier community of about 2,000 people. Attempts to establish a river trade route from Fort Des Moines to Fort Dodge proved futile — the river's channel above Fort Des Moines was simply too shallow to permit commercial navigation. Shippers and travelers resigned themselves to wagons and stagecoaches for the time being, since railroad service

was not expected this far west for another several years.

In 1855 the federal government announced removal of the land office from Homer to Fort Dodge. Reasons for the move remain uncertain, though the investments of Rep. Bernhart Henn in the Fort Dodge Townsite Company and Sen. George Wallace Jones in the Dubuque & Pacific Railroad, whose planned route would go through Fort Dodge, suggest that Iowa's congressmen used their influence in Washington to protect their business interests back home in Iowa. Whatever the explanation, the land office's move to Fort Dodge threw Homer's future in doubt, and there was more trouble to come.

Within a year of his arrival in Fort Dodge in April 1855, John Duncombe began working for removal of the county seat from Homer to Fort Dodge. On February 10, 1856, he recorded in his journal his basic strategy: “Started with Vincents team in company with Sewall Gower for Willsons at Newcastle [Webster City]. Had a talk with them about the county seat. They wanted it at their town if possible but finally consented . . . they would go in with us for a division of the County . . . and assist us in the removal of the County seat.”

An Iowa legislative act of 1855 had provided for the relocation of county seats by petition and referendum, and the following day, February 11, found Duncombe meeting with county judge William Meservey: “Showed him our petition” and he “said that if we got a majority of the voters in the county according to the last Poll Book he would issue an order of Election.” By March 2, Duncombe and Walter C. Willson had gathered enough signatures. By April 11, victory was theirs.

Duncombe, Willson, and their supporters next moved to have Webster County divided in two, and by legislative act in December 1856, the eastern half was renamed Hamilton County, with Webster City (formerly named Newcastle) the county seat. The western half remained Webster County, with its new county seat at Fort Dodge. In the months after the April election, many of Homer's business and professional people had left for Fort Dodge. Now straddling the newly drawn boundary line between Hamilton and Webster Counties, Homer all but disappeared from the map of Iowa.

Historian Jacob Swisher estimated that about two-thirds of Iowa's county seats had been involved in struggles with neighboring towns before securing their positions as the political capitals of their respective counties. Many of these struggles developed when changes in population, transportation, or commerce prompted a rethinking of initial decisions regarding county-seat location. Based on the evidence at hand, however, none of these conditions pertained to the struggle in Webster County, which was still pretty much barren prairie. More significant, it would appear, was John Duncombe's vision of the county's future — and his tenacity in establishing for the Fort Dodge Townsite Company every possible advantage for growth and prosperity in the years ahead. — by Bill Silag

for 70\$ and forty nine dollars and forty cents costs on a second judgment rendered the 14th day of December the suit having been tried on the 19th day of October before at which time he had rendered a judgment for costs merely, as I saw him do with my own Eyes I told Bush that in the morning I would go and attend to it for him

*Feb 18th 1856.* I started early in the morning and went down with Bush to Nettletons. I told Nettleton that if he did not make out his Docket according to the facts in this case I would sue him for a false return. I did not direct him how to do it. Bush and Lundy were present He made out his Docket and then he took a Bond, approved our surety and let us have a chance of a writ of error.

The paper upon which he first rendered judgment for costs he could not find. I have not the least doubt that Berkley carried it away and he knew it. Not the least doubt. Bushes horse run away and I was compelled to remain here all night. Johnsons saw mill is getting on as fast as they can push it. The boiler will be on the spot in a few days.

*19th* Started for Bushes this morning. Met Bush about half way Went to Homer. Then to Sheriff Wests. There met Sheriff with Jones and James Hook taken with a warrant for a breach of the peace by old Isaac Hook. They wanted me to take their case. We all started for Homer. I tried their cases before old Esq Parker and got Jones clear. But Hook was put under 200\$ bonds to appear at the next term of Court. I charged them \$5.00 for my trouble. Jones paid me 2.50 and said he would see that the balance was paid. I then got Bushes writ of error and we started for home. Stayed at Bushes all night. Lay on the floor under a blanket with two men ones name was [lane?] Slept very cold — caught cold.

*20th* Went to Fort Dodge. Started for Old Johnny Beams to be at a river club meeting. Got there about 3 P.M.

