

# The **P**ALIMPSEST

JANUARY 1924

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THE EDITOR

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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

EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

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## Grandmother's Story

The revival of knitting during the World War produced other good results besides warm sweaters and socks for the soldiers. Grandmothers, who had helped spin wool into yarn and knit the yarn into stockings for the various members of the family back in the early days of Iowa history, took up their needles with alacrity and as their swift stitches grew into beautifully knitted articles they became reminiscent of those pioneer times.

My little brown-eyed grandmother, Mary Elizabeth Lyon, was very happy to knit for the Red Cross, and I, being her brown-eyed namesake, received the benefit of her early experiences while she plied her busy needles.

"Tell me, Grandma, about your coming to Iowa", I urged, one evening, as she was rounding off the heel of a gray sock. "I heard you talking about it yesterday and I didn't get the whole story."

“It is a long story,” said grandmother, mechanically counting the stitches on one needle, “and I hardly know where to begin.” So she began with her childhood, and this is the story she told.

Back in Muskingum County, Ohio, there were a good many of us related people. It must have been about 1850, when I tried to enumerate my relatives, but there were so many uncles, aunts, and cousins, both on the side of my father, the Willises, and of my mother, the Stenghers, that my six-year-old brain could not complete the task. You see, the reason there were so many of us was that my mother had four married sisters while my father, Robert Willis, had five. These families, all living in the same neighborhood, made a considerable clan. How we cousins — Willises, Zinbelmans, Johnsons, Crawfords, Dunns, and a whole lot of others — used to enjoy playing in Grandfather Willis’s old barn.

“Grandfather,” I asked one day as I sat on his lap, “why do you have only one eye?”

Mother tried to keep me quiet, because it was very impolite for a little girl to ask such personal questions of her somewhat austere elders. But grandfather seemed willing to speak of his disfigurement. I can’t remember all the details, but he told how he had served in the War of 1812, of the difficult march across Ohio to Detroit under General William Hull, of the siege of Malden, and finally how the men were led from their camp in Detroit and marched

all day by circuitous paths through the woods and over the hills. At every turn they expected to be ordered to form in line and charge the British. Every nerve was strained — every man ready — when lo, coming to a clearing they beheld their own fortifications surmounted by a white flag. Not a blow had been struck in defense! Not a soldier had had an opportunity to help prevent such a disgraceful surrender! With curses and jeers the men broke ranks when they realized they had been tricked. In the general excitement the man nearest Grandfather Willis suddenly raised his bayonet and accidentally hit grandfather in the eye. After weary months in a hospital he came back to Ohio permanently disabled. Eventually the government rewarded him for his services — not in money, but in land warrants.

We heard much of the great, unoccupied prairie region of the Iowa country. Many people from Adamsville and Zanesville were moving there, over the Cumberland Road. On the day I asked about grandfather's eye he told my mother he was anxious for her and Robert to have a better start. "I want him to take my land warrants," he said, "go to Iowa, and take up the land."

A shade came over mother's face, for she dreaded to leave all her beloved relatives behind. My father, however, felt that this was a splendid idea, and in a few months he made a trip to Iowa and returned with such glowing accounts that not only our family

but most of the immediate relatives soon sold their homes, loaded their goods into wagons, and started for Iowa.

That was in the spring of 1852. The colony travelled very comfortably, though not rapidly, across Ohio, Indiana, and a part of Illinois. Desiring to strike the Mississippi at Keokuk they left the Cumberland Road, and came across country by whatsoever roads or trails they could find, fording streams, wading through mud, and enduring untold hardships. I remember the great bows of the old ox-drawn wagon, and can feel yet the lurch and chug of the big wheels, as they struck the ruts and hummocks along the way.

Usually mother drove a part of each day, thus letting father walk behind, while brother William rode our faithful horse, Jim, and drove old "Spot" and "Whitey" and the young cattle which we were bringing to our new home. There were three of us children old enough to run along behind or ride Jim and we took turns in herding our live stock, which frequently paused to graze by the wayside.

Once, shortly before we reached Keokuk, there was a terrible downpour of rain which delayed us for several days. Pushing on through the deep, black mud of Illinois, we finally came to drowned land that seemed scarcely passable. As our team was in the lead, father urged his oxen on. "Get up, Buck! Go long, Dime!" he coaxed, and with final application of the ox goad he bravely sought to

cross the swamp. Buck and Dime did their best — but at last, puffing and panting, they stopped dead still.

The wagon was hub deep in the mire, there was no dry land near, and the wagons behind were too far away to help us escape. Father crept out on the wagon tongue, unyoked the oxen, and headed them back to the edge of the swamp. Mother, with the baby in her arms, mounted old Jim, William crept up behind her, while sister Nan and I each climbed on father's shoulders — for by this time he had waded in up to his knees. "Go on, Jim, pull us out," he said, as he grasped old Jim's tail. Jim seemed to know he was saving the family, for with great care he threaded his way back to firm ground. Another horse was taken from one of the other teams and he and Jim pulled the heavy wagon out, backwards.

