

The Iowa Band

Tuesday evenings were prayer meeting time for a little group of students at the Andover Theological Seminary in the spring of 1843. They had decided to meet in the library. To be sure the rules forbade lights in this building — a fire prevention measure — but no matter, “we can pray in the dark”, said one of the young men. So there in the dim room, smelling faintly of leather and dust, the little group prayed for guidance. They had heard the command, “Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel”, but where were they to begin?

Already the minds of some had turned to the West. Should they go to States like Ohio and Illinois, already comparatively well settled, to some slave State like Missouri, or out beyond? Finally, after a day of fasting and prayer, one of the group — Daniel Lane by name — said to a friend: “Well, I am going to Iowa: whether any one else goes or not, I am going.” One by one others of the group came to the same decision. Thus the “Iowa Band” was formed. It contained a dozen names — all college trained men, soon to complete the course at the theological seminary. Most of them were natives of New England and only one, Edwin B. Turner, of Monticello, Illinois, had lived in the West.

At this time the Territory of Iowa was not quite

five years old. It had a population of between sixty and seventy thousand, a ragged, ever-widening fringe west of the Mississippi River. (Its people were vigorous, ambitious, often turbulent, adrift from their spiritual moorings. Abner Kneeland was attempting to found a colony of infidels near Farmington.) Mormonism threatened to sweep across the Mississippi River. It was the season for planting.

Those already in the field were calling for assistance. Best known of these pioneers, perhaps, was Asa Turner, a Congregational home missionary, who had preached the first Congregational sermon in Iowa at Fort Madison in 1836. When he heard of the prospective recruits, Reverend Turner was skeptical. "I had so often heard", he wrote afterwards, "of ministers, boxed and marked 'for Iowa' lost on the road, that I had lost pretty much all faith in spiritual transportation companies."

But the members of the Iowa Band were in earnest. They asked all sorts of questions about Iowa — its climate, the ague, the food, the clothing, and life there in general. The change of climate from New England to Iowa, Turner said, was "about as great as going from Andover to Lowell." As to clothing, he wrote to one of the prospective ministers: "Get clothes, firm, durable, something that will go through the hazel brush without tearing. Don't be afraid of a good, hard hand, or of a tanned face." But he added at the end of one of his letters, "it's no use to answer any more questions, for

I never expect to see one of you west of the Mississippi river as long as I live."

Evidently some of the young theologians had another problem; they asked Reverend Turner about bringing a wife to Iowa, and he replied: "Get wives of the old Puritan stamp, such as honored the distaff and the loom, those who can pail a cow and churn the butter and be proud of a jean dress or a checked apron."

The Band agreed to meet at the Delavan House, Albany, New York, on the third of October, 1843. When the time came eight of the twelve were on hand — Daniel Lane, Alden B. Robbins, Harvey Adams, William Salter, Edwin B. Turner, Benjamin A. Spaulding, Ebenezer Alden, Jr., and Ephraim Adams. Two of these — Daniel Lane and Alden B. Robbins — brought their brides with them. Horace Hutchinson was delayed for a day but soon overtook the company. Erastus Ripley, who remained behind to assist at the seminary, and James J. Hill, who was detained by home duties, reached Iowa the following spring. Only W. B. Hammond failed to join the Band in Iowa, and he was prevented because of ill health.

The trip was made by rail, by lake steamer, and then by stage or covered wagon across the prairies of Illinois to the Mississippi. Early in November the Band assembled at Denmark, Iowa Territory. There were many things to decide, many things to do. Two members of the Band had been ordained in

New England. On the fifth of November, 1843, seven were ordained by the Denmark Congregational Association, organized only two days earlier. The services were held in the long, plain meeting house at Denmark. The sermon was by J. A. Reed, the ordaining prayer by Asa Turner, the charge by C. Burnham, and the right hand of fellowship by Reuben Gaylord.

A day or two before the ordination service, the Iowa Band had met in Reverend Turner's study to decide where each was to locate. After a prayer, Asa Turner and Reuben Gaylord displayed a map of Iowa, described the needs of the various places, and left the younger men to decide. This was apparently not a difficult problem. It was agreed that the two married men should have the more settled locations. Daniel Lane went to Keosauqua and A. B. Robbins to Bloomington — now Muscatine — then a "smart town" of some four hundred inhabitants. Horace Hutchinson preferred Burlington, and Harvey Adams decided upon Farmington. Benjamin A. Spaulding saw possibilities in the New Purchase, although the living was rough there. William Salter and Edwin B. Turner chose Jackson and Jones counties, Salter locating at Maquoketa and Turner at Cascade.

