

## Three Early Taverns

Around the big bend of the Mississippi steamed the side-wheel packet, the *Gypsy*, upstream to the mud bank landing of the little settlement of Bloomington, now Muscatine, Iowa. The year was 1839. The passengers on deck bound for the newly created Territory of Iowa saw the brush and timber-covered bluff and ravines and, scattered among the cottonwood and oak trees on the slope of the hill and along the shore, some twenty-five or thirty shanties and log cabins almost hidden by the foliage. A rough and uneven road half concealed by the hazel bushes at its sides stretched along what is now Front Street.

Stumps upon the river front served as seats for the townspeople who, hearing the hoarse throaty whistle of the approaching steamboat, came down to the shore curious to see the new arrivals. The deep toned bell of the *Gypsy* rang out as the boat warped into the landing and the gang plank was thrust out upon the mud bank for the eager newcomers to go ashore.

A passenger landing here and asking for a tavern would probably be directed to fat, jolly Bob Kinney, who occupied the largest stump along the bank, and be told that he was the owner of the Iowa House which stood some sixty feet to the north.

Robert C. Kinney, a rotund, pleasant old fellow,

was the first landlord of Bloomington. He had constructed the rear part of his tavern, a story and a half frame structure, in 1836. This building, about sixteen by thirty feet in size, contained three rooms below and three above, and stood well back on the lot.

In two years increased business, due largely to the steady arrival of immigrants to the new country, made it necessary for Kinney to enlarge the Iowa House. Accordingly, he added a front part some thirty by forty feet in size and two stories high, built at right angles to the rear portion. This addition filled the lot to the street.

A two-story veranda extended along the entire front, the lower porch up some four feet from the ground and reached by a flight of steps in the center. This porch became a favorite loafing place because the cool breezes off the river swept it of an evening and it commanded an unobstructed view of the broad curve of the Mississippi, the wooded island down stream, and the green, brush-covered Illinois shore opposite. Usually the ladies occupied the upper porch, while the men on the lower part smoked, told stories, and slapped mosquitoes.

The entire structure, both the new and old parts, was built largely of lumber prepared near the site. The floors, doors, and window frames were made of sawed lumber; the lath, shingles, studding, siding, and rafters were split or hewn from large oak trees which had grown nearby. It was the stumps of

these trees which afforded comfortable seats for the townspeople who came down to view the boats and the river.

The popular landlord of the Iowa House was fat and lazy but big-hearted and generous, and his boarders — nearly all the unmarried doctors, lawyers, and merchants of Bloomington — delighted in playing tricks on him for the fun of getting him excited. The knives and forks at the Iowa House were the common iron type then in use. If one of the tines of the two-tined forks became bent or blunt some one of the boys would jab it up under the bottom of the table top and there let it stick. Then he would call for another one. The lumbering innkeeper, finding that his forks were disappearing, would drawl, "Gor Almighty, Meriah, what got all the forks?"

Kinney set as good a table as the times would permit. Bacon, beans, and bread were staple dishes and occasionally apple sauce added a pleasant variety. He had neither stove nor range; all the cooking was done in a large stone fireplace in the house and in a baking oven located in the back yard. He gave notice that a meal was ready by ringing a bell which hung in a sort of a chicken coop arrangement on top of the tavern. The clang of the dinner bell brought the boarders pell mell into the dining room and at the same time served as a sort of town clock for the settlement.

Another favorite trick of the young men of Bloom-

ington was to remove this bell under cover of darkness and to hide it in the brush. Great was the glee at the excited outburst of the landlord when he pulled the bell rope the next morning and heard no resulting clang.

Whenever an itinerant minister came along Bob Kinney threw open his doors and permitted the free use of his tavern for a religious service. Likewise, he permitted the few travelling exhibitions or shows to use his dining room for an amusement hall. His tavern, too, was always open as a hospital for the sick who needed the special care and attention of the bachelor doctors who boarded with him. Fat and clumsy though he was, Bob Kinney had a generous heart and sacrificed his own income to help those in need.

Dances also were held in the old Iowa House, the quadrille being the favorite although the "Virginia Reel", the "French Four" and "Money Musk" were likewise popular. One Bloomington young dandy of 1840 trapped muskrats to get money enough to buy him a fashionable outfit to attend the cotillion parties at Kinney's tavern.

