

John Johns of Webster County

The Republican State convention of 1860 met in Sherman's Hall in Des Moines on the eighteenth day of January. This small assembly room, located at Third Street and Court Avenue, was "full to overflowing". Being the largest party convention ever "held in the State up to that time" as well as one of the most enthusiastic, it is remembered chiefly as the one that selected delegates to the national convention which nominated Lincoln.

The convention was called to order at two o'clock by the chairman of the State central committee and the "work of organization proceeded at once." The committees on credentials and on permanent organization having been selected, the convention was left to its own devices while the committee reports were in process of preparation. This period of "watchful waiting" was devoted largely to speech making—an interval during which the delegates might with propriety be "instructed or entertained or harassed".

Several "orators and leaders" had been called upon for speeches, "some responding, some refusing", when, during "the intermittent noise and confusion" accompanying such assemblages, some one shouted, "Johns!" One call sufficed. Without a moment's hesitation a "striking figure arose in

the fore left corner of the hall and started toward the platform." Quite indifferent to the shouts, derisive laughter, and the general uproar which his appearance drew from the delegates already wearied from oratory, he strode majestically to the platform, mounted the stage "vigorous of mien and tread", and stood facing the audience.

While the chairman "hammered the table lustily to secure order" some opportunity was given to examine the stranger more closely. "The prospective speaker was of medium height, solidly built," and had "a fine head firmly set on sturdy shoulders." Dressed "in home spun garb," he presented a spectacle unique in political conventions of even that early day. He wore "a knitted cap of blue and white yarn that ran up to a peak, whence a tassel flared and flirted jauntily" with every motion of his head. His thin gray hair, his long unkempt beard, and his thoroughly weatherbeaten appearance were true witnesses of his sixty winters.

Few indeed of the assembled delegates seemed to know him. Even the anxious query, "Who in thunder is Johns!" appears to have elicited no particular response save the prompt appearance of the man occupying the platform. Unruffled and unabashed by the riotous applause the patriarch stood firm, evidently bent upon making a speech.

After a few moments the presiding officer by diligent pounding with the gavel finally brought the restless delegates to a degree of quiet. The speaker

made the most of his opportunity and "proceeded without any embarrassment to elaborate upon current topics." Referring to the feeling prevalent in some quarters that if a "sectional ticket" should be elected the "southern part of the Nation would rebel" he asked, "Who are these gentlemen who make these threats? Are they not the same men who a year ago went all over this state, raised their bandannas, and said they would support no man who did not carry the flag and keep step to the music of the Union?" He then became vehement, daring them, in the event of Republican success, to rebel against the expressed will of the people — daring them "to pluck a single star from the galaxy represented on the flag."

This speech appears to have been "the one dramatic episode of the convention." The audience, once it gave ear to him, listened attentively. Making no pretense at pleasantries, he proceeded to deal with grave realities. In manner he was "serious" and in delivery "almost solemn". To one chronicler he appeared like John Brown of Osawatomie. "His language was concise, unadorned, pointed. Barbed and nipping words" emphasized the "righteousness of the Republican cause and the party's great opportunity," the iniquities of slavery and the blunders of Buchanan's administration. It was a speech almost ominous in portent. It came fresh from the heart of one who had pondered public problems in silent places and every dagger thrust

brought "rounds of applause" from the eager listeners.

Further and, no doubt, even more fervid remarks by the speaker were interrupted by the necessity of receiving the report of the committee on credentials. Then followed the election of delegates to the national convention scheduled to be held a few days later in Chicago. Having completed that order of business some discussion ensued as to the propriety of "instructing the delegates" but failing to reach a favorable decision the convention decided to adjourn until eight o'clock that evening.

The specific purpose for which the delegates re-assembled may never be known. Little real business was transacted — perhaps none of any moment save the election of two additional delegates at large, one of whom was John Johns "whose speech had so stirred the convention a few hours before."

Speech making seemed to be easy for this pioneer from Webster County. When chosen as a delegate he made a second address in which he promised to go to Chicago if he had "to walk all the way". Furthermore, he appears to have had no hesitancy in declaring that he would favor that candidate for President who "seemed to be the one with which the party could most certainly win." That is, his choice of a Republican candidate would depend upon whom the Democrats selected. Opportunism as a recognized political expedient appears to have been known at least as early as 1860.

True to his word John Johns made the trip to Chicago, walking from Fort Dodge to Burlington before taking the train. In the convention he turned out to be an uncompromising Seward man and with four other Iowa abolitionists "died in the ditch" balloting stubbornly for his favorite. But the other delegates evidently held no grudge against him — perhaps Lincoln's nomination soothed them — for the money to pay his railroad fare home was easily raised among them.

Who was John Johns? Who was this man of uncouth appearance who came to the Republican State convention unknown and unhonored even as a delegate; who left it chosen as one of its delegates at large to participate in that great national gathering of Republicans which resulted in the nomination of Abraham Lincoln?

Precise data relative to this picturesque Iowa pioneer is exceedingly scanty. He appears to have been a hunter, a trapper, and "withal an itinerant Baptist preacher of the Free Will persuasion". Living on "Skillet Creek, near Border Plains" in the south central portion of Webster County, just across the river from the present town of Lehigh, he plied his "trade" and his "calling" in that locality. There he "preached and expounded the scriptures" to the early settlers "on the Sabbath day, when he was not too busily engaged in hunting elk and deer, or bee hunting or trapping."

John Johns was a Kentuckian by birth but by

nature and training "an Abolitionist of the militant type — a fact that made his emigration from his native heath expedient, if not imperative." After leaving the blue-grass country the exile journeyed to greener fields, promulgating his views "at camp meetings and on the hustings" in Ohio and Indiana before coming to Iowa.

Just when this ardent "old line Whig" came to Iowa is somewhat uncertain, but according to one account it may have been as early as 1848. At any rate he was a resident of Webster County when it was organized in 1853, for his name appears as one of the successful contenders for the office of justice of the peace in the first election. Little wonder is it that with his double qualification of minister and justice of the peace he "married all the couples" of that region.

His gift for spontaneous oratory must have made the Reverend Johns a favorite at public gatherings — particularly at political rallies and camp meetings. Such semi-community undertakings were events of considerable importance in the rather drab existence of the pioneers. One such camp meeting was held on the Fort Dodge circuit beginning on July 5, 1860. The site was near Border Plains in a wooded tract about a half mile east of the Des Moines River. According to the published notice this place was "of easy access, and a pleasant location", and a general invitation was extended to all who desired "to worship God in the leafy grove".

That it was an event of some duration is evidenced by the caution that all who came were to bring "their tents and provisions with them."

Was John Johns too busy with his bee hunting to attend divine worship amid such ideal surroundings? To such as he the call of an enthusiastic religious service was undoubtedly too strong to be ignored. How many such camp meetings did he attend? We know not. The events of his later years are shrouded in mystery: he went as he had come without greatly disturbing the calm of those early days.

GEO. F. ROBESON