

The **P**ALIMPSEST

AUGUST 1940

CONTENTS

The Campaign of 1840 229

JACK T. JOHNSON

Iowa City Lot Sales 242

JACK T. JOHNSON

The Menace of the Blue-stem 247

BESSIE L. LYON

Comment 259

THE EDITOR

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS MAGAZINE

THE PALIMPSEST, issued monthly by the State Historical Society of Iowa, is devoted to the dissemination of Iowa History. Supplementing the other publications of this Society, it aims to present the materials of Iowa History in a form that is attractive and a style that is popular in the best sense—to the end that the story of our Commonwealth may be more widely read and cherished.

BENJ. F. SHAMBAUGH

Superintendent

THE MEANING OF PALIMPSESTS

In early times palimpsests were parchments or other materials from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete; and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the records of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

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THE PALIMPSEST

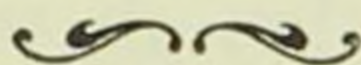
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The Campaign of 1840

In 1840, the Whig Party nominated for President William Henry Harrison, the hero of the battle of Tippecanoe. The Democrats selected Martin Van Buren for reëlection. For the first time in the election of a President effective use was made of campaign songs. To the tune of "The Old Oaken Bucket" George P. Morris wrote for the Whigs:

The iron-armed soldier, the true-hearted soldier,
The gallant old soldier of Tippecanoe.

Equally popular was:

Farewell, dear Van,
You're not our man;
To guard the ship,
We'll try old Tip.

And when the early election returns of those States which voted in August and October came in, A. C. Ross of Zanesville, Ohio, wrote to the tune of "The Little Pig's Tail":

What has caused this great commotion, motion, motion,
Our country through?
It is the ball a-rolling on,
For Tippecanoe and Tyler too, Tippecanoe and Tyler
too!

The spirit of the campaign had its effect in the Territory of Iowa, though the citizens were not eligible to participate in the Presidential election. According to an early historian, the most popular Whig song in the Territory was:

Cold water will do for the Locos,
And a little vinegar stew;
But give us hard cider and whisky
And we'll vote for Old Tippecanoe.

In the Iowa political campaigns of 1838 and 1839 the election discussion had been concerned primarily with the personal merit of the candidates. Indeed, there were those who felt that inasmuch as the people of the Territory could not vote for national officers they should not be influenced by national issues. This viewpoint seems to have prevailed in the Territorial legislature. Although factional caucuses apparently operated in some instances, it is clear that they were not the dominant factor in the lawmaking procedure of the first Iowa Legislative Assemblies.

In 1840, the electors in the Territory of Iowa were scheduled to cast their ballots for local and

Territorial officials. Although party lines were not clearly drawn, it was evident that political organization was beginning to play a more prominent rôle in Territorial affairs. Essentially an individualist, the Iowa pioneer was nevertheless influenced by the social contact afforded by political campaigns. He saw himself associated with others who thought alike, and his sense of democratic power expanded. On the other hand, differences of opinion in national politics seemed artificial and immaterial in comparison with frontier needs on which there was no basis for party division.

W. W. Chapman, Delegate to Congress from Iowa, expressed the typical hostility to partisan politics in the spring of 1840. Referring to a proposal that the Democrats should hold a Territorial convention, he deplored any such action and requested that partisan discussion of Territorial legislation be curbed until the adjournment of Congress in July, because it was his feeling that "no western measure has, or can succeed upon the support of one party alone, because the whole of neither of the parties can be united upon these measures." He also felt that there were bills pending in Congress "which either party in that body, on becoming excited against us, might defeat without a struggle".

If the "craving appetite of party spirit" could be appeased only by a convention in May, he felt obliged as the representative of the Territory to withhold his name from "any Convention of a partizan character — at least, until I have disposed of the trust already confided to me; and the success of which I am sure requires during the session of Congress a strict neutrality. I would prefer success in our present measures," declared Chapman, "coupled with retirement from office under a conscientious belief of having rendered service to my constituents, and done some good for my country, to a nomination by a partizan convention, with defeat of measures important to the prosperity of the Territory staring me in the face."