*Feb. 20th 1856* Rode nearly all the way on the Jump on the ice, on the river Got lost from the road. nearly a mile off before I new where I was so busy thinking about County seat got to Beams made a speach got some 12 signers. Stayed all night at Beams. He told me how the Homerites had robbed him of about \$20 Had eggs here this evening the first I have had this season

*Feb 21st* Went to Allison's then to Wilsons then to Skinners and Wares. Then to Collins — then to Harts there I stayed all night. One Hart would not sign my petition

*22d* Came to Fort Dodge on the ice This day for the first time this winter a kind of mist falls. It is said here that through the month of January the Thermometer averaged 7 degrees below zero.

*23d* Stay in the office to day. I write a petition for the organization of our township. Commence getting signers. Take Mr Vincent out to show him our out Lots. He seems pleased. The snow banks in some places is waist deep.

*24th* Pleasant to day. It verily begins to look as if Spring might be coming slowly. The air is clear and pure the [sun?] is bright the roads begin to grow a little muddy in places. And one of the surest signs is — I begin to feel lazy — a very unusual occurrence indeed!

I have written several letters as shown by my letter book.

*25* Spent my time in the office. wrote 8 letters. sent off a deed to HB Meyers. Sold an out Lot to Humphreys The weather is warm and pleasant The Streets are muddy and very sloppy. I feel quite disagreeable to much so to have my mind on a State of Real activity I begin to feel a slight spiny head ache — a little lazy. The most important feature of the day is Robbins and his dog wolf. Morrison and Garahity's quarrel. About excelling as artists and poets. Mr. Ruggles has gone this evening to Garahity's to see the girls. Garahity lives in a little one roofed cabin just a hovel. All our town live but little better. The best dwelling house in the county is C.H. Vincents There are but two Brick buildings in this county as it now stands containing nearly 1,000,000 acres of land viz Morgan's and old Hooks Dawley sells goods in one and old Hook sells whiskey in the other.

George M Dallas is appointed Minister to England in place of James Buchanan recalled at his own request

*Feb. 26, 1856* The weather is pleasant — plenty of mud under foot — Snow leaving Spent my time in the office writing notices. Selling and showing lots Sold a lot to H.B. Martin for \$75.00 \$25.00 in hand. Rather dull to day. Berkley here. Good business in the land office —

The most remarkable thing in the news is that the Mississippi is closed by ice its whole length and that Banks was elected Speaker of the House of Representatives after nine weeks balloting on the last day.

Also the President issues a Special Message on the Kansas difficulties and a proclamation to keep peace there.

27th Spent my time in the office but little profit to my self or any one Wrote a few letters. Card playing with all the et ceteras is the business that is most generally carried on I will try to keep as clear as possible of all these things.

Feb. 28th 1856 Warm pleasant day — muddy under-foot Streets are covered with mud —

I spent my time in the office. Wrote a long letter to Sister Martha.

I feel a little soreness in my throat caused by dampness in my feet.

Sold 1<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> blocks to Rees for \$550. I agree to let Miller have a chance to purchase my share in his Town if Gaylord thought best to purchase.

29 Cold chilly day. I spend the forenoon in my office and the afternoon in running out Maj William's land. Very tired tonight. I never saw worse travelling in the snow I had with us a bottle of brandy of which we tasted when we began to feel tired but now I am the worse for it. I will now go to bed and resolve to do better but how very unlikely that I will do it!

March 1st 1856. Spent the forenoon in the office Started about noon to go to Allisons down the River. Cold. The Snow flies. I cross the Des Moines River below Tolmans Stop at Beams — go to Allisons —

*I have heard that they intend to mob me at Homer. I am armed with a huge Bowie knife.*

then to Willsons — then to Thos Landers I have two horses and Shaffners Sleigh. Spend the night at Landers have a long talk about the removal of the County Seat. O how little do I spend the Sabbath as I did only one short year since. What a change in me for the two past years. I hope I may not entirely loose my self and loose all my good feelings and good desires.

2d I sleep under a feather bed Dont rest well. It is quite cold 5° degrees below zero this morning. I start early for Homer My friends have gone by the way of New Castle. I drive to Homer by old Frank McGuires. He is just building a ferry boat. The first one I

believe under way this side of Fort Des Moines.

I get to Homer early. I turn out my horses at old man Parker. I have heard that they intend to mob me at Homer. I am armed with a huge Bowie knife. We meet here for the purpose of presenting a petition for the removal of the County seat from Homer to Fort Dodge. The Court opens at nine oclock Our petition is presented. I made a speach. About 50 or 60 in the room. The Court decides contrary to the law against us but we beat them on his own decision I and W.C. Willson swore to the petition. Others swore to the Remonstrance. We had on our petition 359 and they had 348 as the judge counted and as I counted 344. The Court decided that he would grant an order for the Election So we come off victorious.

