



SHSI (DES MOINES)

# Henry Clay Dean

## *An Iowa Copperhead Lashes Out*

by David Holmgren

He was called Dirty Shirt Dean, the Great Unwashed, a raving maniac, a "nasty, dirty, greasy, pettifogging, locofoco Methodist preacher," and a depraved wretch. He was characterized as a demagogue, Southern sympathizer, scamp, scalawag, blackguard, slanderer, and, the ultimate, a traitor.

Henry Clay Dean knew how to respond in kind. He repeatedly denounced the beliefs and activities of anti-slavery men such as Benjamin Wade, Salmon P. Chase, John Brown, and William Lloyd Garrison as wicked. He compared Secretary of War Edwin Stanton to a monster, Thaddeus Stevens and Horace Greeley to Robespierre. He called Secretary of State William Seward a "prince of liars and cunning demagogues."

Dean saved his greatest invectives for Abraham Lincoln, whom he maligned as a usurper, traitor, and tyrant. Four years after the Civil War, he declared that Lincoln's assassination was God's retribution for a "horrible reign of crime and terror," while his administration was a "resort of debauchees," the Treasury Department "a harem," and the president's public officers "stimulated by strong drink and inflamed by the indulgence of every other vice."

In a strongly pro-Union state such as Iowa, Henry Clay Dean and other critics of the Lincoln administration and the war effort stood out in stark contrast to prevailing public opinion. These Copperheads, as they were called by their Unionist detractors, were a small but very visible and noisy group. Their leaders included former Iowa Supreme Court Chief Justice Charles Mason; Dennis Mahony, the fiery editor of the *Dubuque Herald*; and Laurel Summers and Gideon Bailey, both of whom had been leaders in the state legislature and had served as U.S. marshals. Dean knew all these men well and corresponded with them routinely during the war. None of them, however, matched Dean, whose harsh rhetoric stood out like flashes of lightning in the middle of the night.

Born in Pennsylvania in 1822 and educated at Madison College, Dean developed intellectual and political interests early in life, and he studied in great depth the leading Enlightenment thinkers such as Hume, Gibbon,

and Voltaire. Named for Henry Clay, the Whig political leader, Dean was also a Whig in his early years.

Alongside these developing interests and viewpoints, he experienced a profound religious awakening, which generated intense Christian convictions. After moving to Virginia, he joined the Methodist Episcopal Church of Virginia and soon thereafter became a minister in the state conference. Early in his career, he expressed some mildly antislavery views in Methodist publications such as the *Pittsburgh Christian Advocate*, in which he wrote that slavery retarded the onward march of new states such as Missouri. If indeed this was an antislavery view, it was modified by his comments that slavery would end only when it became unprofitable and that abolitionists had no power or influence to end it, nor should they try.

Just when his viewpoints on politics and slavery began to change is uncertain, but change they did. While still living in Virginia, he became acquainted with Henry Wise, a thoroughgoing Jacksonian Democrat and former congressman, and later actively helped Wise win the governorship in Virginia, even though Dean was then living in Iowa.

In 1850, 28-year-old Dean moved to Iowa with his young wife, Christiana, and his growing family. During his first five years in Iowa, he pastored churches in Keosauqua, Muscatine, Middleton, Bloomfield, and Wapello Mission. He developed friendships with Iowa's two U.S. senators, Whig-Free-Soiler (later Republican) James Harlan and Democrat George Wallace Jones. Jones helped Dean win selection as chaplain of the U.S. Senate for the first session of the 34th Congress in 1854/1855. A Catholic, Jones had been particularly impressed with Dean's denunciations of the nativist Know Nothing movement and the newly emerging Republican Party. Dean naturally began to tilt to the Democrats. Withdrawing from the active ministry in favor of practicing law and giving public lectures, he settled in Mount Pleasant, where he would live for the next 15 stormy years.