This open letter, published in the Burlington *Hawk-Eye*, had an immediate effect. Throughout the Territory of Iowa the question of having or not having political conventions was discussed. Essays pro and con appeared in the public press. But with attention fixed only upon success in the forthcoming election, the politicians went ahead with their plans for the election of party men.

As early as February names were offered for the attractive position of Delegate to Congress. In March the Democrats made plans for holding county conventions to select delegates to a Territorial convention which would in turn nominate a

candidate for Congress. Opposition to this plan was well stated in a series of resolutions adopted at an "Anti-Caucus Meeting" held at Fairfield on April 8th. "Whereas the people of this Territory have no voice in the approaching election of President of the United States, and are more deeply interested in laying the foundation for a wholesome System of Laws, and a judicious form of State Government, whenever they shall be required to ask for admission into the Union, than they are in fomenting political jealousies, and bitter party distinctions.

"Therefore it is Resolved . . . That we deprecate the attempts that have been made, and are daily being encouraged by many of our citizens, who profess to be the friends of the present administration of the National Government, to draw the lines of party distinction between the citizens of this Territory, as a measure that our political interests do not require, and one that is mischievous in its tendency, and wholly uncalled for."

Nevertheless county conventions for the purpose of selecting delegates to a Democratic Territorial convention were held in almost every locality. The editor of the Burlington *Hawk-Eye* pointed out that the local conventions had been attended by less than five hundred men. "And

these 500", said the editor, "we verily believe, are in their turn dictated to by less than a dozen men, all but two or three of whom reside in Burlington! Is this Democracy? We thought the majority ought to rule. These are the men who act upon the principle that the people cannot act for themselves, and have taken the responsibility of acting for them. Boys, will you stand that?"

On July 9, 1840, the Democratic party held its Territorial convention at Bloomington. The main problem which confronted Ver Planck Van Antwerp and the other convention managers was the task of selecting a nominee for Delegate to Congress from a large number of political aspirants. William W. Chapman desired reëlection, but the charge that he had Whig inclinations and his public letter appealing for nonpartisanship had sealed his political fate. The delegation from Dubuque County suggested both James Churchman and the perennial candidate, Francis Gehon. But these men were obviously unacceptable to the delegations from the populous southern counties. Doctor James Davis of Des Moines County had been actively campaigning for two months previous to the convention. His nomination, however, seemed likely to split the party.

After a long speech on the merits of the Democratic Party, a typical keynote address, the

political maneuvering began. Davis, "for the promotion of union and harmony", withdrew his candidacy. Thereupon, Gehon, who had been a candidate in 1838 and in the abortive election of 1839, was formally presented for the nomination. Then the convention managers played their trump: they offered for nomination Augustus C. Dodge, a favorite son of the Territory, and one who had a respectable political record and who had not conducted a preconvention campaign. As if to guarantee their selection, a special rule was adopted, providing that each county was entitled to one vote for each two hundred inhabitants. Such a regulation weighted the convention in favor of the populous southern counties, the area in which Dodge was best known.

According to a Whig onlooker at the convention, Dodge received one hundred and thirty votes and Gehon collected but fifty-seven. A committee consisting of the president and four vice presidents of the convention (George Temple, Samuel Holliday, Silas Smith, John Reynolds, and David Hendershott), drafted a statement notifying Dodge of his nomination by the delegates. On July 29, 1840, he accepted the nomination.

The members of the Whig Party could not have failed to be impressed by the interest stimulated by the Democratic convention and by the har-

mony generated from the nomination of Dodge. But their previous criticism of the county conventions made it inexpedient for them to assemble delegates. Nevertheless, the Whigs managed a political sidestep. Upon "popular request" they issued a call for a "Congress of the People" to meet at Bloomington on July 29th.

