

The Tall Cedar of Lebanon

Jesse B. Browne was a man of stately mien and magnificent physique. In 1838, at the age of forty, he weighed 190 pounds and stood six feet, seven inches in his stocking feet; he was "as straight as an arrow, and in polished politeness — when sober — had no superior." The President of the Council of the First Territorial Legislative Assembly of Iowa was indeed a handsome fellow, with a high forehead and sharp, black eyes, the ability to wear clothes well, a proud stride, and a bravado air — a dashing, red-blooded individual whose friends called him "the tall cedar of Lebanon"!

With the previous experience of a successful military career and a sadly unsuccessful business venture, Jesse B. Browne began in 1838 to dabble seriously in politics. He had resigned his commission as captain of dragoons on June 30, 1837, and moved to Fort Madison, where he opened a general store. Though dry goods, groceries, hardware, boots, and hats were commodities in demand, Browne, never a keen business man, could not survive the depression of 1837. In April, 1838, he had to sell his stock of goods to Parrott

and Buchhalter. This failure was a hard blow to the proud captain, but his family was hit even harder; henceforth he was always poor and sometimes unable to provide bare necessities. He knew no more about saving money than about making it.

It was on the rebound from his business disaster that Browne endeavored to save his face and feed his family by achieving something in the field of politics. The death of Postmaster James Douglas was a fortuitous circumstance, for on June 21, 1838, the Fort Madison *Patriot* reported the appointment of Browne to fill the vacancy.

Beginning the same day that the postmastership was announced and continuing weekly throughout the summer months, the following item appeared in the Fort Madison *Patriot*:

"We are authorized to announce the name of CAPTAIN JESSE B. BROWNE, as a Candidate for the Council, from Lee County, in the Iowa Territory."

MANY VOTERS

The principal issue in Lee County was the location of the county seat. One faction favored Fort Madison; the other favored West Point but apparently would have preferred any place to Fort Madison. Browne, a Fort Madison Whig, was opposed by Stephen H. Burtis, a Democrat representing the West Point interests. The question of

creating a separate county from the Half-breed Tract further complicated local political opinion.

In explaining his candidacy, Browne announced on July 4th that he would "give undivided attention" to the matter of extending the northeast boundary of the county to the Skunk River, the natural dividing line. He was so much opposed to the division of Lee County that "he headed a delegation sent from Fort Madison to Keokuk to arouse sentiment against the measure." The conflict of Whig and Democratic principles had little influence in the campaign.

When the votes were counted on September 10, 1838, Captain Browne was elected to represent Lee County in the Council. He received 296 votes while his Democratic opponent polled 273. More remarkable was his selection unanimously as presiding officer of the upper house. Inasmuch as the Council was evenly divided between Whigs and Democrats, it is evident that he was chosen for personal rather than partisan reasons.

The first session of the Iowa legislature was a stormy one. Throughout the deliberations, however, President Browne seems to have retained his popularity. On the last day of the session the members of the Council unanimously tendered their thanks "for the prompt, impartial, and efficient manner in which he has presided".

Jesse B. Browne was a "man of much strength of intellect", a "remarkable character, both for the eccentricities of his mind and for his personal appearance", but "subject occasionally to the infirmities of intemperance." On one of those occasions when he had imbibed too freely, he is said to have fallen asleep in the President's chair. An exciting discussion was in progress, and the members, understanding the situation, went right on. When somebody started to speak in a stentorian voice, Browne awoke. For an instant, before he realized where he was, he thought it was an Indian attack and shouted: "Injuns, by thunder!"

All in all, his career as a legislator included membership in the Council during the first, second, third, and fourth sessions of the Territorial Assembly (two terms), in the House of Representatives during the eighth session in 1845 (one term), and, under the new State organization, in the House of Representatives of the First General Assembly, during the regular session, 1846-1847, and the extra session in 1848 (one term). In 1847 he ran for the office of United States Representative, but was defeated by William Thompson.

In the House of Representatives of the First General Assembly, the Whigs had a majority of one. Moreover, the three Whigs and two Demo-

crats from Lee County had been elected by a large independent vote which gave them the balance of power. It is not surprising that a Lee County Whig, Jesse B. Browne, was chosen Speaker. The Democrats acquiesced the more willingly because they hoped to win some independent support for the greater prize of two seats in the United States Senate. Apparently, however, the Speaker was not beguiled by this maneuver, for when the Senate came to the House chamber for the purpose of electing United States Senators, Browne "sternly refused" to surrender the chair to the President of the Senate, a Democrat. The Whigs almost won the election. To forestall that culmination the Democratic Senate thereafter refused to meet in joint session and consequently prevented the election of any United States Senators.