When we reached the Mississippi we waited our turn to be ferried across to Keokuk. To our childish eyes, the sight of the great, seething mass of water brought terror indeed. Father and mother spoke so reassuringly, however, and even the animals walked on to the boat so calmly that our fears subsided.

Our family stayed two years in Louisa County but my father felt that the land must be richer away from the river, so he went to investigate north central Iowa before he invested grandfather's land warrants. In Hamilton County he located land for himself along White Fox Creek in Cass Township.

He also preëmpted several other farms for relatives who had money as well as warrants to invest. A farm that sold for sixty thousand dollars just before the war boom was one that he took up from the government for my grandmother Stengher.

I remember well his preparations for that trip — how mother looked after every button on his coat, and how she sewed a peculiar band inside his shirt. In this was stitched the money with which the relatives who had no land warrants wished him to pay for their land.

Late one cold day in March, 1854, we arrived at Newcastle, now Webster City, and pushed on as rapidly as possible in hope of reaching the log cabin up on White Fox Creek, which was to be our new home. How anxiously we children scanned the unbroken prairies, looking for that log hut! The roads were muddy and Buck Creek was very high, so we had to leave our goods on the bank that night. The family with a few conveniences were successfully ferried across on old Jim, however, and by dint of walking and carrying many bundles, we made the last two miles of our journey on foot.

But alas for our high expectations! The log cabin was utterly desolate, and it gave ample evidence of having been used as a stable, rather than a human dwelling place. Small wonder that my mother, remembering the pretty little white house back in Ohio, sat down and wept.

But pioneer women spent little time in crying and

mother soon had a fire going. Somehow we got settled. The old hut was made cheerful by being papered with clean newspapers. We children went to the woods, dug up gooseberry bushes, and planted them in neat rows. How much good we got from those old bushes! We started a wild plum grove near the house, and father had some young apple trees sent from Louisa County.

Mr. P. W. Lee, now one of the substantial citizens of Webster City, says that the first apple he ever saw or ate was one I gave to him when he and his father, J. W. Lee, came to visit us. His father was our school master, who had come from Ohio with us and whom we held in high esteem, and it is probable that I plucked some of the first fruit of our young trees to give to little "Willie".

But the greatest event I can remember of our early life on White Fox Creek was the first fair held in Hamilton County. As I said before, we brought old Spot and Whitey from Ohio, and they and their offspring furnished us with milk and butter. Down under the bank of the creek was a shelving rock, beneath which a wonderfully cool spring flowed. Here my mother managed to keep the milk and butter cool even in the heat of summer. In the fall of 1857 every one was urged to exhibit products at the fair and I can see yet the roll of butter, daintily marked and as smooth as marble, that mother sent to the fair. She won first prize on it, too.

The next year news came of an Indian uprising.

With the terror of the Spirit Lake massacre vividly in mind mother and we children hastily grabbed a few belongings, packed a basket of food, and father took us in the wagon to Webster City. From there a regular train of wagons, loaded mostly with women and children, started for Boonesboro. Father returned to our home, determined to defend it.

The party got as far as Hook's Point, now Stratford, where darkness compelled a halt. There was no shelter save one cabin, so the wagons were drawn into a circle, a fire built, and everybody sat up and talked all night. The following morning messengers came bearing the good news that the alarm was false, and so the whole company turned around and reached home that night, tired but safe.

“And did you find your father was all right?” I asked.

“Yes indeed,” smiled grandmother, as she folded her knitting. “We all ran and grabbed him, fairly weeping with joy. It meant so much to us that father was safe, and that this Iowa home was safe too, for we had just found out that we loved our new home in this great new State of Iowa. So Mary, you see that because your great-great-grandfather lost his eye at Detroit, you were born a Hawkeye instead of a Buckeye.”

BESSIE L. LYON

## Grandfather's Adventure

My grandfather, Shubel D. Owen, and his two brothers, Jonathan and Boyd, migrated from east central Pennsylvania to Green Lake, Wisconsin, in 1847, my grandfather then being twenty-four years old, Jonathan two years older, and Boyd twenty-two. They were reared near Tunkhannock, Pennsylvania, along the banks of the Susquehanna River, in a lumber and mining district.

In December, 1857, my grandfather and Jonathan decided to go to Minnesota near what is now the city of Faribault, with a view of buying government land. There being a great deal of snow, they determined to make the trip with horse and sled. About the third day out they came to a tavern a few miles from La Crosse, where they stayed all night. From this point, I will narrate the story as my grandfather told it to me nearly eighteen years ago, when he was eighty-three years old.

