

THE PALIMPSEST

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An Idea is Born

When the first pioneers entered the Black Hawk Purchase on June 1, 1833, they brought with them methods of agriculture no different from those practiced in Colonial days, and little different from that of Biblical times. The method of plowing and planting showed little advancement, while the scythe and flail were in every day use. There were farmers who still believed the iron blade of a wooden plow would poison the soil.

A generation later, during the 1850's, the mechanization of agriculture was well under way. By the opening of the 20th Century most Iowans felt the limits of farm machinery inventions and methods had just about been reached. Within another half century, however, the methods prevailing in the pre-World War I period were being steadily displaced, leaving old machinery in sheds or even exposed outside to the weather and gradually rusting away.

The old machinery, and particularly that associated with steam engines and threshing, was

not readily given up by some farmers. It was not long before it became a hobby to maintain one's old farm equipment and relieve perfectly willing neighbors of the machines they had forsaken for more modern agricultural equipment, even if in doing so it cluttered up one's farm and buildings. As time went on some farmers had acquired a sizable collection of antique farm implements.

In Henry County there was a particularly active group of Iowa farmers who had become steam engine fans. Among these were Ray H. Ernst of Wayland, Milo Mathews of Mount Union, Bob Willits of Mount Pleasant and Roy Vorhies of Lockridge. Learning that men with similar interests had begun to hold annual threshers meetings which were well-attended, Ray Ernst suggested in 1949 that a group get together and visit the Zehr Threshers Reunion at Pontiac, Illinois. The group that went included Clark Everts, W. E. (Ted) Detrick, Herman E. Elgar, and Ray H. Ernst. Enthused with what they saw, and convinced they could do even better with a joint display of their own farm antiques, the four decided to explore the possibilities for holding a threshers meeting in Mount Pleasant.

The first meeting after their return from Pontiac was held at the home of Herman E. Elgar on December 15, 1949. Plans for a reunion were discussed during an afternoon that was all too short, and the group adjourned to gather once

more at the Elgar home on January 16, 1950. At this meeting it was decided to consolidate the Old Settlers and Threshers into one association. After "much discussion" and "considerable misgivings" it was decided to incorporate and hold their reunion early in September of 1950. Ray H. Ernst was elected president; Robert Willits, vice president; Clark Everts, treasurer; and Herman E. Elgar, secretary. W. E. (Ted) Detrick, Frank Johnson, Roy Vorhies, Milo Mathews, and the above named officers made up the first board of directors.

The selection of Ray H. Ernst for president and director was a wise step. Born on a farm in Henry County in 1890, Ernst had operated threshing rings for his neighbors in Henry County and in the Dakotas for almost fifty years. His hobby was collecting old engines, separators, and whistles; and his 60-year-old Westinghouse Separator and McCormick Self Rake, which was built in 1865, were among the oldest exhibits at the first Midwest Old Settlers and Threshers meeting in Mount Pleasant.

Other directors were equally experienced with threshing. In addition, several had already collected unique and valuable steam engines and other farm machinery which were destined to become prime exhibits at future reunions. This combination of rich experience and unbounded enthusiasm, coupled with the ability to transmit their

enthusiasm to Mount Pleasant citizens and their neighbors throughout Henry County, were important factors in the founding of the Midwest Old Settlers and Threshers Association. Equally important, perhaps, was the fact that most of the directors and several of their neighbors already had a nucleus of old steam engines and farm machinery that gave promise for a fine initial start in their great adventure.

With the date fixed and their officers selected, the die was cast. According to Secretary Elgar: "Our biggest worry was how could such a venture be financed? And would the city and the surrounding country appreciate and support such a venture?"

Any doubts as to the interest of Mount Pleasant and Henry County in an Old Settlers and Threshers Reunion were quickly dispelled. Businessmen rallied to the support of the venture, and Mayor George O. Van Allen and the city council granted the free use of city-owned McMillan Park.

The two-day reunion in 1950, which was held on September 20 and 21, began with 15 steam engines and eight separators on hand. The Old Settlers exhibits, moreover, were declared to be the "finest and largest ever assembled." In spite of a rainy morning, several thousand persons were on hand that crucial first day. They left the Park enthused over what they saw. As a result, thou-

sands attended the following day despite the rainy weather. They spent hours in looking over the Old Settlers exhibits and visiting in the shelter house. Visitors from fourteen Midwestern states registered. After a grateful thanks to the citizens of Henry County, as well as those who had come from adjoining states, the directors concluded:

The Association is proud of the fact that the reunion demonstrated beyond any question that the spirit of our colonial fathers still lives in the hearts and minds of our present day generation, and they still enjoy a clean, wholesome gathering of an educational and historic nature such as ours; the Association hopes to always keep the gatherings like this, where we can meet and harvest the golden memories of yester-year and pause in our daily tasks for a day or two each year to visit and relax, but always with a thought in so doing to improve the future harvests of good fellowship and good citizenship.

In the years ahead the Midwest Old Settlers and Threshers Association was destined to face many seemingly attractive lures that could have led them far from these noble objectives. The banning of sideshows, confidence games, and dubious carnival attractions from the Old Threshers Reunion has played an important part in developing one of Iowa's most spectacular success stories.

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