

THE PALIMPSEST

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Lowell

In the southeastern part of Henry County in Baltimore Township, where the Skunk or Chicaqua River winds its way among the wooded hills, lies the quiet and peaceful village of Lowell, nestling in the valley beside the flowing river.

In the pioneer days, Lowell was one of the important industrial centers in rural Iowa. Scarcely had the Black Hawk Purchase been concluded before numerous settlers came pouring into Iowa to make their future homes. The first settlers in the vicinity of Lowell arrived in 1834, and to this location were attracted many men of energy and enterprise in the years that followed.

The river was the making of the town. At this point, where the river channel is narrow and the current swift, the enterprising pioneers quickly saw the opportunity to develop extensive water power, a factor much needed in the growth of a new country.

Flour and meal were prime necessities among the pioneers. While game, vegetables, and wild fruit were abundant, bread stuffs were scarce and at first could only be obtained by a long trip over ungraded roads to mills in Illinois. Hence, the grinding of grain and the making of flour were the first industries to claim the attention of the settlers. The river offered a splendid opportunity at this point.

In 1838, William Smith and Thomas Angel built a dam across the river and began the erection of a flour mill to serve the needs of the people. The demand for labor caused by this enterprise attracted many settlers, and soon a prosperous village was formed. Among the prominent families that settled in the locality were the Boxes, the Archibalds, the Smiths, the Jackmans, the Stevensons, the McFarlands, and the Browns, all enterprising people whose influence and energy brought prosperity to the community. The flour mill proved a success from the start, and when completed was patronized by the people for many miles around.

As interest centered in this locality, other industries were developed. Since lumber was in great demand to supplement the log-cabin homes of the settlers, sawmills were established to supply the necessary material. Justice Clark, observing that corn was plentiful and of little market value, built a distillery in 1840 which consumed much of the surplus corn. It ran for four years, and free whisky was kept on tap for all who cared to partake.

The original town was platted by a man named McCarver and was first called McCarversville. About 1840, however, the town site came into the possession of Edward Archibald, an enterprising man from the East. Because the water power seemed to give promise of great manufacturing possibilities, Archibald changed the name of the town to Lowell, hoping that some day it would rival the industrial city of Massachusetts for which it was named.

In 1839 the United States government began the construction of a military road from Burlington to the Indian Agency on the Des Moines River. This road went through the new village. When it was completed an immense emigration followed this route and as a consequence hotels or taverns were opened at Lowell and many points along the road.

In 1852, Joseph Brown built a grist- and sawmill on the south side of the river to serve the rapidly settling country. This mill soon acquired a fine reputation and was patronized by farmers from a distance of fifty miles. At all hours the mill yards were filled with wagons and teams waiting for their grist. In order to meet the demand of their customers, both mills in Lowell were operated night and day. In connection with one of the grist-mills, carding machines were operated where the farmers could have wool carded into rolls.

The heavy traffic on the Agency road and the coming of so many people to patronize the mills,

required the establishment of mercantile houses and blacksmith shops. R. J. McFarland operated a tannery for many years, and manufactured a goodly quantity of leather which was in great demand by the pioneers.

On the wooded hills around Lowell was a fine forest growth of white oak trees suitable for cooperage purposes. This business was early established, and shops were started not only in the town but on many of the homesteads in the vicinity. Lowell became the headquarters for all kinds of barrels and kegs and general cooperage, and held this distinction for many years after the Civil War.

Another industry that was started and prospered for a time was the manufacture of spinning wheels, warping bars, and all kinds of weaver's supplies. This industry soon perished, however, because of the growth of great textile mills that rapidly superseded hand weaving.

An extensive pottery business, though not established in the town itself, was yet so closely related to it that it gave life and strength to the community. Dennis and Edward Melcher, two men of German birth, discovered a fine stratum of potters' clay about three miles east of Lowell. These men, being familiar with the art of making pottery, proceeded to develop the industry. Large kilns were built for burning and glazing the ware, which proved to be of fine quality. The Melcher wares soon gained a wide reputation and all southeastern Iowa was

supplied with crockery from the Melcher kilns. This industry continued for many years, but finally faded as the problems of trade and commerce changed.

The citizens of Lowell, though gathered from all parts of the nation, were on the whole a peaceful and honorable people. The claim has often been made that no citizen of Lowell or Baltimore Township was ever convicted of a felony. Whether this immunity from conviction arose from the character of the citizenship of the community or from the failure to detect and punish the derelict might be a mooted question. Certain it is that crimes were committed, and it is equally certain that the criminals were never brought to justice.

