

The PALIMPSEST

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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

THE MEANING OF PALIMPSEST

In early times a palimpsest was a parchment or other material 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

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The Clear Lake Outlet Feud

For half a century the settlers around Clear Lake argued and fought over what should be the proper level of the lake. Some wanted the water level high in order to make their lakeshore properties desirable, while others protested against the flooding of their lowland meadows. The existence of a natural outlet on the east side of the lake, consisting of a narrow and easily altered embankment, was the center of the controversy.

Almost from the time the earliest pioneers settled in the vicinity in 1853, the outlet had been tampered with until no one knew what its original level was. While the feud for the most part was confined to disputation, there were times when it threatened and even partook of violence. In the early days some settlers were accused of taking rock out of the outlet for the foundation of their cabins. At one time in the pioneer period a storm tore out the embankment and precipitated one of the most exciting episodes of the community's his-

tory. Those who rebuilt the shore somehow never were able to agree on the amount of embankment that should be raised to return the outlet to its original, prehistoric, undisturbed level. This question of the height of the water was not settled until the Supreme Court of Iowa stepped in on March 9, 1910, and like a reincarnated King Canute said to the waters "so high you shall go, but no higher."

The fight between those who wanted the lake preserved in its pristine beauty and those who wished to make use of the flooded lowlands reached such a state of commotion at the turn of the century that in 1903 the county supervisors, A. A. Crosley, B. A. Brown, and W. V. Crapser, built a concrete sluiceway at the outlet, by which they hoped to set a permanent water level and stop the warfare. But instead of settling the difficulty this act was like a red flag to both factions. That the board was justified in taking some action there was no doubt among those of the county who maintained a neutral attitude, for there was ample evidence that the outlet was being tampered with continually. But singularly enough both sides objected to the permanent sluiceway. The farmers with water in their pastures argued that it was too high, while vacationers and cottage owners contended that it was not high enough.

In the spring of 1905 low-water advocates tried to blow up the south end of the concrete barrier, but inflicted little damage. When the summer vacation season opened, an injunction was filed against the Clear Lake board of supervisors on June 7, 1905, by twenty-two cottage owners and two companies. They claimed that the board had unlawfully constructed an outlet from "18 to 24 inches below the natural level of Clear Lake." The owners of the cottages finally persuaded the supervisors to add two heavy planks on to the sluiceway which raised the water approximately twenty-six inches above the concrete base.

In the early morning hours of October 25, 1905, an explosion rent the air, awakening Clear Lake residents who had been peacefully sleeping. Noise of the blast had come from the outlet, not far from town. Upon investigation it was discovered that "the cement banking and board apron of the outlet were ripped to pieces." Because the dynamite had been poorly placed, the retaining wall was not completely destroyed.

Though there was little evidence to show who had attempted to blow up the outlet, the board of supervisors immediately began a search for the culprit. It was rumored that the board knew who had wrecked the sluiceway but had insufficient evidence to bring the guilty person to court.

An action was later filed asking that the board be enjoined from interfering in any way with the outlet or the flow of water through it. A demurrer to the petition was sustained, but plaintiffs were permitted to bring in other parties as defendants. The State of Iowa filed a petition of intervention, alleging the ownership of the bed of the lake and asking that it be authorized to erect and maintain a permanent embankment, bulkhead, headgates and sluiceways for the purpose of retaining the lake at a high-water level. The supervisors forthwith stepped out of the case. An answer was filed, praying that all obstructions be removed from the outlet and that it be safeguarded in its original condition.

By the time the trial got under way the case of *H. A. Merrill et al. vs. the board of supervisors et al.*, with the State of Iowa as intervenor, had in it on one side or the other all the landowners about the lake, seeking either to raise or lower the level of the water. In their claims concerning the level of the water these two opposing groups were four feet apart, one side contending the water should be thirty inches above and the other a foot below the concrete sluiceway. The law firms of Cliggitt, Rule, Keeler, and Smith and Blythe, Markley, Rule, and Smith of Mason City represented the plaintiffs, while Glass and McConlogue, Robert

Witwer, and Ira W. Jones represented the defendants. H. W. Byers, Attorney General of Iowa; Charles W. Lyon, Assistant Attorney General, and J. E. E. Markley of Mason City represented the State, the intervenor.