After the Election is over we all go over to the hotel The New Castle men leave first. There are six of them After they have left we are sitting around the stove (Six in No) and a ruffian begins to abuse Maj Williams a man then over 60 years. The most shameful abuse is perpetrated Oathes and low vulgar slang constitutes the order. Some 20 men are present besides our crowd. I smile — but inside I am mad and like the indian I feel as if I weighed a Ton

I resolve if a single blow is struck to split open the mans head who does it. I was the only one of our crowd armed I stay in the house until all my friends are in their sleigh then I get into mine and we drive home safe and sound and by my own part not the least scared.

A terrible sleet falls on our way! Oh Bowie knives and human depravity

March 3d 1856 Cold after the shower. Spend my time in the office.

4th Cold but thaws during the day Spend my time in the office.

5th Cold in the morning but thaws during the day. Spend my time in the office. Maj Williams effects a loan for Tod to the amount of 1500\$ at 5 per cent per month to assist him in the erection of a Steam Saw Mill. Tod agrees with us that if any thing should happen so that we should be in danger that we shall have a mortgage. And the first lien on the property. Have a meeting this evening to determine what we will do in relation to the Election for our County seat. And to determine what we will do in relation to the organization of our Township and other matters.

6th Cold in the morning — below zero Warm in an hour or two.

7 Cold in the morning — thaws after noon — in my office

8 Cold in the morning — Evening cold wind —  
Snows a little tonight — about 1½ inches

9 Cold — Thermometer 13° below zero. Continues cold all day — I attend church Congregational church organized — Two Haverlands, Plumb and wife — Dr Olneys wife and one other lady constitute the church. Skinner is the preacher. He administered the Sacrament to his church Text — “God is love”

I have read newspaper all day nearly — Feel a little tired — War news — [most?] important item — England is quite [saucy?]

*March 10. 1856* Cold 18° below zero. I go to Homer on County business. They have threatened to mob me. I go ready to be mobbed. They do not interfere with me. I go to old Parkers tavern. Stay all night at Pembertons store with Henry Martin. Have a long talk with him and with

11 Cold — hard wind from the North Went to Thos Landreth's, Willsons, Allison's, Tolmans thence home to Fort Dodge. Got money \$164.15 from Tolman

12 Cold but pleasant — at my office

13 Cold Snowed Enough to cover the ground afresh

14 Cold but pleasant day

15 Cold but pleasant. Today we hold a caucus to nominate officers for the first Township organization in this Township of Wahkonsa All passed off quietly

*16th* Pleasant day. John Roche bored me all day to day to buy a Lot although it was Sabbath.

*17th* Warm pleasant day. I sold Roche Block No 10. in Morrison & Duncombes Addition for \$400 — he paid 100\$ down and gave his note for \$300, payable on the first day of Feby 1857, and secured it by a mortgage on the property.

18 Pleasant day — Yesterday I saw Wm Church stabled by Wm Hill in a drunken Spree in Homer He was stabled in the lower part of the Abdomen.

Last night I stayed with Judge Maxwell we talked over County seat. I then went to Webster City Saw Willson. Saw Cass township was [organized?] Willson and I went to work to get the boundaries

changed back We circulated a petition and got it signed by over 4/5 of the voters in Cass Township and not one refused to sign the petition that we presented it to except N.L. Osborn The petition was to have the original boundaries restored as they were.

19 Willson and I go to Homer with his mule and jumper We call on his Hon Judge Messervy Judge promises to restore the Boundary of the original Township of Boone if Willson will return his warrant now in the hands of L. N. Osborn Willson starts immediately. The Judge sends [?] Pemberton ahead and orders Mr. Osborn not to give up the warrant although he had made his agreement and that to specifically in writing in his official capacity as Co Judge I called on Mr. Dawson and got my supper

*March 20th 1856* I stayed all night with Squire Parker. Slept with G.W. Willson on the West Side of the river He pretended to be in favor of Fort Dodge. Said that the only thing that he regretted was that the Legislature met to soon so that they could not make capital enough out of county seat. He talked of having a Rail Road run up Skillet.

Mr Willson last mentioned is what I call a treacherous man Good enough when he is with you but to Easily turned. Very passionate — a man of high temper and one that does not understand honesty well enough to practice it if it is not his interest. This is my present opinion Let time prove it.

