

## The Hub of Politics

On April 20, 1836, the first Territory of Wisconsin — an empire in extent, including the Iowa country — was organized. During the following summer a count of inhabitants revealed that nearly half the population of Wisconsin lived west of the Mississippi, and of these approximately two-thirds were in Des Moines County of which Burlington was the metropolis. Southern Iowa was represented by ten members in the first Territorial legislature which met at Belmont in October, 1836. The next year, however, all Burlington exulted when it learned that it was to become the second legislative capital of the Territory. This, the village believed, was a greater honor than being merely one of the twenty-four post offices west of the river.

While lawmakers were on their way to Burlington on horseback and by steamboat early in November, 1837, the new capital was vibrating with preparation and expectancy. Thomas Cooper from Kentucky built a double-roomed house and a dry goods store. Another man paid a license to sell groceries and liquors. Hotels, rooming-houses, taverns, stores, and stables were getting

ready to welcome legislators, lobbyists, visitors, and politicians.

Farflung complaints of legislators over the bed and board at Belmont, where the first legislature had met, had not yet subsided. "Empty stomachs", ran a sour remark, "make clear heads, but not good laws. The Lord deliver us from a set of hungry Legislators."

Burlington promised to be more hospitable and more generous. Hotels were larger and boarding houses better, where excellent entertainment was promised for "man and horse". The hotels of Benson and Miller and of H. E. Dickinson were to be ready. Then, too, there was the "Exchange", always open at proper hours, "where a very civil and attentive host is on the *qui vive* for custom, and where a clean tumbler, fresh water, and an excellent glass, courteously served, may be had; and more — saddle of venison, a prairie chicken, a wild goose, duck, fish, &c. &c., prepared 'according to order' by a worthy disciple of that prince of cuisines, Monsieur Ude."

Never had the frontier village been so crowded. Visitors, office-seekers, legislators, immigrants, traders, and farmers tramped over the clayey streets which bounded the few squares along the river. "We put up at Mrs. Parrott's", wrote one visitor, "and were put in a room filled with some

half dozen beds, and two to a bed, and some times more." One wonders whether Burlington was then conscious of the blighting national panic of 1837.

Jeremiah Smith, an enterprising citizen, had hurried to completion a rude structure where the lawmakers were to convene. When the Governor, Colonel Henry Dodge, arrived on November 2nd the capitol was ready. "Instead of being crowded around a small table as heretofore," pointed out one observer, "each member is provided with a desk — a very great improvement, all will agree." On the next day the House was to be opened with a cotillion for all those fond of "fun, frolic, and flash". Tickets were to be on sale at stores and at the "Bar of the Exchange Coffee House."

Fall weather receded as a long, cold winter set in. A late steamer on December 13th brought the news of Elijah P. Lovejoy's murder on the previous November 7th — tidings greeted by a cheer from the crowd assembled at the wharf. Delegations came to the capital to ask for roads, county lines, town sites, county seats, and ferries. On the evening of December 13th a fire completely destroyed Jeremiah Smith's capitol and the House then met in the store of Weber and Renny.

It was a laborious session for Governor Dodge,

who, as reported by a friendly observer, could on occasion give a sample of "clean Anglo-Saxon swearing." One delegation from a straggling settlement about sixty miles to the north came with a petition for roads, bridges, and a post office. The Governor was surprised when, in answer to his question how many people there were in that neighborhood, he was told there were about 1500. The amazement of the other delegates was met by the later explanation that the Governor had not asked what color the people were!

Governor Dodge and the lawmakers left the capital on the adjournment of the legislature in January, 1838. Before the next assembly met, the Territory of Iowa had been separated from Wisconsin and a new Governor had come to rule the frontier settlements west of the Mississippi. Political events moved rapidly, keeping pace with the growth of population.

