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Early History of Emmetsburg

(George B. McCarty, a pioneer settler of Emmetsburg, recorded his memories of the founding of the city in 1908. His son, Dwight G. McCarty, continues the Emmetsburg story through his own recollections. THE EDITOR.)

About August 3, 1869, at McGregor, Iowa, I, in company with Ben Johnson and David Drun-
ned, Jr., hired M. A. Crawford with his team, to take us on a trip to the western part of Iowa.

We traveled via Calmar and Charles City to Mason City, following the line of the McGregor & Missouri River Railway (now the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railway) which that year had begun building its line west from Calmar.

At Mason City we visited with W. H. Lyttle and Gil Church (both Clayton County men) who had started a small private bank — the Mason City Bank. Lyttle showed us several lots in the city, then a town of probably 300 inhabitants, on the main street, ranging in price from \$150 to \$200. He also showed us a quarter section of nice land two miles southwest of the city at \$5 an acre.

From Mason City we came to Clear Lake and remained there one day, expecting to do some

fishing. It was a windy, rough day and we did not dare venture out in either of the so-called rowboats (board punts) of which Clear Lake (no town) boasted.

Because of the weather and rains (1869 was a very wet year) we could not cross Hancock County. We had to go north to Northwood, crossed into Minnesota, and thence traveled south via Buffalo Center — no settlement but a grove of trees by a small lake — to Algona. On this trip we crossed a level strip of country (no houses in sight) and with night coming on we pitched our tent and tethered our horses on a small knoll.

During the night there was a terrible rainstorm and lightning, such as I have never seen before or since. In the morning we found the ground covered with water in all directions. We left about noon and drove almost continually in water up to the hubs of our wagon and, sometimes even on the level prairie, up to the wagon box. Just before sundown we found some hills and located a good camping ground.

Algona

Reaching Algona, we camped on a knoll west of where the courthouse now stands. While there we met W. H. Ingham, Judge Call, Abraham Call, and a few others. Algona was a village of perhaps 200 people and everyone was talking of the city's prospects when the railroad came. Judge

Call said "With our present prospect of a railroad and of being a great city I would not like to sell a town lot for less than \$100."

After another rain which nearly washed out from under us the hill on which we were encamped, we started westward and made the settlement on Lotts Creek where five settlers had just completed quite comfortable sod houses. The next day we plodded westward and crossed into Palo Alto County and later in the day first beheld Medium Lake at a point north of the Michael Jackman home. When we passed the house the children came out and stood in a row (like an old-fashioned spelling class) the largest at the head and ranging down to one just able to stand alone. We followed the east shore of the lake to where Emmetsburg now stands and thence northwesterly. Near where the Scott Ormsby home now stands we came across three small children herding some cows. We asked them, "Where is Emmetsburg?"

One, a girl, replied, "You are there now, sir."

"Yes, but where is the town?"

"Right here is where it is."

"But we do not see any town."

"Sure. See that stake in the grass and that one there, that is Emmetsburg."

"But where is the hotel?"

"Oh, it's Coonan's you want. It's over there beyond the hill."

So over the hill and just as the sun was setting we saw Coonan's and found our old friend Al Jones. We made camp and remained four or five days before starting down the Des Moines River, following the east side. Rains had swollen the river so it was impossible to cross. On this trip from Clear Lake to the Des Moines River, there were wild duck, geese, sandhill cranes, and prairie chickens without number. It seemed as though the whole country was alive with them, and Medium Lake — it was a sight to behold.

From Emmetsburg we followed the Des Moines to near Rolfe, Pocahontas County, where we found a bridge and crossed the river. We hoped to make our way to Sioux City but found the roads and streams impassable. So we followed the river to Fort Dodge, the terminus of the Dubuque & Sioux City Railroad (Illinois Central). From Fort Dodge we traveled east to Bach Grove P. O., stopping three days because of rain. We crossed the Boone River at the Middleton Bridge and followed the east bank to Poney Creek which we could not cross. Five miles up creek a farmer ferried us over with his wagon box. Next day we reached Webster City and followed the Dubuque & Sioux City Railroad track as far as Independence. From there we returned to McGregor, having been gone about a month on the trip.