20 Start to Fort Dodge early in the morning — with Mr Dawson. He gets to the Fort about noon I stay at the Fort over night Mr Walter C. Willson from New Castle (name now changed to Webster City) comes here to get up a petition to have a direct line of mail from Cedar Falls to this point

21 I go with Mr W.C. Willson and Mr Lash to Webster City — Stay around Webster City all night. It is a warm sunny day. Snow thaws very fast. Sleighing going

22d I go with Willson to N.L Osborn's to see him in relation to voting for us and working for us in our election campaign. He gives us plainly to understand that he will do it. I go to Willson's and stay all night

23d I came to Fort Dodge last night A Storm was up. The snow blowed and it rained hard all the evening or rather sleeted. I arrived safely and slept soundly. Nothing in my way, all passes off quietly

This is the Sabbath. But I am so thronged with

business that it seems almost impossible to spend the day as I ought to do it.

*March. 24. 1856.* Spent this day at home in my office. All goes along pleasantly. I wish our Election was over for County Seat. I am tired of Electioneering I think we will beat Homer but I cannot tell.

25 Warm pleasant day. The sun shines beautifully. I spend my time in my office

26 Warm pleasant day. The stages begin to run on wheels. We have had a very extraordinary winter in all parts of the Country. At Otego N.Y. the snow in the woods on a level has been from 6 to 8 feet in depth. The deepest snow on a level here has been only about 1½ feet But we have not had a thaw from the 7th day of December until this time — Sleighing continuing from the 7th day of December until now a period of 110 days, almost one third of the year!

Board with us is very high, from \$4.00 per week to \$5.00 without lodging and from \$5.00 per week to \$6.00 with lodging, washing \$1.00 per Doz Extra. Making a cost of about \$1.00 per day — cost of living too much to make money at.

I have spent my time very busily all winter. I think I never spent it more constantly employed.

Morally — I think I have not improved any. I am Sorry for it. I wish I might. But I have very little restraint thrown around me. The truth is I have for a long time felt as if ministers of the gospel preached more politicks than Religion — This has to a very great extent destroyed their influence over me They pray now for negroes more than white men — They preach Anti Slavery in the South while they let worse Slavery — Slavery to passion, appetite and the Devil go unnoticed. They petition Congress as a body of Ministers and not as citizens — So they did in the case of the passage of the Kansas & Nebraska Act. The result of all this is, vital religion is becoming very Scarce — Real honest piety is read about I fear more than felt — Honor is giving away before a lax easy State of Morals that threatens to take the place of old established rules. Men in this Country and particularly in the Great West are giving their attention almost exclusively to gain — hoarding wealth

I wonder if I too am not falling into the same state? I wonder if I too am not losing ground in virtuous feelings and virtuous principles? I wonder if I too am not losing my taste for refined Society — the Society of high minded men — virtuous and lovely women — guardians of Virtue for the masculine

human race? I wonder if I am as good a man as I was one year ago today? I wonder if I should be called to settle up all my accounts in life if I could settle them and strike a balance in my favor over the last year? These are serious thoughts. I don't think that I am as good a man as I was last year at this time. I don't turn my attention so directly to the great source of all virtue. I depend more on my feeble self. I look more for

*Reader — whoever you are whenever you read this — you have a copy of my reflections.*

enjoyment to the present. I have once learned that it was worse than folly to turn my attention to the future for enjoyment in this life — and yet I am now striving for what? Why I hope to lay the foundation of a fortune worth about \$20,000 in at least 20 years. Then I hope to get me a comfortable home. Then to get me a pleasant wife who will assist me to be happy True I have had such a wife once and she slumbers in the cold cold ground, but yet I will hope. I hope to raise me a small family that shall cheer my old age if I live to be old. I hope to spend some of my time in reading and reviewing my Books in calling back the pleasant recollections of my college life. In getting ready to die by living a just and honest life. I mean to be useful. I mean to be benevolent. I mean that no man whom I can aid without real injury to myself shall go unaided. I mean to have it never justly said of me "that man has done dishonorably".

In the speculation in which I am engaged I shall have many difficulties to encounter. One of the worst — yes the very worst will be that of governing myself. My mottoes are "keep cool" "think before you speak" "least said soonest mended" "to him that wills nothing is impossible". "Care not for what your inferior may say in slander" but ask was it just.

Reader — whoever you are whenever you read this — you have a copy of my reflections. undigested just as they are for the moment with me. I believe that I am better for stopping to think and I will try to pause often in my life to ask such questions to self as will be likely to make me better in every way

Now at 9 P.M. I will fix my lone cot in my office and if so it is decreed I will lie down and sleep



ALTO KOSUTH HANCOCK CERRO

County Seat

LAHONTAS

WRIGHT FRAZER

LAMON

W E B S HOMER T E R

H A

G R E E N E B O O N E

S T O R

G U T H R I E

H A M I L T O N

H A M I L T O N

H A M I L T O N

Des Moines R.

