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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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THE PALIMPSEST

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The Gathering of the Clan

"There may be a washout at the big slough", said mother nervously. A heavy rain had fallen during the night before, and the road was muddy in spite of the bright sunshine. We found a big hole at one end of the diagonal bridge, but managed to get past. If the bridge had been out, as it often was, we would have had to go back to the corner and around by Peter Wilson's farm to get to church.

That Sunday in June, 1885, was sultry, unseasonably warm. "Good for the corn", father remarked cheerfully. "It'll be knee-high by the Fourth. Look at McDowall's lodged oats. He'll have a deuce of a time cutting them. Our soil is too rich for small grain." The wheels of our high, two-seated buggy chucked into deep ruts worn in the prairie sod as we crept along.

For thirty years the valley of Wolf Creek had been filling up with Scotch farmers. John and West Wilson and George Sloss had been the first

Relatives and neighbors emigrated from Ayrshire in the "Old Country". On the prairies in the northern part of Tama County these thrifty Scotch pioneers formed a parish which they called Tranquillity. The social life of this rural community centered about the church, three miles west of Traer, where men, women, and children met on the Sabbath to worship according to the Presbyterian creed and visit about neighborhood affairs. Sunday was a day to anticipate with pleasure.

"Oh, see that peacock!" We children always watched for Squire Wilson's peafowls when we sighted his place a quarter of a mile away on the other road. There was the peacock standing in front of the pines with his tail spread, a gorgeous

sight.

"Can't you hurry a little? I'm sure we'll be late for church," mother ventured.

But father pointed to the ridges of foamy sweat along the horses' hip bands. "I think we're early. The kitchen clock was fast." But it was a relief when we turned on to the main road at the Squire's corner and saw other teams plowing through the mud. The church was half a mile along the road to the right. It was a simple gabled building facing the north, with three high many-paned windows on each side. The pine trees were small in

those days. Tranquillity had no belfry like the other churches. But there was no need for a bell to call the people to church; they came anyway.

A little farther along we passed the Amity road leading down from the hills. James Taylor, the bachelor elder walking to save his horses, was getting into Edward Dodd's buggy and stammering, "Ay, ay. It's a fine day. Ay, ay, quite so, quite so."

Andrew McCosh crossed the road ahead of us as we rode up to the church. He had a head and beard like Aaron and a body like Abraham Lincoln. He was carrying the silver christening bowl. Mother began wondering whose baby was to be baptized. It would be Janet Dodd's; for her children had the measles at the last communion when the other babies were baptized.

Father drove up to the high platform where mother and the younger children got out. I stayed in the buggy. One of the elders turned in from the Traer road. His daughter stayed with me while her mother hurried into the church with a basket. She wanted to get the silver communion service on the grey marble-topped table and everything covered with the damask cloth before Dr. Hughes came into the pulpit. He was even then shaking hands with people outside.

The men greeted each other with heartiness as

they tied their horses, "Hoo air ye, Edward?" "It's a gran' day, Wullie." Then joining the group in front of the church they fell to discuss-

ing their wet hay.

From where we stood, we could look across the broad sweep of Wolf Creek Valley to the high hills on the other side, on the top of which wound the Ridge Road. To the east, near Traer, was National Grove; to the northwest, Four Mile Grove. The region beyond those hills was an enchanted land which I seldom saw, for our farm lay two miles south of Tranquillity.

"I met James Wilson in toon yesterday. He'd just come frae Washington", said a braw woman as she stepped out of the buggy and shook out her blue dimity frills. "In Smith's store they were all talkin' about his sacrificing his seat in Congress for General Grant but James made nathin' o' it, just speared if we kent aught about the cattle plague around Amity."

"How could this trouble we've been hearin' about all year be decided so quickly?" inquired a

big woman standing near.

"Why did ye no see the papers!" exclaimed a good auntie. "They're a' fu' o' it and the worst of it is a Democrat represents the Fifth District the noo."

"Weel, Esther will be relieved that it's settled

that James'll no go back to Washington. She's ower much o' a lady to manage the farm an' hired men."

"Ay, it has its drawbacks to hae a famous husband wi' his mind always filled wi' big projects that will benefit the nation. For my pairt," the braw woman continued, "I'm very weel content wi' my man. He's no thinkin' beyond me and the weans. But there they're comin' noo. Is that no a fine dress Esther has? She so often wears purple. It's her color."