I decided to locate at Emmetsburg but remained in McGregor until after the election to vote and

work for my townsman, Samuel Merrill, who was running for governor of Iowa.

Heading for Emmetsburg

In October 1869, Al Jones and I started out, going from McGregor via boat to Dubuque and then on to Fort Dodge via railroad. At Fort Dodge we hired a team to haul the stock of goods which Al Jones had purchased to start a store at Emmetsburg. We had three teams loaded with lumber and goods and were three days getting through.

Arriving at Emmetsburg on October 20, 1869, after dark, we stacked and covered our goods. Next morning we began looking for a carpenter and found there were only two in the county. Thos. C. Davis was building a small house for Reverend B. C. Hammond on his homestead, and W. H. Cover was somewhere in the southeast part of the county putting up a shanty. Jones had a saw and hatchet; I had a hammer and jackknife. With this supply of tools we commenced a building, 16x20 feet, with the lumber we had brought. As we expected to get native lumber at the sawmill, we had brought only a small amount of dimension lumber. Finding no native lumber, we used what we had for temporary sills and plates and a few rafters. By night we had the framework up and not having any shingles and only a small amount of boards, we used them sparingly. But we did have a large roll of building paper

which covered a multitude of omissions and quite a pile of goods. The heavens smiled upon us as no rain fell. The second day, using what lumber and building paper we had, the building was well enclosed and roofed in.

In the fall of 1868, Thos. C. Davis settled at Emmetsburg, bringing with him part of an old sawmill. He set it up, built a brush dam, got the mill started, and sawed a few logs for the settlers. In June of 1869, a big rain and high water washed out the dam. It was the Davis mill we had counted on for our native lumber.

On the third day after we arrived it rained. The fourth day I started for Fort Dodge with Jo Smith, Culver, and Clark, three homesteaders who had arrived recently in the county and had horse teams. It was a damp and rainy morning when we started but about five miles on our way the wind suddenly turned to the northwest and blew a gale. I never saw so cold a day. We walked nearly all the time and nearly froze. We made Humboldt about 9 o'clock that night.

We started out the next morning and reached Fort Dodge at noon, the ice in the sloughs carrying the weight of horses and wagons. Loading up the next day, we started the return trip. As the weather was some warmer, the ice would break and our wagons would become stalled. For three days we worked, unloading and reloading our loads, often in water and ice far above our knees.

We finally reached Emmetsburg on the night of the fifth day.

The town of Emmetsburg, at this time, consisted of Coonan's farmhouse, a brick structure, 16x24, and a small wood addition. The brick part was twelve feet high, giving an attic chamber, one room, and what Mrs. Coonan called "the landing," a small space at the head of the stairs, partitioned off by itself. The attic chamber was commonly known as the "school section." It contained four beds, one in each corner, and the balance of the floor space was occupied by the 10 to 30 other male guests and members of the family and when all the floor space, including that under the beds was fully taken, guests had to "sit it out" downstairs.

The lower story was divided into a kitchen (very small), a small bedroom, and a living room. Cooking usually was done in the living room. The small bedroom was occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Coonan, but when women were there Mrs. Coonan sent Martin to the "Section." I boarded at Coonan's for nearly two months and then Al Jones and I slept in the old sawmill. The mill building was owned by Thos. C. Davis and W. G. Pond. Davis had partitioned off a room of about 12 or 14 feet square. The partition was made by setting poles upright, nailing other poles and a few pieces of slab to these uprights, then setting another row of poles, and filling in between with hay. Davis,

his wife, and two small children lived in that room and Pond, a single man, boarded with them. Sometimes when it was stormy, Al Jones and I would camp in the store building.

