

Iowa Pastor

"I am now expecting to start for Iowa about the first of May to labor in connection with the American Home Missionary Society." Thus reads the entry for March 31, 1851, in Ozro French's diary.

This decision was neither voluntary nor easy. His passionate desire was to return to his labors of affection in Siroor. But that was impossible. Boston physicians told him that he would risk his sight in India. And a series of water treatments had failed to relieve a body grown weary and weak on Indian trails. If, then, he could not continue as a foreign missionary, he would enlist in the ranks of those ministers who were carrying the gospel to the American frontier. He was going West. Iowa was his choice.

An anonymous clergyman, writing in *The Home Missionary* for October, 1851, struck off an apt characterization of the West in which French was to find himself. "The errors of the West are of gigantic proportions. Their leaders are bold, reckless, and revolutionary. One of the most striking characteristics of the West, too, is the spirit of self-reliance which manifests itself in

church and state, among saints and sinners They are like steamboats of high pressure, which have vast propelling power, whether they have prudent captains and sober crews or not The mighty West seems like a great caldron where every heterogeneous element is fermenting, foaming, and every now and then overflowing."

French learned, when he went to New York in April of '51 to receive his home missionary commission, that Iowa Congregationalism was prospering. Fifty missionaries already were in the Hawkeye State, in addition to eleven other Congregational ministers, six of whom were entirely supported by their own congregations. There were seventy-one Congregational and Presbyterian churches with a total membership of 2600 souls. This success was determined, in large part, by the work of the Iowa Band, a group of young men from Andover who had arrived in 1843.

Five Congregational churches were composed of Germans, and one of French immigrants. Twenty-nine churches had been dedicated, and ten were under construction. The Reverend Ephraim Adams, of Davenport, once pictured one of these frontier structures. The edifice, he wrote, "gave forth as many sounds as an aeolian harp, though not quite so melodious. With clapboards whizzing, and shingles trembling, windows rattl-

ing, and doors ajar, it afforded a fine opportunity for the cultivation of the [minister's] voice on the higher keys."

While in New York, preparatory to leaving for Iowa, French purchased some books, secured a supply of tracts, and replenished his wardrobe. Returning to Harpersfield, he packed his goods in stout cases and sent them to Saint Louis by way of the Erie Canal and the Great Lakes. On May 5th, he, his wife, Lydia, and the baby bade friends and relatives farewell and started, by easy stages, in a diagonal line running northwest from Harpersfield to Buffalo. They visited in Franklin, Elmira, and Springville. On May 21st, they embarked at Buffalo for Chicago where they arrived on the following Monday after a five-day voyage.

There French lost his pocketbook, containing \$150 in cash and valuable papers. From Chicago, they followed the Illinois canal system through Joliet to LaSalle, and thence Beardstown. The evening of June 2, 1851, was spent in Burlington, Iowa, where the missionary attended a monthly concert.

Early on the following morning, a Mississippi steamboat, her paddles churning the great river, took them to Saint Louis. French lingered in the old city only long enough to claim his baggage.

On the following evening he, his family, and their luggage were all in Fort Madison.

The General Association of Iowa was meeting in Denmark, home of Asa Turner and perhaps the fount of Congregationalism in Iowa. French attended the sessions, met many of the Iowa pastors, and on June 8th preached on the conditions and wants of India. Then he went on to the hamlet of Cedar in Lee County. Swollen streams, hot weather, and swarms of flying bugs all conspired to make the trip unpleasant. Upon one occasion he fell from his horse while fording a stream. Water rushed into his saddle-bags, ruining his few possessions.

Cedar he found an attractive place, newly settled, and in the midst of a farming district. French further emphasized the importance of the place. "Two plank roads," he wrote, "the one from Keokuk going N. W. between the Des Moines and Skunk rivers and the other passing from Burlington to Keosauqua — both of which will probably be constructed ere long — are expected to intersect near this place." There was the center of his pastoral activities. He preached in five different neighborhoods, and when the weather was favorable had good congregations. When he opened his copy of *The Home Missionary* for June, 1851, he found a notice that the

Reverend Ozro French had been commissioned in April to go to Iowa.

As the days passed and the golden time of Indian summer was nipped by November frost, French became increasingly discouraged. The plank roads had not materialized, his congregation was moving farther west, and the work of salvation dragged. He had only twenty-four church members. Of these, seventeen were women. Average attendance at morning service was about thirty-five. The pastor could count no hopeful conversions, no members added by letter, and none by profession. He had been unable to organize a temperance society. His Sabbath School library numbered only about forty-five volumes. His people had contributed only three dollars to foreign missions.

