

THE PALIMPSEST

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The Passing of Homer

Homer. What a name for a town! It seems to conjure up a vision of a well-ordered city, with close-cropped lawns and beautiful homes, churches overgrown with ivy, a good library, and modern, well-equipped schools.

All of this classical suggestiveness in the name of Homer vanishes, however, in view of the reality: five or six small houses scattered indiscriminately along the road, numerous decayed piles of wreckage that tell the tale of what was once a habitation, two wooden church buildings, and a two-story frame schoolhouse. Yonder are piles of old stones and crumbling foundations which upon closer observation appear to be the remains of two business buildings — stores of by-gone days. At the northern extremity of the town is “the store” of the present — a building of indifferent appearance devoted to the needs of casual country shoppers and the Odd Fellows lodge.

The Homer of to-day is an incarnation of the commonplace, but the ramshackle appearance of the place is in itself indicative of better days. Though at present it is a mere dot upon the surface of Iowa it has had possibilities — possibilities that are gone like “the glory that was Greece” and “the grandeur that was Rome”.

Webster County, embracing the territory formerly included in Yell and Risley counties, was established by the State legislature in January, 1853. It was not until the following fall, however, that Homer, the first county seat, was located and platted near the geographical center of the new county. Early in 1854 David Carroll built the first log house in town. It was said to be about sixteen feet square — large enough to accommodate his family and household goods. Soon afterward Granville Burkley, the first postmaster in the county, built another house, which constituted not only his dwelling, but served as a post office also. It is reported that he kept the mail in a box under his bed, and those who called were free to examine the contents for themselves. By 1856 the population of Homer amounted to approximately six hundred people.

The first postmaster, Granville Burkley, seems to have been a versatile man. He practiced law, taught school, and upon occasion he turned carpenter. It was he who erected the first schoolhouse in Homer, and whether he did not build according to the specifications — as many later contractors for school

buildings have been known to do — or whatever was wrong, the people refused to accept the building and Burkley declared that school should not be held there. No doubt sundry small boys hoped that the key would never be surrendered, but a compromise was reached and the new schoolhouse was used in the winter of 1854 and 1855.

After the General Assembly had created Webster County, an election was ordered to be held on the first Monday in April, 1853. The polls were located at the home of William Pierce, and whether his fellow voters felt so grateful to him for his hospitality or whether he had exceptional judicial capacity, at all events Mr. Pierce became the first county judge.

This election was merely to fill the county offices until the regular general election on August 1, 1853, and the records attest that the judge and treasurer received the salary of \$12.50 each for their four months' service.

The first record of Judge Pierce's official career was the issuance of a marriage license to John J. Holmes and Emily Lyon, on May 14, 1853. Holmes was a doctor over at Fort Dodge, and pretty Emily was a cousin of my father. Could Judge Pierce have foreseen the end of this ill-starred marriage, he might have felt that it was an omen of ill luck for the town. The marriage was a failure, and the fate of Homer was worse than failure — it was a tragedy.

Court was held in the schoolhouse at the new

county seat, and many an interesting session not pertaining to pedagogy must have taken place in the house of learning. As the first county attorney, Granville Burkley probably enjoyed pleading cases in the schoolhouse, the possession of whose keys he had so stoutly defended.

The district judge was C. J. McFarland — a man who evidently had a profound respect for the prerogatives of his office. There is a story current among the old-timers who knew him that one hot summer day he held court outside of the schoolhouse under the shade trees. In the midst of the session, a severe thunder storm came up suddenly, and the court attachés were about to run to shelter when Judge McFarland issued the following mandate: "God Almighty reigns above, and Judge McFarland reigns below. The business of the court will proceed!"

Far back in the early fifties Homer shone as a bright star on the western horizon. It was the best known town in northern Iowa, probably because the land office was located there. Toward this embryo city the people of the eastern States wended their way, by whatever method of locomotion was available.

A story is told of J. W. Silvers and a company of men who were en route from central Illinois to Kansas. The party had traveled as far as Mitchellville. There they stopped to dine and during the course of the meal they were told of the wonderful country to

the northwest up near Homer. The next morning Mr. Silvers and his party changed their course and in a short time reached the Boone River country. "Coming out on the prairie west of the timber we saw a sight never to be forgotten — the land covered with a luxuriant growth of grass, known as 'blue stem'. It grew tall as a man could reach. I said to the boys 'This is good enough for me'. . . . We had our pick of the land, as it all belonged to Uncle Sam, and he only wanted \$1.25 an acre for it."