After a preliminary address and the adoption of a permanent organization, the meeting proceeded to vote on nominees for the position of Delegate to Congress. Citizens who attended the "Congress" formed in a long line and passed by tellers, giving the name of their preference. If no one received a majority, a second vote was to be taken for the two candidates receiving the largest number of first ballots. At the end of the first balloting, however, Alfred Rich had received one hundred and twenty votes, Philip Viele sixty-one votes, and Stephen Whicher eleven votes. The "Congress" then proposed that local Tippecanoe Clubs or Committees of Vigilance should be organized to promote Whig interests. These local organizations later exerted a pronounced influence on Territorial politics.

During the month of August, Augustus C. Dodge and Alfred Rich stumped the Territory. Rooming together, boarding together, riding together, and debating together, they became warm

friends except upon the political rostrum. Everywhere they were received as the apostles of "Old Tip" and "Little Van". According to contemporary accounts, Dodge had the advantage, both in personality and polemics.

One pioneer related the following story of Dodge's popularity. "I know that Mr. Dodge is a Democrat, and the candidate of the Democratic party, but you cannot draw party lines on him. His opponent says there is no use in electioneering against him, that you had as well sing psalms to a dead horse as preach Whiggery or Henry Clay where Guss Dodge is; they forget that they ever were Whigs, or had seen Henry Clay. They flock around Dodge, every one insisting that he must go home with him, and leave me standing like a poor boy at a frolic."

The administration of Martin Van Buren was continually discussed with extended ramifications upon the protective tariff and the national bank. The proposition of voting for or against a State Constitutional Convention was injected into the campaign but elicited little debate.

Although William Henry Harrison was elected President of the United States on the Whig ticket, Augustus C. Dodge was chosen Delegate to Congress from the Territory of Iowa. On the balloting which took place on October 5th, Dodge re-

ceived 4009 votes, Rich 3494, and Churchman, who had "bolted" the Democratic convention and who was later described as being in "an awkward fix", garnered but 92 votes.

As if to explain Whig successes elsewhere, James G. Edwards, the editor of the Burlington *Hawk-Eye*, stated: "Hundreds and hundreds of whigs voted for Gen. Dodge on account of personal and local considerations." And in spite of the fact that the Whigs lost the Delegacy, they gained other offices within the Territory. In the Legislative Assembly they elected seven of the thirteen members of the Council, a gain of one seat over the previous session; in the House of Representatives the Whigs won eleven out of twenty-six seats, a gain of two members over the previous session.

The procedure for the Territorial election in Des Moines County which was outlined in the Burlington paper may be considered typical. Precinct polling places were listed. For Des Moines County the officials to be elected were: Territorial councilman, Territorial representatives, county judge of probate, county sheriff, county recorder, county commissioner, county treasurer, county assessor, county coroner, county surveyor, justices of the peace, and constables.

Polls were open from nine in the morning until

six in the afternoon. According to a special act of the Second Legislative Assembly, the general election of 1840 was to be held on the first Monday in October. Thereafter the Territorial elections were to be on the first Monday in August. "The manner of voting", according to the statute regulating elections approved by the First Legislative Assembly, "shall be by the electors approaching the bar in the election room, at any time when the poll is opened, and by presenting a ticket, folded in such a manner that no names on said ticket are visible to the judges, who shall deposit the same immediately into a general ballot box".

The Second Legislative Assembly had provided for the popular election of a county treasurer, coroner, a judge of probate, sheriff, recorder, and surveyor. These county officials, added to the slate of offices previously selected by popular vote, made the ballot of 1840 the longest one which had been presented to the Territorial electors. Needless to say, the increase in the number of offices to be filled stimulated local politics, so that more candidates aspired for office in the campaign of 1840 than in the two preceding years.

Whereas the contest for Delegate to Congress was argued in part on national issues, the campaign for local offices and the Territorial legisla-

ture was waged mainly on the personal merits of the candidates. The voters apparently selected sheriffs, recorders, assessors, coroners, surveyors, treasurers, and justices of the peace on the basis of reputation for integrity, competence, or popularity. Even in the legislature, where alignment according to conflicting policies might have been expected to crystallize into Whig or Democratic allegiance, party lines were not evident. Some counties sent Democrats to the House and Whigs to the Council; others were represented by both parties in both chambers.