The next morning we hitched our horse, a powerful animal of the roadster type, to the sled and started for La Crosse, where we expected to cross the Mississippi River on a ferry. On our arrival, however, we found that the ferry had gone over and that it made no more trips that day. The ferry was owned by the hotel keeper and he found it profitable

to keep travellers in La Crosse, so when he told me that we would have to stay with him until the next morning, I turned to Jonathan and said we would go back and stay at the tavern where we had spent the previous night.

So we drove back to the tavern. I noticed a good-looking team of horses, hitched to a sled, tied in front of the tavern and on entering I found a well dressed stranger, wearing a particularly fine fur overcoat, sitting by the fireplace. I told the innkeeper that the ferryman at La Crosse had refused to take us over until the next day, so we had come back to stay with him for the balance of the day and for the night. Whereupon, the stranger inquired, "Where are you going?"

"Over into Minnesota," I told him.

"Why don't you go up the river and cross over on the ice and stay all night at Dresbach City?" he suggested. "I stayed there last night," he continued, "and if you follow my tracks through the timber you will see where I crossed the river and you will find a good place to stay at Dresbach City."

I turned to Jonathan and said, "Let's go."

So we proceeded through the timber, easily following the trail made by the stranger, and along 'bout half past three in the afternoon, we came to the place where he had crossed the river. We had to unhitch the horse and lead him down on to the ice. We then carried the sled down, hitched the horse up again, and Jonathan went ahead and

tested the ice while I drove the horse. The ice was dangerously thin, as the river was just beginning to freeze over and the ferry, a few miles below, was still in use. But we crossed over safely and came to a basement house, with two stories above, built on the edge of the river at the foot of a great, high bluff. Outside of a stockade and a stable, where horses were kept, there were no other buildings.

I got out of the sled and went over and knocked at the door and a man came and opened it, and I said, "Where is Dresbach City?"

"This is Dresbach City," he answered.

I looked around and said, "Where is the City?"

He repeated, "This is Dresbach City."

"Well," I said, "I met a fellow this morning down near La Crosse, who told me and my brother that we could come up here and stay all night. We are going into Minnesota looking for land." Another man then came to the door and told us to put up our horse and come in. It was beginning to grow dark, as the high bluff cut off the sun early and, besides, the days were short.

So we unhitched our horse, put him in the stable, watered and fed him, and then came in. There were no women about the house, but some fifteen men, all rather rough-looking characters. About six o'clock they served supper and we had a fine meal. I never ate a better one. After supper two of the men cleared away the dishes, and then we all sat around in the big room and smoked and talked.

I was sitting beside a man who appeared to be the oldest in the group — a man about fifty years of age. By and by he said to me, "Where do you hail from?"

I replied, "Hail from Wisconsin, originally from Pennsylvania."

He said, "Pennsylvania! You come from Pennsylvania? Where 'bout in Pennsylvania, did you come from?"

"Well," I said, "I don't s'pose you'd know if I told you. But I lived on the old pike road between Scranton and Wilkes Barre, seven miles from Tunkhannock. In front of our house was a long watering trough where the stage-coach drivers used to stop and water their horses."

The man threw up his hands and exclaimed, "Then your name must be Owen."

I said, "Yes, sir. That's my name."

"I drove a stage-coach over that pike for many years," he went on, "and watered my horses many times at that trough. The Owen boys, who were little fellows then, used to come out and hang on to the back of the coach and ride to the top of the hill."

"Yes, sir," said I, "I did it many times."

Well, we talked on about Pennsylvania, and by and by he said to me, "I'm going over to the other side of the room. After awhile I want you to come over and sit by me. I have something to say to you."

So he moved away, and after fifteen or twenty

minutes, I joined him and then he said to me, in a low voice, "You are from Pennsylvania, and I'm from Pennsylvania. I never go back on my countrymen. You and your brother are two able-looking men, but you're in the worst place to-night you ever was in all your life. Look out for yourself."

When he said that I jumped to my feet, clapped my hands together, and with an oath yelled out, "I never yet was in a place where I had to be carried out." Everybody looked at me in some astonishment, including my brother, Jonathan, but no particular attention was paid to what I said, and by and by it came time to go to bed.

One of the men took my brother and me to the top floor. This floor was divided into four rooms by heavy curtains. On the floor was a carpet so thick that when you walked over it no noise was made. I never walked over so thick a carpet in my life. After the man had left us, Jonathan turned to me and said, "What in thunder made you jump to your feet and yell, 'I never yet was in a place where I had to be carried out'?" Then I told him what the man from Pennsylvania had told me, but Jonathan didn't show any concern. We turned in and Jonathan was soon apparently sound asleep, but I stayed awake. We had eight hundred dollars in cash and no weapons.

I had lain there for I don't know how long but long enough so that my eyes were becoming accustomed to the darkness and I could make out the

outlines of the room. By and by I saw the curtains move. Then I saw a man's hand slowly begin to pull the curtain back. Then a man's face appeared, and I yelled out, in a loud voice, "What in hell do you want?" Whereupon Jonathan shouted, "Shoot him."

