The Palimpsest

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS MAGAZINE

The PALIMPSEST, issued monthly by the State Historical Society of Iowa, is devoted to the dissemination of Iowa History. Supplementing the other publications of this Society, it aims to present the materials of Iowa History in a form that is attractive and a style that is popular in the best sense—to the end that the story of our Commonwealth may be more widely read and cherished.

BENJ. F. SHAMBAUGH
Superintendent

THE MEANING OF PALIMPSESTS

In early times palimpsests were parchments or other materials from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete; and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the records of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

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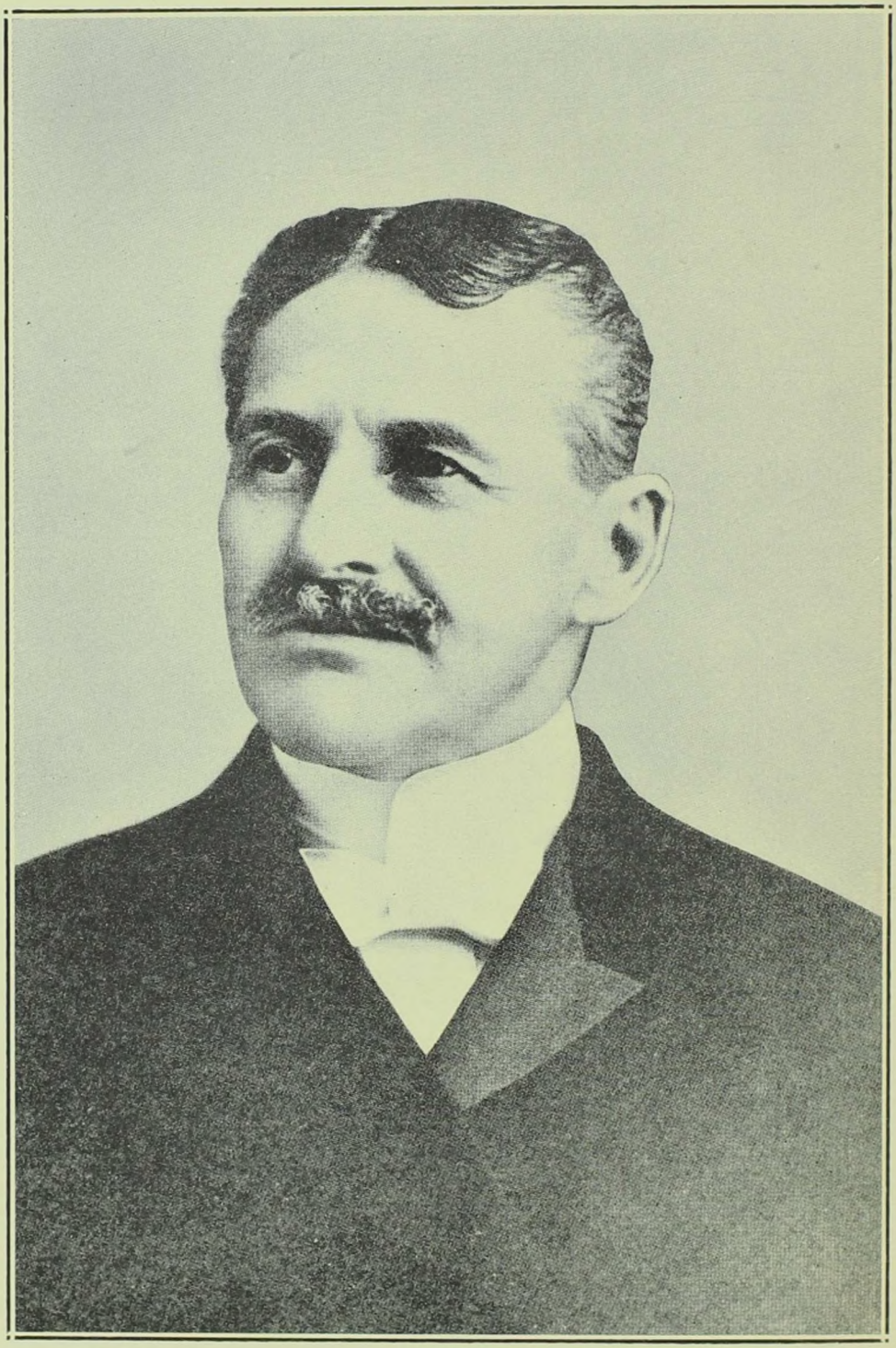

ROBERT J. BURDETTE

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

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"Bob" Burdette—Humorist

There is scarcely a city or even a rural community in the United States that does not cherish memories of "Bob" Burdette — memories that bring a smile to the lips and warmth to the heart. Some people, far and near, can still recall, through the mists of nearly fifty years, the eagerness with which they used to await their copies of the Burlington *Hawk-Eye* which contained his breezy paragraphs. Many more there are who remember him as the lecturer who broadcast smiles and sunshine from a thousand platforms, or, in later years, as the preacher who expounded the gospel in terms of good cheer and human brotherhood.