Many people found Dean's appearance uncouth or comic when they first saw him. His hair and beard were frequently uncut, uncombed, and unclean. His clothes were usually dirty, fit poorly, and worn haphazardly. But



as with his nemesis Lincoln, people recovered quickly from the initial shock of his physical appearance when he began to speak. His flowing words and passionate delivery easily swayed audiences. For those who already agreed with him, his oratory could be utterly exhilarating. His listeners were spellbound. According to one story, while Dean delivered a prayer in great, hallowed earnestness, and with the entire congregation reverently affirming his every word with heads bowed and eyes closed, one communicant opened his eyes for just a moment and noticed Dean tying one of his shoes while still in fervent supplication to the Almighty.

His oratorical powers were so impressive that years later no less a celebrity than Mark Twain recounted a story from a friend who had watched Dean working an audience in Keokuk shortly after the outbreak of the Civil War. Dean's appearance at first caused ripples of laughter from the audience, but his oratory gained such intensity that the crowd began to change its mood, listened more and more closely, and then began erupting in applause. Twain wrote that Dean "stood there, like another Vesuvius, spouting smoke and flames, lava and ashes, raining pumice-stone and cinders, shaking the moral earth with intellectual crash upon crash, explosion upon explosion, while the mad multitude stood upon their feet in a solid body, answering back with a ceaseless hurricane of cheers, through a thrashing snow-storm of waving handkerchiefs."

Jeffersonian and Jacksonian viewpoints came to dominate Dean's political thinking. His views were dogmatic and extreme but not always consistent. He had the mind of a logician, and when he reasoned his way to a conclusion, no matter how fantastic or bizarre it may have appeared to conventional opinion, or however much it may have clashed with his own professed views, he stuck to it with a ferocity that excited both admiration and disgust.

Perhaps the best way to understand Dean is to understand the premises of his world-view. More than anything else, Dean insisted on the absolute rights of the individual, particularly free expression. He was hostile to the power of the federal government and believed the U.S. Constitution was primarily a guarantor of states' rights. He championed the rural culture of an older America over that of the emerging urban industrial society. As a Jacksonian, he opposed currency, tariffs, and all banks.

Dean's inconsistencies over the years would perplex both friends and opponents. Here was a man of profound Christian convictions who often resorted to ruthless name calling; who claimed Andrew Jackson as a hero yet denounced militant nationalism; who advocated peace and reason when the Civil War was approaching but was known for the violence of his rhetoric; who preached incessantly on the sanctity of individual rights and human dignity but increasingly excused slavery before and



This illustration of Henry Clay Dean speaking in Keokuk appeared in Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*. Twain called Dean an "erratic genius" who dressed worse than a "wharf-rat."

during the war. He never condoned physical cruelty to non-whites and was appalled when confronted with it directly, but nevertheless he insisted that constitutional rights applied only to white males. Once he tore into his Republican opponents in a speech in Des Moines with unbridled vehemence, but the next day he cheerily told the editors of the Republican *Iowa State Register* that he had meant nothing personally but had only intended to satisfy the audience's partisan passions.

There seems to be no consensus on the essence of Dean's character. His supporters were convinced of his sterling qualities; his detractors beheld only a ruthless cynic. Perhaps the fairest assessment is that he consciously saw himself as consistent in his attitudes and behavior, a view that could be sustained by the prevailing conservative cultural views of the day, but that in an era when traditional views were being challenged, others saw great inconsistency between his professed values and his comments on contemporary events.

Alarmed by a changing America, Dean grew more radical. He began speaking out on the growing slavery controversy. His ambiguous antislavery views began to change more in defense of the institution; in a speech at Fairfield in August 1860, he proclaimed that "since the crucifixion of Christ there has not been so benevolent an institution known among men as African slavery." Another time he said he approved of the tar and feathering of an antislavery clergyman in Missouri.

Guided by his belief in states' rights, Dean supported Senator Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois for president. After Lincoln's election in November and the ensuing seces-



sion crisis, Dean insisted that reason, mutual goodwill, and calm debate could settle sectional differences. When moderation failed and the war began at Fort Sumter, Dean pledged loyalty to the Union but quickly began criticizing the Lincoln administration. Yet he did not criticize any of the Confederate leaders, even though the war had started with a Confederate attack.