"I beg your pardon, gentlemen," the man said, "but I have made a mistake."

"Well," said I, "don't you make a mistake like that again. It might cost you your life." He then withdrew, but Jonathan and I did not sleep any more that night.

Along about dawn we heard a great commotion downstairs, but concluded not to go down until day-break. When we did go down there was no one about but the cook. He prepared us a good breakfast and told us that the man whom we had met at La Crosse had come home during the night and had tried to cross the river. The ice had given way and his team had been drowned, while he barely escaped with his life. The rescue of this man was the commotion we had heard just before daylight.

After breakfast the man went out with us, helped us to get to the top of the high bluff, and there, for miles and miles as far as we could see, were the snow covered prairies of Minnesota. Not a tree nor a house did we see. We were directed to drive in an almost straight westerly direction to reach our destination. We drove steadily until past noon before we saw a house. Then we came to a little patch

of timber, crossed a stream, and came to a clearing where there was a group of men raising a barn. We drove in and one of the men, evidently the owner of the farm, came down and we asked him if we could get something to eat for ourselves and our horses.

"Certainly," he said, and then asked, "Where did you spend the night?"

When I replied, "Dresbach City", every man on the job came down and gathered around our sled. I told them the whole story, and when I finished they declared that we were the first men who ever stayed all night in Dresbach City and lived to tell the story.

The foregoing is substantially the story as it was told me by my grandfather, but it lacks the dramatic touches which he gave it. He stood six feet three in his stocking feet, and his brother was almost as large, so they were, as the man from Pennsylvania told him, "two able-looking men".

Dresbach is now a little station on the Milwaukee railroad between La Crosse and Winona, and the bluff which my grandfather climbed that morning, nearly seventy years ago, is just as he described it.

The trail which my grandfather took from Green Lake to La Crosse was, some eighteen years later, followed in covered wagons by his two sons, Charles and A. J. Owen, and his son-in-law (my father) C. S. Parker, on their way to western Guthrie County, Iowa, where they settled and still reside.

ADDISON M. PARKER

## An Old Settler's Story

In the old lead-mining days at Dubuque, before the Iowa country was brought within the jurisdiction of the law, it was an easy matter to raise a hue and cry against a person, particularly if he were a stranger and friendless, and the mob would inflict punishment with little regard for justice. There were few more striking instances of the operation of lynch law than the whipping of William Hoffman.

One day as I was returning to the village of Dubuque from the mines, my attention was arrested by a large crowd of people assembled in the vicinity of the blacksmith shop. In the center of the group stood a man about fifty years of age, wearing the fatigue uniform of a United States soldier. Time had begun to whiten the locks which fringed the glazed border of his military cap. He had assumed the erect military attitude, his arms were folded upon his breast, while his eye surveyed with calm indifference the circle of spectators which surrounded him.

This man, it appeared, was accused of stealing twenty dollars, and the assembled citizens were debating whether he should be whipped or tarred and feathered. At length it was suggested that a jury be

[This anecdote is adapted for THE PALIMPSEST from an account by Eliphalet Price published in *The Annals of Iowa* (First Series), Vol. IX, in April, 1871.—THE EDITOR]

impanelled with power to hear the facts alleged against the prisoner and decide what penalty seemed right to them. Accordingly, a jury was impanelled and a presiding judge was elected from their number. The complainant was then called. An Irishman who, like the accused, wore the uniform of a United States soldier, came forward.

"You will state what you know about the prisoner robbing you of twenty dollars," commanded the judge.

"May it please yer 'onerable worships," began the plaintiff, "it's meself that got an 'onerable discharge last wake from the sarvice at Fort Crawford, whin says I te meself, 'Misther McMurty, ye'd better be degin' fer fortin in the mines than to be sogerin' away yer preshus life in doin' niver a thing, barrin' the killin' of a murtherin' Ingin now and thin.' An' with that, be dad, I tipped me cap to the aremy, shouldered me kit, an' with yer 'oner's lave, I arrived in the mines yestherday, and who should I mate but me ould comrad that's standin' up before the coort marshul. 'Willy,' says I, 'an' will yees be afther takin' a drap?' and wid that he said he wud. Well thin, it's a drap we tuk here and there, an' it was meself that tuk a drap too much, when, says I, 'Willy, ye's out of the sarvice longer nor meself, an' bether acquainted with the treeks of the world, do yees be takin' me mooney, an' kape it till I gits sober.' An' wid that he tuk it, an' now a divil a bit will he giv it me at all. An' yer 'onerable

worship knows that it's meself am sober as an ordily on duty, an' that's all I know about it."

The judge then asked the prisoner if he had any defense to make, to which he replied, "I admit that he gave me the money, and at his request I returned it to him soon after. This is true, gentlemen. I have nothing more to say."

"That won't do, old fellow," said the judge. "You can't come the 'old soger' here. You must give up the money or take fifty lashes."

