

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 Since the soldiers had been withdrawn a band of Sioux had returned to their old hunting grounds.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