

## J. I. Cavett of Vandalia

Undoubtedly one of the most significant changes in our social order during the last three decades has been the decline of the small rural towns which played an important part in our society during the nineteenth century. This decline has been accompanied by the rapid rise of large cities. As an example of this, the proportion of the total population of the United States classified as rural by the United States census (that is, in centers of less than 2500) has declined from 54.2 per cent in 1910 to 43.5 per cent in 1940. Similarly, in Iowa this proportion declined during this same period from 69.4 per cent to 57.3 per cent. Two developments have contributed largely to this decline, namely, the automobile, which brought into being one of the most extensive and finest systems of highways in the world; and the rise of the mail-order houses. However, it is not the purpose of this article to discuss the social and economic changes which have wrought so much havoc to the rural towns and villages in the United States; rather, it is to describe one of these towns in central Iowa, two miles from where I was reared, and record some of the typical changes



that have occurred there, particularly in relation to a pioneer storekeeper.

The October 16, 1941, issue of the *Prairie City News*, published in the town of Prairie City, located seven miles from Vandalia, brought the news that J. I. Cavett, at the age of ninety-one, was closing his store in Vandalia after having spent seventy-five years of his life as a merchant in that community. In a way his experience corresponded to the rise and decline of the town he served. To three generations J. I. Cavett personified Vandalia.

According to the records, Vandalia, first called Quincy, was founded by John Quincy Deakin who, in the autumn of 1845, rode up the Indian trail on horseback from Henry County. Evidently being well impressed with this part of the Territory of Iowa, and being himself a surveyor, he took up land from the government and shortly thereafter laid out the village. Twenty years later, in 1865, Vandalia had a population of nearly 500. According to the *History of Jasper County* published in 1878, supplemented by other information, the village then had four general stores, two mills, two hotels, three blacksmith shops, two wagon shops, a plow factory, two shoe shops, a harness shop, a cooper shop, a pump factory, and a carding machine. The stagecoach on the route



from Keokuk to Omaha stopped at one of the Vandalia hotels. There was also a saloon in the town.

Now the population has shrunk to about sixty. One small general store started a few years ago is run by a grandson of Rev. George Miller who preached for many years in the village. There are no other business places.

That the early settlers wanted to keep in touch with their relatives and with other happenings of interest is evidenced by the fact that a post office was established in the village on February 17, 1848, under the name of Con. The founder of the village, John Q. Deakin, served as the first postmaster. This name was changed to Vandalia on March 13, 1856. J. I. Cavett became the postmaster on July 20, 1895, and continued in this capacity until the office was closed on March 30, 1907.

Vandalia was served by a "star route", whereby mail was brought from Des Moines twenty miles away every other day by horse-drawn vehicles. The mail carriers, among whom were included Press Adams, Jonathan Fleming, Ed Cooper, and Jim Rose, would go to Des Moines one day and return the following day with the mail. This star route was a forerunner of rural free delivery, for the mail carrier accommodated



residents who lived along the route by delivering their letters and papers in passing. Generally they would also take produce including butter and eggs to the stores in their light-weight "Democrat" wagon, and on the return trip would bring back goods along with the mail. Such mail as was not delivered en route was distributed at the post office.

It was my duty as a boy to ride my pony to the post office each Saturday afternoon to get the week's mail. Since my father was very fond of reading, we took several papers and magazines. Among those I recall were the *St. Louis Republican*, the *Kansas City Star*, and the *Farm Journal*. In this latter each month there was a little squib about Peter Tumbledown.

Mrs. E. C. Webb, who came by covered wagon from Ohio to Iowa in 1865 at the age of five, went to school in Vandalia between then and 1870. Although now eighty-one years of age, she has a most remarkable memory. "The Vandalia schoolhouse was located about where it is now", she says. "It was an old-fashioned building — one long room heated by a stove or stoves (I'm not sure which) and furnished with old-fashioned wooden benches and desks. At the time I went to school, there were about a hundred pupils enrolled, ranging in ages from beginners to grown



boys and girls twenty-one and twenty-two years old. Among the pupils enrolled were five Cavetts — Orlando, John [of whom this story is written], Nora, Oscar, and Sylvester.