"Give him a hundred," yelled the crowd. "Tar and feather him."

"Will you give up the money or take the lashes?" continued the judge.

"I have not the money," Hoffman insisted. "I returned it to him. I am not guilty of any wrong, gentlemen. I am innocent of the charge."

"Strip him!" came from the crowd.

"Give it to him raw, if he does not fork over," someone suggested, and started a rush for the prisoner. His coat, vest, and shirt were stripped from his body, and he was dragged to a rise of ground, where his hands were lashed each to the hind wheel of a wagon.

A powerful man was selected from the crowd to administer the flogging. A shudder seemed to creep over the prisoner as he watched the executioner coolly lay aside his coat and roll up his shirt sleeves. In the most beseeching manner he begged not to be marked with heavy blows, to which the man

of the whip replied, "I know my duty, and it's to rid the town of such as you."

"Give him the lash!" shouted the crowd.

"Will you give up the money?" asked the executioner, taking his position.

"I have not the money, gentlemen. Do not whip me," replied Hoffman as before.

The rawhide swished through the air, and descended in five successive blows of measured time. The screams, the agony of the prisoner seemed only to awaken a general shout of satisfaction from the mob. The blood trickled from the deep furrows of the lash, when again the bloody whip cut the air. For a moment an ashy paleness diffused over the countenance of the prisoner. His head lowered upon his breast as he staggered against the cords that bound him to the wheels.

"Score home another five!" yelled a blood-crazed spectator.

As the shout fell upon the ear of the prisoner, he started as from a dream and, gathering all his physical strength, he made an herculean effort to burst the bands that held him. Finding himself unequal to the task, he paused for a moment and gazed around upon his enemies; then, straightening himself to his full height, he burst out with an appeal, the energy and language of which can never be erased from my mind. Commencing in a clear, calm tone of voice, and ending with a ringing, stentorian shout, he exclaimed, "Do not kill me, my country-

men. I am an old man. I beat the drum at Tallapoosa and Tallushatchee, and on my breast I carry scars from Bad Axe. I am an American soldier. I am a native of Kentucky."

The delivery of this appeal seemed to strike the mob mute with astonishment, and for a few moments a solemn stillness reigned throughout the dense circle of spectators. Then an undulating swaying of the crowd upon the opposite side of the circle was noticed. A person forced his way through, and strode out upon the vacant area. He was a tall, raw-boned, athletic man, somewhat round-shouldered, and wore a white, slouched hat turned up in front, which, together with his buckskin over-shirt, bespoke him a miner. An old-fashioned flint-lock pistol was belted to his right side, while from his left swung a scabbard that contained his sheath-knife. Munching from a piece of tobacco that he held in his left hand, he advanced towards the prisoner with a slow but firm and measured stride, occasionally glancing to the right or left. There was a spasmodic twitching of the lips, accompanied with a scornful smile that occasionally lit up the scowling aspect of his visage, while his eye seemed to flash deadly defiance upon the crowd that surrounded him.

"I say, stranger," he drawled, "I mean you with the whip — suppose you stay your hand till we get better acquainted." Then, seizing the handle of his knife with his right hand, while with the left he

grasped the sheath that contained it, he exclaimed, "I say, if there is any man in this crowd from old Kentuck, and ain't ashamed to say so, let him show his hand." At the same time, snatching his knife from its scabbard, he flourished it above his head. Pausing for a moment with uplifted blade, he continued, "If there be none here it makes no difference; I am from those parts, and that's sufficient." Then, wheeling upon his heel, he cut the lashings that bound the prisoner.

"See here, stranger," he said, addressing the prisoner, "you say that you are from old Kentuck. Perhaps you are, and perhaps you are not. But there is no time now to consider that; it's enough for me to know that old Kentuck has been called, and I am here to answer for her. Now, if you've been guilty of a mean act, acknowledge the corn, and trail from these parts; and if you can show that you are not guilty, I'll furnish you the tools, and back you up through the tallest fight there's ever been in these diggin's."

Here he was interrupted by McMurty, who came rushing up and exclaimed, "Och, be the powers that made me, Willy, it's innocent ye are. Do yees be batin' him no more, for sure it's a drunken baste that I am, not to be rememberin' that he gave it back to me, and it's a drunken fool that I was to be pokin' the mooney under the office o' Squire Williams. Sure and do yees bate him no more till I brings the mooney, and show yees that it's not the

likes o' Willy that would be sarvin' me a dirty trick."

This announcement burst upon the mob like a stupefying thunderclap, and silence reigned for a time while they waited for the return of McMurty, but he was never after seen in Dubuque.

ELIPHALET PRICE

## Old O'Brien

Charles R. Tuttle once predicted that Old O'Brien, the first county seat of O'Brien County, would someday become a beautiful, prosperous city. Situated on a high plateau enclosed by the Little Sioux River as in a horseshoe, the town looked out upon the only landscape in the county which varied from the dead-level stretches of the prairie. The fertile land extending in every direction afforded abundant resources for a metropolis. Only shipping facilities were lacking.