In August, 1838, Robert Lucas, the new Governor from Ohio, accompanied by his young secretary, Theodore S. Parvin, was travelling upstream toward Burlington. The secretary was bringing a sum of money and a wardrobe. His cargo of fifty law books and two hundred and fifty other volumes he valued at fully \$500. When their steamboat, the *Tempest*, docked at the Burlington wharf on August 8th a large crowd had gathered

to welcome the Governor. Parvin was greeted by two lawyers who had been his classmates at a law college in the East. But more eyes followed the Governor as he proceeded to his quarters at the Burlington House.

A committee wished to honor him with a public dinner but the Governor plead that "official duties of high importance" required him to make a tour of inspection. A few days later the *Knickerbocker* with Lucas and Parvin on board departed for Dubuque. On their return early in September about a hundred persons sat down to a public dinner where the Governor made a "very handsome speech". The secretary's toast, not worse, better, or longer than the many others, was: "Iowa Territory — the youngest *Daughter* of our common *Parent*, fast ripening into *Woman-hood*, she will soon be ready for *Union*."

A heavy snowfall early in November added to the hardships of travel to Burlington. Cold weather set in to form so much ice that neither ferries nor steamboats dared to make their trips. No mails could cross the river. The isolation of Burlington could, however, be forgotten at a merry party at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Lockwood. "There were in attendance", wrote an unmarried man of twenty-one, "about 20 couple. Gentlemen & their Wives. 1 Single Lady and about 10 or

more Single Gentlemen. It was a fine Collection & time passed off very pleasantly as much so as could be expected during the absence of the fair (single) sex."

Ice and snow were soon dispelled by down-pours of rain. Muddy boots tramped on the floors of the Methodist Zion Church where the legislators assembled on November 12, 1838. One member a few days before had been shot and killed in a street brawl — a tragedy which provoked a severe reproof in the message of Governor Lucas to the lawmakers.

This session, in the shelter of a church, was not, however, marked by reverent calm. The halls resounded with the bitter quarrel between Secretary Conway and the legislators over the necessity of pen knives. Partisan prejudice, lengthy vetoes, sharp issues over appropriations, and struggles over appointments brought out debates marked by heat as well as light. The final day furnished both spectacle and entertainment to a large crowd including ladies. "Legislature adjourned in confusion", recorded young Parvin's diary. "All drunk with few exceptions."

At the legislative sessions the social barometer of Burlington rose high and its business life became animated. Its hotel keepers and the white-aproned hosts with stick pins could not rejoice

when the Governor laid the corner of the new capitol at Iowa City. Of the twenty-six House members meeting at Burlington in 1840, seventeen were farmers and the others lawyers, mechanics, a miner, and a doctor. Seven members of the legislature were natives of Kentucky and four of Ohio. The westernmost State furnishing a member was Illinois. In November the Council removed from the basement story of the Methodist Church to the Catholic Church, "a fine spacious hall" where young Father Mazzuchelli preached on Sundays.

Either bad tobacco or respect for lady visitors prompted the House resolution that "no person be allowed to smoke a pipe or cigars in this hall". After the campaign of 1840 the speaker and the chief clerk gave a "Hard Cider Treat of Apples". One member, complained a visitor, abandoned his duties to frequent the grog-shops. Another on-looker at the House sessions noted that most of the members were absent and playing billiards.

One day occurred the annual debate over the question of letting the public printing to the Democratic editor or to his Whig rival, James G. Edwards. A Democratic member described himself as an "honest good man and didn't never vote for politic capital." Nor was he opposing Edwards on "politic grounds". Ripples rose to roars of laughter when this legislator hastened to add

that he had no personal dislike of Mr. Edwards and "thought very well of his wife". Such scenes eased the strains in debates that sometimes tested the tempers of early lawmakers.

Politics, like religion, was a survival of inheritance among the pioneers of Burlington rather than a product of reasoned thought. The settlers brought their Democratic and Whig allegiance along with their household goods and family traditions. In spirited campaigns they found an outlet for emotion comparable to the patriotic fervor that leads men to war. Lads who marched and sang in the log cabin and hard cider campaign of 1840 might serve in the Mexican War a few years later. Others might be destined to wear the blue uniform of 1861.

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