

The Honey War

The Territory of Iowa had no sooner been organized than a controversy over the location of the southern boundary arose with the State of Missouri. A strip of land several miles wide was claimed by both Iowa and Missouri, though Iowans were in actual possession. The contested region consisted of rich agricultural land, and in what is now Van Buren County, Iowa, the presence of numerous bee trees was an additional attraction. The collection of the honey stored in hollow trees by swarms of wild bees was no doubt profitable and involved little expenditure of capital and labor. Various untoward events engendered ill feeling on both sides of the line, but the most irritating incident was the act of a Missourian who chopped down three of the coveted bee trees. That was one of the immediate causes of the so-called comic opera conflict commonly known as the "Honey War" or the "Missouri Boundary War".

To secure the proper setting for the Honey War it is necessary to begin in 1816 when J. C. Sullivan, acting on instructions from the United States District Surveyor, ran a line known as the "Indian boundary line" or the "Sullivan line". When Missouri became a State in 1821, that part of the Sullivan line which extended westward from the Des

Moines River was accepted by Missouri and the United States government as the northern boundary of the new State. In 1824 a treaty between the United States government and the Sauk and Fox Indians creating the Half-breed Tract provided that the northern boundary of this tract should be a continuation of the northern boundary of Missouri from the Des Moines River to the Mississippi.

No serious question in regard to the location of the northern boundary of Missouri was raised before 1837, but by that time many settlers were moving into northeastern Missouri and what later became southeastern Iowa. It was natural that the Missourians should covet the rich land north of the Sullivan line. Their eagerness to secure possession of the bee trees was accentuated by their desire to enlarge the Half-breed Tract lying between the Des Moines and Mississippi rivers. If the Missouri boundary line were moved northward it would have the happy effect, for the Missourians, of giving Missouri land speculators a larger area for their activities.

Influenced by citizens thus interested in the relocation of the northern boundary of Missouri, the legislature of Missouri, in 1837, ordered the line to be resurveyed — a task which was performed by J. C. Brown. This line was about nine miles north of the Sullivan line at the eastern end and about thirteen miles north at the western end. The area between the two lines contained over twenty-six

hundred square miles. Late in 1838, the Missouri legislature passed a law officially claiming the "Brown line" as the State boundary.

The justification for claiming the Brown line as the true boundary was based on the definition of the northern boundary of the State contained in the Constitution adopted by the convention of 1820. According to this definition, the boundary was to be a line running through the "rapids of the river Des Moines". Though these rapids were generally supposed to be the Des Moines Rapids in the Mississippi River above the mouth of the Des Moines River, Brown, in making his survey, sought for the rapids in the Des Moines River. About sixty miles above the mouth, at the Great Bend, near the present town of Keosauqua, he found a riffle which he claimed was the "rapids of the river Des Moines", mentioned in the constitutional description of the boundary. Proceeding on this assumption, he began his survey at that point and ran his line due west.

In the late summer of 1838, the United States government appointed a commissioner to determine the true boundary between Iowa and Missouri, but as Missouri refused to coöperate nothing was effectually settled. So when Missouri officially undertook to extend her jurisdiction north to the Brown line, it was inevitable that trouble should arise. By the end of July, 1839, trouble had developed to such an extent that the citizens of Van Buren County felt called upon to complain to Governor Robert Lucas

that Missouri officials had come into the disputed area to assess property for the purpose of taxation. Lucas was not slow to answer the appeal for aid. On July 29, 1839, he issued a proclamation calling on all officials to uphold the Territorial laws and to maintain the jurisdiction of the United States against every encroachment.

The Missourians read this proclamation with great indignation, and in Clark County, which adjoined Van Buren County on the south, a meeting was held, resolutions adopted, and a pledge taken to maintain unsullied the dignity and honor of Missouri. The Missouri Governor, Lilburn W. Boggs, was also aroused to wrath and, on August 23, 1839, he issued a counter proclamation. While needless collision was to be avoided, the Missouri officials were enjoined to use their full power to enforce the jurisdiction of Missouri in the region to which the State had officially laid claim. About a month later, there appeared another proclamation by Governor Lucas, denying the claims of Missouri and again ordering Iowa officials to enforce the authority of the United States as far south as the Sullivan line.

