

Morton's History of Nebraska

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CHAPTER VII CONTINUED (30)

As the population of prospectors had brought nothing to begin with, their very first acquisition centered in the prospective capital—in the process and methods, as well as the place of fixing it. Every other act of the legislature was subordinate and subsidiary to this one measure and motive of creating something for a commonwealth composed mostly of speculators and largely of carpetbaggers. It does not disturb this proposition that such men as Thomas B. Cuming, O. D. Richardson, Samuel E. Rogers, A. D. Jones, Andrew J. Poppleton, George L. Miller, A. J. Hanscom and Thomas Davis remained—and some of them to this day—to be capable builders of their city and their state, and to illustrate staunch citizenship therein. For if their main object in making Omaha a place by placing the capital there had failed, not all of them would have remained in Nebraska, and none of them in Omaha, for there would have been no Omaha—at least none worthy to command such capable handiwork as theirs. In successfully pressing on to the mark and prize of their calling, the leaders of the capital contest exhibited ability and skill of no mean order. As for the rest of the work of the legislature, as we should expect from such conditions, that which was not merely indifferent must be rated as bad.

The Arrow of Omaha and the Palladium of Bellevue mirror many interesting incidents of the first days of civilized and organized Nebraska. In its initial number the Arrow instructs those not to the manner born as to the pronunciation of Omaha: "As many of our foreign friends will be unable to pronounce this word we will from our Indian dictionary assist them. The proper pronunciation is O-mah-haw, accenting the middle syllable." Since the editor was a tenant at will of the Omaha tribe, and a few weeks later published an admirable description of the village of the tribe which was situated about seven miles to the southwest, he could speak ex cathedra. But civilized usage has sacrificed melody and euphony to convenience by forcing the accent back (or forward?) to the first syllable. The same inexorable mechanical law of civilization has substituted for the beautiful, unconventional slopes and freely irregular lines and the groves as nature placed them, streets and grades and cuttings and piles of brick and mortar, all in hard-and-fast and stiff rectangular lines; and the groves have been wholly sacrificed to the same Moloch. But by the law of compensation this is the price of progress.

October 6 the Arrow notes that in his recent visit to Omaha City the commissioner of Indian affairs "found no fault with the settlers for the occupancy of the land," and to invest this official wink with still greater suggestiveness it is further stated that "a gentleman who accompanied him here purchased a number of lots." The same issue notes "long trains and large herds of stock daily arriving at Bluff City and crossing to Omaha on the steam ferry Marion." On October 20 the Arrow announces that at the late session of the Iowa conference at Keokuk, a new district, known as the Nebraska and Kansas missionary district, was established, at present under Presiding Elder M. F. Shinn of Council Bluffs City, the stations in Nebraska being Omaha City and Old Ft. Kearney. This was doubtless the first formal invasion of Nebraska by the great pioneer Methodist church. The same paper, on November 3, gave the following interesting statement of the beginning of Tekamah: "The Nebraska Stock Company . . . have . . . upon their claimed lands, some fifty-five miles north of this place, . . . laid off a beautiful town or city plat called Tecamah. The county is called Burt. . . after our late respected and lamented governor." The same issue argues in favor of holding a mass democratic convention to nominate a candidate for delegate to Congress. And notice of the advent of the first physician of Omaha is of more than passing interest: "Although but little sickness pervades our prairie land we can but congratulate our citizens upon the acquisition of a young and apparently well qualified physician to our society." The first editor of Nebraska little knew how peremptorily the career of Dr. Miller, the first physician of Omaha, was to require a slight distortion of the meaning of what he was writing. It was not in the professional, but in a much wider sense that Dr. Miller was to become a physician to Omaha in her subsequent ills and ailments. On the 10th of November the Arrow notes that a new town has been laid off one mile below the mouth of the Platte river and lots were to be sold on the 13th. "It is at present named Plattsmouth and will doubtless become a place of some importance."

