

## Oregon Fever

"Oregon fever" — that adventurous spirit which made men and their families desire to pull up stakes and journey to the new and bountiful Oregon country — became epidemic in Iowa City in the spring of 1843.

Agitation for the settlement of the Columbia River Valley in order to establish a better claim to the vast northwest region had been mounting for several years. Neither the British nor Americans wanted to continue joint occupation much longer. Pioneers in Illinois, Kentucky, Missouri, and Iowa were anxious to move farther west if the government would provide some protection and free land. In the United States Senate a bill introduced by Lewis F. Linn of Missouri was debated almost daily in January and passed on February 3, 1843, by a margin of two votes. It provided for the erection of a line of forts from the Missouri River to the best pass over the mountains and for granting a section of land to any settler who would cultivate it for five years. The courts of the Territory of Iowa were to have jurisdiction over the Oregon country.

In the House of Representatives where the



members were predominantly from the East, there was less interest in emigration to Oregon. The bill was referred to the Committee on Foreign Relations from which John Quincy Adams reported it to the House on February 16th with the recommendation that it should not pass. No further action was taken.

Though this measure was defeated in the House of Representatives, it stimulated much interest. Iowa newspapers were full of information about Oregon — the contest with Great Britain for possession of the country, the long trail across the plains and over the mountains, and the opportunities for making a fortune. Oregon talk could be heard in every neighborhood in eastern Iowa. At Burlington, Muscatine, Iowa City, and other towns, men planned to form companies of emigrants.

On March 3, 1843, citizens of Clear Creek Township in Johnson County met at the home of Archibald Gilliland to consider organizing a company to emigrate to Oregon. John Conn presided at the meeting and called upon the host to outline a plan. After considerable discussion a committee of seven was appointed to draft a constitution and report in two weeks at the home of Jarvis H. Frost. The committee consisted of Archibald Gilliland, John Conn, Bryan Dennis, G. N.



Headly, G. L. Frost, David Switzer, and Asa Calkin.

At noon on Saturday, March 18th, the men who had caught the Oregon fever met according to agreement to hear Asa Calkin, a lawyer of Iowa City, read the "constitution and by-laws for the formation, regulation and government of an 'Oregon Emigration Society'." The document was published in both Iowa City newspapers and is here reprinted from the *Iowa Capital Reporter* of March 25th.

*Constitution of the Oregon Emigration Society  
of Iowa Territory at Iowa City*

"Whereas a number of the citizens of Iowa Territory have it in contemplation to remove to, and settle in the Territory of Oregon, west of the Rocky Mountains, and whereas it is desirable and necessary, in order to secure union and concert of action, insure tranquillity and promote the general welfare, that there should be some fixed and permanent rules for the government of the Society during its preparation for said removal, and also during its march, — We do therefore ordain and establish the following Constitution or form of Government, and do mutually agree with each other, to abide by and support the same.



*Article I.*

"Section 1. The Legislative authority of this Society shall be vested in four Trustees, and twelve Councilmen, to be elected by the male members of this Society, entitled to a vote for civil officers under this Constitution.

"Sec. 2. The Trustees shall be elected on the 18th day of March, eighteen hundred and forty three, at an election to be held for that purpose, at the house of Jarvis H. Frost, (provided there shall be fifteen members present who shall be entitled to vote) who shall hold their offices until the first Monday of May, A. D. 1843, and until others are chosen in their place.

"Sec. 3. The Trustees and Councilmen shall be elected annually on the first Monday in May, and shall hold their offices until others are elected in their place. The first election of civil officers shall be held at Iowa City on the first Monday of May, A. D. 1843 — Provided there shall be at that time forty-five members who are entitled to vote.

"Sec. 4. No person shall be eligible to the office of Trustee or Councilman who shall not at the time of his election have attained the age of twenty-five years and be a member of this society.

"Sec. 5. It shall be the duty of the Trustees and Councilmen to make, ordain and publish all



such by-laws, rules and regulations for the government of the society, as in their opinion, or the opinion of a majority of the whole number, would be expedient and subserve the best interest of and promote the general welfare of the society.

"Sec. 6. They shall keep a journal of all their proceedings and the yeas and nays of the members on any question, shall at the desire of any two members be entered on the journals. The journals shall at all times be open to the examination of any member of the society.

"Sec. 7. Any member of the Trustees and Council shall have the liberty to dissent from and protest against any act or resolution which he may think injurious to the general welfare of the society, or any individual, and have the reasons of such dissent entered on the journals.

"Sec. 8. They shall have power to provide for the incidental expenses of the society by levying a tax, or establishing an admittance fee, to audit all accounts and make appropriation for the same; and no payment shall be made by the Treasurer, except upon the appropriation of the Trustees and Council and order of the President.

"Sec. 9. They shall also, when on the march, meet in council and consult with the military officers of the company and a majority of the whole



shall determine the course to be pursued in any case of emergency.

"Sec. 10. They shall have power to appoint hunting parties from time to time, while on the march (whose duty it shall be to hunt and procure game and provisions for the general use of the society), and to determine their duties and term of service.

"Sec. 11. They shall also have power to impeach, try and for good cause remove from office the President or any other civil officer who is elected by the society.

"Sec. 12. They shall also have a general supervision over and regulation of the Military, and have appellate jurisdiction of any decision of the military officers of the company.