The people of the Territory, however, were not unmindful of the partisan victory of Harrison. A majority of the citizens appeared satisfied with his election, perhaps because his campaign typified the spirit of the frontier or perhaps because his career and character appealed to common people. The editor of the *Iowa Standard* at Bloomington suggested that the campaign had been "a struggle for principles against power", and that upon the receipt of the news of the Whig victory "the hearts of the people were given over to utter joyousness" so that "men became boys and played their antics over again". Governor Lucas, Secretary Clarke, and the Justices of the Supreme Court, who received their positions by Presidential appointment, must have realized that they

might be succeeded by Whigs. Nor could the hearts of Whig aspirants have failed to be stirred by the prospect of political office.

Although the election indicated that party affiliation was gaining in importance, it was equally clear that the Territory of Iowa was partially immune from the epidemic of national issues. At least the selection of the Congressional Delegate demonstrated that Iowa electors voted for the man instead of the party. But it was equally clear that political machinery for the promotion of party advantage was being organized. By the time of the next election, the opposition to political conventions was reduced to a politician's whisper.

Neither sanctioned nor prohibited by law, this method of selecting candidates illustrates the political sagacity of the pioneers. And nowhere can the belief in democracy and the capacity of the American people to navigate the ship of state upon the uncharted seas of political development be better illustrated than in the campaign of 1840 in the Territory of Iowa.

JACK T. JOHNSON

Iowa City Lot Sales

The establishment of a permanent seat of government was one of the first problems which confronted the people of the Territory of Iowa. For this purpose, Congress, in an act approved on March 3, 1839, donated to the Territory "one entire section of land". The statute further provided that after the site for the public buildings had been selected there should be no limitation upon the Territory "from selling and disposing of the residue of said section in lots or otherwise, for the use of said Territory, in the erection and completion of said buildings."

Accordingly, the First Legislative Assembly of the Territory declared that after the seat of government was surveyed the Governor should "by proclamation, direct a sale of lots". On July 25, 1839, Governor Robert Lucas authorized two land sales to be held at Iowa City, one on the third Monday in August, and the second on the first Monday in October.

On the dates specified in the Governor's proclamation, certain lots in the square mile that was to constitute the capital city were auctioned to the highest bidders. One-fourth of the purchase price

was to be paid down and the remainder was to be paid in three six-month installments. In each case the purchaser was required to sign a promissory note. But expectations outran the realization. At the August sale 103 lots were sold for the sum of \$17,292.75; at the October sale 106 lots were sold but for only \$11,887. Of the total purchase price the Territory received \$7105 in cash and \$19,634.75 in notes. Other purchasers who had made bids did not consummate the sale because they failed to make the necessary cash payment. Confronted with an inadequacy of funds from the first land sales, and realizing that the most valuable lots had been disposed of and that the revenue from future sales would inevitably decrease, Chauncey Swan, the Acting Commissioner of Public Buildings at Iowa City, pleaded for legislative action.

In January, 1840, the Second Legislative Assembly attempted to balance finances by limiting the cost of completing the capitol. Foreseeing the small income from the sale of lots, the legislators authorized the Acting Commissioner to adopt a plan for a public building that would not cost more than \$51,000. The special session of the Second Legislative Assembly, however, approached the problem of attempting to raise more money by extending the sale of lots. In July, 1840, the Gov-

ernor, the Secretary, and the Acting Commissioner were directed to "equalize the value of the unsold lots" and "affix to each lot a specific value, in proportion to its situation, so as not to reduce the aggregate value of the whole below the average sum of three hundred dollars per lot". In compliance with this statute Governor Lucas, on July 24, 1840, proclaimed that a public sale should be held at the capital city on August 31st.

It appears, however, that the sale failed to stimulate enthusiasm. The price of the lots was still too high. Realizing that some purchasers could not be present on the date of the public sales, the Territorial officials arranged for purchase by private entry. Between July, 1840, and February, 1841, only thirty-eight lots were sold for the sum of \$7077. All these transactions were made by private entry.

