

An Iowa Anecdote

BY ANY OTHER NAME

Sixteen of the twenty-six members were present when Peter H. Engle of Dubuque called the House of Representatives to order in the spacious room over Webber and Remey's store in Burlington. Meeting in special session on the second Monday in June, 1838, the First Legislative Assembly of Wisconsin Territory proceeded to organize for business. Isaac Leffler of Burlington, who had presided in the House during the previous regular session, took the chair as Speaker *pro tem*. When permanent officers were elected, however, William B. Sheldon of Milwaukee received fifteen votes and Leffler only one. Apparently the Representatives east of the Mississippi were in control of the House.

Among the Representatives from the southern part of the Iowa District was David R. Chance, a minister of the Church of Christ. He was "as rough as a bear, but a man of ability, and great activity and earnestness." During the first session of the Legislative Assembly at Belmont, he had protested against the connivance of politicians to locate the capital of Wisconsin Territory. "I

have waited patiently 'till the doctors and lawyers get through, to make a speech on the location of the seat of government. I was raised in the wilds of Illinois, and used to wear a leather hunting shirt and sleep under a buffalo rug. I was educated in the woods. The early part of my life was spent in tracking Indians; but it is harder tracking these gentlemen." When he discovered the scheme of the Dubuque and Fond du Lac factions to share the seat of government and the appropriation for public buildings, he warned "the boys" from Des Moines County to "look out for snakes!"

By the time the special session of the legislature met for the purpose of reapportioning members, the bill dividing the Territory of Wisconsin had passed Congress. Though the news apparently did not reach Burlington until June 22nd, the probability that the region west of the Mississippi would soon become a separate Territory must have influenced the deliberations of the Legislative Assembly. The first days were consumed with the appointment of committees, presentation of petitions, introduction of bills, and special investigations. A committee of one from each county was appointed in the House to study the problem of reapportionment. There was talk of holding the next session of the legislature at Madison, which irked the Iowans.

Representative Chance was still wary of reptiles and unsavory politics. When a group of prodigal citizens proposed that the Territory borrow \$3,000,000 for internal improvements, he moved to reject the petition. A bill to give William S. Hamilton the right to operate a ferry across the Wisconsin River was defeated on his recommendation. Perhaps the deal by which Burlington had become the temporary capital until buildings could be erected for the permanent seat of government at Madison suggested an analogy of names. Or maybe he thought the beautiful valley in which he lived deserved a more appropriate appellation. Whatever his motives may have been, the Reverend David R. Chance, "noted for his love of humor", introduced a bill on June 15th to change the name of Skunk River to Madison.

Sensing the import of the measure, Patrick Quigley of Dubuque proposed an amendment that "every person who shall hereafter be known to call it Skunk, shall forfeit and pay the sum of \$500." Thereupon, a Representative from across the Mississippi suggested that the fine be applied only to persons west of the "big drink". Immediately a man from Iowa was on his feet insisting that the penalty be confined to "citizens of Lee County". This aroused the opposition of Representative John Box of Fort Madison, who declared

that "it did not become gentlemen 'up stream' to legislate in this manner for his constituents."

At this juncture, Peter H. Engle, who was "always ready on such occasions, very adroitly moved the previous question," which closed the debate. A motion by Isaac Leffler to postpone the bill indefinitely was adopted "with many a broad grin".

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