Editor, jester, lecturer, poet, and preacher — "Bob" Burdette trod the primrose path of public favor through two generations. James Whitcomb Riley said his success was due to his "genius for loving." His wife is inclined to emphasize his mag-

netic personality. Perhaps his habit of doing his best in everything he undertook was also partly responsible. Whatever the factors may have been, few men have earned a finer reputation for wholesome humor and steadfast optimism.

Robert J. Burdette began his versatile career of three score years and ten in Greene County, Pennsylvania, in 1844. It was a county, he used to say, "just large enough for a man to get born in." At the age of two he began his westward migration, accompanied by his parents. "I was born in Pennsylvania, weaned in Ohio, kidnapped by Illinois, adopted by Iowa, and married to California", he summarized the stages in his life. "I never, positively never, did anything I was ashamed of while I remained in my native State. I never swore; I never lied; I never stole anything; I never went to a circus; I never ran away from Sunday School; I didn't go out at night; I didn't play billiards nor go to horse races. Good boy that I was, I stayed at home and entertained the family. No man, I ween, ever lived a purer life than I did while I lived in Pennsylvania."

Before coming to Iowa in 1874, where he really established his reputation as a humorist, Mr. Burdette had reached a masterful maturity through the wide experience of his varied early life. In 1861, at the age of sixteen, he graduated from the Peoria, Illinois, high school. His commencement essay, which he later said "foreshadowed my subsequent

career as a statesman", was entitled "The Press and the Ballot Box". "I have preserved that rather remarkable state paper. Would you like to see it? For a hundred thousand dollars you may. I sometimes read it myself. It mitigates the horror of approaching death."

On August 4, 1862, just five days after he was eighteen, he enlisted in the Forty-seventh Illinois Volunteer Infantry. The recruiting officer unenthusiastically pointed to the standard of military height, "a pine stick standing out from the wall in rigid uncompromising insistence, five feet three inches from the floor." As Burdette walked toward it he "could see it slide up, until it seemed to lift itself seven feet above my ambitious head. If I could have kept up the stretching strain I put on every longitudinal muscle in my body in that minute of fate, I would have been as tall as Abraham Lincoln by the close of the war. As it was, when I stepped under that Rhadamantine rod, I felt my scalplock, which was very likely standing on end with apprehension, brush lightly against it." He was accepted and served to the end of the war. Though he "fought through more than a score of battles", received honorable mention for bravery in the siege of Vicksburg, and "romped through more than a hundred frolics", he never saw the inside of a hospital and never lost a day off duty on account of sickness.

Back from the war he taught school near Peoria where the custom was "to go to bed at sunset and

get up some time in the night", as though "the sun did not know when to start the day". It might be true, he thought, that "the early bird catched the worm, but what consolation is that to the worm? Had he stayed in bed later he would not have been caught."

After three months of teaching he was employed a short time as a clerk in a crockery store, "without fatality to dish or human". Then for several months he "was in the railway service when there really wasn't any such thing", working in the capacity of a mail clerk on a short run from Peoria to Logansport, Illinois.

In 1868 he entered Cooper Institute in New York for the purpose of studying art and with the avowed intention of "painting a great historic painting that was to cover a canvas as big as the side of a barn, with buckets of paint and a name made famous signed in the corner". But New York did not seem to want any "great artist", so the young art student earned a scanty living writing visiting cards and sent remarkably vivid letters back home to the Peoria *Transcript*.

New York, he wrote, was a "delightful old mixed-up place, where every avenue you take loses itself in a maze of entanglements, where the stranger, after securing full and definite instructions from a policeman who can speak English, buttons up his coat and resolutely starts out to somewhere, and after turning the first two corners as per directions, finds him-

self back at the same identical corner and policeman he started from; where the streets take a malicious delight in leading the wayfarer up against a dead wall or out to some wharf; where everything is so crooked that were a man to walk rapidly enough he could almost see himself going down another street."

At that time U. S. Grant was very much in the public eye, and Burdette tells in a letter of seeing "the distinguished smoker" airing himself on Broadway. "General Grant left this city today", he wrote. "The closeness with which he has been watched during his stay, precludes any possibility of his having stolen anything."

During Burdette's sojourn in New York he went one Sunday evening to hear Henry Ward Beecher preach. "After reaching Brooklyn", he explained, "you have only to follow the crowds that you see converging from all directions to a common center. That center is Plymouth Church." Knowing that the congregation assembled early he thought he would stroll past the edifice so as to be sure of its exact location before going there in the evening. What was his surprise "to discover a crowd of nearly two hundred people collected on the sidewalk and in the street in front of the closed gates of the church yard, standing patiently there in the midst of a driving snow storm." Inside the church the "long row of benches around the gallery was densely crowded with tourists, interlopers and plebeians long before the pews began to fill. I was amazed

when an energetic usher ordered us to sit closer together, and actually got about a dozen more worshippers seated. Scarcely had we got settled into breathing postures again, when the same usher, inexorable as a street car conductor, packed us still closer and wedged in another delegation, and there we sat, our arms hanging down before us, hands solemnly clasped on our knees, jammed and pressed so tightly together, wrought into such intimate contact, that I could almost tell what my neighbor was thinking about, and had the usher trod on the corns of the man at the end of the seat, I believe all the rest of us would have 'hollered.' "