This deadlock caused much dissatisfaction and various compromises were proposed. One scheme was to throw Democratic votes to Browne in return for Whig support of A. C. Dodge. Browne himself repudiated this plan, however, because he had pledged his vote in caucus to Jonathan McCarty and G. C. R. Mitchell. To refuse such an honor must have been hard. The opportunity came at a time when he was in dire need of such a position. His brother Thomas implored him to

accept the nomination for the family's sake. But Jesse steadfastly kept his caucus promise.

What early training had inculcated such high standards of honor and loyalty to conviction? Jesse B. Browne was born in Christian County, Kentucky, about 1800. His father was a Baptist preacher of the "hard-shell, iron-side order", one who preached without pay, a man of "fair ability, excellent character, and independent means" who did not believe in temperance associations or missionary societies.

As a young man Jesse moved to Illinois, where he served for a time as the clerk of court in Edgar County. In the Black Hawk War he commanded a company of mounted rangers. Afterward he remained on guard duty along the northwest frontier. About the time the enlistment term of the rangers expired, a regiment of dragoons was organized and Browne became captain of one of the companies. Under the command of Colonel Henry Dodge he engaged in "the great Pawnee campaign" to the foot of the Rockies in 1834. Later that year companies B, H, and I, the latter commanded by Jesse B. Browne, were sent to Fort Des Moines at the head of the Des Moines Rapids of the Mississippi River.

Under the rigorous discipline of barrack life some of the soldiers deserted. On one occasion a

half dozen left the fort, crossing the Mississippi on the ice. Browne followed them, but detoured on the way to enjoy a little personal relaxation in Fort Madison. During this delay a spell of warm weather softened the ice: no one dared to cross the river. But Browne, a daredevil by nature and even more reckless under the influence of liquor, did not hesitate. Riding his powerful horse "like a Comanche Indian", he crossed the ice at a gallop. When he reached the Illinois shore, he waved his cap at the astonished crowd on the other side, gave an Indian yell, and rode away.

He lost the deserters at Rushville, Illinois, but tarried a while for his own pleasure. The town was settled by Kentuckians, many of whom Browne knew. At the tavern he bought whisky for the crowd. As his popularity spread, the number of his friends increased. Eventually tiring of the wholesale distribution of free liquor, Browne decided to disperse the crowd. Throwing into the stove a powder keg which he alone knew to be empty, he swore roundly and said that the population had lived long enough. Everybody rushed headlong out the door, after which Browne sauntered out, mounted his horse, gave a blood-curdling yell, and dashed away at full speed.

His life was spiced with many sprees and pranks. One day Benjamin Brattain, a lazy,

good-natured speculator, was reading in the lobby of the Madison House when Browne walked in, stretched Ben's ear, and ran a large pin through it. Ben picked up his chair and rushed at Browne, who stretched himself to his full six feet, seven inches, looked hurt and surprised, swore in "clear, square, Anglo-Saxon" style, and demanded what Ben meant by such conduct. When Ben pointed to his ear, the mischievous Browne looked even more astonished and said that it was a nice state of affairs when a man couldn't take liberties with his own friend without his becoming angry. Brat-tain pulled out the pin, sat down, and resumed his reading.

It was probably a combination of military prestige, political prominence, and civic leadership which caused Governor Lucas to appoint him major general of one of the three divisions of the Territorial militia in January, 1839. Soon after this appointment he was obliged to march his forces to Farmington for the protection of Van Buren County citizens in the Missouri boundary dispute. For a while war seemed inevitable, but before hostilities began General Browne sent three emissaries to negotiate with the enemy across the Des Moines. They found that the Missouri militia had gone home, whereupon Browne sent the Iowa "army" home too.

Through the influence of Congressman Daniel F. Miller, his former associate in the Territorial legislature, he was appointed by the President as one of the visitors to West Point in 1851. Wearing a suit of clothes given him by his friends and maintaining his best behavior, Browne made a fine appearance and received the special commendation of General Winfield Scott.

For many years, he served as justice of the peace in Keokuk. It is said that in most matters he paid more attention to his own idea of justice than to an exact application of the law.

In the late fifties he went to Covington, Kentucky, to live with his married daughter. There, on the eve of the Civil War, excitement ran high. As an ardent adherent of Lincoln and a vigorous Union man, he was frequently engaged in fighting secessionists. It is said that "Browne would never hit but once, and then he was almost sure to bring down his man." Before the end of the struggle he died at his daughter's home in 1864.

Soldier, legislator, public servant, and popular leader, Jesse B. Browne, with all his faults, stands out among the Iowa pioneers as conspicuously in his civic contributions as in physical stature. His convivial nature, generosity, and patriotism were important factors in his political success.

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