Aside from the Coonan house and the old mill building already described, there were three other buildings: N. D. Bearss had built a small shed, 10x12, and about six feet high on one side and seven feet on the other. He had set some old slabs and poles in the ground, tacked on tar paper, and then banked up the outside with hay. The roof was made with poles and hay. In this he had about a wheelbarrow full of goods, some pipes, smoking tobacco, and the like. He was alone and lived in the shed. M. D. Daniels had a one story building, about 12x14, which was made entirely of native lumber. Daniels, his wife, and two children lived in it. He was a blacksmith and his shop was made by standing poles on end and nailing slabs to them. The store building put up by Jones and me in October 1869, constituted all the buildings. During the fall and winter of 1869 and 1870 the regular inhabitants of Emmetsburg were:

Coonan, his wife, and five boys;
T. C. Davis, his wife, and two children;
W. G. Pond;
N. D. Bearss;
M. D. Daniels, his wife, and two children;
Al Jones;

W. H. Shea; and
George B. McCarty.

James P. White was county treasurer. He came to town almost every day and, when the weather was bad, would stay overnight. In addition to the above, there were a number of others who stayed a few weeks: M. E. Griffin, now a banker at Spencer; G. R. Badgerow, now a postmaster at Sioux City; William Starr of Monticello, Iowa; and others. Scarcely a day or night passed that there were not travelers at Coonan's. I remember one night there were forty-eight persons present and all had accommodations such as they were. Shelter on a stormy January night meant a great deal.

In the latter part of February 1870, I started to Fort Dodge with two teamsters and teams for lumber to build an office. There had been quite a heavy snow, and sledding was fair. From Humboldt we traveled on Des Moines River ice. The night we got to Fort Dodge it began to thaw. It also rained and so there was considerable water on the ice as we made the return trip up the river to Humboldt. We stopped at Charles Sherman's, five miles north of Rutland, late that night. He had a small one story log house, about 14x16. When we got there we found two men and teams ahead of us, but Charley said, "There is plenty of room." Later three other men and teams arrived and put up for the night. Sherman had quite a

family besides the guests. During the night there was a terrible blizzard and we were not able to move out for three days. When the storm abated we started on. We found many great snowdrifts and had to shovel our way through. Finally, we reached home, having been out eight days.

At that time Fort Dodge was the terminus of the railroad and lumber prices were high. I paid \$50 per M for dimension lumber; flooring, siding, and other such lumber was about \$65 per M. When I got the lumber home, I figured it had cost me, including the expenses of the trip, about \$120 per M. I went to work at once and put up a 14x16 office building and moved in during the month of March 1870. This building was later moved to the present plat of Emmetsburg and the front portion was destroyed by fire in April of 1909.

In February 1870, T. W. Harrison arrived. He was followed by H. L. Burnell and wife. Harrison and Burnell formed a partnership in the law and land business. Early in the spring of 1870, James P. White and W. H. Shea built an office and Harrison and Burnell put up a small building, using it as office and residence. In May, E. J. Hartshorn came and he and the author formed a partnership in the law and land business. Later, M. L. Brown and his brother, P. S. Brown, built a small hardware and agricultural implement building. Ketchen and Lenhart built a clothing store and A. D. Gallop erected the St. James Hotel.

In December 1870, the McGregor and Missouri River Railway had reached as far as Algona. This was the terminus until the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul acquired the road and extended it to Emmetsburg in 1878. Up to this time Fort Dodge was the nearest railroad point for all of northwest Iowa. After the railroad reached Algona, all marketing and hauling was to and from there.

New Town on the Horizon

Emmetsburg had grown to a group of thirty or more buildings in 1874. They were small and cheaply constructed. Everyone realized that the railroad, when it came, would most likely locate a depot on its own land and lay out its own town. In June 1874, I had a talk with Austin Corbin, a property owner, and General John Lawler, an officer of the railway company. Lawler had acquired the tract for the depot and townsite and had been trying, for several years, to buy Corbin's property. In that interview, Mr. Corbin gave me authority to act for him and to visit the officers of the railroad company with a view of making arrangements for the location of the depot and townsite. In July I went to Prairie du Chien and saw General John Lawler who promised to meet me in Milwaukee the next day.