A pioneer woman of Sac County journeyed with her parents from Pennsylvania, expecting to locate at Homer. An elder brother who had preceded the family had started a store there, and glowing accounts of the prospects of the town made them all anxious to reach the place. Having come as far as Rock Island by rail they were compelled to travel the rest of the way with ox teams. Bad roads and storms impeded their progress. To add to this discouragement they lost their way between Boone and Homer. While they were wondering what they should do, along came a man who advised them to go with him to Sac County. Accordingly they turned away from their original destination and, setting out with their new friend who knew the country, they settled in Sac County. Thus, while Homer was a place of sufficient prominence to attract the eastern settler, immigrants not infrequently stopped by the wayside or were guided elsewhere by circumstance.

The stage ran weekly between Des Moines and

Homer, by way of Boone. With the prairies often soaked by rain and with only trails to follow, staging was difficult and slow. Many a traveler preferred the safe method of walking to doubtful progress by stage. The mail, however, was an important item of the stage driver's load, and though passengers might be obliged to get out and walk, Uncle Sam's mail had to be carried safely across slough and stream. As late as the sixties the stage was the only recognized means of regular travel between Homer and Des Moines.

I have heard my mother relate that during the Civil War one of her cousins, whose husband was an officer in the Union army, came to visit at her home on White Fox Creek, some five miles north of Webster City. When the guest was ready to return, mother said that she and her younger brother took her to Homer in the farm wagon. They started early in the morning, drove over fifteen miles, and arrived long before the time for the stage to depart. Having seen the lady safely started on her journey, they got the mail, and drove home before dark. Only one generation ago a drive of thirty miles with a farm team and lumber wagon was counted a rare privilege!

Homerites were quite content with their populous and flourishing town in 1855. Homesteaders were coming from the East in ever increasing numbers. Fort Dodge, a frontier fort and trading post about twenty miles up the Des Moines River, had been

practically abandoned in 1853. Webster City, then indicated on the map as "Newcastle", was only a tiny settlement about ten miles across country on the Boone River. With Fort Dodge *ex officio* dead and the few scattered log cabins of Newcastle negligible, the future of Homer seemed assured.

About this time, however, Fort Dodge revived, boosters came, and before the inhabitants of Homer were aware of danger the land office had been removed to Fort Dodge. Many of the progressive citizens of Homer followed. What a furor it caused! From that time Fort Dodge and Homer became deadly rivals.

But even with Fort Dodge booming, well-advertised Homer still attracted settlers. Some, it is said, looked over Des Moines, traveled on, and invested in Homer town lots. About this time the firm of Snell and Butterworth started a wholesale store in Homer, speculated in land, built a mill, sold lots, and such was their wealth, coupled with shrewd business capacity, that they came near owning and conducting the town.

Just when Homer was at the height of its glory, when grand preparations were afoot for a brickyard, a wholesale grocery establishment, and other municipal projects, there came another note of warning from Fort Dodge. It was no less a proposition than to remove the county seat from Homer to Fort Dodge. The people of Homer were amazed at the preposterous notion. Had there been a political

Napoleon in Webster County to swoop down upon the Fort Dodge forces and keep them separated from those of Newcastle, the whole history of that section of the State might have been changed. As it was, Fort Dodge and Newcastle united on the issue and the seat of government was transferred to Fort Dodge. It might be added that in all probability the two towns have never been harmonious since.

Elderly pioneers, who as small boys helped stuff the ballot boxes in the election on the removal of the county seat, assert that there is some truth in the legend concerning a famous wrestling match which formed a sequel to the county seat contest. One version has it that Attorney John D. Maxwell of Homer accused the Fort Dodge faction of corrupt practices in the election. Thereupon John F. Duncombe, prime booster for Fort Dodge and future father-in-law of William S. Kenyon, returned the charge and accepted a challenge to wrestle it out. Maxwell was tall, sinewy, and powerful while Duncombe was skilled in the technique of wrestling. No one remembers the details of the contest but there seems to be no doubt that Duncombe came out on top. He lived to see Fort Dodge become one of the important cities of the State. As for Maxwell, it is related that he recognized the significance of his defeat, "spit on his fire, called his dog," and moved to Newcastle where he became a prominent figure.

Meanwhile the village of Newcastle grew, and adopted the more ambitious name of Webster City.

Within a year from the time that Fort Dodge became the county seat of Webster County the State legislature created Hamilton County and, quite overlooking the pride and claims of Homer — a former county seat — designated Webster City as the seat of justice. Poor broken remnant of a village of classical name. Well might it cry, "O tempora, O mores!"

Finally, climax of catastrophies, the railroad went through Webster City and Fort Dodge. Stranded, ten miles from the railroad, its business gone and its citizens leaving, Homer simply shriveled up. Year by year it has decayed and disintegrated until now — a few scattered houses, a group of old tumble down buildings, a wooden schoolhouse — these are all that remain. Homer, its early visions of greatness gone (there is not even a Standard Oil station in town), is just a bit of wreckage on the historical horizon.

BESSIE L. LYON