

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

VOL. XXXIII

ISSUED IN AUGUST 1952

No. 8

Copyright 1952 by The State Historical Society of Iowa



The Days of His Youth

Very few Iowans have lived as richly as did Johnson Brigham. During a crowded lifetime of ninety years, Brigham occupied a post under Lincoln, edited the Cedar Rapids *Republican* during the 1880's, served briefly as consul at Aix la Chappelle, created the *Midland Monthly* in 1894, and from 1898 to his death in 1936 headed the State Library in Des Moines. As a writer he was equally versatile — as a minor poet, an essayist, a critic of discernment, a biographer, and an outstanding historian of the state of Iowa.

Born in Cherry Valley, New York, on March 11, 1846, the year Iowa became a state, he was christened De Witt Clinton Johnson Brigham; later he dropped the first two names. During his boyhood his attention was turned westward by the long lines of Conestoga wagons streaming through Cherry Valley from Albany to the Mississippi.

His father, Phineas Brigham, traced his ancestry back to Thomas and Mercy (Hurd) Brigham, who emigrated from England and settled in Mas-

sachusetts in 1635. His mother, Eliza (Johnson) Brigham, was descended from the pioneer families of Johnson and Stone in central New York. After attending the public schools in Cherry Valley, Johnson enrolled in Elmira Academy in Elmira, New York. His advanced education was interrupted by the Civil War.

In 1862 young Brigham tried to enlist in the 153rd New York Infantry but was rejected because of his age. Disappointed, he went to Washington where he became attached to the United States Sanitary Commission as a hall boy. Soon he was advanced to the position of relief agent. One of Brigham's first tasks was that of reporting on the first exchange of Union and Confederate soldiers near Savannah. He was assigned to the *General Sedgwick*, a northern boat, carrying 5,000 southern soldiers. When he boarded the Confederate steamer, the *New York*, he found hundreds of northern soldiers awaiting exchange. Some were barefoot, many unable to walk, and most without underclothing. The next day Brigham spent hours feeding the hungry soldiers with "Sanitary Commission soup" made from meat, beans, and tomatoes, and in distributing shirts, socks, underwear, and coats.

By 1864 young Brigham had acquired a flair for writing. His publication, an official report of the prisoner exchange, advanced him to a first assistantship under John Y. Culyer in the central office

of the United States Sanitary Commission, a post which he held until the close of the war.

The Washington scene etched unforgettable pictures on the youth's mind, particularly of Lincoln. Johnson Brigham was given the privilege by Mr. Culyer of exercising "a coal black stallion with a running record on the Long Island course." Frequently on the avenues of Washington, Brigham met the President's carriage. He never forgot the tall gaunt man "who sat leaning forward with his elbows on his knees," and whose countenance was "infinitely sad." Almost daily when Culyer's fleet stallion pranced by, Lincoln waved his big hand, as Brigham later wrote, to salute "the handsomest horse in the District."

The early months of 1865 furnished other memories of President Lincoln. On the raw and disagreeable day of March 5, Johnson Brigham listened to President Lincoln as he read his Second Inaugural Address. After Lee's surrender, Brigham and others marched with a band to welcome the President back from the front. Good-naturedly Lincoln appeared on a balcony, and expressed his appreciation. Then, turning to the band leader, he said: "The Confederacy has one tune which I very much like and since we have captured the Confederacy, I think the tune goes with it. Just to please me, will the band strike up 'Dixie'?" And as the drums and fifes played the familiar air the "President beat time with his big foot, and a genial

smile made his strong homely face almost beautiful."

Johnson Brigham never forgot Good Friday night of 1865. He knew Lincoln expected to attend Laura Keene's presentation of "Our Country Cousin" in Ford's Theater. Late that night, as he passed the entrance to the theater, he ran into an excited crowd. His inquiry brought a quick response. "Happened!" shouted a man, "My God, boy, they've killed the President!"

All night young Brigham remained near by "hoping against hope" for the recovery of the President. At seven in the morning, "the solemn tolling of the bells announced that the end had come." The following Tuesday he joined the mourners who passed solemnly by the President's bier at the White House. The next day he watched the funeral cortege move down Pennsylvania Avenue. Perhaps recalling the earlier salutes which the President had given the black stallion, Johnson Brigham was especially saddened by the riderless horse which followed the funeral carriage.

In 1868, at the age of twenty-one, Johnson Brigham entered Hamilton College at Clinton, New York. The following year, when Cornell University first opened its doors, Brigham registered as a junior. Although he remained but two semesters and did not take a degree, this year brought him contacts with several stimulating

minds. James Russell Lowell, George William Curtis, and Louis Agassiz were visiting lecturers at Cornell. Brigham studied under two of these. From George William Curtis, idealist, once associated with Brook Farm and later editor of *Harper's* "Easy Chair," he gained a new appreciation of literature. Under the revered Agassiz he studied geology and zoology. Brigham won the coveted Goldwin Smith prize in history at Cornell.

Becoming deeply interested in journalism, Brigham and four other students founded *The Cornell Era*. Years later, perhaps in justifying his voluntary withdrawal from Cornell without a degree, he spoke of journalism as a poor man's college, which, he felt, "had fitted him as well as many men for the destinies which they were to fulfill in life." This decision brought to an end his academic schooling, but Hamilton College and Cornell University had developed his deep interest in literature and his keen critical faculties.

LUELLA M. WRIGHT