The minister, from his own meagre salary, was making far greater sacrifices for various worthy causes. He contributed to the American and Foreign Christian Union, the American Peace Society, the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, and the American Education Society. While in Cedar he subscribed to the *New Englander*, *Independent*, and *Journal of the American Temperance Union*. From time to time he received boxes of books and clothing from the Ladies Home Missionary Society of Warren,

Massachusetts. These were shipped to him in care of his forwarding agents, Chittenden and McGavie, of Keokuk.

When officials of the Home Missionary Society, in the fall of 1851, asked him to compare the foreign and home missionary fields, he replied in detail. "If you wish to know what my experience has been thus far, I can say that both in India & Iowa I have had enough to eat & to drink & have never known what it is to be anxious about the necessaries or comforts of life. There my principal trials were connected with the climate & the want of social & religious privileges; here with the want of favorably situated & comfortable houses to live in, & a field of labor in which I can feel that I am working to advantage. In both fields I find it necessary to walk by faith in regard to the work in hand, but of the two I think my faith is more severely tried here than it was in India. . . . If a Missionary, with the spirit of his Master, has health & the prospect of usefulness, he will not have reason, in my estimation, to magnify his sufferings, either in the Home or the Foreign field."

He remained at Cedar until February 25, 1852. At that time, after securing permission from his superiors, he moved to a recently vacated field at Bentonsport. There he purchased a house for

\$800 and preached his first sermon in the town from Numbers 24: 13. "I entered upon my labors among this people," French wrote in his quarterly report to the Society, "under favorable circumstances, in most respects . . . I have reason to thank God that my lot has been cast among such a people".

Then, in his modest but comprehensive manner, he wrote on, describing his life and activities among the people of Iowa. "I spend one Sabbath in the month with the Little Cedar church, and preach at two different points. On the other three Sabbaths, I preach each morning at this place. In the afternoon of the first Sabbath, I lecture here on the subject of Foreign Missions, in connection with the monthly concert. The other two Sabbath afternoons, I preach in two neighborhoods, two and five miles distant. I attend regularly upon the Bible class, Sabbath morning at 8 o'clock, and the prayer meeting Wednesday night."

A year later he could report further progress. He had instituted a daily concert of private prayer, had organized a series of evening meetings, and had formed a Juvenile Total Abstinence Society with about fifty members. Only in a few cases was he "prophesying to the dry bones". In 1853, he wrote that "The Lord is favoring us still in reli-

gious matters" and went on to describe an increase in both church and Sabbath School attendance. In addition, he reported a flourishing Bible class for young people.

During the last week of December, 1853, the ladies of the Sewing Society "held a fair, the avails to be devoted to the purchase of a bell for our Academy. The occasion yielded them — after paying all expenses — some \$70 or more. That amount more than paid the balance due for the bell, whose daily tones strike our ears pleasantly."

So successful was he that both in 1853 and 1854, the Bentonsport church petitioned officials of the Home Missionary Society to grant further financial aid that French might be enabled to stay on. Both pleas were signed by John D. Sanford and Edward Colton, deacons. The Reverend Harvey Adams endorsed the petition of 1854. As a result, the national association granted French \$230 in 1853 and \$270 the subsequent year.

But, almost above all else, the Bentonsport missionary wanted a church building. His congregation was worshipping where it could. These temporary abodes were displeasing to French's orderly mind. Even in India he had had a chapel. By 1856 sufficient money had been raised and a

site selected for a new edifice. Workmen, however, were scarce. The immigrant was too busy tilling his fields and building mills to donate labor to a church. Much of the manual work fell to the pastor's lot.

"I have found it necessary," French complained, "to go into the woods, and with my own hands cut down trees, and get out saw logs, and then assist in hauling the lumber from the mill, and stacking it up in the dry-kiln." Twice he drove to the Mississippi with a team for supplies. He aided in building the furnace, helped the mason, and lathed part of the building. "Day after day have I wrought with my own hands, that the work might go on, and the Lord's house be completed this season." The structure was finished and dedicated in 1856. Then there was rejoicing.

Despite his heavy local duties, French found opportunity to identify himself with State religious interests. He became acquainted with O. W. Mather who was preaching in Paw Paw, with Daniel Lane at Keosauqua, and with William Salter in Burlington. On June 3, 1852, he attended meetings of the Des Moines River Association at Muscatine, and in the following year, when the group met in Mount Pleasant, he addressed the children. In 1854, the Association

named him as a delegate to the Synod of Illinois. Such activities he continued as long as he was able.

