

Reminiscences of a Wayfarer

Some of the Important Events of the Pioneer Days of Richardson County and Southeast Nebraska, as remembered by the writer, who has spent fifty-one years here.

FACES FROM OUT THE SHADOW.

Within a week after I came to Falls City I made two discoveries. First, that the little embryo town had commenced its municipal life under a cloud. This resulted from the circumstance that Gen. James H. Lane, the notorious free state leader in Kansas, where the first physical shock occurred between those antagonistic ideas, freedom and slavery, in their strife for control in that new territory early in its settlement, was one of its founders and proprietors. The prevailing sentiment in the county was not in accord with Lane and his principles, and Falls City and its people were called by a name very largely in use among politicians, "black republican." This had the effect to create a pretty wide spread prejudice against it in the minds of people, who, though not active participants in the struggle, were still, on account of early education and association, political and otherwise, favorable to the other side. This prejudice had to be overcome, and was, to a great extent, by the shrewd efforts of one man.

My second discovery was that John A. Burbank was the ablest man I had met in the country, and I was not slow to see that the success of the town depended largely on him, his superior tact, good judgment and common sense methods. The first thing he did was to eliminate the Kansas statesman from the business, and the trouble from that source was ended.

The survey of the town site was finished about the first of July, 1857, and on the 4th, the people then on the ground and from settlements in the near vicinity, gathered for an old fashioned celebration and Gen. Lane made them a speech and that was his last appearance at this city.

In the time to come, and before that mightier collision between those irreconcilable forces in 1861, the prejudice against our little town gradually died out, but it was, as I have said, the result of the splendid management of Mr. Burbank, supplemented by the strong support of the people and his associates. Nebraska has had few abler men than he, if indeed it has had any, though it has had some as noisy as a flock of guinea chickens, or coyotes, and about as valuable to the general public. He never made, or attempted to make a speech in his whole life. It was not his way.

He came here to build a town near the Nemaha falls, the most distinctive point in the county, and selected a spot where he thought the seat of the county government ought to be. In this enterprise he enlisted a corps of the strongest men in the county, among them Isaac and Jesse Crook, two brothers from the far south, unlettered so far as book learning goes, but level-headed, thorough going men who knew how to look the world in the face and give battle to it, on its own terms. They were a host in themselves. Isaac had been county treasurer since the organization of the county, and held it till 1861, when he refused to allow the people to elect him any more.

Jesse was a typical southerner and dispensed more generous hospitality, and fed more hungry people out of sheer goodness of heart and love of his kind, than any man who ever crossed the Missouri river in any direction. They both rest from their labors. Isaac died a quarter of a century ago, but Jesse has been

so lately on these streets, that I feel somehow that I would not be surprised to see him at any moment, walking as usual, down Stone street. He died the day before Christmas last December, and the day following that greatest of all birth days we laid him away to his long sleep in the beautiful cemetery on the high ground to the west; and of all the men I have ever known, he is the only one among them to go out of this world, without leaving an enemy behind him.

It would have been a sorry day indeed for Falls City with these two men, their wide influence and hosts of friends, arrayed against it.

Gov. Burbank was not only an able man, but he was as true as steel and thoroughly reliable in all his relations with his fellows. He was a politician of a high order without a single trait of the demagogue, and as a friend, could always be depended upon. There was nothing visionary about him, and he took no part in the wild schemes and air castle building that was rife among our people in those early days,—and what new country has been without a similar experience?

Hope, it was said, "springs eternal in the human breast," but where that is the only fund to draw against, (and that was about our condition at the time) the drafts made upon it are frequently returned, "payment deferred," and whether it maketh the heart sick, as such deferred payments are said to do, we go on hoping (or drawing) just the same. That is what we did for years in this little out of the way place, but in spite of all opposition and adverse circumstances, success came and mainly through the early efforts of the men I have mentioned, seconded by a united community of earnest men and women acting in their several subordinate capacities, and all struggling for the accomplishment of a common purpose.

Whatever would conduce to that end was done willingly and cheerfully, everybody doing his or her part without question or protest. We were all together and worked together without stopping to settle the question of which was the great or little man in the business. That we did many absurd things goes without saying, but we waited a good many years before we took time to laugh about them. Many of the incidents as well as many of the actors have gone out of my memory entirely, but enough remains to give a general idea of what was done and how it was done. And though the shadows of fifty years have fallen darkly between the events of that distant past and the present moment in which I write, the faces of those who took part in the early struggle and have been long dead, come back to me as real as I knew them in life, and the scenes of the conflict in which we were engaged, extending through four years, are as present to my mental vision as though they were things of yesterday.