Burdette's New York letters shaped the way to his newspaper career. After a thrilling adventure as a member of a filibustering expedition to Cuba where he, "the smallest man on the boat", was wounded by the Spaniards "the first time they fired", he returned to Peoria in 1869 and took a position as telegraph editor on the *Transcript*. By the end of the year he had become city editor and his wit dominated the local page. But one day the editor of the paper announced that when he wanted anything funny in his paper he would write it himself. So Mr. Burdette transferred his services, and later his capital, to the ill-starred Peoria *Review*. When the *Review* went out of business in 1874 about all that was left of Burdette's fortune was his sense of humor, a ticket to Burlington, and a contract to join the editorial staff of the Burlington *Hawk-Eye*.

For several years "Bob" Burdette was connected with the *Hawk-Eye,* first as city editor, then as managing editor, and, after he began lecturing, as special correspondent. He found the *Hawk-Eye* a sedate, conservative old newspaper with a short subscription list, and he left it one of the livest, most influential papers in Iowa and with readers in every State in the Union. The increased circulation was chiefly due to Mr. Burdette's crisp paragraphs touching politics and public life, each with its own whimsical coloring; his shrewd and logical editorials; and his domestic sketches in which his penchant for burlesque, parody, punning, exaggeration, and ludicrous situations was given full play. He came to be known far and wide as "the Burlington Hawk-Eye man".

Charles Beardsley, the editor-in-chief, believed that all printed mirth was unseemly and he chafed and fumed at the city editor's stuff. There was news enough in town without printing nonsense he insisted. But the business office showed him subscription figures that sent Mr. Beardsley back to his wonted editorials, Bob continued to print his genial foolery, and all Burlington was happy. What did anyone on West Hill care that a big fire was covered in a paragraph, so long as there was a column recounting the experiences of Mr. Middlerib? Nobody missed a full report of the political rally at South Hill Square if "the Hawk-Eye man" had published the latest adventures of Old Bilderback and Master Bilderback.

Middlerib and the Bilderbacks were creatures of Burdette's imagination who bore the brunt of his satirical witticisms. They possessed many of the habits and foibles to which human nature is heir, and their traits of character struck the chord of common experience.

" 'No', said Mr. Bilderback who couldn't find his hat, 'it wasn't.' " He had put it there last night just before he went to bed and someone had moved it. Whereupon the family scattered for the usual morning search. "Mrs. Bilderback looked in all the closets with the air of John Rogers going to the stake, and then she went into an old chest, that had the furs and things put away in it, and was opened twice a year, except when Mr. Bilderback's hat was lost, which occurred on an average three times a day. She shook pepper or fine cut tobacco or camphor out of everything she picked up, and varied her search by the most extraordinary sneezes that ever issued from human throat". Miss Bilderback confined her search to the "uncut pages of the last *Scribner,* which she carefully cut and looked into, with an eager scrutiny that told how intensely interested she was in finding that hat. She never varied her method of search, save when the approaching footsteps of her father warned her that he was swinging on his erratic eccentric in that direction, when she hid the magazine, and picking up the corner of the piano cover looked under that article with a sweet air".

Mr. Bilderback himself was a composite system

of investigation. "He raged through the sitting-room like a hurricane; he looked under every chair in that room, and then upset them all to see if he mightn't possibly have overlooked the hat. Then he looked on all the brackets in the parlor, and behind the window curtains, and kicked over the ottoman to look for a hat that he couldn't have squeezed under a wash-tub. And he kept up a running commentary all the time, which served no purpose except to warn his family when he was coming and give them time to prepare. He looked into the clock and left it stopped and standing crooked. And he would like to know who touched that hat. He looked into his daughter's work-box, a sweet little shell that 'George' gave her, and he emptied it out on the table and wondered what such trumpery was for, and who in thunder hid his hat. 'It must be hid,' he said, peering down with a dark, suspicious look into an odor bottle somewhat larger than a thimble, 'for it couldn't have got so completely out of sight by accident.' If people wouldn't meddle with his things, he howled, for the benefit of Mrs. Bilderback, whom he heard sneezing as he went past the closet door, he would always know just where to find them, because (looking gloomily behind the kitchen wood box) he always had one place to put all his things (and he took off the lid of the spice-box), and kept them there. He glared savagely out of the door, in hopes of seeing his hopeful son, but that youthful strategist was out of sight behind his intrenchments. Mr.

