

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.

HOW A TOWN TOOK A BATH.
In a previous paper of this series, I said I would relate how the town at the falls rivaled Falls City, and what came of the enterprise. The Hamilton brothers and their associate Sackett, were young men, natives of Ohio, and full of energy and the enthusiasm of youth, but wholly unacquainted with the west, and especially the climatic conditions in Nebraska. They associated the water fall in the Nemaha with the idea they had of what such a power would be worth in their old state, and without hesitation concluded that it was the very place to found the future manufacturing town of the country. The surroundings were certainly pretty to look at, and the conditions appeared favorable to the success of the schemes conjured up in the minds of those boys, but who, before the summer waned, were to learn, like all the children in the family of man, that there is a great lie out in the world and things are not always what they seem to be.

They naturally argued that there being an abundance of water in the river flowing over a bed of solid rock, and then pitching straight down between five and six feet, a permanent foundation was thus furnished for mills or other establishments for manufacturing purposes that could be built with safety, to utilize the water power thus afforded. The force of the water itself, augmented by that of the fall mentioned, which increases at every point of descent, directly as to the mass and inversely as to the square of the distance, according to mathematicians, thus gathering force as it goes, would yield power, (which they said was going to waste every moment) sufficient to turn all the wheels of manufacture in southern Nebraska. I don't think they put it quite that way, but whether they did or not, the implication is the same, and may go at that. It is said the rushing torrent of Niagara at its foot cannot be cut with an axe, so tremendous is the force with which it descends.

This, and much more of the same kind and to the same purpose, was talked every time I went to the falls till late in July when—but I get ahead of my story.

Early in June we concluded to hold a Fourth of July celebration, and our friends at the falls heard of it and determined to have one too. They strove to outdo us at every point and in everything. They seemed to think that their salvation as a rival town depended on taking every trick in a game they were playing in their imagination, apparently unconscious of the fact that Falls City never looked upon Nemaha Falls so called, as a rival in any sense.

There was no shade in town, no grove, nor tree, nor any object that would cast a shadow of sufficient extent to cover twenty people. So we made one on the court house square, by setting posts in the ground with poles across upon which we put boughs of trees cut in the Nemaha timber and hauled up for the purpose. In that way we made an arbor shady and snug, under which a company of three or four hundred strong could sit and escape the glare of a fierce July sun blazing above them.

A beef, as they called a slaughtered specimen of the bovine tribe, was provided to be roasted for the refection of the people, and other provisions

were made for the entertainment and comfort of the crowd that was expected to attend, but where it was to come from was a mystery to me. It turned out however, that there were more people in the country than I thought for. They came from the valley of the Muddy, from its mouth down towards Rulo, to as far up as where Stella is now located; and from the Nemaha from the Forney farm to up about Salem; and from Pony and Walnut creeks to far out in Kansas; and when they were all assembled we had between three and four hundred people.

The idea of a celebration of our natal day out in that waste and wilderness, was a new and curious one to me. I did not know then, as I have come to learn since, how much of the spirit of the 4th of July every American citizen carries deep down in his heart of hearts, wherever he goes on land or sea, anywhere around the globe. A boy and a bunch of firecrackers make a 4th of July, typifying the boys and the muskets that have won all the fields that have made this nation invincible in arms and glorious in history.

There were some special features attached to the function that day that were new, to me at least, and highly interesting. A band of Indians in full native costume, were secured to perform their traditional war dance under the auspices of their chief headman, Po-to-ko-mah. He was a fine specimen of physical manhood, tall, well made, and as straight up from the ground as the sturdy oak that towers above the surrounding forest and embellished with the native and natural dignity peculiar to his race, that would have done honor to Mr. Turveydrop himself. Another and quite an unexpected one in that bran new community, was a kind of mixed band of music under the leadership of Jim Dye—every old resident about Brownville, Nemaha City, and hereabouts will remember Jim—consisting of five or six persons and as many horns and fiddles, who played all the staple patriotic tunes, and then some, and furnished the music for the dance at night in Jesse Crook's new hotel building on the Richardson County Bank corner, then inclosed and nearing completion.

They enlivened the scene greatly and added to the general festivity in a way possible only through the instrumentality of music, that wizard of the soul, the soother of the sorrowful, parent of poetry and religion, the charm of which has lingered on earth since the dawn of the eternal morning when the stars sang together the "Te Deum" of the spheres, in glad acclaim of creation finished.

And now a word about the people who came that day to help us celebrate the annual recurrence of the day dear to all Americans. They are before me now as I saw them then, brave men and women, some of whom had crossed wide rivers and wider states, to come to this new and virgin land to subdue the wilderness, to work hard and live harder, to build comfortable homes for themselves and families, to open farms, to rear churches and school houses, and scatter the germs of the beautiful in their homes and by the wayside, and to worship God as their fathers had done before them, in the old lands of their birth.

They came in all shapes in the matter of transportation. Some on horseback, some in wagons drawn by horses, and some by a single horse, and I remember

one family, consisting of paterfamilias, his wife and two daughters, in a wagon drawn by a yoke of cattle with a strapping young fellow on foot, driving them.

