

Samuel H. McCrory

The formal history of a community is mainly concerned with those individuals who have contributed the most conspicuous service and achieved the greatest success. But the ordinary citizens who participate in the building of their community and lay the substantial foundation upon which the "great" men are able to erect the spectacular superstructure seem to be forgotten. Many of the pioneers who helped formulate and execute the policies that transformed a frontier settlement into a stable, orderly community, the men who gave freely of their time and energy that their community might grow and flourish, have become mere names, incidentally mentioned in the record of facts that is called history. They were too busy with the every-day responsibilities of life and the common welfare of the group to court personal fame.

Such a man was Samuel Henry McCrory who, through his genuine interest and real desire to help in the evolution of Johnson County from a frontier settlement to orderly government, had the satisfaction of realizing the goal for which he worked. Born in Virginia on August 6, 1807, he

migrated westward while still a young man. After staying in Illinois a short time, he came to Iowa in the summer of 1837 and spent the remainder of his life here. As a young tree transplanted from one place to another takes root and grows, so Samuel McCrory established himself on the frontier. From the time he settled on a choice claim in the valley of the Iowa River, he participated in all phases of the life of a new settlement as it grew into a populous center of political and cultural interests.

Wherever action was being taken to establish law and order, Samuel H. McCrory was present and assumed his share of responsibility. When the pioneers organized an association to protect their land claims, they elected him clerk and recorder, an office which he held the entire four years that the association existed. The completeness and neatness of the records of the Claim Association of Johnson County are excellent proof that he was qualified for this position. He kept the minutes and recorded over 200 claims and nearly as many quit claim deeds. His book contained the proof of title to every piece of land in Johnson County until government certificates were issued. Intolerant of trespassers, he was no doubt among the "sixty stalwart men" who helped tear down the cabin of Mr. Crawford who tried to

"jump" a claim. Thus did McCrory and others like him institute law and order by their own initiative, anticipating the formal establishment of government.

McCrory was chosen "bidder" to represent members of the Association at the government land sales. Forty or fifty settlers of Johnson County arrived at Dubuque "in two-horse wagons, supplied with provisions and camp equipment", ready for the sale on August 3, 1840. McCrory and the assistant bidder, Cyrus Sanders, had large plats of the two Johnson County townships that were to be sold, with each claimant's name written on the tract of land he wanted to purchase. They stood on the platform beside the crier who began with section 1 and called out each eighty-acre tract as rapidly as he could speak.

The first district court in Johnson County was opened by Joseph Williams at Napoleon in Gilbert's trading house on May 13, 1839. There were no windows in the log building and so the sheriff and his deputy had to keep the doorway clear to let in enough light to dispense justice. The grand jury, of which Samuel McCrory was foreman, inquiring "into such matters and things" as were presented on behalf of the Territory, found that Andrew J. Gregg, a horse thief, was

charged with "passing counterfeit money". The jury assembled outside and was addressed by the judge from a saw-log. With McCrory as their spokesman they returned a "true bill" of indictment against the accused man, who was bound over to the next term of court.

State as well as local affairs came within the orbit of McCrory's public service. When the convention was called in 1844 to draft a State constitution, he was elected as one of the three delegates from Johnson County. He served on the committee appointed to prepare articles dealing with Education and School Lands. It is interesting to note his stand on some of the issues before the convention. He voted in favor of opening the daily sessions with prayer. He did not think aliens should be allowed to vote, even if they had declared their intention to become citizens. Popular election of district judges did not meet his approval. He favored a four-year term for the Governor and reasonably generous compensation for State officers.

That his interest in good government continued throughout the years is exemplified by his service in the House of Representatives in the Fifth General Assembly (1854-1855). He was on the committees on Elections and Federal Relations. In the interests of his own community he introduced

several bills. One resulted in the donation of a lot to the First Presbyterian Church of Iowa City, of which he was a trustee for many years. Another became an act "to encourage agriculture and mechanic arts in Johnson County".

McCrory participated in practically every community activity. The first record in regard to roads in Johnson County (May 15, 1839) "orders that Samuel H. McCrory be appointed as a commissioner on the part of the county, to locate a territorial road leading from opposite Oquawka, Illinois, to Napoleon". From July 4th to November 14, 1839, he was postmaster of Napoleon. The office was in his own home, but as soon as possible he moved it to Iowa City, locating in Charles S. Foster's log store, just north of Capitol Square.

Education was one of Samuel McCrory's special interests. He, who obtained his own education "away from school and after business hours" while working in his uncle's store, was treasurer of the Iowa City school district for many years. The records of the board of directors which are available reveal his faithful participation in the meetings for almost two decades. He not only served as treasurer for the district but also helped formulate the rules for the government of the board and the schools.

At the very beginning of the State University (1847-1851), as one of the members of the Board of Trustees, he did much of the "pioneering" in an effort to get the University started. He was on the committee to examine the laws touching the interests of the University to find out at what time and in what proportions the University funds could be made available. The reports record his urging that the lands granted for the support of the University be located as quickly as possible. He helped formulate a plan for the establishment of a law department of the University.

Despite all these public activities, McCrory did not allow his economic welfare to be overshadowed by his civic interests. When the Iowa City Manufacturing Company was established in 1843, he was elected to the committee on stock sales. He considered himself a farmer, however, and devoted his major efforts for three decades to agriculture. His success was reflected in his own well-improved farm and the prizes he won at the early Johnson County fairs.

It is not to be assumed that Samuel McCrory had no "personal" interests, for certainly his home and farm meant much to him. "The gallant, young bachelor", as he was called, "batched it" in a one-room log cabin, located about half way up the hill south of Ralston Creek, when he first came

to Iowa City. But he was not destined to remain single. One of his granddaughters, now living in Iowa City, tells the story — a family tradition — of the fateful day when Samuel McCrory was visiting with George Andrews in Iowa City. Mrs. Andrews's cousin, Elizabeth McCloud, arrived from Muscatine the same day. McCrory saw her alight from the coach. "There's my girl", he announced. On April 6, 1841, they were married at the Andrews home.

A little over a decade later, Samuel H. McCrory built an eleven-room house on his farm and named the place "Virginia Grove". Carrie McCrory, one of his four surviving children, tells of her father's love of trees and the fine orchard he raised west of the house. He planted sugar maples on both sides of the quarter-mile lane leading to the house. They still stand as a landmark of the McCrory farm. High among the branches of one of the large trees in the front yard he built a seat for the children with steps leading up to it. When they were older they sat up there with special friends, cozy and secluded. Miss McCrory recalls her home as "the scene of many pleasant and happy gatherings of friends and students". There were eight girls and five boys in the family.

It was in 1866 that the pioneers who had seen a frontier settlement develop into a thriving com-

munity gathered to form a permanent Old Settlers' Association. They could view with satisfaction the neighborhood to which they had so richly contributed. It was Samuel H. McCrory who drafted their constitution. In 1869 he was elected president.

With this event, the public record of Samuel H. McCrory fades. He was growing old, and the years of toil and pioneering were showing their effect. Though he lived to be over seventy, the remainder of his life was spent quietly at home with his family and among old friends. He died on March 11, 1878.

The information about McCrory to be gleaned from official records and the files of newspapers is singularly devoid of dramatic incidents and personal opinions. In the legislature he seldom spoke, and his services in other organizations were usually secretarial or financial in nature. But his calm and thoughtful advice must have carried weight for he occupied many positions of trust. The imprint of his character, though now obscure and half-forgotten, is nevertheless indelibly affixed to the history of Iowa City.

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