Our first object was to build the town, get the county seat, establish institutions of learning, and create a manufacturing center to vie with the best. This necessitated frequent public consultations in which the whole people could take part, and the general consensus of opinion could be thus obtained. I will here give some specimens of those gatherings—farce comedies would be a better designation—for the consideration of matters touching the general welfare.

I have in mind the first of the

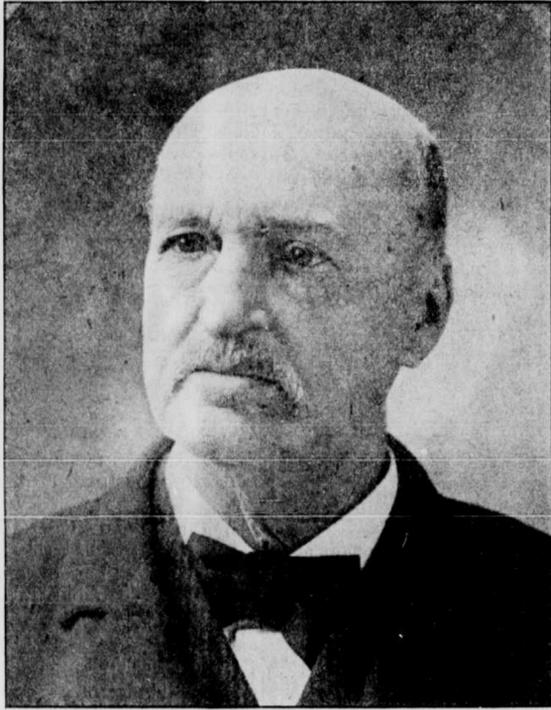
kind I attended. It was called by my sometime friend, Mr. Hamby, to talk over one of his pet projects, the building of a college on the highest point to the north of town. The meeting was held in Squire Dorrington's Carpenter shop, a small shanty, probably ten by twelve feet in size, and was attended by ten or a dozen people. It was Hamby's meeting and he took charge of it in that capacity, made all the motions and three fourths of the speeches. The first motion put the squire in the chair—the chair was his work bench—and he sat upon it with the air of a proprietor as well as the presiding officer of the meeting.

Hamby then stated the general object in hand, which, he said, was to consider ways and means for the immediate construction of a college building in town. I shall not try to reproduce his speech, but it was much like such discourses usually are, with the difference perhaps, that it was interspersed with much that was impracticable, not to say nonsensical. In the midst of his tribute to education and the great advantage it would be to the town to have a first class institution of learning established in it, and the consequent influx of population to receive the benefits afforded thereby in the education of their children, Squire Dorrington interrupted with the question: "I say Am-

tion paper was at once written (by myself as I remember) and each person present, except the chairman, who had exhausted his pre-emption right in Kansas and had no claim in Nebraska, signed it with a donation of forty acres of land to the college fund. In that way we got something like four hundred acres, which, to tell the exact truth about it, were about as valuable as four hundred acres of blue sky, as there was not a foot of the land entered from the government, and no absolute assurance that any of it ever would be, by the then claimants, whose right to do so, might never be exercised in the future.

If the metaphysicians postulate, that there is no difference between a thing and the idea of it, could have been realized in terms of physical demonstration, there might have been some chance for Hamby's college, but not otherwise.

The project was talked over from time to time during the summer till some other croquet took possession of the brain of its originator and it gradually dropped out of the minds of the people and so went to join the shade of the Archer university, created on paper by the legislature a year or two before. I am not certain that the agitation of the college question was in fact a useless expenditure of breath. It served at least one good pur-



Ex-Governor John A. Burbank, Principal Founder of Falls City

pose, it gave occupation to the uneasy and visionary people about town and served to keep alive the spirit of enterprise among us. Mr. Hamby was a very entertaining talker when any one of his numerous schemes formed the subject for the time being, and he was rather convincing for a man of his limited attainments. Certain it is, he led me to think there was something in every scheme that he hatched out while I knew him and he appeared to be always in the business.