He bought broadcloth, mouse colored, for the coat, and the local tailor made him a stylish garment of the claw hammer pattern with long wide padded tails. His waistcoat was a double breasted effect in black satin, quite fancy; his trousers, light colored and tight fitting, spread at the ankles in the so-called spring bottom style and fastened under his calf skin

boots with a strap. A standing collar reaching up to his ears, tied around with a black silk stock, and a tall gray beaver hat completed his stylish attire. Little did he begrudge the two dollars he had to pay for his ticket the first time he wore the suit, for he knew that his chances would be good to dance every tune even though there were only two women for every three men.

The Iowa House offered few of the accommodations of the modern hotel. Three or more beds occupied each room and they were not considered filled unless at least two people slept in each. Oftentimes they held three. No screens kept out the mosquitoes and flies, and bathing facilities were crude. It is related that a stranger arrived and stayed over night. In the morning he asked landlord Kinney where he might wash. Bob inquired if he had a handkerchief. The roomer replied that he had. Whereupon Bob drawled, "Wall, thar's the river, wash thar, and wipe on your handkerchief."

In the early '40's Kinney decided to abandon the more or less unprofitable business of keeping an inn and arranged to rent his tavern to Captain William Fry. Feeling that he should have an iron-clad lease drawn up, Bob went to his lawyer boarder, S. C. Hastings, and stated his requirements. Hastings, seeing a chance to square up a goodly portion of his unpaid board bill, took up the job. He covered several pages of legal cap with old English law terms, then read the finished product to Kinney. It suited

the latter entirely who seemed to like its legal verbiage and he accepted the document. Thus Hastings paid, some say \$25, others \$50, of his long overdue board bill, and Kinney turned over his Iowa House, Bloomington's first hostelry, to a new landlord.

If the newcomer to Bloomington in 1839 was dissatisfied with the accommodations and hospitality at Bob Kinney's tavern he could walk one block east and another north to the Lawson House located on what is now the corner of Iowa Avenue and Second Street.

This house, the second tavern in Bloomington, had been erected in 1837 for John Vanatta by William Gordon and half a dozen workmen who boarded at the Iowa House during the time of construction. Oak timber for this building was cut on and near the site where it stood. The shingles, weatherboards, framing timbers, and floors all were of oak hand-hewn.

When completed, the house was a two-story affair about twenty by forty feet in size with a one-story kitchen forming an L at the rear. A double porch ran the entire length of the building on the Avenue side, the upper part being sheltered by the projecting roof of the house. The porch and roof over it were supported by plain posts, and a railing ran along the front and sides of the upper veranda. There were doors above and below with windows on either side fronting the Avenue, and another door,

on the corner near Second Street, afforded an entrance on that side. A square wooden post with chamfered corners stood on the street corner supporting a lantern which burned fish or whale oil. All in all the new tavern with its light post sign was the most pretentious effect in the little town and the residents pointed with pride to their new hostelry.

John Vanatta, a large, heavily built man who had been a captain in the Black Hawk War, opened a tavern in the new building as soon as it was completed. However, he soon grew tired of the position of landlord and rented his hotel. In 1839 Josiah Parvin secured the Lawson House and began to give Bob Kinney real competition.

Parvin, a kind-hearted courteous host, ran the hotel for a year when his greatly increased business made it necessary to build a new structure to accommodate his guests. His own sociability and the friendliness of his accomplished family created a type of hospitality that brought guests to his tavern. Moreover, a table loaded with the best the times afforded soon gave his establishment a reputation that extended up and down the river and to the interior of the new Territory. Consequently, he captured the lion's share of the hotel trade of Bloomington.

Governor Lucas and his suite stopped with Landlord Parvin in 1839 when they visited the new town. The presence of the tall, dignified Governor of Iowa Territory and his staff at the Lawson House was an honor indeed and it gave the place added prestige.

It became the stopping place for all the notables who came to Bloomington.

Parvin though pleasant and kindly was also excitable, and the boys took fully as much delight in baiting him as they did his rival, Bob Kinney. All that was necessary to send Josiah into an excitable tirade was to suggest that Andrew Jackson was dishonorable. At such a time his vigorous language would attract a circle of amused listeners who would urge him on by other jibes at the Democrats.

A third hostelry of early Muscatine was the picturesque and unique tavern kept by Captain James Palmer, which became known to the trade as "Captain Jim's".

