

John P. Sheldon

A slight young man of twenty-five strode westward from the little town of Rochester, New York, on a day in May, 1817. Before him lay the unplumbed opportunities of the boundless West. In an army knapsack was his entire wardrobe; in his pocket his scanty capital, but a few dollars in all. Yet history walked with the youth, for in his mind was the fixed resolve to establish somewhere in the great Northwest a newspaper, and there "grow up" with the country.

John P. Sheldon, the hero of our tale, had served in the War of 1812, attaining the rank of sergeant in the artillery regiment commanded by Colonel Alexander Macomb. He had learned the printer's art, and in the spring of 1816, in partnership with A. G. Dauby, had established the weekly *Gazette*, Rochester's first newspaper. A year of practical trial, featured by a spell of illness, determined him to abandon the enterprise. Distant Detroit, the ancient capital of the upper country, had suffered horribly during the recent war, but at its close a reaction had set in and the community began to enjoy a distinct real estate boom. Stories of its attractiveness and of its

glowing prospects, coming to the ears of Sheldon, had induced him to explore the possibilities for journalism in that remote region.

At Buffalo, which still bore the scars of British pillage and Indian massacre, Sheldon encountered Ebenezer Reed, a youth of twenty-one, who had served a printer's apprenticeship in the office of Seward and Williams at Utica. Reed proposed to join with Sheldon in the contemplated newspaper enterprise of the latter, and the proffer was accepted. A seven-day voyage on the schooner *Erie* brought the adventurers to the mouth of the Detroit River. "As the vessel moved slowly up the noble strait," wrote Sheldon more than forty years later, "Reed and myself were surprised and delighted with the scenery, and decided, ere we landed, to make Michigan our home — the numerous orchards upon both banks were in full bloom; and directly in front of the orchards, and near the water, the white cottages of the inhabitants gave promise of comfort and hospitality."

While Reed departed for New York, in search of a second-hand press which could be bought on liberal credit, Sheldon busied himself acquainting the townsmen with the boon he was about to bestow upon them. In August the *Gazette* was born. For eight years it was Detroit's only newspaper. For thirteen years it led a busy and color-

ful, if not always prosperous, career. Through all this time Sheldon was the dominant editor, and during most of it a storm-center of angry dispute and discussion. He was a man of aggressive temper, imbued with an exceedingly exalted idea of the editor's rôle in the community.

In the evolution of political opinion which the decade of the twenties witnessed, it was inevitable that Sheldon, an early and ardent admirer of General Andrew Jackson, should become an enthusiastic Democrat, and one of the fathers of the Democratic party in Michigan. For Governor Lewis Cass, who loved the environment of the frontier and knew how to dominate it, he entertained feelings of high admiration and the warmest personal friendship. The two men had much in common and to a large extent the political fortunes of Sheldon were shaped by the patronage of Cass.

Next to Cass the most conspicuous public character in Michigan Territory was William Woodbridge, the Territorial Secretary and Collector of the Port at Detroit. A New Englander of high ideals and fine intellect, he helped found Michigan's State University. In politics, however, he was a Whig, and any member of that party was anathema to a vigorous Democratic editor.

Although Woodbridge and Sheldon were on

friendly terms for several years, in 1822 they became permanent and increasingly bitter enemies. The quarrel for years influenced powerfully the course of politics of the Territory and, indirectly, the future Commonwealth of Iowa. It reached an acute stage in the election of Congressional Delegate in 1825 when the official conduct of Woodbridge gave the victory to his friend, Austin E. Wing, and withheld it from John Biddle, the candidate Sheldon had supported. The affair infuriated Sheldon, and the resentments produced by the electoral contest of 1825 long continued to agitate the Territory.

No less notable was Sheldon's quarrel a few years later with the Supreme Court, of which Woodbridge was then the dominant member. Over the disposition of a case of petty larceny Sheldon criticized the judges in such a fashion that he was haled before the court for contempt. He defied the judges to do their worst, and in consequence was fined \$100. Refusing to pay, he was committed to jail. The circumstance of a Jacksonian Democratic editor imprisoned for criticising a court the majority of whose judges were Whigs afforded a rare opportunity for a display of frontier public opinion. Sheldon announced that he would never pay his fine, whereupon his political adherents undertook to raise the amount

by public subscription, the individual contributions to be limited to a maximum of twelve and a half cents. Since Sheldon's brother was the sheriff in charge of the jail, his confinement was in no way onerous, and it was presently terminated, with a public banquet tendered by his admirers. Although all three Supreme Court judges had joined in punishing him, his wrath was particularly reserved for Woodbridge and Chipman, the two Whig members of the Court. With Andrew Jackson in the Presidency their judicial fate was sealed. The complaints Sheldon poured into the Presidential ear proved effective, and when the term of office of the two judges expired, in 1832, they were retired to private life.

