

Six Miles Square

Iowa is divided into ninety-nine counties, and each county is divided into townships. Civil townships vary in size, in shape, in population, in productivity, in social, political, commercial, industrial, and religious interests. A typical Iowa township, however, corresponds to the land-survey township which is an area six miles square. Within that local area are families, schools, churches, and a multitude of other institutions, which, by and large, are very similar to the personnel, the schools, the churches, and the varied interests of any one of the hundreds of other townships in Iowa. Accordingly, Dayton Township in Cedar County may be regarded as a typical Iowa township, six miles square.

Dayton Township slopes gently from the north and south toward the center where a small stream called Mill Creek flows eastward. The name of the creek was derived from the circumstance that a mill used to be situated near its confluence with the Wapsipinicon River at Oxford Mills in Jones County. The higher ground of the southwest part of the township is the watershed between the Cedar and Wapsipinicon rivers. To the south of

this divide, Sugar Creek and Rock Creek which flow into the Cedar River have their origin. The northern part of the township is quite flat and, until tilled, was rather marshy. Other than the patch of timber in the east central part of the township which is called Onion Grove and is about a mile long and half a mile wide, the rest of the township was found by the earliest settlers to be prairie and covered by typical long tough grass.

Why did the pioneer settlers name this area Dayton Township, rather than Robinson or Mill Creek? There was a political reason. The first settlers came to this region in 1844, but were so few and far between that more than a decade passed before the township was given a permanent name. Meanwhile, James K. Polk became President of the United States and an area comprising three standard townships was organized as Polk Township, which was later divided into three parts. One of these parts was called Massillon Township for a city in Ohio. Another was called Fremont Township in honor of John Charles Fremont, the first Republican presidential nominee in 1856, and the third was called Dayton Township in honor of William Dayton, the vice-presidential nominee. If there were Democrats or Whigs in that part of Cedar County in those days they were not as aggressive as their Republican

neighbors in the matter of adopting place names.

The first settlers in what is now Dayton Township were Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Robinson who settled in the timber on the banks of Mill Creek. In 1847, a son was born to this pioneer family. Thus William S. Robinson was the first white child born in this area. In the same year, the Moses Garrison family migrated from Jones County to become the second family in Dayton Township.

Other pioneer families included those of William Laughrey, Mr. and Mrs. Snow, James Girard, and Mr. and Mrs. Ayers. The Frink and Decker families settled on the banks of Mill Creek in what came to be known as Dayton Valley in the northeast part of the township.

Mrs. Snow is charged with having brought the butter weed to Dayton Township. It was one of her dooryard plants in Ohio. She admired it and, in order to enjoy its bright yellow flowers, she brought some seed to Iowa. Here its eradication soon became a problem.

It is reported that an early election was held at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Ayers and that the ballots that were used were strung on a needle and yarn as they were counted, in order to keep them together.

James Girard was destined to become more re-

nowned. The Girard family, we are told, moved to Kansas, to become the founders of the city of Girard in that State.

Early settlers found quantities of wild onions growing along Mill Creek. From this circumstance they called the body of timber Onion Grove. In May, 1854, a post office named Union Grove was established in Dayton Township, with Thomas Robinson as the postmaster. The post office was served by the carrier of the route which led from Iowa City to Dubuque. Mail was carried by horseback in saddle bags. Deliveries were weekly or bi-weekly depending upon conditions and events. Soon after its establishment the name of the post office was changed to Onion Grove.

Prior to 1856, religious services were held in pioneer homes. In that year regularly scheduled religious services were inaugurated in the Dayton Valley neighborhood. This was the origin of the Dayton Valley Wesleyan Methodist Church — the oldest religious organization in the township. The church building erected in 1869 has had an unbroken record of service from that time until the present. This is also presumed to be the oldest church of this denomination in Iowa.

In 1858, a railroad, then called the Chicago, Iowa and Nebraska Railroad, was graded and

tracks laid into Dayton Township about one-half mile east of the town of Clarence. There the work stopped for lack of funds and because of the approach of winter. A box car was switched to a side track to form the first depot. A farmer named William Hoey was the first station agent. In the following year the track was laid into the new town, the buildings of which had been moved from the original village site of Onion Grove two miles north. A celebration on the Fourth of July that year offered, as its principal attraction, a train ride from Clarence to Lowden, a distance of eight miles, and return. The new community continued to be called Onion Grove, however, and the village was platted under that name. In 1863, L. B. Gere, a merchant of that time, made the suggestion to change the name to Clarence in honor of his home town of Clarence, New York. The telegraph call letters for this station are still O. G. for Onion Grove.