Encouraged by these proclamations, the local authorities on both sides of the border prepared to perform what they regarded as their duty. About the middle of October, 1839, Uriah S. Gregory, better known locally as "Sandy", the sheriff of Clark County, Missouri, entered into the disputed area for the purpose of collecting taxes. He not only failed

in his purpose but was warned not to return. Thereupon, Gregory returned to Waterloo, the county seat of Clark County, and reported that he had been obstructed in the performance of his duty.

Meanwhile, Henry Heffleman, the sheriff of Van Buren County, wrote to Governor Lucas for advice and was instructed to use his own judgment in seeing that the laws were enforced. Shortly afterward delegations of citizens from Van Buren and Clark counties held a conference in which they attempted to arrange a compromise. The Clark County delegates proposed that the disputed area be subjected to a joint jurisdiction until Congress should decide what was the true boundary; but this proposition was rejected by the Van Buren County delegates. In mass meetings held about the last of October, the action of each delegation was approved by the people of their respective counties.

The situation on the southern border became more and more tense as further developments were awaited. In his second annual message to the Legislative Assembly on November 5, 1839, Governor Lucas said that the dispute might "ultimately lead to the effusion of blood." The climax was reached when the Iowa bee trees were destroyed. This act occasioned great excitement in Iowa for it seemed to be an act of wanton malice. An Iowa constable sought to arrest the offender, but the miscreant succeeded in crossing the line to Missouri and safety.

This incident inspired a local satirist, John I.

Campbell of Palmyra, Missouri, to write some verses which were published in the Palmyra *Whig*. The poem, which was intended to be sung to the tune of Yankee Doodle, was in part as follows:

THE HONEY WAR

Ye freemen of the happy land,
Which flows with milk and honey,
Arise! To arms! Your ponies mount!
Regard not blood or money.
Old Governor Lucas, tiger-like,
Is prowling 'round our borders,
But Governor Boggs is wide awake —
Just listen to his orders.

Three bee-trees stand about the line
Between our State and Lucas,
Be ready all these trees to fall,
And bring things to a focus.
We'll show old Lucas how to brag,
And seize our precious honey!
He also claims, I understand,
Of us three bits in money.

Now, if the Governors want to fight,
Just let them meet in person.
And when noble Boggs old Lucas flogs,
'Twill teach the scamp a lesson.
Then let the victor cut the trees,
And have three-bits in money,
And wear a crown from town to town,
Anointed with pure honey.

Shortly after the bee trees had been chopped down, Gregory, the Missouri sheriff, was arrested by Heffleman, the sheriff of Van Buren County, when he attempted to collect taxes in the disputed area. This arrest, which occurred on November 20, 1839, was the signal for activity south of the border. A special session of the Clark County court was held on November 23rd, and orders were issued to General David Willock and General O. H. Allen to muster the militia under their command in order to assist the civil authorities in maintaining the jurisdiction of Missouri over the disputed area.

Public meetings were held at which efforts were made to stir up a high pitch of feeling against the Iowans. In response to the summons of General Willock, over two thousand men began to gather for the Honey War. By December 7, 1839, General Allen had the Lewis County regiment on the march toward the seat of war without tents or blankets and imperfectly supplied with arms and ammunition. Near Waterloo on the Fox River they were joined by the Clark County contingent and pitched camp in the snow.

On the Iowa side of the border there was also a bustle of activity. The United States Deputy Marshal, G. A. Hendry, had arrived in Van Buren County and had taken charge of affairs. Special investigators were sent into Missouri to learn the true situation there. When reports were brought back confirming the rumors of military preparations

on the part of the Missourians, Hendry made ready to meet the expected invasion. On December 6, 1839, Governor Lucas issued orders to the commanders of the Iowa militia to muster their men to aid the civil authorities, if necessary, in maintaining the territorial integrity of Iowa.

The Deputy Marshal immediately made requisitions for these troops to serve as a *posse comitatus*. Though little enthusiasm was manifested for the war at first, recruits were soon "drummed up" and started on their way to the border. "Death to the invading Pukes" was the resounding war cry that stirred the martial spirit of the Iowa pioneers. It was the slack season of the year and as usual money was scarce, so the Iowa militiamen were probably actuated more by the hope of remuneration from the government than by the patriotic appeal to defend their rights against Missourian aggression. In the expectation of receiving pay from the public treasury, however, the volunteers of 1839 were doomed to disappointment despite the best efforts of the Territorial Assembly and Augustus Caesar Dodge to secure an appropriation of \$30,000 from Congress for that purpose.

It was a motley "army" that assembled at Farmington, from Burlington, Bloomington, Davenport, and even as far north as Dubuque. Each man followed his own taste in the matter of a uniform, and the assortment of weapons was as ludicrous as it was miscellaneous.