This trial did a number of things besides fixing the water level of Clear Lake. One of the outstanding achievements was to put on record the entire history of Clear Lake, including the rise and fall of the waters and the occasional efforts of the settlers to regulate this. Men who were among the first to see the lake lying like a mirror in the midst of endless prairies and who later came to know all its moods and caprices, who saw it when it was kind and friendly and when it was cruel and relentless, took part in the trial. They were outdoor men who knew all of the lake's shallows and depressions, its bars and adjoining swamp lands, and who constantly watched the rocks and other marks which told the story of its swells and the periods of depression. The trial showed further that there grew up between these old timers and the clear, sparkling lake a bond of affection that came to a test when there was danger that what they considered grasping mankind was meddling with the outlet that controlled its level.

The testimony of these men showed the lake had regular cycles of high and low water. From

1857 to the time of the trial there were three periods during which high levels were recorded. The first of these began in 1857 and reached the highest point about 1860. The second period reached the high point in 1878 and 1879. The third began to manifest itself in 1903, reaching its maximum level in 1906, when the trial started. Between these high water periods there were corresponding intervals of lower levels, one of the worst of which caused Oscar Stevens to abandon his gristmill at the outlet in 1887.

Testimony in the case was started in 1906 and all the old settlers about the lake put in their appearance, most of them testifying in behalf of the plaintiff in contending the lake level should be raised. The evidence was full of discrepancies, for who can remember accurately a thing that happened a half century ago? Attorneys for the two sides used these inconsistencies in constructing formidable arguments in support of their respective theories.

The general question sought to be settled in the trial was: at what level was the outlet in 1853 before man disturbed the lake banks? And because this was the question, considerable weight was given to the notes of the men who surveyed the lake in 1853. These notes indicated that the water was six inches below the outlet at that time. Then

the problem was to establish whether the lake was at high or low water at that time and at what level the outlet was originally compared with later periods when the bank was tampered with.

One of the storm centers of the fight was a fish trap established by James Sirrine in 1858 about three hundred feet north of the outlet. Practically all the old pioneers testified that when the water ran out at the outlet to a depth of about eight inches it was about two or three inches deep at the trap, indicating the trap was from five to six inches higher. The plaintiffs then presented testimony to show that the sluiceway established by the supervisors would have to be covered by thirty inches of water before it would run through the fish trap, which trap, they argued, was at the same level now as fifty years before, having a large stone base which had not been altered by man or the elements.

The defense, however, contended that the reason water did not go out of the fish trap at the time of the trial was that the trap had been filled in. The argument of the defense on this point to the Supreme Court was to a large extent an elaborate fortification of figures based chiefly on the level given by the surveyor of the fish trap. In rebutting this the plaintiff admitted the surveyor must have been wrong on this one point.

One of the contentions of the plaintiff was that the natural bank of the lake at the outlet had been tampered with. Old settlers testified that the pioneers took rock out of this place for use as foundations for their houses, a practice which tended to lower the bank. In 1860 the lake tore out part of the embankment and a millrace. The fear that the entire lake would pour through the embankment down Willow Creek and flood Mason City, ten miles down the stream, led the entire male population of the community to rush to Clear Lake to aid in rebuilding the bank. The evidence in the trial was that the bank was "put back where it was". In 1891 R. S. Young, then mayor of Clear Lake, strengthened the bank at the outlet. This caused considerable criticism and led to more tampering with the embankment.

The history of an old camp meeting association at Clear Lake also entered into the trial. The ground for this project was platted in 1867 and two pools called Siloam and Bethsaida included. Witnesses testified that at the time of this religious development one could row from the lake into these pools. Plaintiff witnesses testified that since 1900 there had never been a time when a boat could be rowed into these pools. Hence, they contended, the water level should be raised.