The sale of these lots casts an interesting sidelight upon the history of the frontier capital. On September 1, 1840, Walter Butler bought lot six in block eighty, situated on the northeast corner of Clinton and Washington streets. This location came to be one of the most advantageous in the city. Just across from Capitol Square it soon became a focal point of traffic. Interesting, too, is the fact that Walter Butler built on this corner the frame building which later housed the Fourth

Legislative Assembly of Iowa while the lawmakers awaited the completion of the Stone Capitol. Butler paid eight hundred dollars for this choice lot.

During the following months two other valuable lots just off Capitol Square (one on Clinton Street between Washington Street and Iowa Avenue and one on Iowa Avenue just off Clinton Street) were sold for eight and seven hundred dollars each. Probably these locations had remained unsold during the first land sales because of the prospective high price in competitive bidding. Fixed valuations attracted purchasers.

It was at this time also that Governor Lucas became interested in Iowa City real estate. On January 1, 1841, the Governor purchased all of block twenty and half of block twenty-four. This tract lay between Washington Street and Iowa Avenue, four blocks east of Capitol Square. The Governor must have expected the town to develop in that direction for his lots were on low land along meandering Ralston Creek. For the twelve lots he paid only \$530.

With these exceptions few lots were sold. Indeed, the year 1840 was a gloomy one for Iowa City. Progress on the capitol building was slow. The sale of lots had not produced the necessary funds to insure completion of the public buildings.

On November 1, 1840, Chauncey Swan, in his annual report to the legislature, suggested "the propriety of so reducing the minimum price of lots unsold, that they will meet with a ready sale, and create a fund sufficient to complete the capitol without delay, as it has been ascertained by fair experiment that the money cannot be realized for that purpose at the present prices." The Commissioner had already taken the responsibility for exchanging Iowa City lots for material and labor to be expended upon the capitol. But that expedient had likewise been of little avail.

The Legislative Assembly later reduced the minimum price for lots to two hundred dollars, and a Territorial Agent utilized scrip as a means for carrying on the work — both without success. When the Territory of Iowa passed into Statehood the capitol building was still unfinished.

The sale of lots in August, 1840, appears to have been one of the most decisive occasions in Territorial finance. Lots with fixed values were offered for sale but nobody came to purchase. Out of such experiences and defeats the pioneers of Iowa evolved a Commonwealth. They proceeded by trial and error. But with perseverance they achieved success out of failure.

JACK T. JOHNSON

The Menace of the Blue-stem

A century ago the Iowa song would not have been in praise of corn. Beyond the wooded valleys, where the rolling prairie extended for miles and miles without a sign of human habitation, the queen of the landscape was the luxuriant blue-stem grass. When the first settlers came, pushing their way westward over the trackless sod, the undulating sea of blue-stem grass, as high as a horse's back, stretched away to the horizon. It was, indeed, a subject for enthusiastic acclaim, as it waved in regal splendor through the summer months. Ripened by the August sun and withered by the autumn frost, the dry grass was crushed to earth by the winter snow, but in the spring it sprang up again from roots strongly imbedded in the rich soil.

In 1854 W. J. Silvers, A. J. Barr, and two other land seekers on their way from Illinois to Kansas stopped at Mitchellville and, impressed by the vast expanse of rich farming land, decided to alter their plans and see Iowa first. Taking a northwesterly course, they came to the site of Nevada, occupied by only one log house at that time. There they traded a wild turkey they had caught

for a loaf of bread. Going on, to the present location of Story City, they found not even a cabin, but encountered an old trapper who said there was good land over on the Boone River.

Accordingly, they started across the big prairie in the southern part of Hamilton County. There was no road. Some traveler or hunter had gone that way previously and tied rags to tall stalks of gum weed. These were the only marks along the trail. They crossed the Boone River at a ford near the site of what was later known as Bone's mill.

"Coming out upon the prairie west of the timber," Mr. Silvers reminisced in J. W. Lee's *History of Hamilton County*, "we saw a sight never to be forgotten — the land covered with a luxuriant growth of grass, known as the blue-stem. It grew tall as a man could reach. I said to the boys, 'This is good enough for me, I guess I won't go any farther'. We could have our pick of the land as it all belonged to Uncle Sam and he only wanted \$1.25 per acre."