Bridge Cr.

McKnight's Point

F. Rader

Marshes Lake

Marsh

Plaster Run

E. Dodge

Dracut Trass

Boone R.

White River

Marshes

Lake Marshes

Walker Lake

32

31

Marshes

Lake

Lake

end

Homer

Boone Fork

Mount Rapids

Lake

Lake

Mineral Ridge P.O.

Stearns

Lake

Boonsboro

Parkersburg

Nevada

Guthrie

Great Branch Cr.

Con E

Road

Elk Rapids P.O.

Bellepoint

Swad Point

Cambridge P.O.

Hopkins Cr. P.O.

Cory's Bridge

Cory's Grove

Mill

Mill

Elk City

Corydon

Boone Cr.

33

32

31

30

29

28

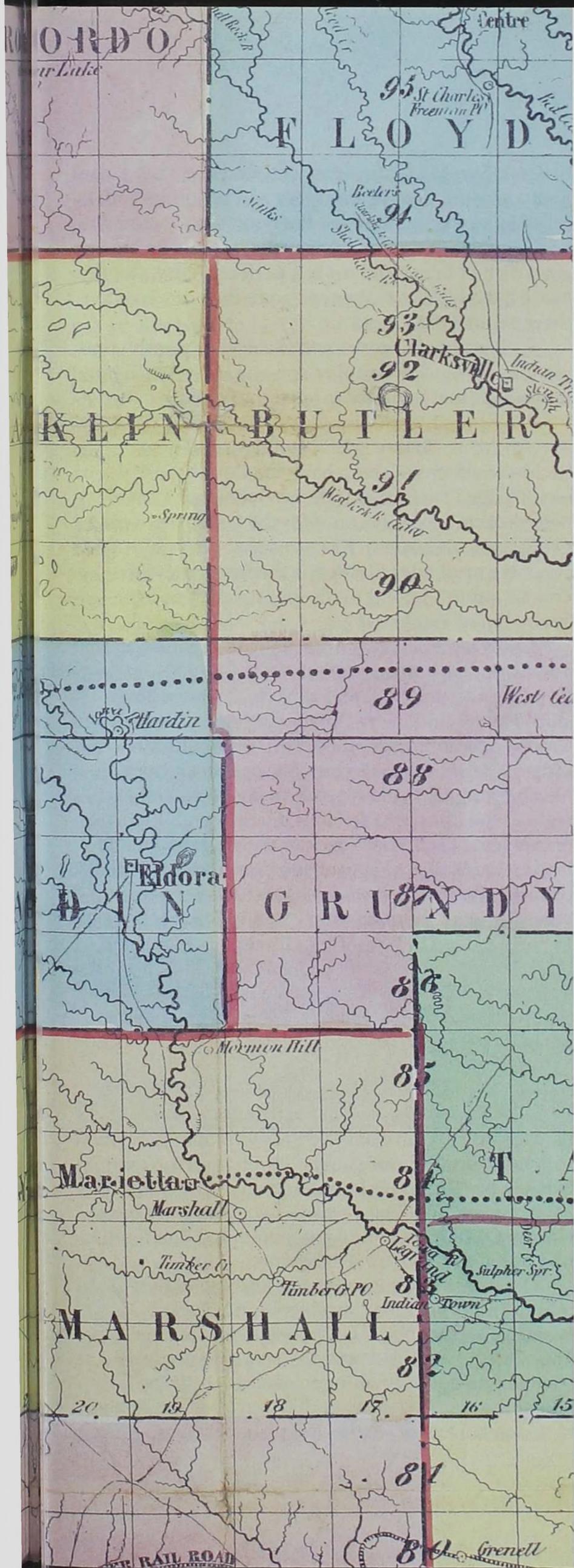
27

20

24

23

22



pleasantly and dream pleasantly of Heaven of my loved one gone, of all that is joyful — and pause in my onward course

March 27th 1856 Warm pleasant day. The river is rising quite fast — heavy snow banks are melting away It is almost impassible to the forks. I make an entry of land for H. Janes for which I paid \$200, cash Gold which settles our accounts to this date in full in every respect.

28 Beautiful spring day. The snow is thawing very fast. The gulches are filled with snow and impassible I spend this day in my office.

29 I start from Fort Dodge go to Tolmans. Take the tickets for the County Seat — go to Homer. go to Saml Osborns. Go to Winsteads Talk to the people about County Seat. also go to John D. Maxwell — See about and fix all our land deal with Osborn Maxwell. Stay all night at Maxwells. Sleep in his cabin. Cabin has no window the light is admitted through a hole over the door.

