

The Midnight Ride of Philip Clark

In imagination one may picture the small group of pioneer settlers who came together at Napoleon on the first day of May to see the capital commissioners and, perhaps, witness the locating of the seat of government. May 1, 1839, was probably a normal Iowa spring day, with clear skies and soft variable breezes from the east and south. Green prairies and budding oaks bespoke the rebirth of living things and gave to the scene an atmosphere of expectancy.

What took place at the town of Napoleon on the appointed day is briefly recorded in the commissioners' *Journal of the Proceedings* in these words: "May 1st, 1839. Chauncey Swan, one of the commissioners appointed under the act of the Legislative Assembly of Iowa entitled 'An Act to locate the Seat of Government and for other purposes,' met at the town of Napoleon in the county of Johnson this day at 9 o'clock A. M. A quorum not being present, other commissioners were sent for. 11 o'clock P. M. John Ronalds, another one of the Commissioners appeared and was qualified after which the board adjourned until tomorrow morning 10 o'clock."

Evidently this official chronicle does not contain the whole story: it is far too brief and too prosaic. One suspects that there was a bit of drama in the scene at Napoleon that day. What happened between nine in the morning and eleven at night? Where was John Ronalds? Why was he delayed? Fortunately tradition supplies the details and illuminates the story.

The morning passed quietly as the pioneer settlers awaited the arrival of John Ronalds and Robert Ralston. As the sun slowly approached the meridian the crowd became uneasy. As they milled around and in-and-out of the trading house the settlers began to wonder what would happen if the other commissioners failed to arrive on the first day of May. Would their selection of a site be valid if they should meet a day or two later?

Upon being questioned, Chauncey Swan told the crowd that the commissioners, or a majority of them, were definitely required by law to meet at the town of Napoleon on the *first* day of May; and he suggested that some one be sent to Louisa County to bring John Ronalds who lived on the banks of the Iowa River about thirty-five miles from Napoleon. Robert Ralston who resided in Des Moines County could not possibly be reached in so short a time. Sharing the anxiety of the settlers, Chauncey Swan called for a volunteer to

make the trip on horseback to the home of John Ronalds. Philip Clark, a first settler, stepped to the front and offered to undertake the somewhat hazardous journey. The crowd cheered as he mounted his horse and galloped away.

And so the crowd at Napoleon waited . . . waited . . . waited . . . through the long hours of the afternoon; while Philip Clark on his way southeast was *riding, riding, riding* through the wilderness, and *galloping, galloping, galloping* across the prairies.

As the hour of midnight approached the moments became more and more tense. Strong men seemed to lose their accustomed patience. The hands of Chauncey Swan's watch were soon to meet on the dial at the figure 12. Every little while some one would step outside the trading house to listen. The last few minutes before twelve o'clock seemed to stretch into hours. Finally out of the darkness came the sound of thudding hoofs. The crowd shouted with joy. The seat of government was saved for Johnson County.

As Philip Clark and John Ronalds dismounted in front of the trading house, Chauncey Swan looked at his watch and calmly observed that there was still time enough before midnight for Justice of the Peace Robert Walker to administer the required oath to the commissioners.

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