As the war lengthened, Dean's attacks intensified. He argued with some justification, as did many antiwar Democrats, that Lincoln exceeded his constitutional authority in suppressing the rebellion. During the first two years of the war, with the upper Mississippi valley in an economic slump due to Confederate control of the lower Mississippi, Dean drew large audiences of those opposed to the war or disaffected by it. He insulted most Union supporters when he said later, "The Yankees, for a people who read as much, are the most ignorant class upon God's earth." After he addressed a Ladies Aid Society in Mount Pleasant in 1862, a group of soldiers from the 4th Iowa Cavalry tried to force him to take a loyalty oath.

In May 1863, as the story goes, Dean was surrounded by a mob in Keokuk that was determined to drown him in the Mississippi. He was given a chance to pray but was told not to make a speech. Instead he started to tell a long story about how he had promised to make his son a kite the following day and how the boy would be so distraught if he did not return home. He told the story at such great length that the mob wearied of it and lost interest in drowning him. Though the mob dispersed, his troubles in Keokuk were just beginning. At the end of the month, he was thrown into the local jail and kept there for 14 days, though no charges were brought against him.

In August 1864, he attended the Democratic National Convention, where General George McClellan was nominated to oppose Lincoln. Firing up a crowd out on the street, Dean shouted that Lincoln and the Union armies had "failed! Failed!! FAILED!!! FAILED!!!!" The loss of life in the past three years "has never been seen since the destruction of Sennacherib by the breath of the Almighty and still the monster usurper wants more men for his slaughter pens," he charged. "Blood had flown down in torrents, and yet the thirst of the old monster was not quenched. His cry was for more blood."

A week later, the rug was pulled out from under Dean and other antiwar Democrats when Atlanta fell, triggering a series of events that transformed the presidential campaign and led to Lincoln's triumphant re-election.

The defeat of the Confederacy and the end of the rebellion did not seem to faze Dean or temper his rhetoric. In many Iowa communities, including Keosauqua, Bloomfield, and Pella, he harped on the evils of military power and black suffrage. Although he drew

large audiences, it is likely that some came just for the perverse pleasure of watching him perform.

In 1869 Dean published his magnum opus, *Crimes of the Civil War, and Curse of the Funding System*, a 500-page diatribe against everything and everybody he held responsible for destroying the nation that he had known and cherished. Even old friends such as Edward H. Stiles, who had stumped with him in Iowa for Douglas, concluded in 1916, "That Dean's tirades against Mr. Lincoln and the war were indefensible, is beyond question. All that can be said is, that in this respect he was false to his real nature." Stiles conjectured that the action of the mob and his imprisonment in Keokuk in 1863 was probably what had embittered Dean.

Indeed, his massive book began with an extended description of his days in the Keokuk jail and then launched into a long list of crimes by Lincoln and his administration. Dean saw no valid differences of opinion or ambiguities in interpreting the actions of the administration, Free Soilers, abolitionists, or Union military leaders. Congress was a total captive of the administration, and yet congressmen "premeditatedly provoked, perpetuated and would yet continue civil war, as a source of profit, power and position." For Dean, the Civil War had not been a rebellion, insurrection, or revolution, but a War Between the States. He repeatedly invoked the Constitution yet supported his theories based on the acts of the British Parliament and the Articles of Confederation, both null and void under the U.S. Constitution.

As to issues regarding freedmen he said, "Different and unequal races cannot live happily or safely under the same government" and "it is then the duty of the superior race in the spirit of justice, to assume guardianship over the inferior race." The Freedmen's Bureau was causing "loss of time, vagrancy, crime, degradation and anarchy, which are unsettling the foundations of Southern society." He opposed extending suffrage to freedmen, concluding that "the claptrap of negro-voting is only to reduce the poor white people down to the level of the negroes." Those who supported it were the "mongrel party."

Two years after publishing *Crimes of the Civil War*, Dean left Mount Pleasant and moved just across the Missouri state line, where he established a farm and community that he appropriately named "Rebels' Cove." He continued to fight for his old principles, still guided by his old hostility to banks and federal power. Uninvited and unwanted, he showed up at outlaw Frank James's trial in 1883 in Gallatin, Missouri, to aid in his defense. Perhaps Dean was partial to former Confederate guerrillas Frank and Jesse James; some saw their robberies of banks and railroads as symbols of resistance to the Union.

