

Comment by the Editor

TWO FACTS AND A FICTION

Many persons have played a game in which the players line up and the person at one end starts a message down the line, each player in turn whispering it to his neighbor. By the time the message reaches the last person in line the person who started it is usually unable to recognize it, but the contrast makes for hilarity.

More serious are the changes which stories often undergo in neighborhood gossip, politics, and even in history. For example, there is the story of Major Jeremiah Smith, Jr., and the capitol he built at Burlington for the Legislative Assembly of Wisconsin Territory. There is no doubt that he built the capitol and the fact that it burned on the night of December 12, 1837, is well authenticated. It is also a fact that the legislators asked Congress to reimburse Major Smith for his loss. But did he ever get paid?

In 1871 Hawkins Taylor wrote a story for the *Annals of Iowa* in which he stated that Congress appropriated \$10,000 to reimburse Jeremiah Smith for the loss of the capitol building, but, sad to say, an uncle of the rightful claimant, also

named Jeremiah Smith, heard of the appropriation, claimed it, and made off with the money, leaving the rightful owner holding the empty sack. In 1879 a similar story was published in a history of Des Moines County, but in this case the amount was given as \$4,000 and the two Smiths were said to have been cousins.

A search of the laws and appropriations made by Congress during these years revealed no appropriation to any Jeremiah Smith, but there was a record of another Jeremiah Smith, an older man who was employed as a miller by the Indian agent in charge along the Des Moines River.

When the Sauk and Fox Indians ceded their lands in Iowa to the United States in 1842 a large amount of money was appropriated to pay their debts to the traders and among the claims approved was one for \$4,000 to Major Jeremiah Smith, Jr., of Burlington for goods sold the Indians. This fact, no doubt, was known to Jeremiah Smith, Sr., the miller. He claimed the money, signed his name, Jeremiah Smith, which was rightfully his, although the money was not, and disappeared with the \$4,000. In the course of time the older Smith was reported to have obtained money appropriated to pay Jeremiah Smith, Jr., for the burned capitol.