Scant opportunity was afforded Sheldon, however, to revel in his triumph. His family was rapidly increasing in numbers, and the proverbial wolf was never far from the door. In 1830 his printing plant and bookstore were burned, and the career of the *Gazette* ended. The blow to Sheldon was a crushing one. In 1831, disappointed in his efforts to win an appointment to the land office at Monroe, he devoted several months to a journey to Texas, seeking restoration of health and a new field of opportunity on that distant frontier.

Meanwhile his staunch friend, Governor Cass, had entered the President's Cabinet as Secretary

of War, and in this capacity had directed the course of the government in the Black Hawk War of 1832. As early as 1830 squatters from across the river had begun flocking to Dubuque's lead mines, and presently a future President of the United States, Colonel Zachary Taylor, sent the only President of the Southern Confederacy, Lieutenant Jefferson Davis, with a squad of soldiers to evict them. The defeat of Black Hawk brought about the cession of the country in question, and the miners swarmed back across the river. The Indian title had been extinguished but no form of civil government had been provided for the country when, on March 16, 1833, Cass appointed Sheldon assistant superintendent of the lead mines in the new Black Hawk Purchase.

Thereby Sheldon gained a livelihood, and the nascent Commonwealth of Iowa an exceedingly valuable settler. With characteristic vigor, Sheldon set out at once for the scene of his new activities, journeying as far as Chicago by way of the Old Sauk Trail, presently to become famous as the Chicago Road, the name conferred upon it by thousands of westward-moving settlers. West of Chicago the country was a virgin wilderness, the only sign of a road being the mark left on the prairie sod by General Winfield Scott's army wagons which had passed that way the year be-

fore. The Indian villages, where Sheldon had been told he would find shelter and information, were deserted. Although the traveler was charmed with the beauties of the prairie and groves he traversed, he did not encounter a single soul from Chicago to Galena.

The mining country, however, hummed with activity. Settlers were crossing the Mississippi in crowds, and in a single month over 150 log houses were erected in the immediate vicinity of Dubuque. West of the river there was no government, and in the belief of the settlers no law, for the best lawyers of Galena were informing them that even the laws of the United States had become inoperative following the consummation of the Black Hawk Purchase. Although it was freely predicted that Sheldon's official authority would be ignored by the miners, his tactful measures appealed to their good sense and won general acquiescence.

That the sanction of the law is essential to the peaceful existence of society, the course of events at Dubuque abundantly proved. Sheldon came upon the scene as a veteran editor, thoroughly familiar with political and governmental affairs. On his lonely journey across the Illinois prairie he drafted a program for the survey and orderly settlement of the region, which he transmitted to Washington almost as soon as he reached Du-

buque. On the same day, in a letter to Secretary Cass, he pointed out that large towns would soon spring up in the Iowa country, and urged the wisdom of making some orderly provision for the laying out of town sites. The problem thus propounded was solved by Congress two years later.

But the provision of regular civil government was the most urgent need of the Iowa country, and in supplying this Sheldon, the sole representative of government west of the Mississippi, played a stellar rôle. Associated with him were two other men, both of whom were important public officials, and both old Detroit neighbors. No man living had a better grasp of the problems affecting the western country than Secretary Cass, who was Sheldon's patron and intimate friend. Third in the Detroit group was Lucius Lyon, Territorial Delegate in Congress from Michigan, and an especial favorite in the mining country. For the future Commonwealth of Iowa the team work of these three men proved ideal. Sheldon, on the ground, supplied his friends at Washington with information and arguments; Lyon in Congress and Cass in the Cabinet provided the legislative oversight and political influence requisite to transmute the recommendations into law.

A series of happenings at Dubuque in the winter and spring of 1833-34 emphasized tragically

the want of an organized government. In this little community three killings occurred in five months' time. The first killer could plead self-defense in extenuation of his deed; the second killing occurred in a drunken brawl and, however deplorable, did not constitute premeditated murder. But other acts of violence were occurring, and the absence of any legal means of punishing the offenders gradually imbued the miners with the belief that in response to the law of self-preservation they must themselves assume the responsibility of enforcing justice.

Such was the situation when on May 19, 1834, a miner, Patrick O'Connor, in cold blood killed his partner, a peaceable, inoffensive man. There ensued an exhibition of ready-made justice which went far to demonstrate the essential devotion of the community to peace and order. The murderer was taken into custody, a jury was empaneled, witnesses sworn, and the accused was afforded every opportunity to clear himself. Flouting the authority of the court, and repeatedly declaring there was "no law" in the country, he declined to attempt any defense. His guilt was established and he was sentenced to be hanged on June 20th, a month from the date of his conviction.

Although Sheldon deemed the murderer richly deserving of death, he strenuously opposed the

procedure of the volunteer court, arguing that it was wholly illegal, and that the laws of the United States were in full effect in the mines and adequate to the enforcement of justice.

