

THE PALIMPSEST

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Suel Foster

In 1836 a New Hampshire farm boy packed his few belongings and headed westward. At the age of twenty, having obtained a common school education, he forsook the New England hills for Rochester, New York, where he worked for several years on a farm and as a traveling merchant. Then, in company with his brother, Dr. John H. Foster, he undertook the long river journey to the frontier. After stopping at St. Louis and Rock Island, the brothers finally landed on the western bank of the Mississippi, thirty miles below Davenport, at a settlement of two log cabins bearing the name of Bloomington and now known as Muscatine. There Suel Foster cast his lot and, except for the interval between 1849 and 1851 when he worked in California as a post-office clerk and a census taker, he continued to reside at Muscatine for the following half century.

His first investment was in land. Shortly after their arrival the Foster brothers paid five hundred

dollars for a one-sixth interest in the town site of Bloomington. Then Suel entered the grocery business with J. W. Richman, and this affiliation continued until he left for California. In the meantime he had married Sarah J. Hastings, who came from a prominent pioneer family. His love for the soil was deep and abiding, and upon returning from California he dedicated himself to horticulture. This interest took tangible form in the establishment of the "Fountain Hill Nursery".

The sale of nursery stock, however, was almost incidental, for in horticulture Suel Foster saw aesthetic and religious values that far outranked the economic factor. For him, there was "a moral and refining influence in trees and flowers, not appreciated or understood by many". In his presidential address to the State Horticultural Society in 1873, he said, "We are engaged in a good cause, the planting of fruits and flowers, trees and hedges, to make comfortable and happy homes for those now living in our beautiful State, and for the coming millions who are hereafter to inhabit it. The work of horticulture, the cultivation of trees, fruits, and flowers, is the best and noblest work we can engage in. Man in his purity, was placed in the garden of Eden, and directed by God himself to dress it and keep it." Foster's was also an inquiring mind and much of his time

was devoted to the testing of new varieties in search of replacements for the eastern sorts which had proven ill-adapted to this new country.

He gave much attention to public affairs. In 1839 he enlisted as a dragoon, hoping to see action in the border controversy between Iowa and Missouri, but his troop got only as far as Burlington when the war was forestalled. He was a town trustee in Muscatine, a deacon in the Congregational Church, one of the founders of "The Society of First Settlers of Muscatine County", a member of the Muscatine Academy of Science at a meeting of which he once read a paper on "Design in Creation", an officer in the Farmers' Mutual Fire Insurance Company, a charter member of the Muscatine County Agricultural Society, and an active participant in the County Grange and Farmers Alliance. He was a ready speaker and his services were in demand at agricultural gatherings. The trips he made, without recompense, often involved journeys over well-nigh impassable roads, and prying his stagecoach out of the mud was not an infrequent experience. In all these activities, states Earle D. Ross, "he belonged to the chronic agitators of the Middle Period and supported many causes to the good of the community but often to the detriment of the nursery business."

He brought with him from the East the best of his New England heritage. He was kind-hearted and benevolent, but in moral questions he was outspoken and adamant in support of the right. He advocated the abolition of slavery and worked for the advancement of any cause relating to the promotion of temperance, education, or morality. The very oddity of temperament that won him many friends was emphasized by his appearance. Tall and thin, he was sometimes said to be the second homeliest man in Muscatine. His carelessness about the cut of his clothes or the fit of his collar heightened his individuality. But dress, looks, and mannerisms were readily forgotten by those who worked with him for the advancement of horticulture and agricultural education.

The Iowa State Horticultural Society was formed in 1866. In Foster's view, "our society is a corporation of men, rather than money. Our object is public good, rather than private gain; we love the green tree, the flower, and the fruit, the vine, and the purple cluster, the virgin soil, and green grass for our carpet, and the sun and open air, in place of confinement in office and store-room." A record of the charter members does not exist, but Foster was known to be one of the founders. At the third annual meeting he presented a paper, and from then until the year of his

death in 1886 he took a prominent part in its activities. In 1872 he was president of the society, and later, as a director, he made the annual reports on the fourth district. In 1879 he served as president of the Eastern Iowa Horticultural Society. In both organizations he appeared several times on every program, reading papers, making reports, or taking part in the general discussion. He was well versed in all phases of horticulture, but trees were his special love, and he was an early ardent advocate of tree-planting for aesthetic and utilitarian reasons. His interest this early was directed toward the conservation of natural resources and the preservation of the pristine beauties of the State. He deplored the lack of interest of most farmers in horticulture, saying, "I think we need a horticultural missionary, and a colporteur with horticultural books to go among the farmers and give them instruction."

Foster did much for the material advancement of agriculture in his State. "His name was a household word" among persons interested in promoting "industrial progress in the West", wrote Josiah B. Grinnell, with whom he was intimately associated. His outstanding contribution, however, was in the cause of technical education and research in the field of agriculture. In the *Iowa Farmer and Horticulturist*, Iowa's first agricul-

tural paper, he expressed a modern and prescient view. The farm can not be isolated, he contended, for it is too closely integrated with the world at large, with "markets, commerce, and internal improvements; political affairs, civil and religious; wars at home and abroad; mechanics and all the sciences." Consequently, "study and practice", or "book farming", needed emphasis, and as a means to this end, he proposed that Iowa should establish an industrial school. "Let our sons and daughters be educated for that which brings to them the highest standard of human perfection, *Wisdom and Knowledge and Industry*", he argued, and in his opinion the best method was to "study the properties of the soil, plants and animals and their improvement and use."