In the same number the editor's quaint fancy runs on an excursion against the "new-fangled names which these reformers hitch on with a flourish to town sites, rivers, etc., throughout the territory." "It is not," he protests, "old fogysm to desire a retention of those names in our prairie land which have become as familiar as household words to pioneer men. Point us out if you can anywhere in the English language any names more musical or more appropriate to our territory than these which exist amongst the Indian tribes or have

been affixed by old frontiersmen." And then he cites as examples of his outraged taste the substitution of Florence for the good old significant and appropriate name of Winter Quarters. "Next comes Bellevue—a little better it is true—but partaking of the same fanciful air." The name of Otoe, originally selected for the place now called Plattsmouth, "was a good one, and far better than the modern innovation. Mt. Vernon, the name of the beautiful site at the mouth of the Weeping Water, is another bad selection; why not call it after the pleasing name of the river?" "And so," he laments, "it is all over the territory; city and town sites, rivers and creeks have with but few exceptions undergone an awkward and unbecoming change of names; an abandonment of these beautiful and original names which oftentimes lend an air of enchantment and pleasure to the place."

Thus at the beginning this voluntary denizen of the wilderness, untutored in the arts, expressed a truth that has rankled in the heart and mind of every sensitive citizen of the commonwealth to this day. And so it seems that taste, that unappraisable gift of God to His creatures—some of them—compound of sentiment and judgment, is born and not made. The schools may lead it out and rectify its vision, but if it has but being in the soul it will see straight and clear to the eternal fitness of things. What pity that our poet-editor was not a Poo Bah, with a lord high executioner resolute to enforce his decrees against these counterfeiters of names. Through our obtuseness or vanity or other infirmity general and irreparable violence has been done to the native names of Nebraska. It is slight consolation to know that this esthetic rape was not committed without protest—that at the first there was at least one eye to pity though there was no arm to save.

It is not likely that this frontier champion of propriety and esthetic sense knew that Washington Irving, high priest of fine taste, at a still earlier date lamented the same misfortune:

"And here we can not but pause to lament the stupid, commonplace, and often ribald names entailed upon the rivers and other features of the great West by traders and settlers. As the aboriginal tribes of these magnificent regions are yet in existence, the Indian names might easily be recovered; which, beside being in general more sonorous and musical, would remain mementoes of the primitive lords of the soil, of whom in a little while scarce any trace will be left. Indeed, it is to be wished that the whole of our country could be rescued, as much as possible, from the wretched nomenclature inflicted upon it, by ignorant and vulgar minds; and this might be done in a great degree, by restoring the Indian names, wherever significant and euphonic. As there appears to be a spirit of research abroad in respect to our aboriginal antiquities we would suggest, as a worthy object of enterprise, a map or maps of every part of our country, giving the Indian names wherever they could be ascertained. Whoever achieves such an object worthily will leave a monument to his own reputation."

The first number of the Palladium, July 15, 1854, states that John F. Kinney, who had lately been appointed chief justice of Utah, had given the name "Bill Nebraska" to his son, born at Dr. M. H. Clark's hospital, Nebraska Center, June 10, 1854—"the first white child born in the territory since the passage of the bill." Strong faith in the future development of the country is a characteristic of pioneers, and may be traced, in part at least, to the instinct of duty and necessity. It is cherished from the feeling, not always clearly conscious, that requisite courage and tenacity of purpose can not be sustained without it. A striking example of this kind of faith is found in a "puff" article about Nebraska which indulges in the prophecy that the Platte river will after a while become navigable. "According to the statement of experienced navigators on the upper Missouri the Nebraska (Platte) is now a much better stream for navigation than the Missouri is twenty-five years ago." This number also gives an account of the first formal celebration of Independence Day which took place at Bellevue. The characteristic serious religious-sentimental temperament of the editor is touched by the scene:

"The assemblage met near the Indian agency, under the broad canopy of heaven, and seemed to have hearts as expansive as the great scene of nature in which they were situated. If the spirit so beautifully and freely manifested on this soul-inspiring occasion be an index to the future character of the vast multitudes who will soon come from the four quarters of the earth, to mingle in the pursuits and pleasures of this people, then it will be true, as it was remarked by one of the speakers, that 'this country will be indeed the "Eden" of the world.'"

The editor himself was president of the celebration. A committee consisting of Judge L. B. Kinney, Stephen Decatur and C. T. Holloway presented patriotic resolutions which did not neglect to point out that Bellevue was the one and only place for the capital. A very long list of toasts which neglected few patriotic topics, and in-

cluded "the ladies" in duplicate, were offered and responded to.