There was also evidence presented that the

Charles Grimm slough, south of the lake, was covered with water in the early days so that it was possible for sail boats to go in. During the sixties a ditch was dug through a hill to what was called Crovell's slough, draining the water into the lake when the lake was low and thus keeping Grimm's land dry. When the lake rose again, however, in its periodic swells, the ditch caused the water to spread over this lowland. Consequently, Grimm and others similarly situated were interested in a low outlet.

Much confusion and apparent inconsistencies occurred in the testimony because of the constantly recurring water level cycles. Oscar Stevens, the gristmill operator, was the chief witness on the water cycles. "Every fourteen years the lake goes up and comes down without any variation," was the way he put it. Stevens had come to Clear Lake in 1855 and his testimony had much bearing on the case. He testified that he operated a sawmill at the outlet in 1856 and a gristmill from 1870 to 1887. After 1887 he ran a line of boats on the lake. It was his opinion, he told the court, that the then existing outlet was not as high as the original one. This also was the testimony of Fred Sirrine, son of James Sirrine who was one of the original settlers at Clear Lake. James Sirrine came to Clear Lake in 1853 and lived within a few

rods of the outlet. It was he who operated the much-discussed fish trap.

Then there was Edwin Nichols, who came to the lake in 1856. He said the water was higher in 1857, before men tampered with the lake banks, than he had seen it since. L. E. Crowell, who had lived at the lake since 1857, said the lake at the time of the trial was twelve inches below the high-water mark. Harrison Hayden, who came in 1861, thought there was six inches difference.

Dwight Palmeter, who first saw the lake in 1863, told the court he had seen it from four to six inches higher. Dr. J. B. Charlton, who came in 1861, admitted he too had seen it higher. A. H. Green, who started in the boat business at Clear Lake in 1874, testified the sluiceway was put in two feet below the original level.

John C. Sherwin, a Supreme Court justice, was also a witness in the trial. He said he came to Mason City in 1876 and that he had been at the lake a large part of the time since. He maintained that part of the embankment in front of the sluiceway had been taken away. William Gilmore, who contended he knew all of the depths and shallows, shores and bars, said the water was not as high as it was formerly, judging from the level register at Dodge's Point, which was opposite from the town of Clear Lake.

W. S. Colby, county surveyor, testified that the spillway was three feet below the old bank. John Gilmore, who came to Clear Lake in 1860, corroborated the testimony of the other witnesses in maintaining that there had been a lowering of the water level. The water in the upper part of the lake, he said, did not reach as far as in the old days.

Witnesses for the defense consisted chiefly of farmers from this upper-lake section, where the water was shallow, who owned the land that was submerged in high-water periods. These almost invariably contended the lands they used for pasture in the old days had in later years become flooded. How these observations could be harmonized with the contentions of the plaintiff witnesses was one of the mysteries of the trial. Among the defense witnesses were Edwin Green, who came in 1876 and had a dock at the camp grounds, and H. Hathron, who came in 1874 and who testified at the trial that the lake in 1906 was the highest he had ever seen it.

D. H. Campbell, who at that time was superintendent of schools, stated that the water had become so high in later years that the ice had pushed out trees and even sidewalks. Jeno Frandson, who lived on a farm in Hancock County, on the west end of the lake, said his land was under

water, adding that "the land has never been under water before that I know of." He had owned the farm twelve years, he said. E. J. Scherf, of Ventura, also owned a farm at the head of the lake, which, he said, was covered with water at the time of the trial while it was dry at the time he bought it in 1873. Chauncy Thomas told the judge he thought the lake was four feet higher than when he came there in 1871. J. B. Wood, resident at the lake since 1855, said the lake was a foot higher than he had ever seen it before. Michael Callanan came to the lake in 1853 and was certain the lake was higher than in the old days.

Shortly after the conclusion of the trial, Judge J. F. Clyde announced his decision, holding that the level of the county supervisors' sluiceway was the correct one. An appeal to the Supreme Court was taken and, after a hearing, the high tribunal of the State in 1910 handed down the decision ordering the outlet raised a foot.