I have in mind another town meeting held some time during the summer of the same year, which was called by Wingate King, I think, to take into consideration the feasibility of building a church for the Methodists in the vicinity. I take it, it must have been for the Methodists because Mr. King was a very devoted member of that denomination. The proceedings of that meeting are rather shadowy in my recollection, but I am sure that we raised money enough to buy a couple of thousand feet of lumber, which was obtained from the Hamby saw mill at the lower end of town. Some party interested hauled the lumber on the ground, which, as nearly as I can fix the spot, was not far from the present residence of Mr. Charles Har-

grave. I know it was north of the present site of the central high school. The whole town in that vicinity was vacant, but whether the church owned any lots there or not I am unable to say, but I do know that the lumber was hauled to the point indicated and unloaded on the ground. That is all that was ever done towards building the church. The lumber remained there until some person or persons appropriated it to their own use. That was not effected by taking all the lumber at once, but by taking small quantities from time to time, mostly at night, until it all disappeared and the church we had built in our minds went the way of Hamby's college.

Gov. Burbank never attended any of these meetings, but he was too politic a man to discourage them or to say anything disparaging about them. They furnished amusement for the people if nothing else, and amusement is one of the compensations for living at all. Seriously speaking, however, these apparently trifling conventions of the people, have another and to my mind, a more substantial value, that is not generally taken into account by writers on political history, De Tocqueville, perhaps excepted, as they play an important part in the synthetic evolution of the state in its first inception, if not at all stages of its existence. They are the natural deliberative bodies of the common every day citizen, and furnish an excellent school for the assimilation of opinion among those whose environment in other localities, have not been the same, and whose social and political principles, not to say prejudices, have not been acquired from the same sources, nor fashioned after the same model. Every man who goes to a new country carries with him the atmosphere of home, its traditions and customs, along with the social, religious and political principles, which his former affiliations, education and surroundings have instilled into his mind and become ingrained in his very being, so that in the formation of a public opinion in a community not entirely homogeneous, contact and association become of the first importance, for that public opinion when formed, by the modification and toning down of individual opinions, becomes crystallized into law as the process of assimilation goes on, and eventually determines the institutions of the new commonwealth.

If I found it impossible, as it certainly is, to write of Falls City in its swaddling clothes without also writing of the man who made it a possibility, I find it equally impossible to write of Nebraska itself without making a similar association. The revolution that was silently going on in the public sentiment of the nation, was quite as apparent, in its effect in Nebraska, as anywhere else. The political administration of the government at Washington in 1858, was rapidly losing the confidence of the people, and before that year passed into history, was at war with a con-

siderable faction of the party that put it in power, and before the next presidential election was had, that same party, once so formidable in its arrogance and power, had practically ceased to exist. The shadow of the coming event, the last and final struggle in the "irrepressible conflict," had fallen long ago, and no where more portentously than in the western territories. It was felt all about us, in social affairs, in political and business relations, and resistance became a necessity.

I knew the men who took up the gage of battle and entered the lists. I saw the fight in its inception, and at its most critical stages, and I saw it end in the triumph of the right. Let me pass in review some of the men who assisted in this noble service, "lest we forget."

There was T. M. Marquette, a lovable man, conscientious and brave, but as gentle as a woman, and as true to his sense of right as the needle to the pole. E. D. Webster, a journalist at Omaha, with his armor always on and always in the thickest of the fight.

O. P. Mason, strong, burly and ready, was a rough and tumble fighter of the first order—a politician who might have realized his highest ambition had he been less in debt to his enemies, and had had a more scrupulous regard for human friendship, to the extent at least of appreciating the value of an old friend in contradistinction from the new one, he was going to make.

R. W. Furnas was a little tardy in his enlistment, but when on the roll was a soldier of tried and true metal and faithful to the end. W. H. Taylor, little known to the people of this day, a son of the southland, an admirer of Henry Clay and a native of his beloved Kentucky, was among the champions of the new crusade. He was a splendid lawyer and an orator unequalled in Nebraska at any time. He was much maligned, misrepresented and cordially hated by his enemies. That circumstance proved the man and his work. Non-entities are not so honored.

E. S. Dundy was in the ranks also, and was known to most of the people hereabouts. He and Burbank were always together, and were potent factors in putting Nebraska in the right column in 1859, where she has been ever since, with the exception of two or three slight attacks of emotional insanity, when some follies were committed as is usual in such cases.

Two other faces come before me, S. G. Daily and John Taffe. I knew them well and loved them both. Daily represented the territory in congress five years, while Taffe represented the state after its admission, in the same body, for six years, and it would have been infinitely better for both, if they had never seen the federal city. They served their people well and faithfully however, much better than they served themselves, and have gone, along with all the others, to the land of shadows, wherever that may be, and are at rest.

"After the fitful fever of this life, they sleep well."

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