Old Zion Church in Burlington served as headquarters during the mobilization, and the capital city of Iowa Territory was alive with the rattling of drums, the whistling of fifes, and the blowing of bugles. A company called the "Grays" was formed with James W. Grimes, later a United States Senator, as captain. S. C. Hastings, later a prominent judge, formed a company of dragoons at Bloomington. When the men were finally assembled, Captain Hastings took a position behind his men, threatened to run the Indian spear with which he was armed through any man who attempted to desert, and gave the order to march. It is said that in one county a small company was organized and equipped with a train of six wagons to carry supplies. As the commander was "determined to keep up the spirits of his men", he loaded five of the wagons with whisky.

In Scott County the men who became fired with the spirit of combat and joined in the preparations for war gathered at Davenport within sight of Fort Armstrong. On the appointed day these valiant soldiers assembled for a grand review. In the ranks were to be found men armed with blunderbuses, flintlocks, and quaint old ancestral swords that had probably adorned the wall for many generations. One private carried a plough coulter suspended over his shoulder by means of a log chain, another had an old fashioned sausage stuffer for a weapon, while a third shouldered a sheet iron sword about six feet long. Such men were "weeded out" and dismissed,

but they did not go home until they had conducted a charge on the "regulars" whom they utterly routed. Before the latter could be reassembled, peace had been declared and their services were not required.

The "army" that was mustered in December, 1839, to defend Iowa from an invasion of Missourians numbered about twelve hundred men. It was very generously supplied with officers, for there were four generals, nine general staff officers, forty field officers, and eighty-three company officers. There were less than eleven hundred noncommissioned men, organized roughly into thirty-two companies, and only about five hundred of these reached the camp at Farmington opposite Waterloo.

While this force was being mustered, cooler headed men on both sides of the border were directing their efforts to prevent open hostilities. On December 4, 1839, the Clark County court appointed a committee to go to Burlington to confer with the Iowa Legislative Assembly with the purpose of re-establishing friendly relations. The Missourians proposed that both sides suspend civil control but exercise criminal jurisdiction jointly in the disputed area.

The Iowa law-making body could not agree to such a plan but drew up some resolutions requesting Governors Lucas and Boggs to suspend hostilities until Congress decided the boundary question, and a committee was sent to Clark County to present the resolutions to the authorities there. Upon their ar-

rival on December 12, 1839, a special session of the Clark County court was held, speeches were made in which friendship was professed by both sides, and, finally, the court issued an order to disband the Missouri militia.

This sudden ending of the war found Missouri militia marching toward Clark County. When the news reached these troops that their services were not needed they decided to demonstrate their opinion of the entire affair before they returned home. Believing the two Governors to be responsible for the whole trouble they halved a haunch of venison and labelled one part "Gov. Lucas of Iowa" and the other "Gov. Boggs of Missouri". Both were then hung up and riddled with bullets, after which they were taken down and buried with mock military honors. On the way home the men indulged in much "rough and wild sport".

Meanwhile, the Iowa militia assembled on the border were at a loss to understand why the expected invasion of the Missourians did not materialize. To solve the mystery, the Iowa commander, General Jesse B. Brown, acting on instructions from Deputy Marshal Hendry, sent a delegation to Waterloo to learn the intentions of the enemy. This delegation, consisting of A. C. Dodge, James Churchman, and J. A. Clark, soon returned with the news that the Missouri militia has disbanded and that the war was over.

It did not take the Iowa army long to start for

home. On the way other troops marching to the war zone were told the glad tidings. The homecoming was attended with much rejoicing and celebration. An eye-witness stated that he had never seen "a wilder set of men and a greater carousal than there was in the City of Burlington" on the night when the troops arrived. Amid such scenes the Honey War came to an end.

The close of the Honey War, however, left the boundary dispute as far as ever from adjustment. Fruitless attempts were made to settle the question in Congress, but as time passed it became more and more evident that the final decision would have to come from the United States Supreme Court. After Iowa was admitted into the Union as a State, an "agreed" case was arranged with Missouri and the matter was brought before the Supreme Court. In 1849 that tribunal decreed that the Sullivan line was the true boundary, and commissioners were appointed to resurvey and remark the line. The completion of their work and the acceptance of their report by the Supreme Court in 1851 ended the dispute that had continued for over a decade concerning the location of the southern boundary of Iowa.

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