"An examination of the record leaves no doubt but that the ground surface of the outlet as it formerly existed was considerably above the elevation decreed by the court," was the opinion of the Supreme Court in which the decision of Judge Clyde was modified and affirmed.

The high court held that witnesses who testified concerning the height of the water at the outlet,

nearly all of whom were for the plaintiff, had the decided advantage over the defense witnesses, most of whom testified concerning water flooding their lower pastures, due to the fact that they had an opportunity to compare the height of the water "with other objects".

"A separate examination of the record has convinced us that the elevation of the outlet as compared with the datum bench mark at the southeast corner of Clear Lake park should have been fixed at 190.23 instead of 189.23, and as so modified the decree will be affirmed", the Supreme Court judges continued. The statement was added that Judge Sherwin of Mason City, who was one of the witnesses in the action, took no part in the Supreme Court proceedings.

Almost immediately after this decision the supervisors built a new sluiceway twelve inches above the old one. For over thirty years now the water level has stood where the Supreme Court ordained it. No one has tried to dynamite the new outlet which the high tribunal ordered to be constructed. The disgruntled farmer has tilled what he could and fished on the remainder of his land. But the cycles of high and low water continue.

ENOCH A. NOREM

Boyhood at Fort Dodge

William Williams was worried as he hurried along the trail up the Des Moines Valley toward Fort Dodge. Three weeks before, when he had left his sixteen-year-old son James and three other men at the former military post, the Indians were showing signs of hostility. Since the soldiers had been withdrawn a band of Sioux had returned to their old hunting grounds.

In January, 1854, a renegade trader named Henry Lott had murdered Sidominadota, the chief of this band, in revenge for the death of his wife and son nearly eight years before. At first the Indians were content with the promise that Lott would be punished, but as winter passed and the murderer was not apprehended Inkpaduta, disreputable brother of Sidominadota, who had become chieftain of the band, threatened to take vengeance against any white settlers in the upper Des Moines Valley.

Having completed his business in Iowa City and visited his wife and children who were living with his brother, Judge Joseph Williams, in Muscatine, the former sutler at Fort Dodge was returning to that outpost of white settlement. A

letter from his son which had reached Muscatine implied that conditions were critical.

His general anxiety was accentuated by George Warner, one of the settlers at Fort Dodge, whom Williams encountered in Des Moines. Warner was alarmed. He admitted that he was afraid of the Indians and was returning to civilization. He was not, Williams knew, the bravest of pioneers, but his story sounded plausible. The Indians, seventy tepees of warriors, painted and armed, so he said, were encamped only six miles above the fort. They had given notice that if Henry Lott and his son, the murderers of Sidominadota, were not delivered within six weeks the Indians would burn the fort and start down the Des Moines River, killing all the settlers. The time was almost up, and Lott's trail had been lost when he crossed the Missouri River. William R. Miller had found the Indians so menacing that he abandoned his claim nine miles up the river and brought his family down to the old fort for protection.

Warner had even been fired upon by Indians within call of the fort as he went after his cow one night. That was bad enough, but the last straw had been added when the huge encampment of warriors was discovered up the river. He had piled his belongings and family into a wagon and started south, warning settlers along the way.

In no easy state of mind, Williams started by forced marches on the last hundred miles of timber and prairie to the fort. All the "traffic" on the trail was going south: settlers abandoning their claims and seeking civilization. Each told the same story — Warner's. The farther north he went the fewer were the homesteads and the less alarming the stories of the settlers who remained — but then, dead pioneers spread no tales.

The last twenty miles, over uninhabited prairie, Williams was burdened with anxiety and fatigue. Nor could he be sure that all was lost or that all was well at the fort until he was upon it, since the buildings were beyond a slight hill. Even as he approached this last rise, no smoke from cabin chimneys was visible, a bad sign. He paused to control his dread and to prepare himself for the one sight all pioneers feared: a burned cabin and scalped inmates. Finally he peeped cautiously over the brow of the hill. Every building was there!