Two important places and two men remained. Neither having a preference, they agreed to let Reverend Turner decide. He assigned Ebenezer Alden to Solon and Ephraim Adams to Mount

Pleasant. And so on Monday, November 6, 1843, nine members of the Iowa Band scattered to their posts. Never again did all these men meet together at one place. (In the spring of 1844, James J. Hill took up his work at Garnavillo in Clayton County and Erastus Ripley located at Bentonsport, the third in Van Buren County.

One of the first problems to be decided was the question — should the newly organized churches be Congregational or Presbyterian? The men had been sent out under the auspices of the American Home Missionary Society, supported largely by the Congregational and New School Presbyterian churches in the East. They were free to establish churches of either denomination. It happened, however, that in the course of a few months all the members of the Band were preaching in churches organized under the Congregational polity.

A picture of the early experiences of these home missionaries may be painted by culling excerpts from a diary kept by Ephraim Adams while on a tour in the summer of 1844. It begins at Keosauqua. "*July 16, 1844.* —Here are Brother Lane and wife in their little home with two rooms. They have a chair or two now, and a table; but they say they set up housekeeping without either, using, instead, old boxes. They have a church of a few members, a village of promise, and the people are kind. . . . The church is organized as Presbyterian; but its members are not all of that way of thinking.

Brother Lane is coming to be very decided that Congregationalism is the true Bible way; is really quite conscientious about it. A majority are with him in opinion. How things will turn out, I can't tell."

In the diary for July twenty-third he wrote: "This day's ride on my faithful pony, for I've forgotten to say that I now own one — price forty-five dollars — has brought me to Tipton, county-seat of Cedar County. Here found Brother Alden. He has a study, a little ground room right on the street, in a 'lean-to' of a store, over which lives the family. Horses stand around, these hot days, kicking the flies; and when he is out the pigs run in, unless he is careful to shut the door. Poor place, I should think, for writing sermons. Partition so thin that all the store talk, especially when the doors are open, is plainly heard.

"It being Tuesday evening, we of course wished to remember the Tuesday evening prayer-meeting, but wanted a more private place for it: so went out in search of one. Came to a two-story log building, used for jail which happened to be empty, with the doors open. Went up by an outside stairway to the upper room, and there, with the moon sailing over the prairies, had our meeting; prayed for each other, for the brethren, for Iowa, for home. Not exactly like the old Andover meetings in the library, but something like them."

Four days later he was at Dubuque, of which he made the following record: "Am up now as far as

Dubuque. Here is where really the first white man crossed the river to dwell. . . . The place takes his name; and the whole region is honeycombed with miner's diggings. . . . Some say that if all the labor expended in digging for lead had been expended on the surface of the ground, about six inches deep, the people generally would be better off. . . . Brother Holbrook preaches here, and has, I am told, great influence. He is away now at the East to get funds towards repairing the church. It needs it; for it is a stone building with bare, unplastered walls inside. Yet it is the only house of worship built expressly for this object that we have in the Territory."

To tell the story of each of these eleven men and their work during the years which followed would fill many pages. A few glimpses must suffice. Horace Hutchinson died of tuberculosis at Burlington, his first pastorate, in the spring of 1846, at the age of twenty-nine. His place was taken by William Salter, who died there on August 15, 1910 — the last surviving member of the Band.

During the years between, the members of the Band labored, preached, and died. B. A. Spaulding was another victim of tuberculosis, dying at Ottumwa in 1867 at the age of fifty-two. Ephraim Adams preached a year at Mount Pleasant, spent twelve years at Davenport, another fifteen years at Decorah, six more at Eldora, and then retired, dying at Waterloo in 1907 at the age of eighty-nine — the

oldest of the Band. He was one of the founders of Iowa College and a life long member of its board of trustees. James J. Hill is said to have founded seven churches. He died at Fayette in 1870.

