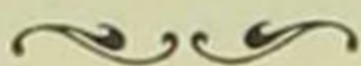


THE PALIMPSEST

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Elder Bowman

The Reverend George Byrant Bowman began his life in North Carolina on May 1, 1812, and ended it in California in 1888. Between those years he lived in Iowa long enough to impress the seal of his character upon the progress of education and religion and to contribute to the welfare of three towns — Iowa City, Dubuque, and Mount Vernon. He was by profession and faith a minister but, being also one who is often described but seldom seen, a "born leader of men", his activities were many faceted and almost all equally successful.

This was good, for a pioneer preacher has never trod a path of roses. He has never had a corps of deacons and assistants as a buffer between himself and the outer world. Often he has had to raise his salary, build his fires, help erect his church, and guide the handles of the plow while he prepared his Sunday sermon.

To Elder Bowman, however, these things were

all in a day's undertaking, and it would have been as impossible for him to sit with his feet on the hearth during the week as it would to stay in bed on Sunday. He came to Iowa in 1841 and built a church at Iowa City. Two years later he was transferred to Dubuque, and then from 1845 to 1850 he "rode the circuit", carrying the Gospel to scattered groups of pioneers. He was next transferred to Mount Vernon, where he built his second church, and on July 4, 1852, broke ground for and founded Cornell College. These were the achievements of a preacher whose faith and vision were combined with keen business sense and honest toil.

In 1840 the Methodists of Iowa City organized a class meeting under the direction of Reverend Bartholomew Weed, who was in charge of the Iowa mission. A year later, when the number of Methodists had increased to more than a hundred, they looked for a minister who would have the business capacity to build a church. In the Missouri Conference was a young man by the name of G. B. Bowman who seemed to be very well qualified, but his transfer was hard to effect, for the Conference well nigh refused to part with such a promising man and Bowman himself, after consenting to come, asked to be released. Nevertheless "Brother Bowman went to his new mis-

sion, gathered a large congregation, formed a society, erected a church in Iowa City, and found the means between that and Boston to pay for it."

In the business of erecting the church, Bowman proved himself ingenious as well as enterprising. The congregation was poor and could not possibly raise enough money to erect a building such as the "wants and prospects of the community demanded." Bowman proposed that another minister fill his pulpit while he made a trip east in search of funds. This idea was eagerly accepted, and for six months Bowman went begging and preaching all the way to Philadelphia and New York and back.

When he returned he had "nearly four thousand dollars in money and means." Always resourceful, he immediately rented a building, opened a store, and converted his miscellaneous "means" into cash which could more easily be traded for lumber. When this novel procedure was ended he put the money with the little that his own people could raise, and erected "a splendid brick church, forty-five by sixty feet, with a basement throughout, with a large school room and four class rooms. The church was well finished and handsomely seated, with aisles, four tiers of seats, an altar and a pulpit of the most substantial workmanship." It was no wonder that long after

he had left for other fields, Bowman's begging trip was a topic for fireside commendation.

Several years later, while pastor at Mount Vernon, dissatisfied with the old schoolhouse in which meetings were held, he undertook with his indomitable energy and perseverance to build a church. Again he traveled about the country gathering subscriptions, and presently superintended the building of a substantial brick structure.

During the course of construction he and several other men went to the nearby "Jasper Nick" quarry to obtain the door-sill stones. They took the stones "with the permission of an employe there, during the absence of the proprietors, and afterwards had considerable difficulty in settling therefor with the owners, who threatened the good men with prosecution for stealing." It is not to be doubted that Bowman "held his own" in an affair of this kind. If necessary, he could be a very "scrappy" preacher.

Perhaps some of the most characteristic and lovable memories of the man relate to the period when he was an itinerant preacher, riding the "Linn Grove Circuit" and Presiding Elder of the Dubuque District. The little bands of men and women on the fringes of civilization felt that the coming of Brother Bowman into their religious services marked an occasion to be long remem-

bered. They often felt a keen sense of loneliness and even despair at being settled amid the hardships of the new country, far away from their loved ones, and many a faltering pioneer received divine comfort and renewed courage from the big man with the simple message and the firm hand clasp.

