

Lytle City

Lytle City was a village in Fillmore Township, Iowa County, Iowa. It was located in 1857, in anticipation of the coming of a railroad, which did not come; and it gave up the ghost in 1884, because a railroad came, after twenty-seven years of bedraggled, sordid, inconsequential waiting for it. Lytle City was not the ordinary rural Iowa village, and therein lies its claim, if any, to historical consideration.

When the Mississippi and Missouri Railroad (later to become a part of the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad) was about to be constructed between Iowa City and Des Moines, John Lytle and his sons, Robert Bryce Lytle and Lionel Branson Lytle, then temporarily residing at Solon, near Iowa City, conceived the project of locating a town site on that proposed railroad. The route of the railroad had been at least partly surveyed, so that they thought they could select a spot through which the projected railroad would be built. The site chosen was on a line between Iowa City and Des Moines, about twenty-five miles nearly straight west of Iowa City.

On June 24, 1857, a plat of the town site under

the name of "Lytle City", and dated June 23, 1857, was filed in the recorder's office at Marengo, under the authority of the leader of the enterprise, Robert B. Lytle (erroneously written Robert "T" Lytle on the official record). This plat is a crude drawing of mere crossed lines indicating lots, without any designation of streets or alleys, and without any surveyor's technical marks, but with the designation of a large space for a "city park". Curious posterity may be interested to know that the official description of the land was the southwest quarter, and the northwest quarter, of the northeast quarter of section one of township seventy-eight north, of range ten.

At Lytle City the three founders and their families settled, and began enthusiastically to develop their project. They immediately erected some wooden dwelling houses and a stone building and opened a general store. From Licking County, Ohio, the former home of the Lytles, and from other places acquaintances came to participate in the thrilling venture. People were attracted from older Iowa towns, and even from Chicago. The population soon included a blacksmith, a shoemaker, a carpenter, a wagon maker, a plasterer, a saloon keeper, and several merchants. They all lived hopefully in the expectation of enjoying great benefit from the coming railroad.

But these first inhabitants were doomed soon to be the victims of crushing disappointment. The prospective railroad was turned nearly twenty miles northward from the original survey, to Marengo, the county-seat, and off the straight line between Iowa City and Des Moines; and it was forever lost to Lytle City. By looking at the map, as well as the old survey stakes still standing, it is plain to see now why these original inhabitants logically expected the projected railroad to go through Lytle City. But they were not to be benefited by their geographic knowledge, or their logical perceptions of economical railroad locations.

This blow must have fallen on Lytle City before 1860. Thereupon the chief founder of Lytle City, Robert B. Lytle, left for ventures in other places, especially in the region of Sioux City; and his father, John Lytle, went to southern Iowa; and both thus passed out of the subsequent life of Lytle City. Lionel Branson Lytle stayed on as the proprietor of the general store, in disappointment, but with lingering hopes that something interesting would happen. In 1868 he died, nothing interesting having happened in the meantime. He left in the town his widow, three daughters, and three sons, who were to carry on and wait for something interesting to happen.

Marrying and giving in marriage followed. Children were born. Men, women, and children died. Occasionally an older inhabitant left and somebody came to succeed him. The population, not much over one hundred actual residents of the town at any time, did not change perceptibly in number; and they all, even against the logic of circumstances and the actual course of events, continued to expect and await the coming of a railroad. Subsequently running its languid course to disaster, life at Lytle City went on.

The inhabitants of Lytle City were of various racial descents, numerous religious beliefs, and all shades of politically partisan opinion. Purely racial, religious, or political questions were not often or ever acrimoniously discussed. The inhabitants themselves dwelt together in more than customary harmony; and exhibitions of want of it came mostly from the outside. These people were busied daily with the usual small affairs of a rural village, were honest, conscientious and amiable, but not remarkably ambitious or industrious. They were content to make a living peacefully and easily, while waiting patiently for something to turn up sometime. There was one special peculiarity about these people; they were all young, or middle-aged; there were no elderly persons among them. Before growing old the

inhabitants departed, by one method or another.

Lytle City had one Negro in its population, a boy named Bell, who kept the doctor's horses. The local doctor, George Welsh, a Canadian, was a graduate of the medical college of the State University of Michigan. He was the only man of science and substantial education in the place, and his learning was held in great respect.

Lytle City was not at any time an incorporated town. It had no town officers, no policeman, no jail, no town hall, no public meeting place, no theater, no church, no newspaper, no library, no hotel, no public water supply, no public lighting system for buildings or streets, no sewer, no sidewalks, no town streets, no undertaker, no cemetery, no livery stable, no barber shop, no railroad.