Ozro French, in this period of his life, made a dignified appearance in his black suit, dark silk waistcoat, and starched white shirt. His face seemed to express the determination of his New England background as well as the characteristics of his Yankee stock. Graying hair, brushed back from a high forehead and falling over the well-defined ears, softened what could easily have been an austere face. His keen eyes looked down over a rather thin nose which flared slightly at the nostrils. Prominent wrinkles, almost creases, ran in an arc from the lower face to beneath his narrow lips while the stiff points of a stand-up collar stood sentinel over a resolute chin.

His daughter, Elizabeth, described him as reserved and dignified, but quite fond of a proper and dignified joke. He regarded order as a first law, and on his desk each article was arranged with mathematical precision. A lover of native flowers, he frequently returned from preaching trips with plants, carefully wrapped in paper, in his saddle-bags.

In the fall of 1856, the Home Missionary Society moved French to Knoxville. He preached there and at nearby Pleasantville. These were

barren fields. French said that he seemed to be doing little more than holding the ground and keeping the church together. Frequently his thoughts turned to the heyday of his ministry in India. What a season of joy that experience now appeared to him. The comparison between labors in India and Iowa "always makes me feel that either I have sadly degenerated as a laborer in the vineyard of the Lord, or this is a less hopeful field of labor than it was my privilege to occupy on the other side of the globe."

Such gloom was further intensified by the death of Charles, an adopted son, on May 11, 1860. This five-year-old lad was the fourth male child lost to the pastor and his wife. Surely, the Lord's chastisement was heavy. They found consolation, however, in their three daughters. Mary, the youngest, was born at Bentonsport on December 15, 1852.

Members of the Knoxville congregation found it increasingly difficult to raise \$125 as their share toward French's salary of \$400 in 1861. The Home Missionary Society, generous as always, agreed to underwrite the balance of \$275. But both church and the Society were not always prompt, and the French family entered upon a period of real financial embarrassment.

"Our wardrobe is getting reduced," complained

the unhappy minister, "and we have no intimation that any of our friends are about to replenish it." He asked for a box of clothes which would fit himself and Mrs. French, "both above mediocrity in size", as well as garments suitable for three daughters "whose heights are respectively 5 ft. 2 in, 4 ft. 6 in, and 3 ft. 10 in." Such were the measurements of Lydia, Elizabeth, and Mary, three little girls anxiously awaiting a missionary box. It finally arrived, sent in care of Ogden and Copp, of Ottumwa. Then came days of fittings and adjustments.

When the Civil War broke out, French made a home for volunteers who were drilling in the neighborhood. In June, 1861, a hundred recruits left Knoxville for military service. "At the request of the captain," wrote French, "each of the ministers of the place had opportunity to preach to the company. It was a sort of protracted meeting of five services." Each soldier was then presented with a Bible and a New Testament. By October, some 400 volunteers, including a company of Home Guards, had left Knoxville and vicinity. "The sad effects of the civil war is sweeping like a tornado through this fair land."

By New Year's Day of 1862, French was out of funds and in despair. He wrote officials of the Home Missionary Society asking permission to

open a small school by which he might supplement his slender salary. He was refused. French thereupon applied for a transfer to another field. He ceased his labors in Knoxville on July 31, 1862, to begin work in New Haven, Washington County, on February 2, 1863. There he ministered to two country churches. He was then in the fifty-fifth year of his life and had been a minister for almost a quarter of a century.

Southern sentiment was strong in the pastor's new parish. Yet this did not deter French from uttering strong Union and anti-slavery sentiments. "Almost always in my prayers," he grimly reported to his superiors, "I remember the state of our country and pray for the overthrow of Slavery." Within a year he was quietly asking to be sent elsewhere, preferably to Tennessee or southern Missouri.

His last pastorate was at Blairstown where he was moved in 1864. There he organized a church, but feeble health prevented him from the strenuous efforts he customarily put forth. "I have suffered a good deal," he wrote, "in my winter rides over these broad prairies of Iowa . . . I presume my ten years residence in a tropical climate had a permanent effect upon my constitution, unfitting me for such severe weather as we sometimes have here."

Yet he determined to carry on. He purchased a lot in Blairstown and set his house upon wooden posts as he could secure no foundation stone. With his own hands, he fashioned a dug-out for a cellar. He preached regularly, waged war upon local saloon keepers and gamblers, and took delight in watching the operations of a new steam flouring mill.

"Our work here is just begun," he wrote in his final report to the Home Missionary Society. "In this vicinity there is but little leaven to leaven a large lump of heedless indifference and skepticism." He died on September 28, 1865, from an ailment which had first manifested itself in Siroor. Said the Dubuque *News-Letter*, "He won the respect and esteem of his fellow citizens as an indefatigable and earnest Christian minister, and has left the memory and savor of a godly life and conversation."

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