The issue of August 16 states that "the Presbyterian board of foreign missions for the benefit of the Otoe and Omaha Indians was established in the fall of 1846," and "the mission buildings were built upon a large scale, having every necessary accommodation for one hundred persons." In the whole range of their descriptive articles we find these "rough" pioneers still harping on esthetic features. And so this mission, we are told, "is built upon the brow of an eminence that overlooks the majestic Missouri and surrounding country, and upon which nature has lavished her charms with unsparring profusion."

And then, moved to overstrain his eye of faith, the editor sees that "Bellevue is destined by nature to be the metropolis of learning as well as of legislation and commerce in Nebraska." In eight months after these visions of glory had thus strained his aching sight, the confident prophet was to abandon the fruitless and hopeless field. Mr. Reed's judgment was at fault in that it had failed to apprehend that the period of nature-made capitals had been superseded by man-made capitals. Henceforth railways and not God-chosen sites were to locate the important towns, and the destiny of railways is dictated by men. In brief, man was not only to propose but also almost absolutely to dispose of town sites. When in 1856 two or three railway magnates diverted the Rock Island line from the proposed Pigeon Creek route to the Mosquito Creek route Omaha's permanency became possible and probable. When, in 1867 the Union Pacific bridge was located at Omaha after a fearful struggle between men, Omaha was made and Bellevue's last hope was destroyed. Again the editor's vision of the coming educational and political capital was quite right in general and wrong only in particularizing. When a dozen years later men, violating all the old rules of town-making, and turning their backs on every site of nature's choice, commanded, "Let there be a capital to be called Lincoln at no where"—and there was a capital—the orthodox editor could not have comprehended that his prophecy of a capital though not of his capital was true.

The Palladium of November 29 calls attention to the fact that, "in accordance with the custom of our Puritan ancestors" the acting governor had designated the 30th of that month as the first Thanksgiving day. The editor is a moral exotic, somewhat misplaced in this western desert, and fitter for the society of eastern round-head than of western cavalier. And so he moralizes: "Although we have, as in all new countries, comparatively little to be thankful for, we have sufficient to inspire our gratitude and praise." It is difficult for this severe purist to acknowledge anything good in a free lance like Governor Cuming, but he comes to it grudgingly and characteristically:

"We have reason to be thankful that the governor has thus publicly acknowledged the Supreme Ruler, and recommended a day of thanksgiving to be observed by the people of this territory on the very threshold of their territorial existence. We hope this ordinance will be respected and perpetuated from year to year to the latest posterity."

In the next number the editor tells us that "We were greatly pleased to witness the general interest which this festive occasion seemed to awaken among our citizens, and the zeal which they seemed to manifest in the exercises that belong to this time-hallowed institution. . . . The day was calm and lovely, and the earth, though robed in the dark hues of autumn, never appeared more beautiful than on this consecrated day." And he goes on to say that, "considering the place, a large and respectable audience attended public worship held at the mission at 11 o'clock a.m. An excellent lecture was delivered on the occasion by the Rev. Wm. Hamilton, founded on the following text: 1st Thessalonians, 5th Chapter, 18th verse: 'For in everything give thanks, for this is the will of God concerning you.'" A remarkably large portion of his available space is given up by this devotional editor to an exposition of the traditional first, secondly and thirdly of the sermon.

Alas, for the editor. Even the paucity of things temporal for which to be thankful, and for which he had murmured, is soon to be further reduced by the designation of Omaha as the capital of the territory, thus sweeping away his first and last hope of something worth living for at Bellevue. And while these faithful souls were holding their devotional services on Thanksgiving day, with an ill-timed trust in the justice and righteousness of their capital cause, their Omaha—or rather Council Bluffs—rivals, true modern hustlers, were trustful, too, but in their own intention to command and use whatever means should be necessary to appropriate the prize, discarding moralizing, and, it is to be feared, morals as well. They were so trustful in their own resources that while their opponents on that first Thanksgiving day prayed, and laid down the rules of righteousness and justice, they hustled and laid up the walls of the capitol, while yet they had no assurance, but self-assurance, of its use.

(To be Continued)

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