Relief was short-lived. Not a person was visible, and a shout brought no sign of life. Empty buildings would not be worth much if the settlers had been the first victims of Inkpaduta's revenge. With such lingering fears of disaster he approached the store building where his son James should be. The door was locked, and knocking

brought no response. Peering through the window, he could see that all inside seemed to be in order. He called again. No answer. Next he walked down the line of cabins toward the river. Near the soldiers' "theatre", not far from the stream, he shouted, loudly.

From the river came an answer, and the happy man hurried down to the shore of the Des Moines. Across the stream he saw his son's canoe pulled up at the head of Duck Island. Near it stood the boy himself, gun in hand and dogs at heel, looking anything but frightened.

Quickly James crossed to welcome his father. The first thing the elder asked was why he risked being so far from the cabin with the Indians just over the hill. And where were the others? To which James replied that he was not afraid of the Indians. The men were out hunting. And how were mother and the family at Muscatine? The scene of the supposed massacre appeared to be the one calm spot on the frontier.

Greetings over, James was able to explain the flight of George Warner. To the others at the fort it appeared amusing, but under the comic circumstances lay the seriousness of life on the frontier where only the fit could survive. Warner was not fit because he was easily frightened. If he had kept his fears to himself, he would have been en-

couraged by the neighbors, but he was too timid to venture a few hundred yards away from his cabin. In such a community, one of his type was not pleasant company. It was exasperating to be awakened in the middle of the night by his pounding on your door because he thought he heard or saw Indians in the woods. The Sidominadota tragedy caused enough real danger without having some one repeatedly crying wolf.

One evening when James and Sergeant John Heffley were at the store, George Warner came in to beg some one to go after his cow. Both found something that needed immediate attention, telling him that his cow had been seen in the trees just over the hill. Warner waited a while for the boys to relent, then started alone for his cow, looking for redskins under every bush.

He was no more than around the corner when Williams and Heffley went into action. Throwing blankets over their shoulders and tying handkerchiefs about their heads, they picked up rifles and hurried by a roundabout way to the spot where they had told Warner he would find his cow. The timid settler finally appeared, to be greeted by an "Indian" war-whoop and a shot from a gun. The echoes had scarcely died away before the scared man was back at the fort spreading wild tales of Indians.

This episode suggested a reconnaissance to discover the strength and location of the hostile Indians. Young Williams and Heffley made the best of the opportunity. They reported at least seventy tepees only six miles above the fort. The warriors, armed to the teeth and painted to the toes, were waiting only for the expiration of their ultimatum that Lott be delivered before starting a massacre. The peril was too imminent for Warner. He loaded his wagon and headed south, reporting murder and bloodshed all the way to Des Moines. The practical jokers resumed their normal pursuits.

No one understood the Indian situation better than William Williams and his son. For nearly four years they had lived on the Iowa frontier in daily contact with soldiers and Indians, for William Williams had obtained the position of sutler at the new fort established at the mouth of Lizard Creek on the Des Moines in 1850. With his brother at Muscatine he had left his wife, daughter, and younger son, but James Blakely, born on May 11, 1837, he took along. And so the boy, recently from Pennsylvania, became a part of the unofficial personnel of the army post.

Life was not too hard at first. James ate at the troop mess, joined in the songs and amusements of the soldiers in the evenings, and attended their

amateur performances in the fort theatre, an auditorium with a real stage and painted scenery, for many of the soldiers were educated men and all were versatile. When the barracks and other living quarters were finished, the men who had wives and families brought them down from Fort Snelling in the spring of 1851. Thereafter clean shirts were less of a problem.

No boys were included in the soldiers' families, and so playmates were few. If it had not been for Wahkonsa, life would have been lonely indeed for James Williams. Worthy of any man's friendship was this Sioux boy, son of Umpashota, a Sisseton chieftain. Besides describing the geography of the region for the troops, he taught his white friends much of his language and the ways of the animals, learning in return English and something of the white man's way of life. It was fitting that this brave's name should become Fort Dodge's first symbol of hospitality, the Wahkonsa House, since his paleface playmate was always welcome in the tepee of his parents, just as Wahkonsa found the latchstring of the sutler's cabin always out to him.