Bilderback wrathfully resumed his search, and roared, for his daughter's benefit, that he would spend every cent he had intended to lay out for winter bonnets, in new hats for himself, and then maybe he might be able to find one when he wanted it. Then he opened the door of the oven and looked darkly in, turned all the clothes out of the wash-basket, and strewed them around, wondering '*who* had hid that hat?' And he pulled the clothes-line off its nail, and got down on his hands and knees to look behind the refrigerator, and wondered 'who *had* hid that hat;' and then he climbed on the back of a chair to look on the top shelf of the cupboard, and sneezed around among old wide-mouthed bottles and pungent paper parcels, and wondered in muffled wrath 'who had *hid* that hat?' And he went down into the cellar and roamed around among rows of stone jars covered with plates and tied up with brown paper, and smelling of pickles and things in all stages of progress; every one of which he looked into, and how he did wonder 'who had hid *that* hat.' And he looked into dark corners and swore when he jammed his head against the corners of swinging shelves, and felt along those shelves and run his fingers into all sorts of bowls, containing all sorts of greasy and sticky stuff, and thumped his head against hams hanging from the rafters, at which he swore anew, and he peered into and felt around in barrels which seemed to have nothing in them but cobwebs and nails; shook boxes which were prolific

in dust and startling in rats, and he wondered 'who had hid that *hat?*'

"And just then loud whoops and shouts came from up stairs, announcing that 'here it was.' And old Bilderback went up stairs growling, because the person who hid it hadn't brought it out before, and saw the entire family pointing out into the back yard, where the hat surmounted Mr. Bilderback's cane, which was leaning against the fence, 'just where you left it, pa,' Miss Bilderback explained, 'when we called you in to supper, and it has been out there all night.' And Mr. Bilderback, evidently restraining, by a violent effort, an intense desire to bless his daughter with the cane, remarked with a mysterious manner, that 'it was mighty singular,' and putting on his hat, he strode away with great dignity; leaving his wife and daughter to re-arrange the house."

On another occasion the Middlerib family went on a picnic. "Mr. M. went out and looked at the sky, and noted the direction of the wind, and watched the movements of the chimney swallows with a critical and scientific eye, and came in and announced that it would not rain for five days, and they would have the picnic just two days before the rain. And from the hour of that announcement the Middlerib family and their invited relations did nothing but bake, and roast, and stew, and iron clothes, and declare they were tired to death and would be glad when it was all over and done with."

On the morning of the picnic the sky was overcast and the sun had "a terribly wild and dissipated look" which was not encouraging. "There is no scene in all this wide world of pathos more pathetic than a group of anxious mortals, on the morn of a picnic, trying to delude each other into the belief that when the sky is covered with heavy black clouds, 800 feet thick, and a damp scud is driving through the air, and the sun is only half visible occasionally through a thin cloud that is waiting to be patched up to the standard thickness and density, it is going to be a very fine day indeed. So the Middleribs looked at the coppery old sun, and the dismal clouds, and tried to look cheerful, and said encouragingly that 'Oh, it never rained when the clouds came up that way;' and, 'See, it is all clear over in the east;' and, 'It often rains very heavily in town when there doesn't a drop of water fall at Prospect Hill.' And thus, with many encouraging remarks of similar import, they awaited the gathering of the party, and the human beings finally climbed into one wagon, put the baskets and the boys in the other, and drove away, giggling and howling with well dissembled glee.

"The happy party, although they well knew that it would not rain, had taken the precaution nevertheless to take a large assortment of shawls and umbrellas. They were a quarter of a mile from town when it began to thunder some, but as it didn't thunder in the direction of Prospect Hill, distant

some three miles, they went on, confident that it wasn't raining, and wouldn't, and couldn't rain at Prospect Hill. They were half a mile from town when the cloud that all the rest of the clouds had been waiting for came up and remorselessly sat down on the last, solitary lingering patch of blue that broke the monotony of the leaden sky, but the party pressed on, confident that they would find blue sky when they got to Prospect Hill. They were a mile from town when old Aquarius pulled the bottom out of the rain wagon and began the entertainment. It was a grand success. The curtain hadn't been up ten minutes before all the standing room in the house was taken up and the box office was closed. The Middlerib party having gone early, and secured front seats, were able to see everything. They expressed their pleasure by loud shrieks, and howls, and wails. They tore umbrellas, that had been furtively placed in the wagon, out of their lurking places, and shot them up with such abruptness that the hats in the wagon were knocked out into the road. Then the wagon stopped and people crawled out and waded around after hats, and came piling back into the wagon, with their feet loaded with mud. The umbrellas got into each other's way, and from the points of the ribs streams of dirty water trickled down shuddering backs, and stained immaculate dresses, and took the independence out of glossy shirt fronts. And the picnic party turned homeward, but still the Middleribs did not lose heart.

They smiled through their tears, and Miss Middlerib, beautiful in her grief, still advocated going on and having the picnic in a barn, and wept when they refused her. It rained harder every rod of the way back.

"Then the clouds broke, and then sun came out, and smiling nature stood around looking as pleasant as though it had never played a mean trick on a happy picnic party in its life; and the Middleribs hung themselves out in the sun to dry, and tried to play croquet in the wet grass, and kept up their spirits as well as they knew how, and were not cross if they did get wet. If smiling nature had only given them a show, or even half a chance, they would have got along all right. They were bound to have the picnic party anyhow, so they kept all the relations at the house, and when dinner time came, the grass was dry and they set the table out under the trees and made it look as picnicky as possible. It clouded up a little when they were setting the table, but nobody thought it looked very threatening. The soaked things had been dried as carefully as possible, and the table looked beautiful when they gathered around it. And just about the time they got their plates filled and declared that they were glad they came back, and that this was ever so much better than Prospect Hill, a forty acre cloud came and stood right over the table, and then and there went all to pieces.