“There were two teachers whose names were Shaw and McFall. All classes were in that one room, two at a time — one in each end of the building. Reading, writing, arithmetic, grammar, and spelling were most important.

“The schoolhouse was sort of a social center for Sunday school and other programs. I remember attending a Community Christmas Tree there, and seven or eight years later my sister and I with some other friends attended a large school exhibition put on by people of the community. They had a home talent negro minstrel, with good singing and orchestra music.”

At one time Vandalia was an independent school district. With the loss in population the school enrollment has of course declined, until today there is only a one-teacher school with twenty-two pupils. Since 1937 it has reverted to the jurisdiction of the school township. Back in the nineties the Vandalia school had a reputation of being difficult to manage. One of the teachers who was able to control it by one means or another was my first teacher — Frank S. Shankland, now District Judge in Des Moines.



The Baptists built a church soon after the Civil War. It is still in use and so has served the community for a long time, not only for religious services, but for a large number of funerals. Also, each year the Memorial Day services are held in this church. That was an important event in my boyhood memories — to see the church filled with people and to see the flower girls all dressed in white. One such girl was assigned to decorate the grave of each soldier buried in the cemetery. In the horse-and-buggy days, these girls marched from the church to the cemetery about one and one-half miles away. Although the village has declined in most other respects, that is not true so far as churches are concerned. A second church was built a few years ago, so the village now has two. Moreover, money was raised by subscription to rehabilitate the Baptist Church.

Probably the most important factor in the decline of Vandalia was the lack of a railroad. The early settlers hoped that the Rock Island would pass through on the way to Des Moines, but the route was located farther north through Newton and Colfax. Then there were prospects of attracting the Des Moines Valley Railroad. Indeed, during the activities preliminary to building that road, according to the county history of 1878, "a survey was made through Vandalia, from which



incident the people drew strong hope of securing the road; but in this they were doomed to disappointment, for the settled policy of the projectors of the enterprise, which was an outgrowth of the Des Moines Navigation Company, was not so much to build railroad track as to get land". Consequently a longer route was followed through Monroe and Prairie City. And when the Wabash railroad was extended to Des Moines, it followed the Des Moines River. Thus Vandalia was left between these two railroad lines, with practically no hope of ever having the benefit of that form of transportation.

The history of the village undoubtedly would have been much different had a plan for the location of the State capital been carried out. Three commissioners were appointed by the General Assembly in 1847 to select a new site as near the geographical center of Iowa as possible. After exploring several eligible places they designated a spot on "a beautiful prairie in Jasper County, between the Desmoines and Skunk rivers" about six miles northeast of Vandalia. They laid out a town called Monroe City and sold lots, but made the mistake of investing in some of the choicest locations themselves. The next General Assembly abandoned the whole project. If the seat of State government had remained there, the village of



Vandalia, which had been laid out two years before, would probably now be a suburb of the capital city.

Since Vandalia during the time of the Civil War was the largest town in that vicinity, it must have been the center of a good deal of activity. According to one historian who described the rallies held in the nearby groves during the war, the residents would go to the store and buy whole bolts of muslin which were unrolled on the grass in place of a tablecloth. Dinner was then spread on the cloth, and when the meal was over some prominent person spoke.

One enterprising writer made this statement: "In 1860 when the country called for help, not a place of its size could be found flowing with more patriotism than this little village that sent out regiment after regiment." For a village of 500 population to furnish several regiments seems to overstate the probability a trifle.

In this connection Mrs. Webb has described a Fourth of July celebration which she attended at Vandalia shortly after the Civil War. "I only remember attending one celebration of the Fourth of July at Vandalia. It was held at the west edge of Vandalia in the form of a picnic, with patriotic speeches and a brass band hired from an outside town. There was a circle swing run by horse-



power, and of course there were stands selling lemonade and other things to eat and drink. In the evening there was a platform dance. The music for dancing was furnished by a fiddler with some one to accompany him on an organ, and the caller. The platform was large enough for two sets at a time. Old and young participated. People loaded into wagons and came for miles, and there was a good crowd — I should say between five and eight hundred.”