Having acquired a quarter section, Mr. Silvers returned to Illinois to fetch his family. Conveyed in a heavy wagon drawn by six yoke of oxen, they did not arrive until October and, consequently, the hastily constructed log cabin could not be thoroughly weather-proofed. Adequate protection from the severe cold was impossible. Both

Mr. and Mrs. Silvers froze their feet, while inside the cabin, that winter. Cold and other hardships, however, were the expected lot of the pioneer.

Distressing as were many of the circumstances of early settlement, nothing was more frightful than prairie fires. Pestilence, drought, floods, cyclones, blizzards, grasshoppers, and Indians were dreaded, but the flames that swept through the dry grass devastated fields, burned homes, and left families more helpless than any other calamity. Mr. Silvers did not escape this terrible experience. "I had all my fence burned twice by prairie fires," he remembered, "and barely saved my house and stable by hard work."

J. L. E. Peck, a pioneer lawyer of Primghar who began practice there in 1877, grew up on the prairies of Iowa. His observations on conditions during the settlement of the northwest part of the State carry the weight of excellent authority. In regard to prairie fires and their dire results, he wrote in his history of O'Brien County: "The yearly burning of the heavy annual growth of grass on the prairie, which had occurred from time immemorial, either from natural cause or from being set by human hands, was continued after the white settlers came in, and was a source of much annoyance, apprehension and, frequently, of severe loss. From the time the grass would burn,

which was soon after the first frost, usually about the first of October, till the surrounding prairie was all burned over, or if not all burnt, till green grass in the spring had grown sufficiently to prevent the rapid progress of the fire, the settlers were continually on the watch, and, as they usually expressed the idea, 'sleeping with one eye open'. When the ground was covered with snow, or during rainy weather, the apprehension was quieted and both eyes could be closed with safety."

The settlers resorted to various means of protection against the menace of the prairie blue-stem. A common practice was to plow several furrows on each side of a strip of prairie sod around buildings or fields and then burn the grass in the furrow-bounded zone. Sometimes, however, the prairie did not burn in the fall and spring fires were likely to cross the protective strip unless it was freshly burned. If conditions were favorable, therefore, settlers sometimes fired the prairie beyond the outer furrows and reserved the protective strip for the following summer when both old and new grass would burn.

Another method of safeguarding premises was to backfire by lighting the grass near the buildings, stamping out the blaze as it approached, and controlling the outward spread as the flames

moved slowly against the wind. This was the best defense in the path of a prairie fire, sending a small blaze to meet the general conflagration, but it was a dangerous thing to do when the prairie was not already on fire.

All these precautions took time and labor. The early settler was busy beyond all conception of a generation used to automatic machinery and the conveniences of an established community. There was usually no time for doing what would now seem to be a task as easy as it was desirable. Moreover, protective measures were sometimes futile. "A prairie fire, driven by a high wind, would often leap all barriers and seem to put human efforts at defiance. When a fire had passed through a prairie, leaving the long lines of side fires, like two armies facing each other, the sight at night was grand; if one's premises were securely protected, he could enjoy such a fine exhibition hugely, but if the property was exposed, the sublimity of the scene was lost in the apprehension of danger."

The menace of prairie fires was so generally recognized that the State legislature provided in the *Code of 1851* that any person who "wilfully or without using proper caution set fire to" the prairie and thereby injured or destroyed the property of another person might be fined \$500, im-

prisoned in jail a year, or both. In 1862 a penalty of \$100 fine or thirty days in jail was prescribed for any one convicted of setting fire to the prairie and "allowing such fire to escape from his control, between the first day of September in any year, and the first day of May following". Men did not like to prosecute their neighbors, however, and the penalties were seldom inflicted, though fires were often set and frequently got out of control. Not dangerous to buildings on the windward side, because a fire moving against the wind could easily be extinguished, a grass fire was a serious hazard to neighbors on the leeward side.