He occupied the one story frame house which stood back a little from the street, on the north side of what is now Second Street, about half way between Iowa Avenue and Chestnut Street. This building had been begun by Suel Foster and his brother, a stone mason, in 1838, but not completed for want of lumber. They had built the basement of white stone blocks blasted and quarried out of the sandstone bluff. On this solid foundation they built the framework, studding, braces, joists, and rafters of split white oak.

Judge Joseph Williams who had come to Bloomington and was looking for a home purchased the partially completed house from the Fosters and secured William Gordon, the builder of the Lawson



House, to complete the work. When completed in 1839 the house made a snug and commodious dwelling. The roof sloped down over a porch in front which was supported by plain posts or pillars, and several steps led up to this veranda.

After the house came into the possession of Captain James Palmer he ran the following notice in the *Bloomington Herald*:

A PROCLAMATION

Whereas, I, Capt. Jim, long a dispenser of food to the hungry and a couch to the weary, as well as a "horn" to the dry, having taken possession of that large and commodious house on Second street, Bloomington, Iowa, formerly the residence of His Hon. J. Williams, do hereby declare and make known to the world that I am now prepared at the sign of Capt. Jim, to accommodate those who may call upon me, in a satisfactory manner, otherwise they go scot free. That the statement may the more fully prove true, I hereby declare and make known that the following are my charges, for all of which the best the market can afford are furnished.

|                            |       |
|----------------------------|-------|
| Single meal                | 25    |
| Board per day with lodging | 75    |
| Three days, per day        | 62½   |
| Per week                   | 3 00  |
| One horse feed             | 12½   |
| Horse per night            | 25    |
| Horse per week             | 1 62½ |

All other bills in proportion. I, the said Capt. Jim, do hereby further declare to those indebted to me for eating, sleeping, drinking, or upon contract of any kind whatsoever, that unless they come forward immediately and make

settlement, Michael Scot was never in Scotland if I don't send a constable after them to bring them to "taw". So look out for Conklin or Ward.

Thankful for past favors, he hopes to receive a share of public patronage corresponding with his efforts to minister to the tastes and render comfortable those who may favor him with their patronage.

CAPT. JIM PALMER.

Captain Jim like Bob Kinney was a large fat old fellow and he was a good customer at his own bar. His place was not as quiet as the Iowa House but, nevertheless, it was a good place to stop, for the bluff old landlord treated the stranger who had no money as well as the man who had plenty. His tavern was a favorite loafing place for the boys who wanted to smoke, to swap yarns, and to get a drink, but Captain Jim, while enjoying his fun with the rest, usually kept his customers in hand.

His sign hung some twelve feet above the ground on the ugliest piece of timber obtainable, a crooked stick about eight inches in diameter. Crooked branches about twenty inches long had been left sticking out at irregular intervals to embellish the main stock. This sign of Captain Jim's was easily the most prominent object on Second Street.

Dan Rice, the old showman, relates that the first time he played Bloomington early in the forties, he stopped at "Capt. Jim's" with his troupe and arranged to give his performance in the tavern. The landlord suspicious of the showman's financial status demanded his pay in advance but agreed to

wait when Rice offered to make him doorkeeper and ticket seller for the show. Rice, therefore, proceeded to stage his exhibition.

When the show was over Rice asked Captain Jim for the money but the host hadn't a cent. He knew everybody in Bloomington and everybody knew him, and being of a generous and accommodating disposition, he did not have the heart to charge his friends admission. Consequently he had no receipts for Rice and the latter had no funds with which to pay his lodging.

Thus did the bluff old Captain along with his contemporaries dispense hospitality in the early days of Muscatine, and perhaps in some respects his tavern surpassed the others in conviviality.

These three taverns of Bloomington were typical of the early Territorial lodging places and are unique only in the fact that incidents which occurred in them have been preserved. Their fireplaces furnishing warmth and cheer on wintry evenings, their tallow dips in tin reflectors hung on the wall and affording feeble illumination, their total lack of the comforts of the modern hotels, were duplicated in every town of the Territory. Governor Lucas found no better conveniences or greater hospitality in his swing around the Territory he governed than he did at Bloomington. The taverns and their landlords everywhere were conspicuous and always played a prominent part in the pioneer drama.

BRUCE E. MAHAN