With a population of this number it is strange that Vandalia was never incorporated. Undoubtedly there must have been a large number of smaller incorporated towns in the State. According to the 1940 census there are about forty incorporated places in Iowa with populations less than 100. Three of them in Dubuque County each have fewer than forty inhabitants. Vandalia throughout its history has been governed simply as a part of rural Des Moines Township. For many years Ed Cooper, who, like the founder of the village, John Q. Deakin, came from Henry County, was justice of the peace. Apparently he, together with the other township officials, was able to provide satisfactory local government. Ed Hayes, a farmer who lived two miles east of the village and who was much interested in the law, gave legal advice to persons in and around the village.



Obviously, the loss of the post office in 1907 was a serious blow to Vandalia. Occasionally coal mining contributed to the prosperity of the village. At one time a paper called the *Vandalia Visitor* was published monthly by Ira E. Draper, generally known as Ellis Draper. At the head of the paper was printed this statement: "Owes No Man Anything". The subscription rate was a dollar per year, and according to the records the circulation was about one thousand.

A number of physicians have been prominent in the history of Vandalia. These included Dr. H. C. Potter, who practiced in the village around 1870. According to Mrs. Webb, who remembers him, "He was a good doctor, giving of his time, night and day, to the people of the surrounding community." He was followed by Dr. Carson Kitchen, who had taught school in the village and later returned to practice medicine. As a boy I recall Dr. A. M. Norris, to whom I was frequently sent for medicine. I remember, too, that he always inquired how much money I had, planning each time to leave me five or ten cents to get candy at the store. Also, in the person of Henry Gorham the village had a resident who for many years practiced medicine to some extent but mainly ran a drug store. The house in which he lived was a most interesting one located immediately west of



the store. Just back of it was the well with two buckets on a rope and pulley for drawing the water.

Undoubtedly the most notable structure in the village was the Pulver house located on the hill east of the store. A number of years ago the Congressional Library requested for its files blueprints and descriptions of representative pioneer homes in Iowa. This house was one of eleven selected by Edgar R. Harlan for this purpose. Erected about 1857, it was a seventeen-room structure of the Swiss chalet type. It was built with wooden pegs and bolts instead of nails. The lower portion of the dwelling was constructed of stone, while the upper parts were walled-in brick with outside wood facing. Unfortunately, this fine example of pioneer architecture was destroyed by fire in 1939.

It is of interest to note that this house was occupied throughout its entire existence by the Pulver family. The builder, Daniel Pulver, was followed by his son, William, who in turn was followed by his daughter, Irma, who, with her husband, Jay McCoy, lived in the house at the time it was destroyed. Daniel Pulver was a furniture and casket maker, using solid black walnut which grew in abundance in that community. He used the first floor for his workshop and storage place for the caskets. I recall as a boy trying to keep



away from this place, which then seemed very spooky. Later, when I was a young man, my wife and I served as best man and lady at the marriage of Altha, one of William Pulver's daughters.

Such names as Wagner, Danner, Thompson, Hourine, Van Horn, Wes and Tom Brown, Deakin, Hatfield, Draper, Hayes, and Means were familiar as pioneers who had played an important part in the development of the community. Another character which interested me very much was Max Smith, who was alleged to be a hypnotist. Also, he "witched" for water when a farmer was going to dig a well. This he did by taking a small fork of an apple tree and holding one of the prongs in each hand with the main stem pointing at an angle toward the ground. He would then walk over the area where the farmer wanted the well. If he passed over a good vein of water, then, according to his theory, the main prong would be pulled toward the ground, thus turning the stems in his hands. He did this one time on my father's farm before digging a well. Observing my skepticism, he insisted that I should try the procedure. I must admit that at the spot where a very good well was dug (which is now still in use) there was a downward pull on the main prong. Whether this was merely a coincidence or whether there is really something to the procedure



I do not know. At any rate, I still vividly recall that experience.

For at least fifty of the seventy-five years which J. I. Cavett was a storekeeper he was a dominant figure of the community. No matter what the occasion — Memorial Day, Fourth of July, Christmas, funerals, church, school, or politics — Mr. Cavett was at the center of it. He made generous contributions to all worthy causes, largely controlled the votes of the village and community, and in many other ways served as spokesman.