Justice was administered, and the public peace was theoretically conserved, by the township justice of the peace and constable. They functioned at the roadside, or in a village store. If a person was taken into custody, he could not be lodged in a place of public confinement closer than Marengo, twenty miles away. An arrest for confinement at Lytle City would have caused the constable more punishment than the culprit.

Strangers coming to the village were kept at one of the private houses, if kept at all. They were generally traveling salesmen, who were

happy to take what they could get. Each householder procured the necessary domestic water supply from his own well and cistern. For artificial light everybody carried a lantern out of doors and kerosene lamps supplied all buildings. In all kinds of weather, and in all seasons, the inhabitants walked in the common highway, in dust, or mud, or snow. Occasionally an unusually industrious inhabitant laid down a stray board, at a particularly muddy place, for his own use. The dead were unprofessionally attended by their fellow villagers, and were taken elsewhere for burial, in farm wagons, often as far as thirty miles away. The townspeople had to go several miles to vote in elections. They shaved themselves, and cut one another's hair.

One may ask what these people had. They had a post-office, a carpenter shop, a blacksmith shop, a wagon shop, a shoemaker's shop, a tinner's shop, a saloon, a doctor's office, a general store, and the use of the public highway, the "old state road" from Iowa City westward. Old Man's Creek, a mile wide in the freshets of spring and almost dusty for long stretches in midsummer, was the only geographic novelty in the landscape. Most of the inhabitants cherished the abiding conviction that sometime a railroad would come, and lead them out of their wilderness.

Though most of the inhabitants had religious connections at various other places, they had none in Lytle City. The nearest church was St. Michael's, several miles east. The town had no religious exercises, except the private prayers of its inhabitants. No clergymen raised his voice there in public worship or admonition.

The inhabitants read few newspapers and books. The Chicago *Times* and the New York *Ledger* were the favorite city papers. Two county newspapers were read generally. One family gave the inhabitants access to Knight's *History of England*, Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Shakespeare, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Robinson Crusoe*, Mark Twain's early books, various novels, Walker's *American Law*, Blackstone's *Commentaries*, and some similar books. The Bible was in every home. Every family had a history of the United States, an almanac, and McGuffey's school readers.

The Civil War left Lytle City more than its share of crippled men and intense post-war bitterness of feeling toward "the Southerners". Old soldiers went about in the dingy remnants of old blue army uniforms. Empty sleeves and crutches were common insignia of practical patriotism. Daily there were rehearsals of war tragedies and atrocities in "rebel prisons". The

town was steeped in fierce Union sentiment and patriotic prayers for retribution. The "rebellion" was the ever-recurring topic of conversation, and the talk was ever abounding in such words as "secessionists", "rebels", "copperheads", "southerners", "slaveholders", and "traitors".

There was nothing unusually interesting to the inhabitants of Lytle City. Old Man's Creek supplied few and worthless fish and meager and muddy swimming holes in summer, and fragmentary and occasional ice in winter. Swimming, fishing, riding horseback, playing ball, and dancing in summer; sleighing, skating, and dancing in winter; hunting rabbits, squirrels, and prairie chickens in autumn were the diversions for men, women, and children. There was nothing from the outside world but the daily stage from Iowa City or Marengo, the mail, an infrequent traveling salesman, a wayfaring "prairie schooner" on its way west, an occasional visitor to one of the families, or an inhabitant returning from market.

In various spots near old Lytle City there was still in my early boyhood some patches of the original prairie, covered with tall, sharp, rank grasses, and colorfully adorned with wild flowers of gorgeous hues. The primeval undisturbed prairie in daytime, and the everlasting, undimmed star-lit sky at night, were the constant splendors

of nature that were abundantly provided for the poorest inhabitant.

Lytle City was really little more than a small cluster of buildings and their expectant, unsettled occupants strung along both sides of a country road, which was alternately a trail of dust or a river of mud. Yet this temporary, miscellaneous, hopefully expectant aggregation existed thus, waiting for a railroad, from 1857 until 1884, twenty-seven years!

The mail was brought in by "stage" from Iowa City or from Marengo. The coach consisted of a three-seated spring wagon with a canvas top, drawn by two horses. It also carried light freight and passengers. A town sensation was the coming of the stage. This was the most available opportunity for actual contacts with the outside world. The stage came from the railroad and the telegraph, and brought occasional strangers as well as news.