In the spring of 1856, when eastern Iowa was discussing railroad terminals and the location of the State capital, and Sioux City, on the Missouri, had a little land office and a population of two hundred, O'Brien County was without a settler. Its level acres had not been touched by cultivation, Indians roamed the prairie, and game was abundant. Wild flowers, woven in colored patterns, lifted up their faces to the sun unnoticed, while the east wind, outstripping the ponderous settlers, made a grassy sea of the land and then swept on.

In the month of July, 1856, Hannibal H. Waterman, with his wife and one child, Emily, arrived in O'Brien County. Attracted by the timber in the southeastern part of the county, he squatted on a quarter section in what is now Waterman Township.

At that time covered wagons were crossing central Iowa in veritable caravans and a few ventured northwest. Land sharks and swindlers from Fort Dodge and Sioux City darted out, like spiders from their web, and fell upon these slow-moving, easily trapped victims that crawled across the prairie. Many were diverted from their course and their destinies were shaped to fatten the purse of the swindler.

Encouraged by these successes and the trusting reputation of the settlers, a band of unscrupulous men, headed by James W. Bosler, came from Sioux City in December, 1859, to organize O'Brien County, which had been established nearly nine years before but attached to Woodbury County awaiting settlement. They conferred with Waterman on the subject but he told them that he was there to farm and knew nothing of organization. He was then offered a choice of county offices and was told it would be well to make no objections. They secured his signature to a petition signed also by seven non-resident organizers. This petition, requesting that an election be authorized for the purpose of choosing county officers, was presented to the court of Woodbury County. The county judge thereupon appointed I. C. Furber as organizing sheriff and on February 6, 1860, when there was but one bona fide settler in the county an election was held at the Waterman log cabin and the host was elected to the offices of treasurer, recorder, and superintendent of

schools. Close beside the Waterman cabin J. W. Bosler contracted to build a log courthouse, "not more than eighteen feet square" according to the terms of the contract, and the plunder of the county began.

The organizers were mistaken when they thought that Waterman would become their ally. He asserted his ideas of honesty and the grafters regretted the power they had given him. Tranquillity was maintained, however, until the following summer when the gang from Fort Dodge arrived. This party of twelve men, led by John H. Cofer, had heard of the booty in the new counties and had come to share the spoils. Waterman heartily welcomed this crowd, as they cleverly conveyed the idea of being real settlers. A feud immediately sprang up between the two factions and for awhile they threatened physical combat but a compromise was made, Waterman's claim was jumped, and he was told that he would get his land back if he resigned his offices, which he did gladly. At the regular election in November, 1860, Henry C. Tiffey was elected clerk, I. C. Furber, treasurer and recorder, Archibald Murray, county judge, and Sam H. Morrow, surveyor — all vitally interested in the promotion of county organization.

With united power, the ring continued to "organize" the county. They wished to purchase forty acres of land from Waterman for the purpose of laying out a town, but he refused to sell. The tract

was eventually obtained from H. C. Tiffey, one of the gang, for the sum of two thousand dollars, though the land was not worth five dollars an acre. Thus Old O'Brien, the county seat, was born.

A public square was marked off with cottonwood trees and the old log courthouse was moved into the center. Never was court held within the walls of this temple of justice. A hotel, a store, and dwelling houses were built and Old O'Brien took on the appearance of a frontier town.

The seat of government was inhabited exclusively by ingenious men whose principal occupation was the conversion of public funds into private resources. As honest Fred Feldman described the situation, "I am der peoples. Der rest all be officers. Don't it?" Practically the only county records were warrant books and the business of the officials was to detach the drafts upon the treasury.

Taxes were enormous, yet bonds were issued and sold in eastern markets. The greater part of the county debt was created by bridge swindles, swamp land enterprises, soldiers' bounties, and all manner of pseudo services rendered to the county. The county officers entered into solemn contracts with the county and collected their profits.

When the county was only nineteen months old and before there was any considerable revenue in the treasury the supervisors allowed bills totalling \$17,500. Of this amount I. C. Furber received \$950, J. H. Cofer drew \$650, and J. W. Bosler got \$450 for

such items as firewood, books, and salary. Archibald Murray was allowed \$2000 for building the old log courthouse and \$300 for office rent, while H. C. Tiffey was voted \$2000 for his forty acres of land, \$300 for transcribing records, \$150 for making out a tax list, \$300 for office rent, and \$500 salary. The largest sum was \$8000 awarded to John S. Jenkins for building bridges.