"Sec. 13. They shall also have power to hear, try, and determine all complaints against any member of the society, for dishonesty, immoral, or improper conduct, and to dismiss any member from the society who shall wilfully disobey or violate any of the provisions of this constitution or the by-laws of this society — or be guilty of any immoral, dishonest, or improper conduct, or for other good cause.

"Sec. 14. They shall also use their influence to encourage the emigration with this society of



Ministers of the Gospel, Teachers, Artizans, and Physicians.

"Sec. 15. It shall be the duty of the Trustees especially to examine all applicants for admission into this society, and shall make report of the result of such examination at each regular meeting of the society, and no person shall finally be admitted or rejected except by the vote of the society — and no person of intemperate habits, dishonest or immoral character, shall be entitled to admission into this society.

"Sec. 16. The said Trustees shall also open books for the subscription of stock as provided in the 2d Resolution adopted at a meeting of the citizens held on the 3rd day of March, 1843, at the house of Archibald Gilliland, and until otherwise provided by law, they shall be governed in their duties by said resolution.

### *Article II.*

"Sec. 1. The Executive power shall be vested in one President and two Vice Presidents, who shall be chosen annually on the first Monday in May, by the male members of this society, entitled to vote for civil officers under this constitution, and shall hold their offices for one year and until others are chosen in their places.

"Sec. 2. It shall be the duty of the President



to preside at all public meetings of the society, and at all meetings of the Trustees and Council, and also when on the march, at all meetings of the Trustees and Council with the military officers of the company. He shall not, however, be entitled to a vote upon any question before the meeting, except in case of a tie, when he shall give the casting vote.

"Sec. 3. The President shall have power to nominate, and by and with the consent of the Trustees and Council, to appoint one Recording Secretary who shall be ex-officio clerk of the Board of Trustees and Council, and one Corresponding Secretary who shall be Treasurer ex-officio.

"Sec. 4. It shall be the duty of the 1st Vice President to preside in the absence of the President, and in case of a vacancy of the office of President, he shall fill the office and perform all the duties of the office of President until the vacancy shall be filled.

"Sec. 5. It shall be the duty of the 2d Vice President to preside in the absence of both the President and the 1st Vice President.

"Sec. 6. No person shall be eligible to the office of President or Vice President who shall not have attained the age of 30 years, and be a member of this society at the time of his election.



*Article III.*

"Sec. 1. The Military authority of this society shall be vested in a Captain, two Lieutenants, and three Sergeants, who shall be elected by the male members of this society between the ages of forty-five and seventeen years, whose duties it shall be to drill and exercise the Company in Military tactics and who shall be elected in the manner provided by law.

"Sec. 2. Every able bodied male member of this society between the ages of forty-five and seventeen years, shall be disciplined, shall arm and equip themselves, and be liable to do military duty under the rules and regulations provided by law, except the civil officers while on the march.

*Article IV.*

"Sec. 1. Every male member of this society over the age of seventeen years shall be entitled to vote for the election of the civil officers of this society.

"Sec. 2. In case of a vacancy from any cause whatever, in any of the civil offices, there shall be an election held to fill the vacancy at such time and place as shall be designated by the President, who shall give twenty days previous public notice of the time and place of holding such election and of the office to be filled, by



publication in one or more of the public newspapers printed in Iowa City.

"Sec. 3. In case of vacancy in the office of, or in the absence of the President, the 1st Vice President shall give the requisite notices for such election, and in case of the absence of both the President and first Vice President, then the said notice shall be given by the 2d Vice President.

#### Article V.

"Sec. 1. No person shall be entitled to become a member of this society who shall not have attained the age of twenty-one years, unless he shall, at the time of making his application, present to the Trustees the written consent of his parents or guardian.

"Sec. 2. No persons of *intemperate* or *immoral* habits or principles shall under any circumstances, be admitted as members of this society.

"Sec. 3. No Black or Mullattoe persons shall in any case, or under any circumstances whatever, be admitted into this society or permitted to emigrate with it.

#### Article VI.

"Sec. 1. The President, Vice Presidents, Trustees, Councilmen, and other civil officers shall be exempt from performing actual military service on the march. They shall, however, fully



arm and equip themselves, and when on the march, in any case of emergency, shall remain with and protect the families and baggage.

*Article VII.*

"This Constitution may be altered or amended at any time, twenty days previous notice being given by the President, by publication in one or more of the public newspapers printed in Iowa City of the time and place of the meeting of the members of this society for that purpose — Provided, That two-thirds of all the members present shall concur therein."

According to the newspaper this constitution "was unanimously adopted, and a large number of citizens present subscribed their names to the same." The society then proceeded to elect four Trustees. Asa Calkin, David Switzer, Israel L. Clark, and J. L. Frost were unanimously chosen and Calkin was requested to deliver a public address before the society at its next meeting, to be held in Iowa City on the first Monday in May.

By May, however, the Oregon fever seemed to have abated, for the Iowa City newspapers reported no more activities of the emigration society. Perhaps tales of hardship and Indian hostility had cooled the ardor of the people. Spring work on the farms may have occupied all their atten-



tion. The failure of Congress to pass the Oregon bill with its generous homestead provisions probably discouraged most of the prospective emigrants. Asa Calkin, David Switzer, and others became active in organizing the Iowa City Manufacturing Company which indicated their intention to remain in the community. A few of the more venturesome families of Johnson County may have joined Burlington, Muscatine, or other companies which set out by covered wagon in May for the enchanting land beyond the Rockies.

REEVES HALL