"The pleasure-seekers grabbed whatever they

could reach and broke for the house, uttering wild shrieks of dismay. They crowded into the hall, which wasn't half big enough, and there they stood on each other's trains, and trod on each other's corns, and poured coffee down each other's backs, and jabbed forks into one another's arms. And when Uncle Steve, who had found Aunt Carrie's baby out under the deserted table, maintaining an unequal struggle with half of a huckle-berry pie and a whole thunder-storm, came tearing in with the hapless infant, and, dashing through the crowd, deposited it on top of a pile of hard-boiled eggs, Miss Middlerib fainted, and the youngest gentleman cousin was driven into a spasm of jealousy because he couldn't walk over a row of cold meats and lobster salad to get to her, and had to endure the misery of seeing the oldest and ugliest bachelor uncle carry her drooping form to a sofa, and lay her down tenderly, with her classic head in a nest of cream tarts, and her dainty feet on Sadie's Jenny Lind cake. And when Mrs. Middlerib looked out of the window, and saw the dog Heedle with his fore paws in the lemonade bucket, growling at Cousin John, who was trying to drive him out of it, she expressed a willingness to die right there. And when they were startled by some unearthly sounds and muffled shrieks, that even rose above the human babel in the hall, and found that the cat had got its poor head jammed tighter than wax in the mouth of the jar that contained the cream, everybody just sat on the plate of

things nearest him, and gasped, 'What next?' while Cousin David lifted cat and jar by the tail of the former, and carried them out to be broken apart. And when old Mr. Rubelkins lost his teeth in the coffee pot, half the people in the hall began to lose heart, and one discouraged young cousin said he half wished that they had put the picnic off a day. And finally, when the uproar was at its height, the door-bell rang, and the aunt nearest the door opened it, and there stood the Hon. Mrs. J. C. P. R. Le von Blatheringford and her daughter, the richest and most stylish people in the neighborhood, arrayed like fashion-plates making their first formal call. While they stood gazing in mute bewilderment at the scene of ruin and devastation and chaos before them, Mrs. Middlerib just got behind the door and pounded her head against the wall''. That was the blow that finished the picnic.

''Bob'' Burdette's daily column of ''Hawkeye-tems'' was replete with ludicrous events, inexcusable puns, and fantastic hyperboles, as the following samples will indicate.

''It's the fashionable thing among Burlington youngsters, now-a-days, to have the mumps, and they are awfully puffed about it, too.''

''Talk about your centennial trophies. A man on The Hawk-Eye has a nick that was knocked in George Washington's hatchet when he hit it on a nail in the front fence. We are the man, but our modesty will not permit us to say so.''

"A little boy on West Hill, in some inscrutable manner obtained possession of a Swedish primer, last night about eight o'clock, and before the affrighted mother could snatch the dangerous toy from his grasp he had attempted to pronounce one of the long words and had fractured his little jaw in three places."

"Art has its votaries even amid the untaught children of the wilderness. A few days ago a savage Indian painted his own face, went into an emigrant wagon that was sketched, by himself, out on the prairie after dark, and drew a woman from under the canvas and sculptor."

"A spirited race between an old man and a young calf yesterday morning, made a pleasant episode for Tenth street, out on South Hill. The calf got away with the patriarch in a way that was painful. He pulled the old gent down on his knees on a loose plank in the crossing, tore his trousers and ruined his temper and broke some of the commandments."

The "Hawk-Eye man" delighted in poking fun at Burlington peculiarities. An old cutter stranded on South Hill by some thaw or Hallowe'en prank was made famous from one end of the land to the other as the "Red Sleigh on Maple Street". A low-lying block, tenanted by two or three unkempt squatter families with numerous dogs and uncared-for children, had been a problem and vexation for years. Burdette christened the place Happy Hollow and reported the social life of the inhabitants in great de-

tail. One day a horse ran away with a light delivery wagon on Angular Street, "but he got so dizzy and bewildered trying to follow the course of the way, that he sat down on the sidewalk and cried, from sheer vexation."

Prohibition was a prominent issue in Burlington in 1874, and the "wets" contended that the closing of the saloons would hurt business. Burdette seized upon the argument and applied it on all sorts of occasions. When the poorhouse burned one of the paupers, indignant at being assigned quarters in an out-building, crossed the river and became "a happy inmate" of an Illinois poorhouse. "Thus fanaticism and religious oppression continue to drive capital out of Burlington", concluded the city editor.

"Bob" Burdette launched his first lecture "on the broad ocean of human hearts and ears" at Keokuk in December, 1876. He had "about nine and a half pounds of manuscript" on the subject of "The Rise and Fall of the Mustache" and did not miss a word or leave out a line. It took two hours and fifteen minutes to deliver that lecture and when he had finished he "hadn't enough voice left to ask for a glass of water". But the audience liked his humor and that winter he and his lecture were much in demand.