The post-office was the only visible representative of the federal government. It was a very small office. Once the postmaster was asked by the Postmaster General to explain a trivial postal delinquency. He replied that it was "caused by an assistant, an old man." The Postmaster General ordered "the dismissal of the assistant at once". The postmaster was then in great

embarrassment, for the "assistant" was an owner of the store, where the post-office was kept, and he was also the father-in-law of the postmaster. The Postmaster General, when informed of these pertinent facts, subsided into permanent silence.

The country school at the edge of Lytle City was probably a typical "district school" of the time in rural Iowa. The thick brush around it, in the opinion of successive directors, rendered expenditures for the customary outhouses unnecessary. Long benches around the room were the seats for the pupils. One small blackboard was at one end of the room. One stove, which consumed several four-foot sticks of wood at a time and was always red hot, supplied heat in the winter. The pupils burned on one side while they froze on the other. Drinking water for the pupils was carried by them in buckets to the schoolhouse from a well six hundred feet distant. All the pupils had perpetual colds, and coughed incessantly throughout the winter. When the pupils recited, they stood in a row lengthwise of the room. There were no grades. In arithmetic the pupils worked individually, the teacher going from pupil to pupil at their seats to give needed instruction. They were regularly in various stages of advancement in the different subjects, except reading, which was conducted in classes.

Discipline was the chief matter for the teacher's attention. The pupils ranged in age from six to twenty-one years, and necessarily required several different kinds and intensities of mental and physical control. Many of the older boys were very disorderly; some of them aroused the teacher to extreme physical effort. Most of the various teachers, both men and women, were patient, competent, and zealous, and earned the permanent respect and kindly remembrance of the pupils. But there were occasional exceptions. One teacher threw an ink bottle at a pupil. Another caused a young man to bare his back to repeated blows of a hickory stick that drew blood, and left the erring pupil weak and sick. The teacher's lot was hard. It required more accomplishments than are expected of a modern college president.

Money was scarce at all seasons of the year among the farmers. Consequently the merchant operated his store on the credit plan; so that money was scarce with him too. Nor was there any definite plan for payment. But the customer was expected to pay as soon as he had the money. It was highly offensive to send a bill to a customer. Sometimes customers bought goods in Lytle City on credit when they had no money, and bought goods elsewhere for cash when they had money. The merchant had to acquire real financial genius

to be able to sell his goods at a profit on credit, and recover timely payment for them to keep his credit good with his wholesaler.

But it should be said that while the merchant did this unlimited credit business from 1874 till 1883, trusting substantially everybody, and that while he did not make his last collection till 1906, he lost not a cent of his charged accounts. In many cases interest was voluntarily added. Some of the accounts were paid by children of the original debtors. Widows often paid the debts of long deceased husbands.

In summer Indians were a common sight at Lytle City, wandering from their reservation at Tama on long begging trips — braves, squaws, boys, girls, papooses, ponies, bows and arrows. They shot arrows at targets for pennies, stared into the windows of dwelling houses, scaring women and children, and begged articles of food and apparel. The same Indians returned summer after summer.

A papoose had been buried on a farm near Lytle City, and Indians visited the grave every summer. The farm was sold, but the new owner could not be induced to take title while the grave was on the land; so the little body was moved to a cemetery in another town. One day the former owner's house was unexpectedly flooded with

indignant Indians, demanding explanations, apologies, sanctions, and reparations. The "grave robber" was suddenly stupefied, but he finally got his wits together, and took the rebellious Indians to the cemetery. There he displayed to them the grave of the papoose with its suitable headstone appropriately inscribed. The Indians walked aside inarticulate for a private conference. In a few minutes they returned, expressed their satisfaction, and signified peace. The "grave robber" again breathed freely.

In these days of hard roads it is impossible, for persons used to no others, to visualize the roads that we had to use at Lytle City. They were not prepared roads, but were miscellaneous strips of land abandoned to wagon traffic. They were deep in dust in dry seasons, and bottomless in mud in wet seasons. Little rain, little thawing in the spring, made a sea of sticky mud in which horses sank to their bellies, and wagons became so immersed that their wheels could not be turned without the use of pick and shovel. Such conditions were impediments to intellectual, moral, and industrial development.

Nor can anyone realize now, in this age of flying machines and automobiles, what an important place in life at Lytle City horses occupied. Nearly everybody had the use of at least one

horse. Our amusements, recreations, business, farming, industry, social intercourse, travel, transportation, and mail depended upon that noble animal. Horses were raised for all these uses, but also for racing, and especially for sale in the great cities. Matching horses for city teams was a bucolic profession. A beautiful horse, a fast horse, a big horse, a pedigreed horse, a horse of a particular size, color, and style was ever the object of somebody's zealous search. Family horses were abundantly and affectionately treasured, and were pets for both children and adults alike; and their separation from the family life always caused genuine sorrow.

