

## Union Grove

An immigrant casting about for a place of settlement upon an unclaimed piece of land made certain of two things. There must be a grove of trees for shelter and fuel, and there must be a spring to supply water. Thousands of settlers settled upon such "choice spots" in Iowa. In northwest Tama County certain early settlers found fertile land with timber and springs. Searching no further for a suitable name, they called their settlement Union Grove (adding Union for unity among the settlers), and gave to the township the name Spring Creek.

Nothing unusual, perhaps, marked the small community of Union Grove. Its historical significance lies in the typical lines of its development — in its pioneer ways of living, its interest in politics, its communal activities, its manner of amusement, and in its hopes for a greater future under the influence of such a powerful patron as the railroad. Its struggles and hopes, as well as its disappointments, were duplicated in many villages.

The settlement of Union Grove sprang up in the early eighteen fifties. Among those who founded the community were the families of

William C. Bywater, S. S. Mann, William Merrill, Emanuel Kuns, W. L. Conant, Stephen King and his sons, William and Orpheus, and the Bowen family.

After seventy-five years, I can still remember vividly the arrival of the Mann family in 1866. Viewed from our covered wagon, Mr. Merrill's home was of the type of prairie home that succeeded the sod house or log cabin. It was vertically boarded and battened. In this home, enacting the rôles of good neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Merrill planned that we, nine of us, be their guests until the covered wagon and some blanket tents could be improvised as "home" while the new house was being built. The hospitality of this pioneer home can not be forgotten. How Mother Merrill ever provided comfort for her own, and our large families, eighteen in all, is a secret known only to pioneer mothers of that time. And how I remember the big hot cornpone and butter she provided for our breakfast! And I recall further how embarrassed we were when half through eating, our host, just in from chores, sat up to the table and asked a blessing. Shamefaced we laid down our knives and forks, ceased wagging our jaws, and waited for the Amen.

Frontier activities prevailed indoors and outdoors. The Union Grove schoolhouse, often filled

to capacity regardless of the district limits, roads or weather, was the center of cultural and social activities outside of school hours. It was the gathering place for spelling schools, singing schools, Sunday schools, even church services; for literary society meetings, debates, Punch and Judy shows, and elections.

Other pastimes took forms less sedate. On home floors parties were frequent — “heel-and-toe-and away-we-go” with a lone fiddler in the corner energetically providing the rhythm. There was joy unconfined out on the prairies! The “heel-and-toe art” was best exemplified in the large spring and dairy house of W. B. King, or in the boweries of the Grove on Independence Day.

A little of the prankster spirit came west also. One frosty autumn evening a group of settlers planned a quail hunt in the Grove and drafted a newcomer to hold a gunny-sack open while the others scurried through the Grove beating the bushes to round up the quail. The birds did not turn in, however — and neither did the unsuspecting sack-holder until two o'clock in the morning.

In the search for wild game, sport was combined with fruitful occupation. Prairie chickens are said to have been shot or trapped by the wagon load and shipped to eastern markets. Wild

life had no protection by law at that time. One settler near the Grove obtained his year-round meat supply by shooting and dressing rabbits. He is known to have salted them down by the half-barrel full.

Union Grove, like most settlements, grew warm and serious over politics. When William B. King was twice elected to the State Senate to represent Tama and Benton counties, he went as a liberal Republican, though he had been a Jacksonian Democrat. "Yes," sarcastically commented an envious partisan, "that was when there were only Indians in the district to represent." At another election, S. S. Mann, school teacher, farmer, ordained minister, justice of the peace, gold miner, and wheelwright, dared as a Jeffersonian Democrat to be a candidate for the State legislature. Although he did not win the election, he materially reduced the usual Republican majority. In the days following the Civil War, this was considered no mean accomplishment.

Traveling in pioneer times was an undertaking, and transportation a problem. Some of the earliest settlers of Spring Creek Township went by foot to Dubuque to secure their claims at the United States land office. Others rode on horseback. William B. King habitually used a favorite saddle horse in supervising his large farm and

stock enterprises, or in directing the construction of roads and bridges. Mules and oxen were commonly used, but such means of travel were attended by weary hours and hardships on trips sixty miles to a flour mill or a general store. Wagons were often unloaded to lighten the pull through soft, muddy places and on uphill grades.

Union Grove's hopes as a community, however, rested upon the coming of a railroad. There were rumors of a track from Iuka (Tama City) through Deer Creek Valley to Union Grove. In fact the road was built as far as Toledo, but after a delay of several years, it was switched to the abandoned grade of a Toledo-Waterloo project. Finally it digressed to the new town of Gladbrook, several miles east of Union Grove.

Gladbrook's gain was Union Grove's loss, but Union Grove had already contributed its share to the life and settlement of the State.

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