Those were the palmy days of the lyceum when P. T. Barnum, Henry Ward Beecher, Joaquin Miller, Wendell Phillips, Henry W. Shaw, "Bill" Nye, and Eugene Field were at the height of their fame on the platform. During the winter of 1877-1878 Mr. Bur-

dette lectured under the direction of the Redpath Lyceum Bureau. From that time the platform claimed more and more of his attention, but for several years he served the *Hawk-Eye* as special correspondent. The "Roaming Robert" letters, containing some of the finest things he ever wrote, were full of philosophy, humor, and pathos all blended in happy harmony by his frolicsome pen. They told with characteristic cleverness of his experiences in all parts of the country, of the people he met, of the trains he traveled on and those he missed, of the audiences he addressed, and of the tribulations he encountered.

In 1880 he left Burlington in the vain hope that his wife's health would be improved and his letters to the *Hawk-Eye* ceased, though he wrote for the Brooklyn *Eagle* for several years. He spent the summers at some secluded place recuperating from the strain of the lyceum season. It was while he was camping in the woods in Warren County, Pennsylvania, that he received his "call" to the ministry. "The people came to me and said they had no pastor, would I preach for them? I would and did."

Asked one time why he was a Baptist, he replied that he inherited his religious faith. "I love the Universalists and the Russians, I love the Congregationalists and Prussians and Methodists; I love the Presbyterians and the English; but I was born a Baptist and an American, and that settles it."

During the lecture season for a number of years

he preached every Sunday, "from Dan to Beersheba". In 1898 he became supply minister of the First Presbyterian Church of Pasadena, California, and when the Temple Baptist Church of Los Angeles was organized in 1903 he was selected as pastor, a position he occupied until his death in 1914.

The transition from professional humorist to preacher extended over a period of eighteen years. He emphatically denied that he had wearied of the "strenuous life of the lecture field and sought ease in the pastorate". In these days of intellectual alertness, he said, "the man who seeks the pastorate for a vacation will find far more quiet and ease and meditative restfulness in falling down stairs with a kitchen stove or dodging automobiles on racing day."

While he studiously avoided telling funny stories in the pulpit, his sermons were filled with richly humorous philosophy. "Great things don't amount to much", he declared. "Life is made up of little things. I have known men who were so great they were of no account. You have seen trees so big you could not tie a horse to them. I have heard preachers who knew so much you could not understand a word they said, and once in a while you go into a house where they have a Bible so big they never read it. It is easier to be great than it is to be humble." He always maintained that "humor is but the garment of truth."

SHERMAN J. MCNALLY

Grasshopper Times

Northwestern Iowa has suffered much from the grasshoppers. The ravages of the Rocky Mountain locusts were almost continuous in O'Brien County from 1873 until 1879, though the devastation was much worse in some summers than in others. Thomas Barry, a victim of their invasions, relates his personal experiences in the following pages.

'Tis well I remember that beautiful June day when our future — which looked so bright — was so quickly blasted by an invasion of grasshoppers. It was Sunday morning: six of my neighbors had called for me to go with them to Hospers to attend church. There was no definite road, so we simply headed northwest and avoided the deepest slews. The sun was well up in the cloudless blue sky, causing the drops of dew to shine in the soft green grass mottled with prairie flowers. The tall grass by the side of the slew nodded to us as the wind blew over it. Meadow larks, like an orchestra of flutes, greeted us with their jubilant song from the tiptop of the tallest weeds as they accompanied us for long stretches. Then flashing the black crescents on their breasts, they flew away and others took up the relay with as clear a note.

The heavy sweet smell of bluejoint which filled the

air so dulled my senses that the German conversation of my companions seemed far away. A hearty laugh from the crowd brought me back to their presence, and turning to them I said, "Isn't this wonderful?" They looked at me rather blankly so I hesitated a little and ventured, "Schön, sehr schön, nicht wahr?" and spread my arms over the land. They all assented, "Ja", but one settler who had seen June prairies before edged up more closely and said, "Ja, schön, but you can't eat it." He nodded his head in emphasis and limped back to his place in the wagon.

When about half way to Hospers a large black cloud suddenly appeared high in the west from which came an ominous sound. The apparition moved directly toward us, its dark appearance became more and more terrifying, and the sound changed to a deep hum. At first we thought a cyclone was upon us. The oxen stopped and we all stared at each other mystified. "Der jüngste Tag", one man shouted and began to pray. The cloud broadened out and settled lower as it drew near: the noise became deafening. When it was directly over us it looked like a heavy storm of black flakes, the dark particles singling out and becoming more defined in shape as they descended. We heard the buzzing; we saw the shining wings, the long bodies, the legs. The grasshoppers — the scourge of the prairie — were upon us.

As Mike Roeder lashed his whip and turned the

oxen toward home, we nodded approval. He urged the animals into their swiftest gait — a wabbly trot. When they breathed loudly, he drew them into a slow, steady walk. The men spoke little: gloom settled upon the group. Again the meadow larks flew with us and plaintively sang, "O, do not give up hope."