March 30. 1856 Sabbath day — I rest today at Maxwells. Spend my time in reading and conversation.

I think this is a very long day to me. I am used to a more active business life. The day is warm and pleasant.

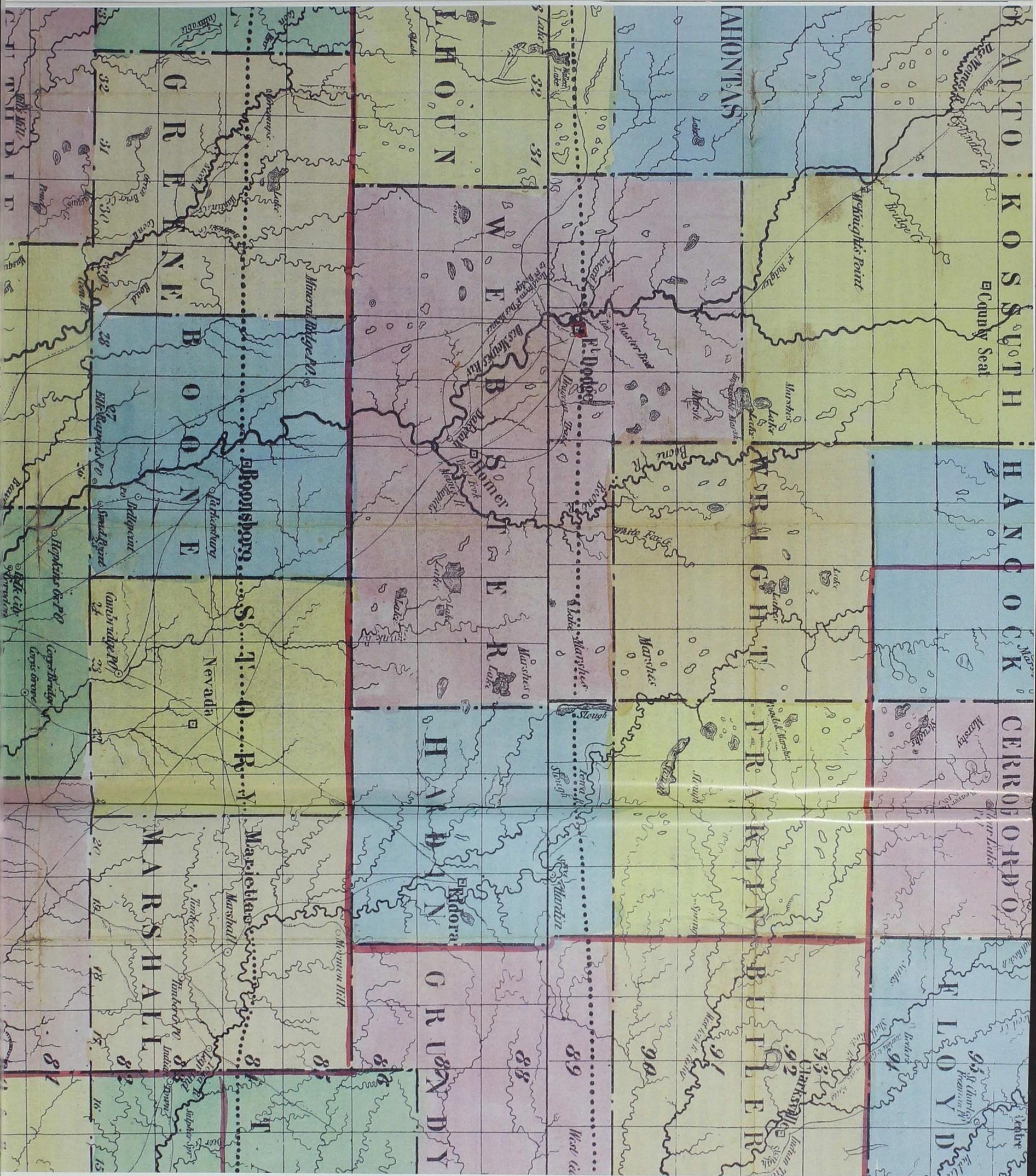
O! This is rather a hard world but I am not discouraged. Hurrah! Good pluck my lad.

