

THE PALIMPSEST

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At the End of Their Rope

A part of the public park system of the city of Council Bluffs embraces the remainder of what in early days was called "Big Lake", a body of water which, in 1853, was in the neighborhood of a mile and one-half long and from one-half to three-fourths of a mile wide. It was in fact the old bed of the Missouri River abandoned by the stream about the year 1832, when what was known to river men as "Hart's Cutoff" was formed nearly a mile to the westward. Between the new channel and the abandoned river bed was left a strip of land locally known as "the island", covered by a dense growth of cottonwood, willow, and other trees, underbrush, and wild grape vines, making an ideal habitat for wild turkeys, rabbits, and quail. A few bobcats and lynxes also dwelt therein, while coons, skunks, wolves, foxes, and other animals common to the locality abounded, making the tract a favorite hunt-

ing ground for the nimrods of the then small city and vicinity.

One Saturday morning, after a moderate snow fall late in the autumn of 1860, two well-grown school boys left the City Hotel to spend a holiday hunting on the island and in the vicinity of the lake. Late in the afternoon, having traversed the island and rounded the northern end of the lake, they began their homeward journey, hunting through the rough hills bordering the eastern side of the lake, and near the close of the day entered a broad ravine thickly wooded with small burr oak and other trees. About half way through this ravine, and only little more than a mile from home, they came upon a number of horses tethered to the branches of the trees, the indications being that they had been there for several days and had been well cared for. Boys to the manner born, they instantly recognized the fact that they had come upon a horse thief's hiding place. They were sufficiently discreet to know that, although no human being was to be seen, it would be well not to seem too curious, so apparently without paying great attention to the horses, they hastened to the hotel and informed the landlord of their discovery. He immediately communicated the information to the city marshal, who was also a deputy sheriff.

It was too late to do anything about the matter that night, but the marshal summoned a posse of three citizens good and true and made preparation

for a very early move the following morning. Accordingly at break of day the deputy and his posse, with one of the boys for a guide, started for the thieves' rendezvous. Upon arrival there they found that the quarry had fled during the night with all the booty. The trail led out to the lake and along its eastern and southern shore to the south end of the island where it entered the shallow water lying between the river bank and a sand bar some three hundred yards distant, thence across the bar and into the rapid channel. Through the deep water the thieves had evidently swum the horses to the Nebraska shore. This dangerous course was adopted by them to avoid the town of Omaha on the south and Florence at the north.

From this point the boy guide returned to his home, while the deputy and posse went down to the ferry between Omaha and Council Bluffs, crossed the river, and soon afterward picked up the trail of the thieves which led westward over the first line of hills and then turned to the north. Obviously the scoundrels were heading for the Indian country near Blackbird Hills at which place the Omaha Indian agency was then located. After passing far enough north to avoid the town of Florence the trail returned to the river bank just above the village of Fort Calhoun, and about two miles farther on it terminated. The thieves had gone into camp, prepared and eaten breakfast, rolled up in their blankets, and gone to sleep. It was in this condition that

they were discovered by the deputy and his posse. They were awakened and disarmed, and with the recovered horses the deputy and posse soon afterward began the return journey to Council Bluffs, where they arrived early in the evening.

While the horses were being put away at the livery stable some one asked the deputy if he had brought in the thieves. He replied laconically, "No, we didn't bring 'em in, but we know where they are."

A few days later a hunter arriving at the village of Fort Calhoun reported having seen the bodies of three men hanging in a tree a mile or two above town. Investigation proved his report to be true. The coroner attended to the obsequies without inquiring too closely as to why, when, or by whom the men had been hanged, and thus the episode, not an unusual one for the time, was closed.

The stolen horses were all eventually restored to their owners, who were residents of southern Iowa and northern Missouri. And the boy who helped trail the thieves never forgot that thrilling experience.

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