It was a difficult job to bring goods to Lytle City from the nearest railroad point, seventeen miles distant. They were hauled in wagons by horses from South Amana, through dust, mud, hot sun, or rain of summer, and cold or snow of winter. The round trip required a long day of sixteen to eighteen hours in the best of weather.

The country around Lytle City was thickly settled with farmers, who gave the town somewhat voluminous and varied activity. Many of them were Irish immigrants, but there were also English, Germans, and Yankees. These people were, for the most part, conscientious, honorable, religious, generous, and industrious men and

women, of little school education, but of natural ability and shrewdness. Some of the women were characterized by elements of real nobility, and nearly all of them by great loyalty to their family obligations. Many of these people, both men and women, are remembered with respect, some of them with feelings of real affection.

But all the pertinent facts must be told. Some of the men of the surrounding country, relatively only a few, were inordinately and conspicuously addicted to intoxicating drinks. They made Lytle City infamous throughout a wide territory on account of their malignant delinquency in that respect. Others were occasional offenders. The single saloon was the source of most of this misfortune. It supplied intoxicants to all applicants, regardless of their reputation, character, age, or condition. It was often filled with drunken men, continuing to drink, and engaging in noisy brawls. But in all of this unhappiness women were absent, except as sufferers and victims.

The literal truth about the conduct of these relatively few men is really quite unbelievable now. They frequently came to town, became intoxicated immediately by design, and kept intoxicated for days, drinking whisky and beer together, and eating no food. Their horses, which brought them to town, were left hitched without

feed or water, till some charitable inhabitant supplied them. Their families came to town to seek them, and, finding them, tried generally in vain to take them home. They lay drunk in the brush, fence corners, old boxes, barrels, and sheds. Sober, these unfortunate men were humane, gentle, and industrious; strong drink turned them into beasts and maniacs.

This general condition developed many special instances. A certain Fourth of July may be mentioned. The day had worn along into the afternoon, with customary holiday exhibitions of dissolute drunkenness. There was much hilarity in the saloon. Suddenly a crowd of drunken men burst out of it, yelling and striking one another, but with no apparent order or objective. Around them collected many others. All of them were soon joining in miscellaneous combat.

One big man clinched with another in the hot, dusty road. The partisan followers of each joined in the fight. Blood began to drip upon the ground. One man stabbed another. The injured man dropped in the dust. Another walked up to him and deliberately kicked him in the head, while he lay bleeding. Fighting continued over the prostrate man. Blows and curses filled the air. Finally some of the villagers went into the road, pulled the stabbed man from the trampling feet,

carried him to the shade of a tree, and laid him on the ground. The village doctor came, and intermittently ministered to his patient, and drove the gaping, awe-stricken spectators away. The injured man lived to fight another day.

Sunday was always a lively day in summer. A crowd of men and boys regularly gathered from the surrounding country. They played baseball in a meadow, and ran horse races in the dusty road. The saloon was not closed on Sundays; and so the visitors congregated there. Drunkenness and fighting regularly ensued. Sunday became a day of apprehension.

The priest at the church several miles down the road went about his parish on horseback. He heaped his just and continuous criticism on the dissolute conduct of those who made the village hideous; and they were afraid of meeting him there. Upon going through Lytle City, he always dismounted at the town's edge, and walked slowly through, leading his horse, the while reading his breviary. This was his method of showing his contempt for that disgraced village.

The farming community around Lytle City was spread over a wide territory. During the summer it was very inconvenient for the farmers to leave their fields to go to the town for necessities. The merchant who conducted the general

store contrived a plan for taking his goods to them. He did this by making trips into the country, with a specially designed wagon, five days a week. On each day he took a different but particular route; and thus each week he covered the whole territory of his customers.

The wagon started from Lytle City early in the morning and returned late at night. To every farmhouse, within a few minutes of the same time each week, it carried needed supplies to be traded for butter and eggs. It also brought the rural gossip, the news, and the farmer's mail from the post-office, if he desired, thus making a sort of rural, free mail-delivery system long before the beginning of the official one.

Paradoxically, ironically, and unexpectedly a railroad finally came to Lytle City, but it brought disaster. In 1884 the town's death-knell was sounded by the coming of the Chicago, Milwaukee and Saint Paul Railroad, a few miles to the west, running north and south between Marion and Ottumwa. Near-by the village of Parnell was established. To the new town the remaining disappointed inhabitants of Lytle City promptly moved, taking their very houses with them.

Thus ended Lytle City, after twenty-seven years of wistful, watchful waiting for a railroad, to be succeeded by forty acres of tall corn.

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