The Indians were not always friendly, and most of the wild animals never. Many a lonesome night this eastern boy must have lain awake listening to the wolves attempting to steal a meal of

venison from the commissary supply, for the sentries were under orders not to shoot at wolves in the darkness. The sound of gunfire must indicate only a real attack, for the red strategists might imitate the howl of a wolf in order to empty the guard's gun before a raid. At such times the boy's thoughts must have turned to his brother and sister safe at Muscatine. His father from time to time went to see them, but on such occasions James had to remain behind to manage the sutler's store, just as he did when his father went off with the troops to investigate Indian depredations, wondering all the time if the post's record of not having lost a soldier might not be broken.

One incident brings out clearly the understanding that existed between the young frontiersman and the Indians who visited the post from time to time. James was alone in the store when an Indian came in. As usual the native idled about, examining with curiosity everything he saw. Quietly he slipped something under his blanket. But James was not to be caught napping. Picking up the nearest object, he threw it at the Indian. The surprised brave dropped his booty, but showed more chagrin than resentment. It was a game and he had lost it fairly.

At the same time the whites held no sentimental illusions about the Indians' attitude toward the

settlers who were taking the land and killing the game. Individually the reds might be friends, but collectively they were potential enemies. The fort had been established to protect the frontier from the Indians who had been annoying settlers and attacking surveying parties. No untoward incidents had occurred while the soldiers were present but in 1851 the Sioux agreed to relinquish their land in northern Iowa. Since its purpose had been fulfilled, orders were given in the spring of 1853 to vacate the post and on June 2nd the garrison lowered the flag and marched away.

The site of Fort Dodge had been well chosen. Sutler Williams was confident that a prosperous town could be founded there. When the buildings at the fort, including the mill, were sold at auction he bought most of them. About that time, apparently, he made the acquaintance of Henn and Williams, a firm of land speculators at Fairfield. They knew that the site of Fort Dodge was included in the land grant for the improvement of the Des Moines River and could therefore be purchased from the State at once. On behalf of the Fort Dodge Company, composed of Bernart Henn, Jesse Williams, William Williams, and George Gillaspay, the former sutler negotiated the purchase of land in January, 1854. The town plat was surveyed by S. C. Woods of Boone County

in March, and Williams became the leading proprietor, pioneer merchant, and first postmaster of Fort Dodge.

Meanwhile, during the previous summer and fall, the Indians had returned to their former haunts, though they had no right to be there. The situation was fraught with danger, especially after the murder of Sidominadota. The three or four men at the abandoned post had to be constantly on the alert.

Never did any one leave his cabin without arms. When Indians came to visit, as some did every few days in the fall of 1853, they were watched closely. If the savages arrived with squaws and children, they came to trade and all was well; if the braves came alone, it was best to keep them away from the arms rack; if but a few of the head men came, it was time to investigate, because the braves were probably off on a raid, with the diplomats at the post to keep the settlers occupied. James B. Williams was used to the routine of watchfulness, so the small arsenal of Sharp's rifles, Colt's pistols, knives, and even axes was always ready. And to keep the trigger finger limber there was always game to be shot for the table.

The fort was a lonely place after the troops marched north. The elder Williams kept busy

writing letters to eastern newspapers, extolling the advantages of Fort Dodge, hoping thereby to bring desirable settlers to his town. The son was housekeeper and cook, but a one-room cabin needed little care to make it livable for two bachelors, and a diet of flapjacks, molasses, boiled rice, and a variety of fish and game did not take long to prepare. The two cows needed a certain amount of care and always expected to be milked, one task to be looked forward to during strawberry season when all the wild berries one could eat were to be had for the picking.