Four farms cornered at the church, the one lying along side belonging to James Wilson. His house was a little way up the road that passed the church. As he stopped to speak with his neighbors at the church door, he appeared more like a successful farmer than a Congressman. Though his manners were simple and cordial, he nevertheless had a noble bearing and gave an impression of great dignity and reserve. After he passed into the church with his wife, the men fell into a spirited discussion that impressed me strongly, for they spoke with much feeling.

In the last few minutes of the Forty-eighth Congress, the Republicans tried to put through a bill restoring to the dying General Grant his old army rank and pension; but the Democrats, in the majority then, demanded a vote first on the election

contest between James Wilson and Benjamin T. Frederick for the seat of United States Representative from the Fifth Iowa District. Though Wilson had held the position through the whole term of Congress, the Democrats were ready to decide the contest in favor of his opponent. The Republicans could easily have filibustered until the session closed, but they wanted to have the Grant bill considered and the Democrats refused to take it up until the election contest was settled. Thereupon, Wilson anounced that if the House would vote to put General Grant on the retired list he was willing to be sacrificed. This was done.

"Some larger work'll come to Jeames," said a

visionary cousin.

"Na, his party leaders will hae nae mair use for him", replied a neighbor with conviction as he spat

out his quid of tobacco.

But Aunt Salie, Andrew Wilson's wife, voiced the sentiments of Tranquillity people when she said to Geordie Sloss as they went up the church walk, "Auch! An' what are they a' haiverin' [talking] aboot? Oor Jeames would never hae thocht o' daein' onything else."

The visionary cousin was right. There was a larger work ahead of "Tama Jim" Wilson. He was to serve as Secretary of Agriculture for sixteen years under McKinley, Roosevelt, and Taft.

He added prestige to a family already prominent in a local way.

Tranquillity life revolved around the Wilson clan. There were three brothers, Uncle John (father of James), the Squire (West Wilson), Andrew, and five sisters — all with large families. The Wilsons have race pride and family loyalty. They were all "kisns" (cousins) — the various families of McMillans, Galts, Dodds, McDowalls, Slosses, and McCoshes.

In my childhood these "kisns", children of the older Wilson generation that came out from Scotland, had intermarried with other family groups and nearly all had settled on adjoining farms in the same agricultural community. Thus it was that the Tranquillity people were bound into a homogeneous group by the three strong ties of race, religion, and family. No wonder that outsiders spoke of these people as the clannish Scotch of Tranquillity.

JANETTE STEVENSON MURRAY

Sabbath in the Kirk

They were beginning to sing the first Psalm. The married men, like father, with wives already in the church, started for their pews; but it always took the second or third Psalm to start the young men. They sat in the back corner, farthest from their parents — and farthest from grace the ministers would have said sometimes. But these stalwart sons of grim Calvinistic fathers had more grace in their hearts than they cared to display.

The interior of the church, like the chaste and simple outside, was neither garish nor crude. The low pulpit with the Ionic frieze behind on the wall and two steps at each side, was neat and suitable. Between the two aisles was a main section of seats with a partition running through the center as in the old New England churches. This divided the pews into definite sections. There was no promiscuous mixing of families. The rows of pews along the outside of the church were broken in the middle by the two stoves.

Our pew was in front of the right hand stove and the boy's corner. In later years, I used to feel shy going in past all those boys. Grandmother Stevenson sat in front of us and I sat with her, whiling away the tedious hour by watching the Squire's second wife, Barbara Kennedy, who sat in front of us with her two daughters. She had recently returned from a trip to Scotland. I admired her Glasgow bonnet and silk gown, her long watch chain, fine Irish lace, the bead fringe on her dolman, and her dignity and poise.

The Squire, who had on the big linen coat he always wore in hot weather, sat alone in the pew in front, just where, if the sermon proved a bit wearisome, he could look out at McDowall's waving grain and his own farmstead beyond with the long row of pines. A prince among men was the Squire, a real Lord Chesterfield with his distinguished carriage and grand manner. It was easy to imagine him visiting not long since with his cousin, the Lord Mayor of London.

On each side of the pulpit were three amencorner pews, reserved we thought for the elders and the elect. On our side, in the front seat, directly in front of the Squire, sat his brother John, "Tama Jim's" father, the spiritually minded elder who had so much to do with organizing the church.

His farm joined the McCosh farm across the road, but the house, once filled to overflowing with fourteen children, was set back in the fields. The gentle Uncle John sat through the service with his

hands upon the top of his cane, his head bowed, and his eyes closed. He never slept. His eyes

were not strong in the later years.