When we pulled into my yard, the shiny brown pests already covered my patch of sod corn and the field of wheat. The entire garden was a dark moving mass and the tender young cottonwoods were brown. I was greatly relieved at the apparent composure of my wife as I saw her cutting down the clothes line. She had recovered from her fright and suggested that by swinging a rope we might be able to save some wheat. I figured it a useless procedure but we tied together all the rope we could find and, each taking an end, we swung it back and forth most of the day. We saved enough wheat for seed.

I do not think anyone but the old settlers themselves can ever realize the depredations caused by the hoppers. In O'Brien and surrounding counties they ate everything before them — small grain, corn, vegetables, bark and leaves of trees, the clothes on the line, and the tender shoots of grass that grew near the ground on the prairie. Some farmers cut the unripened grain. By harvest time there was little left to cut.

The settlers in northwest Iowa were for the most part people of limited means who had taken advan-

tage of the homestead or preëmption laws. Long and hard they had labored in anticipation of better times. They had endured all of the hardships and privations of pioneer life in the hope of realizing a substantial reward in the years of prosperity that were to follow. They had come into the new country practically empty-handed, depending entirely upon the crops from year to year: there was no surplus for emergencies. The early summer of seventy-three held out big promises. Implements were purchased, new granaries built, and lightning rod agents did a thriving business — on credit. The harvest would pay for it all. And then came the grasshoppers. To make matters worse a financial panic broke over the country in September.

The approach of winter found many of the farmers in dire need of clothing, fuel, and food. A convention was held in Fort Dodge and an appeal was made for donations to relieve the destitute in the stricken region. People from all parts of the country responded generously, and "grasshopper parties" for the benefit of the homesteaders became something of a fad.

When the General Assembly convened in January, Governor C. C. Carpenter recommended that the needs of the grasshopper victims should be investigated and some means provided for their relief. A legislative committee visited Sioux, O'Brien, and Osceola counties, met and interviewed hundreds of settlers, and found our local authorities totally un-

able to meet the situation. The shortage of seed grain was especially serious. Before the end of February a bill was passed which appropriated $50,000 "for the purpose of furnishing the destitute in northwestern Iowa, suffering in consequence of the grasshopper raid of the summer of 1873, with such seed, grain, and vegetables as may be deemed necessary". Over $36,000 of this money was used that spring and nearly two thousand people were aided. I did not take advantage of any of the relief that was offered because I had managed to save some seed and we were able to buy enough food and clothing.

During the late summer and early fall the hoppers had deposited cells of eggs in countless numbers in the cultivated land. Each cell contained about thirty eggs and was covered with a little soil. In the spring the eggs hatched and the ground seemed alive with queer little insects about one-fourth of an inch in length and possessing ravenous appetites. They seemed to be instinctively attracted toward the fields where the tender shoots of grain were making their appearance. The first sign of their ravages was a narrow strip along the side of a field where the grain or corn was missing. At first it was usually attributed to a balk in sowing but as it grew wider day by day the cause was soon apparent.

We experimented with every means conceivable to exterminate the pests. Smudging, burning the prairie, burning tar, digging ditches, using kerosene,

and harrowing the land infested with eggs were all tried with little success.

Again there was no harvest. Many settlers left the country disheartened and discouraged. Some did not wait to dispose of their land but loaded up and left, others sold for what they could get, while those who remained hoped for the next year. Many were in a pitiful condition. I sold our old home in Massachusetts and was saved some of the privations my neighbors suffered. Sharks and swindlers were plentiful and took advantage of the needy settlers by offering mortgages at high rates of interest — frequently charging two and one-half per cent a month. Only the coarsest food was available.

Every spring a new horde of grasshoppers was hatched. They moulted and began to eat as soon as green vegetation appeared. At times we were visited by migratory swarms which would stay a while and then all fly off again in a favorable wind. A grasshopper flight has been likened to "an immense snow-storm, extending from the ground to a height at which our visual organs perceive them only as minute, darting scintillations, leaving the imagination to picture them indefinite distances beyond. . . . On the horizon they often appear as a dust tornado, riding upon the wind like an ominous hail-storm, eddying and whirling about like the wild, dead leaves in an autumn storm". When a change of temperature was encountered or a storm approached the grasshoppers descended. In alighting,

they circled in myriads about you, beating against everything animate or inanimate, driving into open doors and windows, heaping about your feet and around your buildings, while their jaws were constantly at work biting and testing all things in seeking what they could devour. Amid the incessant buzz that such a flight produced and in the presence of the inevitable destruction going on everywhere, one was bewildered and awed at the collective power of the ravaging host.

The noise made by one of the vast swarms of migratory grasshoppers when they were engaged in their work of destruction was much the same as the low crackling and rasping sound of a prairie fire swept along before a brisk wind — and the damage was scarcely less complete. The poet Robert Southey has vividly described the noise produced by a flight of these locusts:

> Onward they come, a dark, continuous cloud
> Of congregated myriads numberless,
> The rushing of whose wings was as the sound
> Of a broad river, headlong in its course
> Plunged from a mountain summit, or the roar
> Of a wild ocean in the autumn storm,
> Shattering its billows on a shore of rocks!