31 Cool morning — A severe wind is blowing. I start for the settlements on the Skunk river I go by the head of Wall lake. The streams that run into the lake are flooded. The ice in the streams (which are belly deep to my horse) is about one inch thick making them all most impassible. O my poor horse did I not pity him! Some time the ice would bare but generally it broke This with my facing a very severe East wind made me tie up my face but I was compelled to get along without the handkerchief as there was no road. The land north of this lake also East is very good.

I think it will nearly all be settled in about ten years.

April 1st 1856 Last evening at got to Elisha Lakin who lives in Section 23. T.87. R.24 Saw McCowan, Everett, and S[?] then rode down the river to Alex Starey who lives about 1½ miles from Story Co line. Stayed at Stareys all night He seemed to be

Detail of 1855 map shows sloughs, marshes, and streams — and Webster County before it was halved.



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Detail of 1855 map shows sloughs, marshes, and streams — and Webster County before it was halved.

favorable to the Removal of the County Seat

*Apr 2.* Went to Halls, who lives in Sec 31. T.86. R.23. about a  $\frac{1}{4}$  of a mile from Story Co. To day it commences raining about 9 A.M. This is the first rain that we have had since Dec 7, 1855, not a drop according to my recollection. A period of almost 4 months. I go from Halls to Mr. Lakins. I get wet to the skin. I dry off. About 2 o'clock P.M. I start for New Castle for the purpose of crossing Boon river. The river I find is very high I swim my horse across the river. Go to Willsons. Stay all night Willson has just got his steam saw mill on. The water is very high. [Moon?] from Iowa City is on at Willsons. Willson has sold out to him. Webster City bids fair to be one of the finest towns in the County of Webster.

*Apr 3* The wind blows very severely from the North West. It rains a very little One of the disagreeable days that gives a man the blues. I get very cold riding from Webster City to Ft Dodge The water is very deep between those two points. In one of the Sloughs the water is up to my stirrup Irons in my Saddle — almost swimming deep. I get to Fort Dodge about 1. o'clock P.M.

*Apr 3* Made a mistake in the date of my diary on Apr 1st Apr 1st being March 31. Cool day. I am rather down spirited. I see every thing wrong side up to day. I feel very cross I scarcely know why.

*Apr 4. 1856* Go down to Tolmans. See the people and tell them we will give them from 75. to 100. votes for their man John Tolman for school fund commissioner. It pleases them first rate well. I stay at John Tolmans to night

*Apr 5.* Start for Hardins. Beautiful day the snow is nearly all gone. I cross Brush creek just across below McBrides house. The water is deep but does not swim my horse I go to Homer See Martin Give Martin & Shurry tickets for election. Go on to Old E.H. West. He is a bag of wind — one of those awful shrewd fellows who know a thing or two. I have no confidence in the man especially behind my back.

*Apr 6.* Sabbath — try to cross Boon river It is over its banks — I go down to Leonards, oposite B[?] mill. He has a canoe But it is in an inland pond I offer Leonard \$3.00 to take tickets into Hardins precinct. He agrees to do it I to pay when the tickets are delivered. I then go to Wests and get my horse — go down to Boon at the old ford cross over in a split canoe and carry some

tickets a foot to Hardins precinct. Coming back I meet Leonard — he does as he agrees and of course I am in for the pay. I go back across the Boon thence Home to Fort Dodge — Stop on my way at Old John States I go get a dish of bread and milk, a perfect luxury. Get my horse fed a little corn thence I go to the Fort, arriving there about 8. P.M. tired.

Rather to much work for the Sabbath expressly commanded by God to be a day of rest. O this world how it misleads me! I will try to keep the Sabbath better

*Apr 7th 1856.* To day is Election day. To day we decide whether we are to have the County Seat yea or nay. To day I shall have it decided whether I have been working in vain or not for the last seven weeks. I get up and stir around. Rist a man whom I paid 10\$ to stay here until after Election is the first man who votes I am the second in the organization of the Township of Wahkonsa

Last year an attempt was made to organize the Township but it utterly failed.

About 10 o'clock A.M. I start for Tolmans Township. There I find every thing going right. I send Irwin Crouse over to Rosses and I go  $4\frac{1}{2}$  miles after his father. The old man is a complete specimen from North Carolina. I tell him to take my horse and I will walk to the Election. I tell him if he wont go I will go on my hands and knees back to the election. Finally he concludes to go. I stay at Tolmans until the Poll is counted. We get 29 votes for us and Homer gets 8 votes for them I run my horse to Fort Dodge. We give in Fort Dodge 210 votes 2 for Homer 1 in blank and the balance for Fort Dodge. I have no doubt there are a great many illegal votes cast at Fort Dodge and Homer today. News seems very favorable in every quarter we will beat Homer by eighty votes — Hurrah! Good!