His wife, Jean McCosh, had died some time before. She was a sister of Uncle Andrew McCosh who lived in the "wee hoose". They were cousins of Dr. James McCosh, distinguished metaphysician and former president of Princeton. This pioneer woman was richly endowed with intellect and character. Her illustrious son, James, inherited many of her strong qualities. From the vantage point of her amen-corner seat, she used to scrutinize the congregation. All through the service she would look down over the top of her glasses.

Behind Uncle John's pew was that of his brother-in-law, Gilbert McDowall, who named his farm "Dangart" after his home in Scotland. The name of the farm was applied to the man, and so the elder McDowall was known in north Tama as the "Dangart". He had donated a corner of his farm for the church site. His home was up in the field behind the church. Back of his was the Stevenson pew. After grandfather's death grandmother moved to the pew in front of us.

I remember only one man sitting in the amencorner on the opposite side of the church. This was James Taylor, a middle-aged bachelor living in a little white house on the top of a high hill near the Ridge Road. His shining bald head and full sandy beard contrasted with his "Sabbath blacks". His grey eyes twinkled with kindly humor as he stuttered a greeting, "Ay, ay, it's a fine day. Quite so, quite so." But his eyes took on a glint of steel when any one in the congregation talked of hymns or an organ. He was a Covenanter direct from Scotland with all the prejudices of his ancestors, who, rather than give up their faith, had been driven into the glens by fierce persecution.

Not far from Taylor, in the side seats corresponding to the Squire's, sat Gilbert McMillan who lived at Four Mile Grove and was always ready for a "crack wi' his frien's". Just behind him was Andrew Wilson who came late from Scotland, a middle-aged bachelor and something of a sport. He sent back for his long-time sweetheart, that colorful Scotchwoman with her broad accent and original sayings, who became Aunt Salie to the whole clan.

Back of the stove on our side, Mrs. Dodd was trying to keep the baby from mussing her long christening robe. It was like the one mother had made from her mother's wedding dress. Most of our grandmothers embroidered exquisite eyelet designs on the sheerest of muslin for their wedding dresses.

In the center section sat the patriarchal Andrew McCosh from across the way. Behind him in an earlier day were the Andrew Dodds. In the words of Esma Galt McCormack, a gifted grand-daughter of the Wilson clan:

There was dear 'Auntie Dodd' wi' her sonsie face So full of genuine, kindly grace,

I can still see it beaming, so brightly it shone,

As she welcomed both strangers and friends to her home.

Ah! the cheer of that home, can we ever forget?
And the good things to eat! I remember them yet,
Her shortbread, her scones, and her cheese kept for
months!

And even a haggis I tasted there once.

In front of the Dodds sat Mrs. McCosh's warm-hearted and clever brother, Geordie Sloss, ever ready to argue religion or help a friend in need. His placid wife always had a bag of peppermints in the generous pocket of her black silk "goon". She had a way of deftly slipping these into the hands of near-by bairns.

The children all went to church in Tranquillity. We little girls sat demurely enough for awhile in our beruffled, tucked, and lace-trimmed dresses, our pink and blue sashes, and our hair ribbons. We were not so uncomfortable as the boys with their kilts (plaited skirts) and white starched

blouses with the wide embroidered frills. They were real little Lord Fauntleroys when they put on their velvet tams. Great was their joy when at seven they were emancipated from kilts and curls.

It was hard to sit still so long but there was no sneaking out past father's guarding knee, nor was there any giggling. We had to preserve a proper decorum. Our mothers were fortified with cookies, our fathers with rods at home which were used rather briskly sometimes when there had been special provocation during the long sermon.

Mr. and Mrs. Dodd walked proudly up with the baby who looked wonderingly at Dr. Hughes as he put his hand upon her head and said, "I baptize thee in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

Then the men settled themselves in peace for a long hour of rest. The sermon seemed orthodox and they nodded assent. There might be need for some nudges from the "gude wife" this day for the men had worked hard at the hay. The flies buzzed drowsily about the children's cookies.

JANETTE STEVENSON MURRAY

A Beloved Dominie

As north Tama County became more thickly settled, the little church at Tranquillity was outgrown. Neighboring communities wanted their own places of worship. In 1878 the United Presbyterians built a brick church in Traer. Another congregation was formed at Amity. They both drew members from Tranquillity, leaving only about thirty-five in the parent church. The synod decided that it should be closed. But no; these were Scotch people "with a mind o" their ain".