Webster County ninety years ago was a hunter's paradise, and James Williams and his dogs made the most of it. Even when alone he could enjoy these pleasures, but if the Umpashotas were camping near, Wahkonsa would be sure to be there to share the hunt, the canoe trip, the swim, or the contest of endurance. In speed and agility, slight James excelled the Indian boy and won a Sioux name for himself, but its spelling was not recorded and has faded from the memory of those who once knew it. The white boy spent days at a time as a welcome guest of the Indians. From the Indians James acquired the hobby of making pets of wild animals — coons, deer, elk, and buffalo calves, most of the varieties in twos and threes. The collection and care of his private menagerie

occupied much of the boy's attention and taught him the lore of nature.

Evenings were long, even when everybody went to bed early to conserve candles. A rare treat was a visit from some of the settlers on the Des Moines below the fort. Occasionally hunters from downstream come up the river in canoes, looking for game or bee trees. On these infrequent occasions the visitors would spend the night and there would be news and hunting tales. If the remarkable Reverend John Johns (he who never thought his pulpit more important than the finding of a bee tree) were along, they could be sure of a very tall tale, with John Johns himself playing the part of a veritable David.

Once in a while an event would provide amusement for many days. Such is the tale of the Eslicks, the Howards, and some playful Indians. The Eslicks and Howards were Missourians who had settled in the southern part of Webster County. On a hunting expedition, they stopped at the fort (it must have been the fall of 1854) for powder, lead, and information, continuing their hunt for deer along Lizard Creek, taking with them their ox-drawn wagon and a saddle horse. Twenty-four hours later they came back as fast as the oxen could make it, reporting that Indians had attacked and robbed them.

The Williamsses, knowing the Indians who were in the neighborhood, doubted that there had been any attack, but the hunters would neither think of going with them to the Indian camp to investigate nor stay long enough at the fort for any one else to find out. In the slang of the time, they "made a straight coat-tail" for home to start another rumor that the little settlement at Fort Dodge was practically destroyed.

Word was sent to the Indians that they were wanted on the carpet. Next day a group of very docile braves came to the store, and sure enough one Indian wore a white man's shirt. He was challenged and readily handed over the shirt, insisting, however, that the nice white man had given it to him. Then the story came out.

One of the Howards had started to burn the prairie in order to scare out the deer for the rest of the party stationed up the creek. An Indian was watching him from a place of concealment where he had been waiting for a deer to approach. As Howard straightened up he was surprised to see an armed warrior near. Jumping to conclusions, the Missourian yelled to his friends and started running for the wagon. The Indian's deer was gone, so he called to Howard, saying he wanted to talk with him. Howard's only reply was to run faster. The Indian gave chase and soon overtook

him, but the hunter was so frightened that he could not respond to the Indian's greeting or to the friendly outstretched hand, even after the Indian had laid his gun down in token of peaceful intentions.

The friendly Sioux tried to make Howard understand that he wanted to trade, either for a coat or shirt (Howard wore two of one and three of the other), but the hunter could not have understood even the King's English at that point and kept shaking his head, or perhaps, more accurately, just shaking.

Then the Indian tried sign language, drawing his hand from his forehead down the center of his body to his legs, meaning that the white man and he were half and half, inseparable friends. But Howard's interpretation was that the brave meant to split him in two if he refused to obey, so he started to peel off his clothes. The Indian picked up the shirt he wanted and tried to tell the white man that if he would come to his camp he might have furs in exchange, but Howard could not or would not understand, so the Sioux took what he supposed was a gift, shook hands with the hunter, picked up his rifle, and left.

As though that were not enough, the rest of the party were providing sport for other Indians. At Howard's first call the hunters started to run, only

to discover some braves between them and the wagon. The Indians thought this too good a chance for fun, so they ran yelling after the whites. To the Indians it compensated for a spoiled deer hunt; to the Missourians, even in that heyday of the practical joke, it lacked humor. The pranksters soon tired of their sport, however, and allowed the badly frightened hunters to return to Fort Dodge.