A boy who was present at one of these informal gatherings in a farmer's one-room lean-to cabin afterward related his impressions of the event. "The preacher was late in getting there and I kept looking out through the kitchen door. Finally he came, dismounted, tied his horse, removed his saddle bags from the saddle and came in, stooping to get in through the low kitchen door. I remember his bronzed face as it was framed in that doorway, and then, there he stood in the midst of us, tall and straight and lean, his features well moulded, strong and expressive."

Of Bowman's peculiar fitness for the work, he says that he was "a man with a keen eye to both the spiritual and the business end of God's Kingdom in Iowa. A pioneer preacher of force, of energy and of power, endowed by nature with a missionary spirit for religious conquest. He was one of those rare characters seemingly designed by Providence for a special work. He had a message, and he had motive power and native ability

sufficient to put it into the plain words of a Gospel Pilot pointing the way."

This attractiveness and acumen did not lessen with the years. Much later a fellow minister reported that when Reverend Bowman presided over a meeting it was "like a celestial benison". Though he had grown gray, he was not old. "He had a wonderful fellow feeling that gushed forth like an exuberant spring. He was as artless, gentle and loving as a child, but withal he took a strong grip upon the business of the Conference."

But Bowman was more than a preacher. He was a pioneer among pioneers: one of the first in that rough country to feel that people needed something besides faith to help them lead noble lives, and that that need was education. So it was that while in Iowa City, in 1843, he became one of the founders of Iowa City College, organized under the direction of a Methodist Conference.

The work of the institution was "elementary, although it was designed ultimately to assume the work of a real college." Professor James Harlan was the principal instructor, and the public was assured that additional professors would be added as they were needed; and also that "efficient instruction would be given in all the primary and regular college studies."

But for all the sanguine hopes of its founders,

the life of the school was brief for there was neither enough "money or patronage to warrant it." However, had it not been for the collapse of this enterprise, Elder Bowman would have felt no need for cherishing his ideal for education until 1852, when it blossomed more brightly and bore fruit at Mount Vernon.

The rugged preacher had traveled on horseback over his vast circuit, growing to know its hills and valleys and sweeps of prairie as a friend knows a familiar face. And of all the places that he saw, he felt that the country around Mount Vernon was the most beautiful. It was the locality for which he had been searching ever since the failure of the educational venture at Iowa City. He was a "man of mighty faith and hope and confidence. Scholars now put these qualities all into one word and call it 'vision', but vision can only reach to the skyline, while faith and hope and confidence reach farther and away beyond. His vision, however, was far-reaching enough to see the need of an institution of learning in this locality, and the appropriateness of the hill which he called beautiful as a site for college grounds."

There is a legend about his finding the spot. "The pioneer itinerant in 1851 ascended this beautiful mount on horseback, and from the summit opened his eyes upon this charming landscape of

blending prairie and forest stretching amphitheatre-like for ten or fifteen miles in all directions. His illuminated eyes saw here the ideal site for a Christian college, and there were revealed to him in prophetic vision future buildings, inspiring teachers, and an oncoming host of students. He dismounted and sought a concealed bower in a clump of native hazel, where, kneeling before Almighty God, he dedicated the site and himself to the cause of Christian education."

Be that as it may, Elder Bowman immediately set about in his characteristic way to found a college. Without any "authority from Church or State, without any board of trustees, without even a title deed to the land, he formed his plans" for building the institution.

On July 4, 1852, his project was made known to the public at a big celebration. The gathering was advertised on handbills throughout the country and people poured in on all the roads, coming in wagons, carriages, and on horseback from as far as "Anamosa, Marion, Cedar Rapids, Iowa City, Burlington, and Dubuque." A great feast was prepared — "such a plethora of edibles" as was never "seen west of the Mississippi River up to that date" — and after the scraps were partially cleared away the gathering listened attentively to the speech of the day. The orator was

James Harlan, first State Superintendent of Public Instruction, and his subject was "Education". Nowadays it would be hard to hold a Fourth of July audience with such a theme, but at that time education was an ideal as yet unrealized, a bright torch which the people dreamed of carrying in the parade of progress.