In 1864 the people of Lowell were thrown into a fever of excitement by the report that outlaws had entered the home of Edward Folsom, living one mile east of the village, and deliberately shot him as he lay peacefully in bed, then seized two of his horses and hastily fled. Folsom's wife and child, who were unmolested, ran to Lowell and gave the alarm. A posse was quickly gathered and went to the Folsom home, but no sound could be heard from within except the groans of the dangerously wounded man. His horses were found abandoned near Burlington, but no trace of the outlaws was discovered. It has been alleged by some that Folsom knew the man who shot him, but feared to reveal his identity until he learned of his death at the hands of a vigilance committee in Missouri.

Perhaps no political campaign in the history of Iowa was prosecuted with such vigor and energy as the struggle between the followers of Lincoln and Douglas in 1860. In every town and hamlet the partisans of Lincoln were organized into marching clubs and commanded and drilled by some officer or veteran of the Mexican War who was acquainted with the manual of arms. These marching companies were equipped with oilcloth caps and capes and double-wicked oil lamps attached by swivel to the end of a staff so that the lamp would always hang in an upright position no matter what the angle of the staff. These marching companies were called Wide Awakes and when marching at night made a very spectacular appearance. The followers of the "Little Giant" were also organized into marching companies and were officered and drilled in a similar manner. They were equipped with a heavy hickory staff, one end of which was crowned with a bunch of red, white, and blue ribbons. These clubs bore the cognomen of Hickories in honor of "Old Hickory" Jackson.

The rivalry between the two organizations was very intense. Many of the early pioneers of Lowell were emigrants or descendants of emigrants from the southern States, who were strongly proslavery in sentiment and hated the "abolitionists", as Lincoln's supporters were called. In this regard the people of Lowell and Salem were strongly arrayed against each other. During the progress of the cam-

paign, numerous rallies were held by the respective parties where the drilled companies marched and countermarched amidst the plaudits of their admirers. It so happened that the Wide Awakes of Salem and the Hickories of Lowell were scheduled to march at Lowell on the same evening. So bitter was the feeling between the two communities, it was greatly feared that a militant encounter might occur between the two organizations. In such a contingency the heavy clubs with which the Hickories were equipped would make very formidable weapons, while the Wide Awakes with their oil lamps and light supporting staffs would be no match for their assailants. To be prepared for any emergency that might arise, the Wide Awakes of Salem provided themselves with hatchets and butcher knives and other implements of defense, suspended or concealed beneath their oilcloth capes. Wise counsel prevailed, however, and the two rallies occurred without friction, much to the relief of the friends of the respective companies.

Among the pioneers of Lowell were a number of noted characters. Edward Archibald came from New England to Lowell at an early date, and entered at once into the business enterprises of the town. Being possessed of considerable means he was a conspicuous figure in the community. Before leaving his eastern home, he had studied medicine, but it is not known that he was a graduate of any particular school. He opened an office in Lowell

and continued the practice of medicine to the end of his career. Dr. Archibald gained such a wide reputation in the treatment of diphtheria that he was called long distances to treat that malady. It is doubtful, however, if the pioneer physician distinguished between diphtheria and tonsilitis, since both diseases in those days were called putrid sore throat and given the same treatment.

John S. Stevenson was another man that left his mark upon the Lowell community. Stevenson came to Lowell in 1836, and settled in the woods near the river. Four years later he moved to the prairie in Jackson Township where he built a palatial home. In 1845 and 1846 he represented Henry County in the Territorial assembly at Iowa City. Afterward he opened a general store at Boyl's mill which he conducted for several years, but the enterprise was not successful and in 1856 he returned to Lowell to spend the remainder of his life in that village.

One of the most versatile and unique characters among Iowa pioneers was the first settler of Lowell. James Box was born in South Carolina and emigrated with his parents to Tennessee and Kentucky. In 1834 he settled in Henry County, Iowa, one mile southwest of the site of Lowell. He was in the fullest sense of the word a child of the forest. Unlearned in the books of the day, innocent of school attendance, yet he was splendidly equipped with worldly knowledge which enabled him to maintain an independent existence on the fringe of civiliza-

tion. A master in the woodcraft of his generation and familiar with the ways of the frontier, he was well able to cope with the hardships and privations incident to pioneer life. James Box was not one of those adventurous spirits that sought fame and fortune in the new Territory, but came instead to establish a home where he could live a quiet, independent life among his fellows regardless of what race or nationality they might be. The most peculiar characteristic of this queer person was his ability to fabricate strange and extravagant stories. So renowned did he become in this regard that he early acquired the name of being the biggest liar in the Territory of Iowa, a distinction which seemed to please him.