When the misunderstanding was explained the Sioux brave handed the shirt over to young Williams, who, with the help of C. C. Carpenter and John Miller, wrapped it, without removing any of the dirt, grease, and smell of skunk acquired while the Indian had it, and sent it down to the Homer post office to be held for Howard. Inclosed was a letter from the boys, saying that, after quite an effort, they had recovered it from the squaw who had taken it.

Naturally all was not comic and all was not intangible danger. By the fall of 1854 there were enough settlers in Fort Dodge to include some undesirables. When the better element felt that a man named Rogers, who occupied one of the old fort cabins, should go elsewhere to live, Rogers calmly refused to vacate. Williams secured papers for a legal eviction. When the constables came, Rogers's answer was to barricade the cabin. The

younger Williams was, of course, among the citizens who were eager to break down the door and enforce the law. When Rogers's wife, a tigress of a woman, was finally subdued, the family possessions were put on a wagon, to be sent south, with their owner vowing vengeance.

But such excitement was rare that first year after the soldiers left. To while away a few hours, James B. Williams began the publication of Fort Dodge's first "newspaper". One copy which survived many years was headed: "Fort Dodge Reporter, 1853 — October — Editor J. B. W. Rates, two coonskins per annum." It was obviously a juvenile project, yet probably the neighbors enjoyed it. Among news items and jokes, appeared the following notice, initialed by a settler who must have been Thomas Holliday, a homesteader down the river.

Estray Bull.

A brindle bull belonging to a subscriber has been missing for some days. Whoever brings said bull to me shall have expenses paid and a watermelon.

T. H.

A watermelon in October would have been no mean reward.

Probably Williams considered the "Reporter" part of the son's education, for this boy of the frontier had no formal schooling after his twelfth

year. Some books there were in the cabin, for the elder Williams was a man who relied on books, albeit partial to sermons and history. His library was large for the time, though probably the bulk of it remained in Muscatine until the family moved to Fort Dodge in March, 1855, when the frontier was considered safe for women and children. Yet James B. Williams was not uneducated in any sense of the word. In later life there was scarcely a subject upon which he was not intelligently informed. He supported the early library associations. In other things he had a training that no school or book could give him. For example, he never carried a watch: the Indians had taught him so successfully to use nature's sundials that he always could tell the time within ten minutes.

When real civilization came, James Blakely Williams could feel that he had had a real part in the conquest of a section of the frontier. The responsibility of the sutler's store was but a prelude to other more serious parts of the frontier drama that young Williams was to play. By modern standards, his boyhood came to an early close. His father devoted most of his time to promotion and to his duties as postmaster after May of 1854. And so James, just turned seventeen, found himself a merchant in a budding town. The Fort Dodge Claim Club was organized in July of that

year, with J. B. Williams as a charter member, young enough, but by frontier standards ready for a man's place.

With the coming of the family in 1855, the year that saw the influx of many settlers, he became an active member of society, his violin contributing to the musical evenings which were looked forward to each week at the Williams' open house. The father and his two sons all fiddled, while Mrs. Williams played the piano.

In October, 1855, James was host at an oyster party, with oysters brought all the way from the Mississippi by the new stage line. His guests included several whose names became household words in State politics. That same year he was also manager of the Christmas ball, when many of the young men adopted the latest fad of wearing a white shirt under another of colored flannel, open at the throat.

When the cornerstone of the first courthouse was laid in 1859, it contained a history of Webster County in the beautiful handwriting of James Williams. He was such an excellent penman that soon after his enlistment in the Union Army he was transferred to the headquarters of Company I, Thirty-second Iowa Volunteer Infantry, so that the records might be well kept. After the war, he opened an abstract office in Fort Dodge. Not

only are his records accurate, but they are as legible and neat as any typewriter could have made them.

The boy who participated in the founding of Fort Dodge devoted the rest of his useful life to the welfare of that community. He lived unpretentiously until August 25, 1903, long regarded as the town's first citizen, not only in the sense of the longest residence but as one who contributed more to the progress of Fort Dodge than some of the better known capitalists and politicians.

HAROLD D. PETERSON

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