I then went to Milwaukee and saw S. S. Merrill, general manager, and Alex Mitchell, president of the railroad. After a session of several

hours with the three men an agreement was reached: that the railroad company was to proceed at once in connection with Austin Corbin and plat the property owned by Lawler and Corbin into a townsite and town lots; that the township line between said quarters should be the principal street; that the depot should be located within 200 feet of said line; and that a courthouse square should be platted on the highest point east of said line and dedicated to the use of the county for courthouse purposes, provided the county took steps to locate the county seat there within a reasonable time. The agreement also provided for a public park, not to exceed a square of four blocks, to be located on high ground near the northwest corner; also for an equal division of lots between Austin Corbin and John Lawler; and for providing free lots for those who moved from the Coonan plat. It was also agreed that I was to act as agent for Austin Corbin and T. W. Harrison as agent for the railroad company. We were to proceed immediately to survey and plat the town as soon as possible. Finally the agreement stipulated that General Grenville Dodge, chief engineer of the railroad company, must give final approval. I went to Madison, Wisconsin, and saw General Dodge. He approved all of the arrangements and agreed to have a plat of the depot grounds and site ready within ten days.

In the meantime, while I was getting the pre-

liminary matters arranged, T. W. Harrison was engaged in removal plans. An agreement was drawn up and signed by most of the businessmen and residents of the old town: that in consideration of the fact that the railroad company and Corbin would lay out a permanent townsite, locate a permanent depot on the site, and would donate lots, that they, the residents of old town, would move their buildings to the new site on or before December 1, 1874. In default of so doing each resident was to agree to pay a forfeit of \$500. Only three or four held out and would not sign the agreement.

We employed LeRoy Grout to make the survey and he started about August 1, 1874. The grass was tall; not a tree nor shrub was in sight — just prairie. Flags were set. A team and mower cut two swaths through the high grass so we could see to set and line up the stakes. When the survey was well along the question of moving came up. In the meantime dissension had arisen. An awakened Coonan was offering special inducements for people to stay and others got discouraged at the thought of moving out on the prairie and locating their buildings in the tall grass, without a furrow broken, with no roads or paths. In fact, it did not look very inviting. Some of the dissenters held a meeting and resolved they would not move. A moving outfit arrived but no one wanted to be the first to move. Late one night it

was agreed that the Harrison office, the McCarty office, and the White and Shea office were to be moved at once. T. H. Tobin & Co., a general store, became the fourth building moved. Ketchen and Lenhart with a stock of clothing, boots, and shoes agreed to follow. On September 2, 1874, the movers hitched to the Harrison building and moved it to its new location. The others followed.

Then came a halt. No one else would make a start. Those who had moved up cut the grass and set out a few hitching posts and were ready for business. Several days were spent in trying to get the others to move but to no avail. About this time T. C. Davis, postmaster, said he would put up a building if they would give him a lot. We had forwarded a petition to Washington for permission to move the post office but red tape held it up for some time. In the meantime two or three small dwellings had been moved up. The Ormsbys agreed to have their bank building and E. S. Ormsby house moved. P. Joyce and Joseph Fitzgerald, each with a general store, refused to move. Others joined them. John D. Hall said he would move if others would. Finally, a meeting was held which was attended by those who had moved and those favorable, seeking a means to break the deadlock. The idled moving outfits threatened to leave. It was agreed that the parties present would pay the movers when not at work for the next week and to appeal to the people of the county. A

painter by the name of Walt Duncan was put to work painting signs.

Duncan's first sign read "Staketown or bust." Staketown was the name given to the new town by those who opposed it. Some of the other signs read: "On to Staketown," "Staketown only station on this line," and "Staketown will pay more for farm products and sell goods cheaper." These were nailed to stakes and set up on all roads. Men were sent out to appeal to the farmers to give their aid in having one good town and a county seat located without a county seat war. It was noted that the location was a central one and that the railroad would build the depot as contracted for. The speakers said, on the other hand, it would be two small towns within $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles of each other, always scrapping and fighting for a county seat, a post office, and other public buildings. Such arguments seemed to take well with the farmers. (Emmetsburg was the only town in the county at that time.) It was a winning card and turned the tide of events. By December 1, old town had moved up and the new town loomed upon its hills and could be seen from almost any part of the county — not a tree or shrub to hide it. Soon afterwards by an almost unanimous vote the county seat was located in the new town.