Their flights sometimes darkened the sky and gave the settler an ominous feeling of disaster. One afternoon I was coming from Primghar in company with some neighbors when the largest and darkest cloud of hoppers we had ever seen passed between

us and the sun. The landscape grew hazy and things seemed so unreal we could hardly believe our senses. Daylight vanished, the air lost its warmth, and stars were visible. But after a while the cloud, carrying a tail like a comet, passed on. Sunlight and warmth returned, but it was several hours before we could shake off the terror that had seized us.

People in the East have often smiled incredulously at our statements that the grasshoppers stopped the trains on the railroads. At times the hordes of migratory hoppers accumulated on the track in such numbers that the oil from their crushed bodies made it necessary to sand the rails before the train could make the grade. J. M. Brainard, a prominent newspaper man in Iowa at that time, related that one day, well along in the afternoon, while he was on a trip to Council Bluffs, the train came to a standstill on the eastern slope of the divide near Arcadia. The sun was low and the air cool so that the hoppers had clustered upon the warm rails. The engineer was obliged to back the train and then make a rush for the top of the grade, liberally sanding the track as he did so. The same performance was repeated several times.

Some people, not living in the devastated section, treated the invasion as a joke. Much humorous literature was published concerning the hoppers. Menus were printed showing the variety of ways they could be served as food. It was said that really delicious soup could be made from the insects, while

fried in butter they tasted no better and no worse than shrimps. An agricultural house got out a card that had a picture of an enormous hopper sitting on a fence gazing at a field of wheat, and underneath were the words: "In this(s)wheat bye and bye". Fabulous yarns were told of the weird things the grasshoppers did.

As might be assumed, the loss of many harvests caused hard times. There was little money in circulation. Gopher pelts, on which there was a bounty of five cents, were a common medium of exchange. I used some cutlery that I received from Northampton in place of money. There was a good demand for my ware so I tramped the prairies with my sack on my back and visited surrounding towns.

The grasshoppers transformed the prairie into a barren world. Only the coarsest dry grass remained. Glossy brown hoppers shone everywhere in the sunlight, often piling up in their greed for any tender vegetation that might be found. I passed prairie shacks with the doors nailed shut; heard pitiful tales from settlers' families; saw hungry children, lean cattle, and a few cases of despair.

With all the desolation, hope never seemed to leave me. I was often lost in the fog and staid on the prairie all night. Thinking little of my health which I had been sent west to recover, I lay on the ground and watched the fog lift and the friendly stars come out. When dawn stole around me I arose, convinced that better times were in store for us.

In the summer of seventy-nine, when we all felt that we could not endure much longer, a favorable wind came before the hoppers had deposited their eggs. They arose and flew high seeking richer fields.

After the invasion was over, there was an influx of new settlers. Barbed wire did away with the free range and marked off our land like a checkerboard. A town sprang up near my place and the Chicago and Northwestern trains puffed through my pasture. A period of general prosperity began.

Of the seven old settlers who witnessed the coming of the grasshopppers on that memorable Sunday in June, 1873, six have gone to their reward. In the years that followed we found that we had the same ideals, though we spoke a different language.

JOSEPHINE BARRY DONOVAN

Comment by the Editor

THE AGE OF IOWA

In a political sense Iowa is young. Indeed, the political history of this Commonwealth is compassed in the span of a single lifetime: it is but a moment in the evolution of political institutions. A little less than eighty-five years have passed since the Territory of Iowa was established. It was scarcely more than three quarters of a century ago that the Territory became a State. Sixty-five years measure the time that Des Moines has been the capital city. All within the memory of men still living.

Physically, however, Iowa is as old as the rest of the world. This region existed ages before the advent of man. Most of the time it was under the sea while tiny clams laid down their shells to form the limestone and the marble for the future dwellings of a nobler race. There were also long periods when the ocean receded and the land appeared. Sometimes the country was a barren waste; again the climate was tropical when giant trees and enormous ferns grew in reptile-infested marshes; and only a hundred thousand years ago the surface of Iowa was covered with glaciers. The geological history of Iowa is measured by incomprehensible eons of time.

In the realm of human history Iowa has a venerable past. The mound builders flourished centuries before the civilization of the Pharaohs of Egypt. On the seventeenth of June it will have been just two hundred and fifty years since the white men first came to Iowa. Louis XIV was then dreaming of empire; Charles II maintained his uncertain seat upon the English throne; while Peter the Great was just learning to walk. The discovery of Iowa by Jacques Marquette and Louis Joliet occurred in 1673, nearly sixty years before George Washington was born and a century prior to the Boston Tea Party.

When William Penn was petitioning King Charles for an American land grant in 1680 Louis Hennepin was voyaging up the Mississippi along the eastern border of Iowa. Ten years before the siege and capture of the impregnable fortress of Louisburg by New England militia in 1745 the Sac and Fox Indians had defeated a French army in the Des Moines Valley. At the time Washington took the oath of office as President of the United States, Julien Dubuque was busily mining lead on Catfish Creek. Iowa is as old as the nation, and older.

J. E. B.

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