Dean lived in Rebels' Cove until his death in 1887. Then and in the years that followed, both his friends and enemies commented on Dean's genius, oratorical



abilities, and gift of persuasion. Many had mixed assessments, ranging from repulsion to admiration. Yet when he died in 1887, Iowa newspapers that had denounced him during the war remarked mostly on his qualities as a leader of men, an intellectual, and a man of great personal warmth and a charitable nature. Numerous Union leaders in Iowa who had known him well published essentially positive reviews of his life's work while noting his many quirks. It was also reported that late in his life Dean privately regretted his harshest rhetoric.

The storms of controversy that Dean had created and survived defined him. One day shortly before his death, as he sat on his front porch with a friend, he commented, "Do you see that large elm down there in the grove, doctor? I've watched it grow from a tiny sprout. It has stood the assault of hailstorms, hurricanes and of lightning, and now it reaches up above all the rest, strong, sturdy, unafraid, like my life has been. That tree, doctor, is to be my headstone." ❖

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

Special Collections, State Historical Society of Iowa (Des Moines) holds the papers of Henry Clay Dean, Charles Mason, Laurel Summers, and Gideon Bailey. Pertinent articles appeared in the *Burlington Hawk-Eye*, *Iowa State Register*, *Davenport Democrat*, *Fairfield Ledger*, *Keokuk Daily Constitution*, *Keokuk Daily Gate City*, [Mount Pleasant] *Home Journal*, and *Tipton Advertiser*. Useful secondary sources include several articles in the *Annals of Iowa*, *Iowa Journal of History*, and the *Palimpsest* (all published by the State Historical Society of Iowa), as well as books on Dean and Iowa Copperheads, particularly Hubert W. Wubben, *Civil War Iowa and the Copperhead Movement*. See also Boyd B. Stutler, "Henry Clay Dean—Inconsistent Rebel," *West Virginia Review* 9 (Jan. 1932); and Edgar White, "Henry Clay Dean, 'The Orator of Rebel Cove,'" *Missouri Historical Review* 22 (July 1928).

Complete annotations are in the *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* production files at the State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City).

*David Holmgren volunteers at the State Historical Society of Iowa and writes often for this magazine. His article on Pammel Court received an honorable mention for the Mills/Noun Award from the Board of Trustees of the State Historical Society of Iowa.*

# James H. Williams

## *Iowa Legislator, Virginia Confederate*

by David Connon

On May 12, 1861, 25-year-old James Harrison Williams wrote in his diary: "Started for Des Moines this morning . . . I go most reluctantly to the legislature. Want to be home, to get ready to go to Va. & espouse her cause."

The son of a well-connected state legislator and slave-owner, James H. Williams grew up in the Shenandoah Valley. A talkative ladies' man, he loved studying, smoking cigars, playing board games, and hunting. In 1857 he graduated near the top of the class at the University of Virginia Law School.

Later that year, James headed to Dubuque, Iowa, where he joined the law firm of native Virginian John T. Lovell, his future brother-in-law. Living in a state quite unlike Virginia, he cherished his "sacred memories of home," as his diary reveals, and on a visit in the spring of 1859 he "saw old Va in all its glory."

As Williams entered Dubuque's political life, he met leading Democrats in and out of the courtroom. He also became acquainted with 11 Dubuque men who later served the Confederacy. This group included a merchant and several men practicing and studying law.

Twice elected state representative as an independent Democrat, James also served as a correspondent for the *Democratic Dubuque Herald*. Under the pen name "Lex," he reportedly wrote in December 1860: "The abolition of slavery [should depend] upon more than the wish of the slave. The best interest of society, of both races, enter[s] into the right to be free. *Their superior condition in slavery [as compared] to freedom in the North must enter into it.*"

As war clouds loomed in March 1861, Williams's father in the Virginia legislature called for his state to secede. The next month, South Carolina troops fired upon Fort Sumter, President Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers, and Virginia passed a secession ordinance. In Iowa, Governor Samuel Kirkwood also called for Iowa volunteers and then a special legislative session to legitimize and fund Iowa's war effort. Ap-



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