An illustration of this danger occurred near Hook's Point (now Stratford) in 1871. A man was burning some stubble. Possibly through neglect, the fire got beyond his control and swept toward the north and east. The Patrick McPhillips home in Independence Township, some five and one-half miles east of Webster City, lay directly in the path of the fire. Mr. McPhillips was sick with ague and could do nothing to avert the destruction of his small house and perhaps the death of himself and family. Night was approaching and all seemed lost. At this juncture, however, a neighbor who was outside the track of the fire rushed to the rescue with a team and breaking plow. Quickly a furrow was made around the

house and grain stacks. About twenty-five feet from this he plowed a double furrow, and then burned the grass between. This proved to be an effective barrier against the flames. The cattle and horses were hastily driven out, took to their heels, and successfully outran the flames. The hay-covered barn burned, however, and two hogs perished in it. The flames illuminated the place as light as day. Oddly enough, this conflagration occurred on the same night that Mrs. O'Leary's cow kicked over the lantern and started the Chicago fire.

Helen Welch (later Mrs. J. N. Garth) wrote a description of this disastrous fire in Hamilton County to her cousin in Massachusetts. Her letter is characteristic of a young woman, reared in the East, who came to Iowa in the early days with all the youthful enthusiasm and courage of the founders of the prairie Commonwealth.

The Welch family bought land in Cass Township, Hamilton County, in 1869. Helen Welch lived in this community until the time of her death in 1892. "On the first night of the Chicago fire," she wrote to her cousin, "there was here the most horrid prairie fire that I ever witnessed. We expected to be burnt out, as it was a very windy night. About dusk we noticed a terrible prairie fire sweeping across the prairie, but thought it

might run farther east than it did. We saw it was coming near the home of a widow that lives three-quarters of a mile east of us, and the men all went to try to protect her buildings. They succeeded in doing so, with great work.

"One part of the fire started up about a mile south of her house, and went by her house like a streak of lightning, faster than a horse could run. She had a pile of potatoes and the fire baked part of them, half way through."

There was still danger that the fire might spread westward. The men began mowing, raking, and burning the grass around the Welch homestead, but about one o'clock in the morning a shower extinguished the flames.

"This fire started twenty-two miles away," reported Miss Welch, "and it burned out a great many people's stables and grain stacks. One man, seeing it coming, took all his furniture out of the house, and put it where he thought it would be safer than in the house, and it all burned up while the house was saved."

"Imagine the feelings of a man", wrote J. L. E. Peck, "who, alone in a strange land, after building a very modest homestead shanty" and harvesting his crops, "has his premises surrounded by a sea of standing grass, dry as tinder, stretching away for miles in every direction, over which the wild

prairie wind howls a dismal requiem, and knowing that a spark or match applied in all that distance will send a sea of fire wherever the wind may waft it". The settler would also be "conscious of the fact that there are men who would embrace the first opportunity to set fire from outside their own fields, regardless of whom it might consume," if their own property would be protected.

Single prairie fires have been known to burn over a quarter of a county and spread to adjoining land. The next day the whole area "would look like one drapery of death in mock funeral destruction, with the black ashes or dust moving in the heavens in streamers of black smoke". It was a spectacle never to be seen after the prairie blue-stem was gone.

"Conceive of grass from eight inches to five feet high," wrote Mr. Peck, "then apply the principle that heat rises and creates its own wind even on a still day; then add to that a high wind; then picture what havoc fire can do; then add the haystacks, bursting in air, which gave proof through the night that those stacks were still there; then get the conception of the fact that many prairies stretched for thirty or more unimpeded miles, and that a high wind would carry this seething, roaring, consuming fire and mass of flames often ten to fifteen feet high, with dense smoke and cinders

flying all over and high in the air, all piling flame after flame, and actually going as fast as a horse can run." In tall slough grass the fire sounded "like the rumbling of distant thunder" and lighted the sky on a dark night "like the Aurora Borealis".