It is recorded in the session book that the Honorable James Wilson made the motion to unite under one pastorate the fields of Tranquillity and Salem, a Presbyterian church six miles west. Tranquillity had to change from the United Presbyterian to the Presbyterian denomination. Mr. Wilson persuaded Dr. Daniel L. Hughes to organize the church in 1879. Peter Wilson induced the old members to join the new association.

Dr. Hughes was a saintly man — like an apostle of old with his smooth-shaven upper lip, long white beard, erect figure, and gentle way. I can remember him yet as he stood among us with his hands outstretched, blessing and exhorting us to

more "pious, happy, and useful lives." Sometimes the halo about his head was almost visible.

Some of our fundamentalist ministers preached so much about sin and punishment that their sermons smelled of brimstone. But Dr. Hughes seldom talked about hell or the devil. He seemed to be the personification of Christlike gentleness. Even at the most casual meeting, he could discuss divine love and our soul's salvation without it seeming in the least inappropriate. Yet there was much strength behind the gentleness.

He was a real home missionary. Coming to Iowa in 1857 when the frontier had scarcely touched the Missouri River, his first work was in the Council Bluffs Presbytery. Later he served in Des Moines. Then he moved to Vinton and entered upon extensive mission work in Benton, Tama, and Black Hawk counties.

In connection with his preaching, he developed a 1200 acre farm; introduced the cultivation of flax; and improved breeds of hogs and cattle, selling at one public sale \$26,000 worth of Shorthorns. He gave a tenth of his income to the church; one month it amounted to \$1000. Before coming to Tranquillity, he had serious losses and decided to give all his attention to the Lord's work. But his experience in cattle breeding made him popular with the farmers of Tranquillity.

From his home in Traer he drove to Tranquillity, Baker's Grove, and Salem. Being afflicted with asthma, the frail old man's struggles with the sudden changes of the prairie weather, bad roads, raw winds, storms, and long winters were pathetic. He nearly always mentioned the weather and roads in session and Sunday school reports. To pass the tedious hours on the road, he repeated Psalms from memory.

He often stayed over night at our house on his way to and from Salem. It was something of an occasion when the minister came to visit, at least to the grown-ups. From the children's point of view there was a decided drawback to these visits for he always felt it his duty to test our knowledge of the catechism.

A good many in my day, under the inspiration of Dr. Hughes, committed first the Children's and then the Shorter Catechism and received the presbyterial-fund Bibles and Testaments as a reward. There were always some of us, however, floundering about, lost in the maze of the "benefits", "what is required?", "what is forbidden?", and "the reasons annexed", to the Ten Commandments. It took a lot of theological acumen to grasp the fine distinctions involved. If they had all been as easy and sensible as, "What doth every sin deserve?", we would have done better.

I remember one late afternoon when Dr. Hughes drove into our yard. He had been over at Salem. Mother was in town. Being the eldest, I felt a grave responsibility. This, however, did not trouble me as much as the fear that he might ask me some "questions". Now there were only two I was ever sure of: "What is the chief end of man?" and "The eternal decrees of God".

The minister warmed himself at the stove and talked with the encircling children. Then he turned to me and said, "Now, we'll have to see how you're getting on with your catechism." The world looked black. I was sure to disgrace myself without mother's fortifying presence. The good man cleared his throat and began, "What are the eternal decrees of God?" I reeled off the answer. "Ah, that's fine", he said, and never asked me another question.

Dr. Hughes dissolved his pastoral relations with the church of Tranquillity on October 7, 1885. A year later his wife died. Once as a child I had dinner with father and mother in their home. Mrs. Hughes presided with such grace that I thought she was the most lovely lady I had ever seen. Almost her last act was to send a dollar to the Foreign Missionary Society with the message that it would be her final offering.

Old and in failing health, Dr. Hughes sought

the healing effects of seaside climate at Cape May in New Jersey. "It is simply wonderful how my native sea air restores me", he used to say. He could not humor his asthma long, however. On October 4, 1887, he was dismissed from the Waterloo Presbytery to the Presbytery of Huntingdon, Pennsylvania, where for four years he served as pastor at Petersburg. A short time before his death he published a history of his family: God's Covenant Fulfilled in Pious Households.

JANETTE STEVENSON MURRAY

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