The railroad was not completed to Emmetsburg until August 1878, and the courthouse was not built until 1880. During this time court was

held in various buildings, the sheriff procuring the most suitable room. County offices were scattered around in such places as could be obtained. In 1869 the population of the county was 535; in 1870 it had jumped to 1,336 persons.

Warrants and Politics

Politically the county was strongly Democratic. In 1864 George Jacobs of West Bend Township cast the only vote for Abraham Lincoln. Not having a printed Republican ticket he wrote, "Abe Lincoln for President," crossing out the Democratic candidate. But he omitted scratching the Democratic electors. Notwithstanding his good intentions, George's vote for Lincoln was not counted. In 1870 all county officers were Democratic except one or two members of the board of supervisors. In the fall of 1870 the Republicans formed an organization, put a printed ticket in the field, and appointed a central committee. But no Republicans were elected.

The county had been run loosely and its warrants were selling at 25¢ on the dollar in 1869 with no buyers. In the spring of 1870 John A. Elliot, land commissioner for the Des Moines Valley Railroad Company, authorized the writer to buy up from \$3,000 to \$5,000 in county warrants which were to be used by the railroad in paying its county taxes. Nearly \$3,000 worth of these warrants were purchased at the 25¢ figure. Another party, through James P. White, began to

buy warrants and the price advanced to 30¢, 33 1/3¢, and a few at 35¢. Having bought the required amount, I stopped buying and there was no further market for them. Warrants were issued by the board at 25¢ on the dollar; that is the county would buy a bill of stationery amounting to \$25.00. Then it would issue warrants to the amount of \$100.00 to pay for it.

In the spring of 1870 while still buying warrants, I went before the board and explained that it was ruinous to issue such warrants. Board members explained they could do nothing else as they had received no money because the county treasurer turned in warrants for all county taxes. It was finally agreed no warrants for less than 35¢ on the dollar would be issued. This did not help matters materially because there was a large amount of railroad and other lands unpatented and not taxable.

In 1871 a county treasurer, auditor, and other officers were to be elected. The Republicans, fully organized, held a convention and nominated a full ticket. The contest at once became spirited. *The Advance*, a Republican newspaper, was started by E. J. Hartshorn, H. L. Burnell, and myself. It had a patent inside and the local pages were printed first at Humboldt and later at Algona in the *Upper Des Moines* office. We would write our local news, editorial matter, advertisements, and other items, hitch up a team, drive to the

printer's, where the material was set up, and the papers run off. These were brought back and mailed to everyone in the county. In the meantime James P. White and W. H. Shea started *The Democrat*, which was printed at Fort Dodge.

M. L. Brown was the Republican candidate for county treasurer and James P. White, the Democratic. The battle waged hottest for this office, but the others were not neglected. Participating in a house to house canvas during the last five weeks of the campaign were these men on the Republican side: E. J. Hartshorn, T. W. Harrison, H. L. Burnell, J. L. Martin, myself, and others.

While the contest was spirited, little or no personal abuse was indulged in and the workers and candidates on the different sides often would meet and recite incidents of the campaign in the most friendly manner. The entire Republican ticket was elected and, as promised during the campaign, a policy of retrenchment in the finances of the county was begun. First, a proposition for a mill cash county tax was carried; then only cash was paid for supplies bought; every bill was paid at 100¢ on the dollar; the county treasurer was not permitted to turn in county warrants in lieu of cash collected on county tax from non-residents and others paying cash. County warrants were accepted only when brought to the office by the taxpayer to pay the county portion of his taxes and not for the special county tax. This brought

the county's credit standing up and warrants were worth their face value. Outstanding warrants were bonded and the finances of the county placed on a firm fiscal basis. While Clay, O'Brien, Lyon, and other counties in northwest Iowa repudiated their indebtedness, Palo Alto County paid dollar for dollar.

Since then the county has been equally divided between the Republican and Democratic parties. In some elections all of one ticket would be elected and at another, all of the other party. Sometimes both parties would have successful candidates. But the Republicans have carried more elections than the Democrats.

GEORGE B. McCARTY