Haystacks were particularly vulnerable and, once ablaze, facilitated the spread of the fire. Homesteaders and hay companies cut the blue-stem grass and cured hundreds of tons of wild hay. The stacks were scattered over the unoccupied prairie, partly for convenience and partly for protection against fire. It was safer to leave the hay out on the prairie, each stack protected by a circle of plowed ground, than to bring it all into the barnyard. When a haystack caught on fire, bunches of blazing grass would be carried high into the air and sail away to start new fires wherever the burning embers fell.

Loss of property was not the worst feature of the most dreaded calamity that overtook the early settlers. The danger of persons being caught with no means of escape was a constant threat. The pages of pioneer history are full of such tragedies.

On October 1, 1859, Robert and Margaret Caraway, with their baby, were returning to their farm home northeast of Alden in Hardin County, after a visit to the neighbors. Suddenly they no-

ticed a prairie fire coming toward them, driven by a strong wind. Though they ran for safety, Mrs. Caraway's clothing caught on fire and she was badly burned. After weeks of suffering she recovered, but the fire left deep scars. Her face was seamed and her fingers drawn and twisted. Mrs. Veda Caraway Long of Webster City, granddaughter of the injured woman, never forgot the scars on her grandmother's face.

The Schweringen family, consisting of father, mother, and three children, left their Ohio home in 1860 to locate on a claim north of Duncombe in Webster County. They left Nevada one beautiful Indian-summer morning in October, hoping to reach their new home the next day. They drove along happily, apparently oblivious of distant smoke in the air, or mistaking it for autumnal haze. They reached the southwest corner of section ten in Milford Township, Story County, and were traveling through a ravine when a raging prairie fire leaped through the tall dry grass and enveloped the wagon. The family made futile efforts to escape, but heat and suffocation overcame them, and the mother and two children perished there by the wagon. One child must have crept away, for its skull was found on the prairie the next spring. Mr. Schweringen, suffering fearfully from burns, managed to crawl to a house over a mile away,

where he was tenderly cared for. His burns were so serious, however, that he died the next day. On May 29, 1938, a bronze marker was placed, with appropriate ceremonies, at the grave of the Schweringens, whose remains were buried in the Sheffield Cemetery, some five miles southeast of Story City. In a broader sense this particular monument is a memorial to the courage and hardship of the pioneers who risked their lives in taming the wilderness of grass. Many were the sacrifices to the inflammability of the luxuriant blue-stem.

BESSIE L. LYON

Comment by the Editor

PARTY OR PERSON

Before 1840, political party affiliations of Iowa voters were more hypothetical than effective. No doubt the pioneers brought to the frontier political predilections they had formed in eastern States where national politics influenced suffrage more decisively. A man counted himself a Democrat or a Whig more by habit than in principle. Newspaper editors indicated their party preference but not very emphatically. They were inclined to deplore the injection of national issues into local politics. And, as Delegate W. W. Chapman explained, party conflict at home might jeopardize Territorial interests in Congress.

Biographers and historians, in their zeal for classification, have labelled the early public officials of Iowa as Whigs or Democrats. In many instances such designations might have been acquired after 1840 and projected into the earlier years on an assumption of political consistency. There were no precise tests of party membership before the nominating conventions and Tippecanoe clubs were organized in the campaign of Harrison against Van Buren. Though Iowans

could not vote for President, they were affected by national conditions and participated in the partisan demonstrations. But in spite of barbecues, torch-light parades, hard cider, "Tippecanoe and Tyler too", party affiliation had relatively little effect in the election of local officials.

Various factors contributed to independent voting. Over the vital problems of law enforcement, land titles, and community improvements there were no sharp differences of opinion. Rivalry over the location of county seats and other special advantages, which was translated into political action, was more geographical than partisan. The principal issue in early Iowa elections pertained to the personal reputation of the candidates. Inasmuch as there were no party or official ballots, each voter was obliged to designate his favorite candidate for each office. Straight-ticket voting was impossible. And in the computation of political assets, such virtues as integrity, diligence, thrift, friendliness, and piety were much more valuable than party affiliation.

J. E. B.

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