Alden B. Robbins went to Muscatine when he came to Iowa in 1843 and remained there until his death on December 27, 1896, although he resigned his pastorate in 1891. Robbins, a graduate of Amherst College, was described as having clear blue eyes, a Roman nose, and wavy hair which turned white at forty. His compensation from the church varied from \$150 a year in 1845 and \$500 in 1849 to \$1200 in 1857 and \$1800 in 1868, the highest salary he received. Like the other members of the Band, Robbins was a staunch supporter of temperance and a pronounced anti-slavery leader. Indeed, his church was known as the "Uncle Tom's Cabin Church".

All sorts of problems came before these frontier churches — some trivial, others of national importance. In 1856, for example, the Muscatine church tried one of its members who was charged with running a ferry on the Sabbath. Due to his confession and repentance he was let off with "suspension from the privileges of church fellowship for one week." How great was this punishment is not clear, but settlers waiting to cross into Iowa probably regretted the congregation's action.

In addition to his regular pastoral work, William Salter, one of the best loved and most influential

members of the Band, found time to write a number of books and articles, and many of his sermons were printed. Among the best known of his more than forty publications are his *Life of James W. Grimes*; *Sixty Years and Other Discourses*; and *Iowa, the First Free State in the Louisiana Purchase*.

It was not without significance, perhaps, that the prayer meetings which led to the coming of the Iowa Band were held in a library. To all these men religion and education went hand in hand. "If each one of us can only plant one good permanent church, and all together build a college, what a work that would be!" said a member of the Band as they planned their work in the West. When they reached Iowa they found that their second goal was already being discussed. The first meeting of those interested was held at Denmark, on March 12, 1844. It was agreed that a committee should be appointed to select a site, where a suitable tract of land could be secured. Later the surplus was to be sold to add to the endowment of the institution. At the second meeting, held a month later, the Iowa College Association was formed and Reverend Asa Turner was sent east to secure funds. The delegates, all poor men, pledged their own scanty funds for his expenses. But the eastern philanthropists were not willing to put their money into a "paper college", and the agent returned empty-handed.

In spite of this disappointment, the Iowa College Association went ahead. By 1846 they had agreed

that the college should be located at Davenport. At one of the meetings of the Association about this time, James J. Hill laid a silver dollar on the table and said, "I give one dollar for the founding of a Christian College in Iowa. Appoint your trustees to care for that dollar." Other members of the Association added their contributions. Soon afterward Iowa College was incorporated and a board of trustees selected. One-third of this board of fifteen members were from the Iowa Band — Daniel Lane, Harvey Adams, A. B. Robbins, Ebenezer Alden, and Ephraim Adams.

The Association planned to "erect a building, which shall be a permanent college building in good taste, and which, when enclosed, shall not exceed in cost the sum of two thousand dollars." As might be expected — considering this reservation — the first building was small, only thirty-six by fifty-five feet.

In November, 1848, Iowa College opened its doors. Reverend Erastus Ripley was professor of languages, at a salary of five hundred dollars a year. The first ten years were lean and full of tribulations. The first site was broken up by the projection of one of the city streets and a second site suffered the same fate. One of the officials proved unfaithful. It was felt that the atmosphere of the river towns was not favorable for a Christian college. Moreover, the population was moving westward. The trustees considered all these factors and decided to

move the college inland if a more suitable location could be found.

West of Davenport was the town of Grinnell, like old Denmark a center of New England ideals. It was the seat of Grinnell University, another struggling little college with high purpose and limited resources. Consolidation was not unknown even then, and in 1859 the trustees agreed to combine the two institutions at Grinnell. The fruit of this consolidation is Grinnell College.

The story of the Iowa Band would be incomplete without some tribute to the wives, cultured and devout women, upon whom the burden of this pioneer preaching fell fully as heavily as on the men. It was for them to make a home, where the amenities of life were preserved, in a one or two-room cabin, the furniture made chiefly of rough boxes; to rear families of their own; to gather the roaming children into the Sunday school; to encourage church attendance; to comfort those in sorrow; to help the sick and needy.

It was one of the wives who, in preparation for the meeting of the Association in her town, borrowed a farm wagon, drove out into the country to find straw to fill the ticks which were placed in bedroom, parlor, and entry to accommodate guests from away. It was this same young woman — she died at the age of twenty-eight — who said in connection with her gift to Iowa College, "Somebody must be built into these foundations."

It is in part due to these deeply religious, educated, cultured, courageous men and women that the Iowa of to-day belongs in the "Bible belt" and is at the same time the Commonwealth with the lowest per cent of illiteracy in the United States. "Where there is no vision, the people perish". The Iowa Band had vision.

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