

Iowa in Mourning

In war regalia Lieutenant Peter Melendy had led the Governor's Guards up and down Main Street of Cedar Falls in the victory parade, and had responded to Zimri Streeter's request for a speech in the victory assembly in Overman Hall. Usually the prime mover in every community enterprise from lyceum debating to raising funds for soldiers' orphans, Peter Melendy was absent from the little city and could not participate in the Lincoln memorial service on Easter afternoon. In order to meet members of the State Fair Board and to complete arrangements for the State Fair to be held at Burlington in September, he had left Cedar Falls on Wednesday, April 12th.

In pre-associated press days the Perkins brothers had fostered the newspaper habit of making press correspondents of all local residents, who sojourned at Pike's Peak, dug gold in Nevada, attended national conventions, or visited the State legislature. Throughout the war they had elicited correspondence from soldiers in hospitals, in camp, or on the march. To such requests no citizen responded more generously than did Peter Melendy. So liberally did he keep the *Gazette*

informed about crops, new railroad activities, political conventions, the proceedings of the State Fair Board, and the progress of the new "farm college" that he earned from the editors of the rival paper at Waterloo the sobriquet of the "literary scribbler for the *Gazette*".

Two days after the Victory Celebration, an all-day ride on the Dubuque and Sioux City Railroad brought him to Dubuque where he found the citizens jubilant over the surrender of Lee and his army. The next day by steamboat he traveled down the Mississippi to Davenport whence he boarded a train on the Mississippi and Missouri Railroad for Grinnell. In cities and all along the road he found "rejoicing to be the order of the day". Returning on Saturday, April 15th, he stopped off at Iowa City to arrange for exhibits of stock at the State Fair. There he met N. H. Brainerd and Samuel J. Kirkwood in the post-office. While they were engaged in conversation, an excited person interrupted them to ask what they knew of the rumor concerning the assassination of the President and of Secretary Seward. Their informant knew only that, as the morning train pulled out from Davenport, a message of that nature had been received at the railway station.

The news spread like wildfire through the

streets of Iowa City. Business was disregarded. Since Iowa City then possessed no telegraph office, the often reiterated question, "Can it be?" could not be answered. A courier on horseback was dispatched to Muscatine. Peter Melendy, a hero-worshipper of Abraham Lincoln, found himself too distraught to complete the State Fair arrangements. With a group of gentlemen who could not wait for the return of the messenger, he boarded the east-bound afternoon train and reached Muscatine in the evening, where his worst fears concerning President Lincoln were confirmed. He spent the rest of the week-end with Suel Foster, then Iowa's chief orchardist and one of the foremost advocates of scientific agriculture.

On Easter Sunday morning the weather was sufficiently warm for Melendy to carry his writing materials out upon the veranda of Suel Foster's home. From the high knoll he could look across his host's extensive apple orchards to the wooded hills overlooking the Mississippi. Fully conscious of the contrast between the promise of the warm April day and the devastating gloom settling over the North, he fulfilled his promises as newspaper correspondent by writing to H. A. Perkins: "I arrived in this city last night at 7 P. M., and found the report too true. O, I never can forget the

feelings that I had when I stepped from the cars and looking here and there saw the flags at half mast and the stores and dwellings draped in mourning. . . . The dreadful news was received here about 9 A. M. Saturday, when the stores were closed, a public meeting was called at Tremont Hall, and arrangements made to observe the day. Minute guns were fired until sundown, flags were at half mast, and crepe hung on all the doors."

With Suel Foster that Easter Sunday morning, Melendy attended memorial services in the Congregational Church and heard President George F. Magoun of Grinnell College eulogize Abraham Lincoln. After the noon meal he again stepped out upon the porch to complete the letter he had begun in the forenoon. It seemed to him that the songs of the birds were sad, that the budding trees had paused in their springtime exuberance, that all nature was mourning with the nation. "The waters of the great Mississippi," he wrote, "chant a mournful dirge for the Nation's Pride. The blow is heavy; it fell like a thunderbolt on the hearts of the people."

Peter Melendy's mind reverted to scenes connected with the National Union Convention in Baltimore less than a year before when he had met and talked with Lincoln. "But a few short months ago," he recalled, "I took the great good man by

the hand at the White House, and when I remember the warm reception he gave me, as well as the entire Iowa delegation to the National Convention at Baltimore, the thought would arise, Can it be possible that he is dead? It seems but yesterday that he stood there in all his manliness and great goodness, with high hopes of his country's future. And then again the recollection of that great convention, such an one as was never before held, and the like of which will never be seen again — so harmonious and unanimous for the great man. The scene will never be forgotten."

Furthermore, with thousands of others in all parts of the nation, he felt the ominous menace to the nation's future and the danger that the cause for which the North had fought might yet be lost. He knew that misguided persons could cause havoc without calm and wise leadership. The letter closed with a prayer that was almost an imprecation: "Would to God that the hot wrath of the people might swing every man that rejoices at this calamity."

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