The old people were seated on chairs smoking their pipes, and seemed to enjoy themselves, while the girls were smartened up with new calico frocks and ribbons in profusion, with bunches of elderberries stuck in their hair as special ornaments. The costumes of the people were just as grotesque and varied as their means of transportation. Nobody seemed to have on anything new, except the dresses of the younger females of the party and they were, in most part, of calico. No two men had coats, vests or pantaloons, of the same cut, fashion or material, and all appeared to have been in service a long time, nor were there any two hats of the same fashion or any fashion. Nevertheless their meeting with each other, and their families, were of the most hearty and friendly character. Nobody appeared at a disadvantage, but all seemed on a footing of exact equality. There were no rich people among them to exact attention for that reason, nor were there any poor trash to be looked down upon and snubbed, on that account. It was essentially a democratic meeting in which each man and his family was greeted and treated with the same consideration and respect that was accorded to all.

In that assembly I saw—but without being conscious of the fact at the time—the perfect realization of what is meant when we say in this country, that every person under the aegis of the constitution, stands on exact equality before the law, with the difference that these people stood upon exact equality before the conventions of society, which is neither expressed or implied, when that other maxim is used in judicial decisions, acts of legislation or in high sounding phrase of blatant politicians. I came to know this after many years of study and observation, and particularly after careful consideration of the policy of our government in the disposition of its public lands. Every man who attended that celebration was the owner or claimant under the pre-emption act of 1841, of a quarter section of land and no one of them owned any more nor could he, and that accounted for the equality I mentioned. The speculator had no chance to ply his trade till the government had parted with the title, and then he began with the careless and improvident and the country has become what it is. Whoever will examine the legislation of congress providing for the disposition of the public domain, will find that it has uniformly been its policy to parcel out the land to actual settlers. That was good so far, but it did not, nor ever has, gone far enough. It should have retained the legal title in the government during the life of the claimant, or have prohibited its sale during that period. Some such notion was in the minds of the men who passed the law of 1841, for it prescribed an oath to be taken by the pre-emptor to the effect that he was entering the land for himself and for his own uses, which implied that he wanted it for a home. There were other things specified in the oath not necessary to mention here.

This is something of depression, the subject of which, may be resumed at another time, when leisure and inclination are favorable for the purpose.

It is sufficient for the matter in hand, that we executed the common intention and celebrated in the usual way. Some one read the old declaration of independence, and I made them a

sophimoric speech in which I have little doubt, a great deal spread eagle nonsense abounded, but it was a boy's effort delivered in perfect recognition of the solemn occasion, and whether well or ill performed, did its office and that was enough. The Indian war dance followed, and then the public dinner consisting mostly of beef and bread; but the interesting part, to me, was to watch the Indians take refreshment. Did any of the readers of the Tribune ever see an Indian—I mean a regular blanket Indian, fresh and wild from the plains—eat? Well, if they have not, they have missed something. A native Indian—and they are all alike, as I know from actual observation, anywhere from the Missouri to the western sea—never eats but one thing at a time. Give him meat and bread, and he will eat the meat first and then perform the same office with the bread. They never eat these two articles of food at the same time. It was a new and very amusing experience to me, and I watched the process with close attention.

I noticed another peculiarity about them. They were wholly indifferent as to quality, but pertinaciously particular as to quantity. They wanted enough and it made no kind of difference from what part of the bullock their rations came. A steak from behind the horns was quite as acceptable as one from the hindquarter, provided there was enough of it. I have seen some white men, accused of being civilized, who were afflicted with the same peculiarity in manners pertaining to a different order of things, and in a different state of society. It was the brute in both that claimed attention, in either case.

Everything went off in a peaceable and orderly manner. There was no rioting, drunken-

ness or boisterous behavior. That ornament of our advanced christian civilization—the saloon—had not made its advent into Falls City at that early day, which, more than anything else, accounts for the good conduct of the people on that occasion.

Our friends at the falls had their celebration also, and Judge Dundy made a speech for them, and in that particular, outshone ours on the bills. In all other particulars ours was the best and pleased the people most. There have not been any more celebrations at the falls, and for the reason following. About three weeks afterwards there came upon the country one of those sudden rain storms, to which the people of this region are familiar, and within twelve hours thereafter the whole Nemaha valley, from bluff to bluff, had become an inland sea. I have seen many floods in the Nemaha since, but I have never seen one that I thought equalled that, though that is probably a mere notion, for nature, like men, is essentially a creature of habit, and what it does once it is likely to do again, and many times again. In that case the settlers were all driven out, many of them running narrow risks of drowning along with their families. Much of their live stock was drowned, and all their improvements destroyed. But what of our rival town at the falls? When the flood had subsided the town was found to have gone with it, and the future manufacturing center of the country had ceased to exist. Most of the people in the valley came to Falls City, and never went back. I will relate something further concerning them at another time. The Hamiltons came with others, staid about town until they got money from the east to take them home, and I never saw them again. In time the elder

Stumbo foreclosed his mortgage on the town site, bought the land at sheriff's sale, along with the ghost of the departed village, and the story of the once boasted municipality of the future, was closed forever.

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