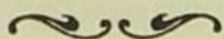


THE PALIMPSEST

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Boyhood and Youth

Almost any day on the campus of the State University of Iowa, among students and professors hurrying to and from classes, a tall gray-haired man may be seen. He walks with a firm step, and the motion of his body is almost athletic. His eyes shine as though inspired with a great vision. While he appears young, he is past eighty. He is neither a student nor a professor — although long ago he was a student and his father was a professor.

On the second floor of the building where history is studied on the Old Capitol campus, this man enters a little room which serves as his office and library. The compactness of the space is accentuated by a small collection of books and a large number of steel cases securely locked. From the steel cases several documents are taken and placed on a desk already loaded with ledgers, newspaper clippings, and cancelled checks totaling millions of dollars. A yellowing letter is sub-

jected to a scrutinizing gaze, and the fading script is traced under a magnifying glass. On one wall is a map of the principal railroads of the country. On another, hang pictures of men who look as if they belonged to a past generation. They do. Altogether the scene stimulates interest and the atmosphere suggests romance.

The man in the room is Levi O. Leonard. And the documents in the steel cases constitute one of the most remarkable collections of source material relating to railroad history in America. There the romance of the first transcontinental railroad is documented. There the fascinating financial story of the Credit Mobilier awaits revelation. And in those papers lies concealed the story of a man's life.

Levi O. Leonard was born in the middle fifties on a farm in the vicinity of the little village of Kosuth, near Burlington, Iowa. He was the first of five children. At the time of his birth his father was completing a post-graduate course at Harvard College.

In 1858, three years after the opening of the State University of Iowa, Chancellor Amos Dean recommended to the Board of Trustees that the work of the institution over which he presided be suspended in order that sufficient funds might be accumulated to keep all the departments in oper-

ation, that buildings might be erected, and that students might become qualified in preparatory schools for work in the University. Owing to the uncertainty of legislation dealing with education and the pressure of the financial crisis of the late fifties, all but the Normal Department of the University was suspended pursuant to the Chancellor's recommendation. When the institution reopened in 1860 the father of Levi O. Leonard was appointed Professor of Mathematics and Astronomy.

The Leonard family moved to Iowa City in August, 1860, and took as a residence the last house on the north side of East College Street. The place was known as the Hart House, since it belonged to Anson Hart who was then secretary of the University Board of Trustees.

"I do not remember a great deal about that first year in Iowa City", says Mr. Leonard in recalling those early days. "The presidential campaign was on and I was given a Lincoln badge which I wore on my blouse." One day when he was down town with his father a stranger accosted him: "Sonny, you are wearing the wrong emblem." The boy was puzzled; and he was still more confused when, in October, he and his father encountered a large group of people listening to a speech in a park. "There", said his father, pointing to the speaker,

"is Stephen A. Douglas who wants to be President." ♦ During the life of every individual much history is recorded in memory's storehouse.

Perhaps in this boy's life the only variations from the usual activities of boys of that time were occasional visits to his father's classes. The Old Stone Capitol was then the only building on the campus, and within its walls all of the University classes were held. There young Levi was placed on a chair near the window where he was expected to remain quiet during the class hour; but two or three girls of the class could not resist holding the "youngest member" on their knees. ♦ Trivial incidents are sometimes remembered when more significant events are forgotten.

After two years of "auditing" his father's courses, Levi Leonard entered the primary school in the Mechanics Academy. "My teacher", he says, "was Miss Amelia C. Romaine. I do not remember many of the pupils then going to school, save the three Finkbine boys, Charles, Ed, and W. O." In due time Levi was promoted to the Second Ward School which was then located in the same block, within a hundred feet of the Academy. In 1871 he entered the State University which he attended for two years. Eye trouble compelled him to give up his studies. The remedy prescribed was rest.

It was about this time that St. Joseph's School was conducting a course in deciphering telegraphy by sound. Robert Gray, the night operator at the Rock Island depot, was the instructor. The grand adventure of telegraphy and railroading was in the first act. Little wonder that Levi, attending the class, should want to see how that drama was going to unfold on the western stage. His training in telegraphy was to reward him later.

The eager youth read all the books in the library on Montana, Utah, and Wyoming. The next step was to go west. Two of Iowa City's prominent attorneys (George J. Boal and Rush Clark) and an influential business man (W. H. Hubbard) gave him letters of introduction. "It so happened that I never had an opportunity to use the letters", says Mr. Leonard, "but I have preserved them as souvenirs of the beginnings of my historical collection." ♦ Three letters of introduction became the foundation of a great collection of historical source materials.

Mr. Leonard did not go west: he went south. In the spring of 1879 the Burlington, Cedar Rapids & Northern Railroad began the survey of a branch line from Elmira through Iowa City to Riverside. The right-of-way through the city was subject to the inspection of Professor Leonard who was the local engineer. In conducting the survey

the railroad engineer welcomed the aid of the city engineer's son. Levi's interest in surveying had begun while he was a student in the University and afterward he became his father's assistant. The work on the railroad through the city took three days. On paying the young man for his services the chief engineer asked: "How would you like a position in our engineering department? I can use a young man like you." The offer was promptly accepted.

The road was soon completed to Riverside; and the next task for the engineering party was to erect an iron bridge across the river below Iowa City. This work was finished early in the fall of 1879; and when the men went to the next assignment, Levi Leonard went along.

The Louisville Bridge and Iron Company had contracted with the Cairo & Vincennes Railroad for the construction of twelve bridges over rivers and small streams in southern Illinois. One day Mr. Leonard was asked by the superintendent to take the pay roll to the main office. "Upon arriving at Louisville", recalls Leonard, "I found that General Grant was expected to stop there on his return from a trip around the world. It was a rainy morning and the streets were muddy. Grant's train was stopped on a Main Street siding about three blocks west of the Louisville Hotel.

A great crowd had assembled. The General was taken to a stand where the Governor presented him with a flag. After that he was taken to the hotel where he met a large delegation of Union and Confederate soldiers. Everything moved according to the program until the General stopped to shake hands with the men in blue and gray uniforms. Then there was a mad rush. Grant was lifted to the shoulders of two men and carried away. Everybody tried to grasp his hand. Some one in the crowd called out: "The General has two hands, one for the North and one for the South!"

Working with engineering parties was more than seeing history in the making: it was hard work. Late in the fall of 1879 it became apparent that before winter set in the last bridge would be finished. But the men were required to work on Thanksgiving; and they had to take their dinner with them. The location of the engineering party was near the little town of Vienna. At noon, in order to get out of the rain, the party climbed a hillside and prepared to eat their lunch under some overhanging rocks. "What a cheering sight met our gaze", recounts Mr. Leonard. "Our feast turned out to be cold beans, sour corn bread, and molasses. We were not very enthusiastic over that spread; and so my partner, a veteran mechanic,

ventured the opinion that it was time we were getting back to the northern country." Mr. Leonard agreed with the idea, but not with the place. He knew where to go. He had heard the white-coated philosopher Horace Greeley speak in Iowa City at the old Metropolitan Hall. ♦ What strange training lies in the background of a great vision! What we have been is sometimes what we are.

JACK T. JOHNSON