*Apr. 8.* Beautiful day. News comes in Boon Tp casts 76 votes, for us 75 — one in blank. I go over to Gowers office. I have some words with him in relation to School fund Commissioner He charges me with backing out. I tell him he lies and any man who says I back out lies. Fool that I was — I got mad — mad at Gower. O Shame! I would have pounded him if he had dared to take it up. Oh Shame!

Doc Pease told me what was absolutely false. He told me that I said that I had sent out tickets to Woodard, before I had. He accused me of using "duplicity" when he wanted — and repeatedly said we must pledge everything to everybody at the last end of the race. I would not do it but he wanted me to. I look at Doc L.L. Pease as a dishonest man — not

to be trusted. One that will do lots of talking but no work. One that is cap[ab]le of All the political intrigue of any man who has no more brains. But I will keep on friendly terms with him. But I will ever closely watch him.

Gower — I look at as a babler of no account. I will pay no attention to him in the future. He is a rascal and a fool to boot. And I am as big a fool for noticing him at all. In the future I will work my card to thwart all his plans that do not agree with what is honorable and what is just. He is not worthy of decent treatment, from a rational man

Apr. 9. Beautiful day. I feel much better pleased on account of the fine weather — and the good election news than I did yesterday. I am in better spirits every way. Hurrah! I'll not let trifles trouble me. Not I. Be a man I'll say. Let my mottos be "keep cool" "Think before you speak." "Least said soonest mended" "To him that wills nothing is impossible." "Care not for slander ask is it just" "Be diligent in business"

We'll beat the Homer boys about 90 votes — guess 100.

Apr 10 Beautiful day. Never finer. The streets are dry and the sun shines so warm and lovely. I feel in excellent spirits and excellent health. Good I'll beat the Homer boys 110 votes. Stock is rising

Apr 11th 1856. A very rainy stormy day. Mr Beecher and I start in the rain for Homer to take home our Election returns to the County seat. We have an awful

*I go to bed tired and feverish. No whiskey drunk this evening*

time. rain & mud — the sloughs are just opening up and we find our light ponies are better than heavy horses. The Homer people are quiet Not a word said — they all seem glad to get rid of the county seat. We leave Homer about 5 oclock P.M. About half way home it thunders and lightens terrifically. What a time we have! It is so dark that we cant see anything. When we get home to the Fort, and bring the news that we have beaten Homer about 150 majority what a time the boys have We get out our revolvers, pistols, rifles shot guns &c And we make night hideous by our huzzas and firing of guns. The boys give me three

cheers for my services in this matter then they give cheers for the balance. I go to bed tired and feverish. No whiskey drunk this evening

Apr 12th 1856. A pleasant day. Maj Williams claim is jumped by Busy & Karr. I dont know what is best to do. If we take them off that will not [?] for they have been removed once by force and once legally If we dont remove them we acknowledge at once that our club is of no account. I am willing to go if the balance are. I am not willing to go unless the club is united.

This evening we have a meeting of the Democrats of our Town. 34 are present. Everything seems to indicate that we will have a pretty stirring time about 3 months from this time. I am with W.H. Merritt & Saml Robbins appointed a committee to draf Articles of Association for our club. To prepare for the coming contest. We have rotten Democrats in our ranks. Those that do not join us are against us. We will try our strength if there are not one dozzen of us. I had rather be governed by principal alone, than to have a regiment at my heels with no principal

Apr 13th 1856. Beautiful Sabbath day. I wish my heart was as happy as it once was. But I am determined to do the best I can. I will not be down spirited. Let what will come I will try to be an honorable man. If I was alone doing nothing — no one would complain on my account. But I am in the employ of Williams Henn & Co and every body seems down on them the hardest kind of a way, for no other reason than because they got the best hold at Fort Dodge. Let them work who are enemies to the plan. [They?] undoubtedly will greatly injure us. But the day will come when men will do what is honorable and right For my own part I will stand entirely aloof. I will keep my own secrets. I will watch carefully a clique who are now working in Fort Dodge for the purpose of gaining their own selfish ends. I will say all that I can for my town and her interests Let what will come. I will try to be a patriot on this ground at least

14 Remained in my office Great talk about title Dr Pease tells me there is no use to talk any more about title for there is no title. "Let her rip"

15 Remain in the office, it rains all day nearly — Nothing of importance Except yesterday I learned that Gower was trying to find out whether I was a whig (ha! ha! ha) before I came here

16 Beautiful morning Started today to hunt for land.

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. 1/4 sec 6. & S.W. 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 occupys 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