At the close of the speech Elder Bowman delivered a characteristic address which sparkled with enthusiasm and vitality, and then, "in the presence of the vast assemblage, the ground was broken for the foundation of the first building, now known as Science Hall."

In the following month, Elder Bowman obtained "in his own name a title deed from I. H. Julian and Reuben Ash to the original site of the school." In September, at the session of the Iowa Conference held at Burlington, a report was adopted accepting a gift of fifteen acres of land "upon which there is now in progress of erection a large and substantial edifice adapted to and designed for educational and collegiate purposes." Such was the rapidity with which Elder Bowman started things moving. He was never deterred if the horse wasn't ready when he needed it, but promptly started off with the cart.

The school was commonly referred to as the Mount Vernon Wesleyan Seminary but in 1854 it

was incorporated as the Iowa Conference Seminary. In 1855 the name was changed to Cornell College, "in honor of William W. Cornell, of New York City, one of the early contributors to the institution."

Elder Bowman was not content, however, in merely launching the infant school. During the first year he was appointed "agent" of the institution, and the duties of this office seemed to include everything from raising money to raising the building. With indefatigable energy he made a personal canvass asking for funds. One minister related that since there was nothing of value in his home Bowman insisted upon confiscating his large Dutch watch. The only thing that saved the treasure was the owner's remark that he wouldn't know when to leave off preaching without it.

Notwithstanding these activities, Bowman was continually on hand to superintend the erection of the building. The Board of Trustees said of him in 1855, "He has secured donations, and made all the purchases of real estate and building material, made all contracts with the workmen, superintended the erection of the buildings, collected all the funds, and paid off all demands in person, from the commencement to the completion of the buildings."

The first structure erected was "forty feet by

seventy-two, and three stories high including the basement." When school opened in September, 1853, the "walls were up, the roof was on, windows in, doors hung, and floors laid; but nothing was painted throughout the building, only one coat of plastering on the partitions, and no plastering on the outer brick walls." In this unfinished state, school was conducted until the close of the first year.

Elder Bowman felt, however, as did every one connected with the institution, that the first precarious year had gone exceedingly well. He expected an influx of settlers, and consequently laid out in lots Bowman's first addition and Bowman's second addition. His real estate venture went well, and soon the plots were incorporated into the town of Mount Vernon.

During these intensive years he also owned a store in the village which netted him a neat profit. Though he was seldom seen behind the counter, everybody knew it as "Bowman's store".

In 1858 the endless toil began to show its effect, and soon he was compelled to move to California because of ill health. Cornell did not cease to occupy his "loving interest", however, for presently he sent back to his friends the magnificent gift of \$10,000 to be used toward the erection of a new building, Bowman Hall.

An acquaintance of the time spoke of him as without "the culture of the schools, yet possessed of wide information, broad sympathies, and magnetic personality." Moreover, he was "a man of profound convictions, unconquerable purpose, and strong, imperious will. He knew men, and was a man of affairs. He knew Jesus Christ, and was well versed in the Bible. He was a tireless worker — he brought things to pass. Difficulties only stimulated him to greater effort. Defeat to him meant subsequent victory."

There is a picture of Elder Bowman in clerical garb which hangs in one of the college halls. It is labeled "The Founder of Cornell College", and is a fine, dignified, scholarly looking portrait of an enterprising man. There is another picture in the hearts of pioneers which recalls him as he rode horseback over the hills — a tall, sinewy form, a face bronzed by the sun and wind, an alert eye, and a simple faith which proclaimed him a messenger of Christ in a new country. But whatever the picture, however the memory, there has always been the same high praise. Elder Bowman was beloved by all.

PAULINE GRAHAME