Moreover, with the low operating expenses, since he ran his business almost single-handed, and being willing to accept a small margin of profit, he attracted trade for many miles. In fact, as a boy I was much impressed with the so-called "big" farmers who came for miles to buy huge quantities of groceries, shoes, and clothing because of the bargains offered. His store was not a grocery store, but in modern parlance a department store, because he not only sold groceries, shoes, and clothing, but dry goods, hardware, harness, machinery, and patent medicines. Furthermore, if he did not have what a customer wanted he would order it from the "runner" the next time he came.

With such a large volume of trade, he did much credit business. Growing out of that he took



poultry, hogs, cattle, horses, grain, and what-have-you on these accounts. Many customers took unfair advantage of Mr. Cavett's willingness to grant credit to any one who needed it. With the coming of automobiles and the development of mail-order houses, it was a common practice among some people to go to Des Moines or order from a mail-order house when they had cash, but when they needed credit they went to J. I. Cavett. As a result of this he lost many thousands of dollars in bad debts. Typical of his reaction to this development in its early stages, I recall a large sign which he placed on the front of his store bearing these words: "Take Your Butter and Eggs to Sears & Roebuck." He adopted a practice of issuing due bills. These were given in lieu of goods not traded for produce at the time, but could be turned in later in exchange for supplies. They read in this manner: "Due John Holy — Two dollars and eighty-four cents (\$2.84).

J. I. Cavett."

Today we hear a great deal about public forums where current problems are discussed and solutions proposed. Well, during my boyhood — and no doubt for a long time before — Cavett's store maintained a perpetual forum. Near the back of the main store building was an enormous heating stove. Surrounding it and extending about two



or three feet in each direction was an ash pit kept in place by "two-by-four's" attached edgewise to the floor. This provided sufficient scope for the most random spitter. Just beyond the pit were some old double school seats for both the audience and the participants. In the winter, in particular, questions of both local and national significance were daily decided in this forum. Sometimes the smoke was so thick it was a little difficult to see the issues clearly. Nevertheless, in true democratic fashion, and accompanied by strong and picturesque language, these issues were settled with a finality which left nothing in doubt.

The going here was especially good during heated presidential campaigns. The one I recall clearly as a small boy was the Bryan-McKinley campaign in 1896. Mr. Cavett, being a staunch Republican (he has voted for every Republican candidate for president beginning with Ulysses S. Grant), led the McKinley forces. In fact, his control of the community was so strong that only the most loyal and courageous Democrats would speak against him. Among these were Rev. George Miller, John Hayes (who for many years was elected township assessor by the Democrats), his brother Ed Hayes, and my father. On the night of the election Mr. Cavett and a group of loyal Republicans, among whom was my grand-



father, went to Prairie City to get the returns by telegraph. They did not return until the next morning, when, according to the reports, they were still a little tipsy.

What has been recorded here for Vandalia could be duplicated for hundreds of similar communities throughout the country. The passing of these community centers is to be regretted, for they made a significant contribution to democracy. One of the frequent observations made today is that local government has broken down. When a community now has a difficult problem, the first reaction is to appeal to the State government, and thence to national authorities. Vandalia in its heyday never thought of passing on its problems to Des Moines or Washington. The only direct knowledge I had as a boy that the Federal government actually existed was through the post office, and the fact that every three months my grandfather who had served in the Civil War got a pension check for \$36.

When I was in Vandalia for a visit about a year ago and saw Mr. Cavett's store, which once teemed with life and activity, now deserted; the "back room", once filled with hardware, machinery, kerosene, and the like, now torn away; the shelves, once filled to overflowing with goods of all kinds and the candy case once designed to



make a boy's mouth water, now empty, I had a feeling of depression because this had come to pass. Here was an enterprise which had once supplied the life blood to a bustling, thriving community, now no longer functioning.

Yet despite all this, there was the man who had served the community for three quarters of a century — ninety-one years of age — still bravely trying to carry on. The announcement that the store had closed merely made official what in reality had already happened. As I pondered over these things I was reminded of the words of Oliver Goldsmith in "The Deserted Village":

But now the sounds of population fail,  
No cheerful murmurs fluctuate in the gale,  
No busy steps the grass-grown footway tread,  
For all the bloomy flush of life is fled.

T. C. HOLY