To this cause he pledged his influence, and he was, writes Professor Ross, "the earliest and the most persistent champion of industrial education in the state." In his writings and addresses he agitated for the establishment of an agricultural college. The stimulation he received from the examples of other States, and the support of men in Iowa, who also believed in agricultural education, contributed to the success of the movement in 1858.

Two years earlier, a resolution favoring an agricultural college passed the House of Repre-

sentatives but failed in the Senate of Iowa. Governor Ralph P. Lowe, in his inaugural address of 1858, recommended schools in conjunction with experimental farms, for he thought the General Assembly ought to carry out the constitutional provision for encouraging "intellectual, scientific, moral, and agricultural improvement". The Seventh General Assembly passed the bill which Foster had originally helped to draft. It became the organic act of the Iowa State Agricultural College and Model Farm, "to be connected with the entire Agricultural Interests of the State". In recognition of his labors, Foster was named in the act as a member of the original Board of Trustees, in which capacity he served for eight years. With much to do and little to do with, Foster labored unceasingly to get the program started. Buildings had to be erected, the land drained and put under the plow, a faculty hired — and these were but a few of the preparations that were preliminary to the opening of the college.

The first important decision the Board had to face was selecting a location for the college and farm. Proposals had been received from several counties, among them Story and Polk. In his own words, it was Foster's vote that "brought the committee to favor" Ames over Des Moines. There were a few regrets over this choice at the

time, but no one who has seen the college as it is today can doubt the wisdom of Foster's preference. In 1860 there was a movement in the General Assembly to rescind the organic act establishing the college, but the adroit strategy of the friends of the college frustrated this effort.

Foster served as president from 1862 until his retirement from the Board in 1866. During this time another storm gathered when an effort was made to combine the Agricultural College with the University. Foster vigorously opposed this measure, stating that such a plan would weaken the program of technical education. The committee appointed by the legislature to visit the college decided the proposal was impracticable. In a short time the threat disappeared.

The college did not open its doors to students until 1869, three years after Foster's retirement from the Board. But in the decade following the legal establishment of the agricultural school, the Board worked hard to lay a sound foundation for agricultural education. The visiting committee of 1868 lauded the work of the trustees, who "have moved slowly and cautiously . . . and have performed their duties faithfully . . . with an earnest desire to make this institution an object of pride to our people." Foster's interest in the welfare of the college remained unabated. In the ensuing

years, he actively supported policies of which he approved, and when the situation was otherwise, his voice was equally pronounced. For example, in 1873 he stated in his presidential address to the Horticultural Society, "I labored earnestly and as faithfully as I knew how, for many years, to get this institution [the college] started, and whilst we ought to give it much credit for its valuable services in most of its departments, we have been disappointed in the management of its horticultural experiments."

This criticism was partially answered when a separate department of horticulture and forestry was established in the following year, but if horticulturists gloried in the prestige of a departmental status, they were handicapped by the feeble financial support. In 1876, Foster could still say that the college had "almost ignored" horticulture. His advice was sought in relocating the nursery. The department, however, lacked a horticultural laboratory and a propagating house. Indeed, it was said, "not a fourth-class nurseryman in the state but has superior advantages for successful work in this line over our State Agricultural College." Foster became chairman of the committee appointed by the Horticultural Society to discuss this problem with the college Board. In 1878 the report of the Agricultural College still complained

about the inadequate support provided for the department by the State legislature.

Although he continued to show his interest in college affairs, Foster's last years were devoted largely to things horticultural, and his fame spread beyond the boundaries of his own State. He labored to impress upon people the virtues and joys that were to be found in the cultivation of fruits, flowers, and trees. In his addresses and papers before horticultural gatherings he stressed these points. The catalpa tree and the Wealthy apple were favorites whose virtues he never ceased to laud. He became an authority on pears. He was happy in his work because he loved it, and he remained active and useful to the day of his death.

Though unable to attend the sessions of the State Horticultural Society in January, 1886, he sent two papers to be read for him. He died on January 21st while the Society was still in session, and the news brought sadness to the members. Josiah B. Grinnell, speaking to the Society, said, "Truly one of our historic personages has fallen, worn with dutiful toil and crowned with honor". Grinnell then spoke of Foster's work in connection with the State college, and the promotion of horticultural and agricultural interests. "He won the favor of true gentlemen in the ranks of ad-

vanced science and progressive thought." He is "commemorated by ten thousand fields which may sing his praises by the soft breezes in the branches of the arboreal blessings he above all others has brought to our state."

In recognition of his zealous pioneering of the movement for technical education in this State, the Iowa State Horticultural Society, at its annual meeting in 1941, presented the Iowa State College with a placque bearing this inscription.

SUEL FOSTER

1811-1886

PIONEER HORTICULTURALIST

A PRIME MOVER IN THE FOUNDING
OF THE IOWA STATE COLLEGE
AND PRESIDENT OF
FIRST BOARD OF TRUSTEES

A. T. ERWIN