My father, Joel C. Garretson, settled in Henry County in 1837 about six miles from the home of Mr. Box. The two men soon met and father learned something of his neighbor's characteristics. Not long afterward, Mr. Box appeared at my father's cabin but not finding him at home he placed his hands on the door casing and, addressing my mother in his slow deliberate fashion, said, "Well, Mrs. Garretson, I don't suppose you know who I am, but I am the biggest liar in the Territory of Iowa."

"Good morning, Mr. Box", replied my mother without a moment's hesitation, much to the delight of the caller.

The following incident will illustrate the remark-

able temperament of this unusual man. One morning, Mr. Box was walking along the road carrying a small stick in his hand, when he met a neighbor and his wife driving toward the village. After having passed the usual greetings, his friend said, "Tell us a lie this morning, Uncle Jimmie."

"Oh, I haven't time this morning," Mr. Box replied. "Our neighbor's child died last night." And, holding up his little stick, he added, "I am going up to take the measure for the coffin."

Shocked and grieved at the sad news, the man and his wife turned around and drove back to the stricken home to offer sympathy and assistance. But when they arrived they learned, much to their relief, that Uncle Jimmie had told them the lie they had requested.

After the Indians were removed from the Black Hawk Purchase, small bands often returned to the vicinity of Lowell on hunting expeditions. On the occasion of one of these visits a member of the hunting party, known as Indian Jim, decided to remain permanently. For some time his activities were watched with great solicitude by the early residents of the community but they gradually became accustomed to his presence. He erected his hut in an isolated spot and made his living by hunting, trapping, and selling lead ore to his pale-faced neighbors.

Herein lies the principal interest of the pioneers in Indian Jim. He claimed to know the location of

a lead mine from which he obtained his lead ore, but he kept the location of his mine a profound secret. The quality of the ore was fine, and the Indian seemed to be able to furnish any quantity of it to his neighbors. The people, not being versed in the geological formations of the territory, firmly believed that he had a real lead mine. This aroused their cupidity and curiosity to such a degree that the country was thoroughly searched for any trace of the coveted mine. Parties were organized to watch the movements of the Indian, hoping thus to solve the mystery, but Indian Jim was too wary for them all and kept his secret unrevealed. Just before going on a visit to his tribe at the Agency, he promised Lewis Collins, with whom he was intimate, that when he returned he would show him the source of his lead supply. But Indian Jim never returned. The great wealth for which Lowell had so fondly hoped was never discovered, and the secret lead mine of Indian Jim remains a secret still.

A very peculiar character among the people of Lowell was Lewis Collins, a free negro. He was a miller by trade and was employed in the flour mills. Although a majority of the people of the community were proslavery in sentiment, Collins held the respect of his neighbors. It is alleged that several plots to sell him into slavery were frustrated by the people of Lowell.

Before he was employed in the Lowell mills, Collins operated a small grist-mill on Prairie Creek a

few miles west of the town. In those days, millers received their pay for grinding by taking toll of the grist. In this way large quantities of corn were accumulated for which there was small cash market, so it was customary for millers to keep a herd of hogs to consume the accumulated toll. One summer Collins had a fine herd of young hogs that fed daily at the mill, but ran at liberty in the open woods. About the middle of September, these hogs were missing and failed to return. Collins searched the woods in vain. About two miles from the mill in the Skunk River bottom, there lived a man whose reputation was a little shady. While searching in this vicinity for his missing pigs, Collins came upon a pen in the middle of his neighbor's cornfield, and there, carefully concealed, was his herd of hogs.

Here was a problem. Should he report the case to the officers and have his neighbor arrested for the theft of his property? The negro did nothing of the kind. He was a diplomat of no mean ability. Seeing that his hogs were being well cared for, he went quietly home and said nothing, but kept watch over his property. Late in the fall, several farmers in the neighborhood prepared to drive their hogs to market at Burlington. Collins announced that he had a herd ready to go and proposed joining in the drive. On the day designated for the trip, he calmly went to his neighbor's cornfield and drove his hogs away to market. The potential thief did not dare to protest.

The founders of Lowell never realized their expectations. The town was doomed because of its location and changes in the currents of trade. The advent of new inventions, the integration of industry, the introduction of improved means of transportation, and the modifications of the domestic requirements of the people sapped the foundations of the community. Like many another bustling pioneer village, Lowell now lies dreaming of the past and what it might have been. The river, whose power once turned the busy wheels of mills and factories, is as free as it was the day the first explorer gazed upon its rippling waters. The descendants of the pioneers now live in quiet solitude beside the flowing stream, thinking of the energy and enterprise of their ancestors, realizing how futile was their hope that Lowell would rival its eastern namesake, yet conscious that this pioneer village fulfilled its destiny well in the days when the foundations of the Commonwealth were being laid.

O. A. GARRETSON