In a letter to the *Galenaian* on June 10th, he presented this point of view, and appealed to the Galena bar to issue a formal statement concerning it. If this should uphold the local opinion that there was no law west of the Mississippi, the death sentence upon O'Connor would be carried out; if, on the contrary, the lawyers should agree with Sheldon, such an opinion might influence the miners to reprieve O'Connor until such time as a regular court could take cognizance of his case. The bar did not respond to this appeal, and Sheldon planned one last effort to preserve the community from the blot of mob law. He proposed to visit Dubuque on the day set for the execution (his home was at Peru, five miles north of Dubuque) and address the crowd assembled to witness it, in a last effort to win the miners to his point of view. When the day came he was too sick to carry out this plan, but he wrote a letter to the foreman of the jury which had condemned O'Connor, reiterating his arguments for the reprieve of the culprit.

The appeal failed, as Sheldon had expected it would, and a letter of July 9th to Secretary Cass

described the resulting procedure: "about one o'clock, on the 20th ult., O'Connor was hung with as much decorum as the most fastidious amateur could desire. The shops were closed and no liquor sold. A guard of about a hundred miners armed with rifles acted as the criminal's escort and surrounded the gallows to keep order. A Catholic priest attended the criminal in his last moments. From all the facts that I can gather, it seems that O'Connor did not begin to entertain any serious apprehensions that his end was so near until about the 18th, and when the awful moment arrived he was completely paralyzed by fear."

The murder of George O'Keaf and the execution of Patrick O'Connor, however, were not the only evidences of lawlessness at the Dubuque mines. The government had provided no warehouses at Dubuque and as a result thousands of pounds of rent lead lay exposed at several places near the river — easy plunder for thieves. "The day before yesterday", wrote Sheldon to Secretary Cass on July 9th, "a man was tried by a jury of citizens of Dubuque for stealing lead — he was sentenced to receive 35 lashes & to be banished from the country. The lashes were given in the most public manner, he was then marched through the street to the tune of Rogues march, and ferried to the east bank of the Miss^{ppi}. The fellow was a

noted thief, and plead guilty to the charge of stealing 57 pigs (about 3,200 lbs.) which he took to the Upper rapids, near Rock Island, in a large canoe, which he also stole."

Sheldon was concerned about the effect of these events. "Will the people here be censured, and considered as a band of outlaws," he wondered, "or will the blame for this state of things be attributed to the proper cause — a factious and revengeful and disappointed minority in the Senate, who have succeeded in procrastinating or defeating almost every measure intended for the public good?"

As an ardent Democrat, Sheldon thus neatly deposited upon the back of the opposition party in Congress responsibility for the illegal procedure in the mining country; and the historian finds difficulty in repelling the accusation. The most dictatorial President the country has ever known was in the White House, and an embittered and furious congressional opposition let slip no opportunity to checkmate his measures.

When, therefore, a bill was brought forward for the organization of a Territorial government west of the Mississippi, such leaders as Clay and Calhoun turned thumbs down without regard to the actual merit of the proposal. "They are opposed to doing anything", wrote the watchful Lucius

Lyon, "that will allow the President the least extension of patronage. I believe, however, when it comes to the test they will not dare to vote against the measure in sufficient number to defeat the bill, even though they may desire to do so. If they do, I shall endeavor to attach the country on the west bank of the Mississippi to the Territory of Michigan by way of an amendment to some bill, as it is passing."

They did, however, and he did, and thereby the boon of civil government was secured for the Iowa country. On June 20th, the very day of O'Connor's execution, Lyon wrote from Washington expressing despair over the prospects of the bill for the new Territory, and his intention to proceed on the other tack. Three days later, he proposed a bill attaching the Iowa country to Michigan Territory. "It will probably pass both houses," he reported to Sheldon, "that is, if any bills pass, which is somewhat doubtful."

The opposition of Clay, Calhoun, and other anti-administration leaders in the Senate doomed to certain defeat the measures that had been introduced looking to the admission to statehood of the eastern portion of Michigan Territory and the organization of a separate Territorial government for the portion west of Lake Michigan. Perceiving this, Lyon procured the introduction and

passage of two new measures. The first merely annexed the Iowa country to the existing Territory of Michigan. The second authorized the calling of an extra session of the Legislative Council of the Territory to organize local government in the country west of the Mississippi.

Upon coming to Iowa in 1833, Sheldon had established his home at Peru, five miles north of Dubuque. He quickly discovered that his official salary of \$1000 was inadequate to the support of his family, and to supplement his income he began to develop a stock and dairy farm. Meanwhile, he importuned his patron at Washington for a more lucrative office, and in the summer of 1834 he was appointed register of the land office at Mineral Point, Wisconsin, to take effect in November, following. Within less than two years, therefore, he abandoned his home at the mouth of the Little Maquoketa — “a more beautiful place than you ever saw in Michigan,” he had written of it to his wife at Detroit in the spring of 1833 — and began the establishment of a new home at Willow Springs, Wisconsin. Despite the brevity of his residence, it may well be doubted whether Iowa ever had a more useful pioneer, or one who guarded more jealously the interests of the nascent Commonwealth.

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