On Sunday, June 3, 1860, a most devastating tornado swept into Dayton Township from the northwest. In the northern part of the township it struck the home of Mr. and Mrs. John Baker, killing both of them. It proceeded thence eastward roughly following Mill Creek and struck the home of Mr. and Mrs. McMackin, killing the entire family. Mrs. Elizabeth Decker, a widow

with her four children were residing on a farm directly in the path of the storm. Before the tornado arrived at that point it had sucked up the water and mud from the creek, and just as it was opposite the house that sheltered the terrified family, it let loose a blast as from a gigantic hose and literally plastered the outside walls with mud and sticks. The storm then lifted and descended again in Clinton County, and is known today as the Camanche Cyclone.

Many years later, on May 18, 1898, another destructive tornado formed two miles west of town and swept along the north edge of the Clarence cemetery, laying everything flat in its path. A little to the northeast it hit the farm long owned by the late Thomas Brink and tenanted then by the Charles Deke family. Fred Koch, Sr., who was working on the farm, spied the storm in time to warn the family and hurry them into the cellar not a minute too soon. The house was demolished over their heads but the floor was left in place. Mr. Koch's trunk, which he had brought from Germany, was dropped by the storm near Massillon. The barn roof was ripped off and carried intact beyond the Wapsipinicon River. About a hundred feet of hedge fence was uprooted, and the yard was littered with lumber, broken machinery, and grain.

The coming of the Civil War found the people of the community ready to support the Union. Almost a whole company was raised in this township — Company G of the Thirty-first Infantry which saw action around Chattanooga, Tennessee. Only one person from Dayton Township, however, lost his life in battle, Carlton Frink, a young man of twenty, was killed in the battle of Shiloh.

During the decade of the seventies, lured by cheap land, many families from this section began to move on into western Iowa and Nebraska. This displacement of population made an opening that was filled for the most part by sturdy German immigrants. Among the first of these was the Decker family. In the early seventies the Bauman, Bachman, Goldsmith, Hoffmeister, Hoffner, and other families came. The virtues of thrift, integrity, and frugality were deeply implanted in these people. Given an adequate economic opportunity, they were bound to prosper. Moreover, they were a reverent people — a characteristic which led them to band together for worship as soon as there were a few families in this region, and as a result St. John's Evangelical Church was organized in 1882.

It was a far cry, economically and mechanically, from the experiences of the early pioneers to the

conveniences and luxuries of our day. The first settlers broke up the tough prairie sod with a large breaking plow which had a sharp knife or disk mounted on the beam ahead of the plow-share itself to cut the sod so that it could be turned over. In order to rot the sod the ground was planted to small grain. Every farmer raised wheat enough for his own flour, and many of them produced wheat for the market. Flour mills were operated by water power of the Wapsipinicon River at Oxford Mills in Jones County, and at Toronto in Clinton County.

In the decade of the eighties, chinch bugs came to eat the wheat and the thrifty farmers of Dayton Township changed from the growing of wheat to the production of corn and hogs. Thus it was in a measure because of the little red chinch bug that Iowa came to be called the "State where the tall corn grows", and thus it is, too, that Dayton Township is renowned for its production of corn.

But this change did not come in a season. It came by way of the long road of evolution. The pioneer settlers did not have the specially selected strains of corn that we have today. There were yellow, white, and a "calico" corn in those days — the latter being a mixture of white and red grains on the same cob. Farmers as they husked corn saved the best formed ears for seed for the

coming season. The popular Reid Yellow Dent corn came much later, and the modern hybrid is of recent origin.

Drainage was a serious problem for the pioneer farmer. The slope of the land was so gradual that the water did not run off, and in wet seasons only the high ground could be worked and the flatter portions of the farms were allowed to grow up to slough grass.

One of the early devices to drain the land was a "mole ditcher" which went along below the surface about four feet deep and reamed out a small tunnel in the earth like a mole's burrow. These channels soon filled up with mud, roots, and the bodies of animals. The farmers finally turned their attention seriously to the possibilities of clay drain tile. At first only two-inch tile were used, but they soon filled up and it was found desirable to substitute four-inch tile. The "draws" on higher ground were tiled out first because they were adjacent to the land already under cultivation. Only after tiling had become very general was the lower land adequately drained.

In all of these developments, the settlers and residents of Dayton Township have had a part. Those who came a hundred years ago planned and served and passed. Their children and their children's children came to carry on the labors

that they began. The developments and improvements that have come have been well earned and well appreciated. There are those living today in Dayton Township whose great, great grandparents were here one hundred years ago. Marvelous things, indeed, have transpired within this township during these years. Dayton Township has come to be one of Iowa's many typical, progressive areas six miles square.

GORDON SMITH