None of these bridges were ever seen, or heard of afterward. One of the grafters explained the bridge building enterprise much as Raws Upright in *The Hawkeye* boasted of the good house and equally good barn he had acquired from the county contracts. "We built a bridge," said the O'Brien County organizer, "and then made an elaborate report. Then we drew our county warrant. Then we tore down that bridge and built the same bridge — excuse me, another bridge — in another prairie slough, and drew another warrant. Why shouldn't we tear it down? Nobody ever crossed on it, no road was there even. And finally, with due regard to the comfort, happiness, and general welfare of my dear family, I tore down the bridge and built for myself a home, sweet home." Tradition has it that on one occasion planks were simply laid upon the ice and a bridge was reported built. Indeed, it was not necessary to actually perform a job in order to collect payment, for many bills were allowed with the explanation, "Being satisfied that said work will be done, the warrant is ordered issued."

The sloughs or swamp lands of O'Brien County, about two hundred and forty acres in all, were also grist for the grafters' mill. The county ring made a contract with James W. Bosler to build a bridge, valued at five hundred dollars, and for the same deeded to him fifty thousand acres of what "were or might be swamp lands". Bosler immediately deeded part of this land to his colleagues. They drew up legal-looking abstracts of title to this fake swamp land and Bosler went east where he sold these claims, giving a deed with the county seal attached. In the meantime actual settlers occupied the land. Taxes were collected from the bogus owner in the east and the honest owner in O'Brien County. One payment was entered in the records and the other was pocketed by the grafters. Later on, the United States issued patents to the rightful homesteaders and the eastern owners perforce gave up their claims. Even to-day many of the abstracts of title to land in O'Brien County continue to show these bogus deeds and often hamper present owners in trying to sell or to secure loans thereon.

Another fraud was perpetrated at a session of the board of supervisors on January 2, 1865. During the dark period of the Civil War when President Lincoln called for volunteers, bounties to encourage enlistments were offered by individuals, towns, and counties. The O'Brien County organizers generously asked the board of supervisors, which consisted of themselves, to vote a bounty as a

commendable duty of their county. The board magnanimously authorized a bond issue of \$17,500 and engaged an agent at a salary of \$1000 to go east and sell the bonds. He sold them several months after the war had ended for twenty cents on the dollar which produced \$3,500. This "patriotic pot" was divided in three equal shares among Archibald Murray, William Payne, and I. C. Furber, who, the record recites, were credited to O'Brien County as soldiers. Yet while these men posed as soldiers they were also drawing salaries as county officials.

Prairie schooners were now rolling into northwestern Iowa. They passed through Old O'Brien singly and in groups, their gray tops moving evenly like sails on the green prairie sea. The voices of the adventurers and the laughter of children were carried into the air with the smoke of the evening camp fire. The treeless prairie was being settled: the western part of the county had broken sod. With the advent of the real makers of the county the organizers departed.

The heritage of the Bosler-Cofer organization was not only a public debt far in excess of the constitutional limit but all of the attendant evils. All possibility of borrowing for legitimate improvements was precluded. For nineteen years county warrants were discounted at less than half of their face value. Defalcations were numerous. In 1869, when John W. Kelly, Obadiah Higbee, and Hannibal H.

Waterman were elected on the board of supervisors, a new regime began in O'Brien County. Mr. Kelly took up the cudgel of reform and found others ready to work with him. O'Brien County, though with the opposition of the Tax Payers Association which favored repudiation, assumed the fraudulent debt of \$230,000 incurred by the early officials. During the most trying years, when the grasshoppers, hail, and cyclones made hard times the county struggled with its burden of debt. In 1881 the bonds were refunded at a lower rate of interest but it was not until 1908 that the last of the principal was paid — the last penny of tribute exacted by the machinations of the early organizers.

Old O'Brien itself, whose early political history is a blot on the county's record of integrity, was, however, a factor in the settling up of northwestern Iowa. Home seekers, wishing to live near streams and timber, feared the treeless prairie and the Indians farther west. Old O'Brien was the gateway to the unprotected prairie and in its early days showed signs of prosperity. In this humble village the business life of the county had its beginning. Here the O'Brien *Pioneer*, the first newspaper, sent out its weekly chronicle of local events to the few subscribers. Here was a school, a post office, and a blacksmith shop. The Crego hotel, built by C. W. Inman, was a commodious building for its day. In a room upstairs R. G. Allen had a cobbler's bench in one corner while I. R. Pumphrey, as county treas-

urer, controlled finances in another. The hotel was the stopping place of transients and land seekers. The old hotel building is still standing and is being used as a farm house.

Clark Greene's store is remembered by all the old settlers as a rendezvous where members of the county ring sat around on barrels smoking clay pipes while they discussed the nation, the State, and the locality. To this store was brought the news of a new settler, and his experience in crossing Hill's Slough—the twenty-mile slough between Old O'Brien and Fort Dodge.

The old town was transformed into a fort when a band of Indians were reported to have been sighted. Wagons loaded with families and household goods, the horses and oxen urged to top speed, formed an exodus from the prairie to Old O'Brien. The place bristled with shot guns and was filled with warriors. Major D. W. Inman was made commander-in-chief and Greene's store became his headquarters. The commissary provided the army with an abundance of vinegar bitters, and the campaign lasted as long as the bitters did. A few men advanced toward the enemy and found him to be a herd of harmless cattle recently brought into the county.

The first Fourth of July celebration held in the county took place at Old O'Brien. From their claims and homesteads for miles around the settlers came. They sat on rudely constructed benches and listened to the reading of the Declaration of Inde-

pendence. They feasted together, enjoyed the delicacies prepared by the women, and exchanged joys and sorrows. As the afternoon wore away, they lifted tired children into wagons, promised an exchange of visits, and set out across the prairie to take up again their task of home making in a new country.

In June, 1872, the board of supervisors, determined to free the county of every corrupt influence, ordered an election on the question of removing the county capital from Old O'Brien, the seat of all the trouble in the past. The exact center of the county seemed to afford a desirable location, and there the town of Primghar was laid out and named from a combination of the initials of the surnames of the eight men chiefly responsible for its founding. Another consideration in the location of Primghar was the fact that a railroad company had been granted a right-of-way "as near as may be" to the forty-third parallel, only two miles away. At the election in November the forty acres of raw prairie known as Primghar was chosen for the county seat by a vote of three hundred and seven to fifty-three. That election was the doom of Old O'Brien.

To-day, the original town site of Old O'Brien is farmed by Fred Noding who bought it as town lots. Mrs. Noding said that it took them many years to clear away debris and to fill in the cellars. They have succeeded in their efforts for not a piece of crumbled brick or charred log can now be seen. A

slight elevation in the pasture, where sour dock grows plentifully, marks the site of the old brick schoolhouse. On the spot where the log courthouse once stood, grass grows thickly in the shade of sturdy young maples and tall cottonwoods. And the gentle summer wind in the rustling leaves of the old cottonwoods whispers of the struggle, the glory, and the death of the old town.

On the plateau from which Mr. Tuttle envisioned spires and smokestacks, I looked down one day last summer upon the green and gold of an Iowa landscape. I sighted the horseshoe course of the Little Sioux River, by its fringe of soft green, as it still encloses the site of Old O'Brien — the village so favored by nature but forgotten by fate.

JOSEPHINE BARRY DONOVAN

## Comment by the Editor

### THE ESSAY CONTEST

Without pride of family and respect for local institutions there can be little sincere patriotism. Daily associations, personal experiences, and familiar objects are the treasures in life most esteemed. People love the nation only as the sum of family, church, school, town, and State. It is for hearth and home that men go to war.

In recognition of the services of the founders of this Commonwealth, the importance of every community, and the value of patriotic zeal, the Iowa Federation of Women's Clubs with the coöperation of the State Historical Society is conducting an essay contest in local history. Every high school student in the State has been invited to write a true story drawn from the history of Iowa. Liberal prizes are offered to those who produce the nine best essays. The topics, while affording a wide range of subject-matter, are such that the materials are readily available to everyone: The Story of My Grandmother, The Story of My Grandfather, An Old Settler's Story, A Story in the History of My Community, and What Iowa Means to Me.

In this number of *THE PALIMPSEST* there is a grandmother's story, a grandfather's story, and a

story as told by an old settler, while the account of Old O'Brien is a narrative of events in the history of a community clearly suggested by Herbert Quick's novel, *The Hawkeye*. Attention is called to these stories, not as models to be imitated, but rather as examples of the variety of incident and character in pioneer life at the disposal of the essayist.

#### WHAT IOWA MEANS

Out of this contest it is hoped there will come an abiding interest in local affairs, pride in the achievements of our fathers and mothers, understanding of past conditions from which the present has evolved, and an appreciation of the true worth of the Commonwealth. This enterprise may contribute to the attainment of State consciousness. But there can be no clear common awareness until people have a definite realization of what Iowa means to those who live here.

In the minds of some, Iowa is a geographical area with a certain shape; while others visualize the physical features of prairie and timber, farms and towns, rivers and hills and valleys. People of political temperament think of the State as a Republican stronghold. Probably the most popular concept is that of a place where prosperity reigns, where crops never fail, where hogs and hens vie with each other in the production of wealth, and where everyone rides in an automobile.

What has Iowa meant through the ages to the people who have made their abode along the streams and on the prairies of that friendly region embraced in the two great arms of the Father of Waters? What did it mean to the ancient Mound Builder as he built his places of worship? What did it mean to the roving Indian as he pursued the bison or watched his squaw planting the corn in the spring-time? What did it mean to the hardy settler as he unyoked his oxen from the old covered wagon and staked out a claim? What has it meant to the children and grandchildren of the pioneers?

To me, Iowa means what it has to the millions who have lived here — home.

J. E. B.

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Established by the Pioneers in 1857  
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