

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.

MY FIRST VISIT TO BROWNVILLE

The first settlements in Nebraska were along the Missouri river, extending from the mouth of the Great Nemaha north to *Leau qui court*, or in ordinary United States, The Running Water, or as that stream is now known, the Niobrara, which empties its waters into the Missouri in Dakota county, lying across from Sioux City, in the state of Iowa. The three principal towns on the Missouri, south of the Platte, were Plattsmouth, so named because it is a few miles, three or four, south of the point of confluence of the Platte with the Missouri river, in Cass county; Nebraska City immediately south in Otoe county, and Brownville still further south, in Nemaha county.

There were three other towns below Brownville, Nemaha City, Aspinwall and St. Deroin, in Nemaha county, and two further down, St. Stephens and Rulo, in Richardson county. In 1858 Brownville was a flourishing place, exceedingly lively and full of business. The land office for the southern district, was located there, which made it a point of great importance. Every squatter in the district had to go there to file, as it was called, on the quarter section he intended to purchase from the government by right of pre-emption; and if another fellow wanted the same quarter on any pretense, a contest was provided for bylaw, and a trial of the respective rights of the contestants to the land was had before the officers of the land office, and if either was dissatisfied with the decision, an appeal was allowed to the commissioners of the general land office at Washington, and if this decision did not suit both parties, and it hardly ever did, the loser could cause a review of the whole matter by the Secretary of the Interior. And even his decision would not end the contest, if the defeated party had the money and the "sand" to formulate a case for the courts, and then everybody knows what might happen.

I well remember my first visit to Brownville. It was made in the night, to save time, as my fellow travelers called it, but just how it was a saving of time was not very clear, as none of us had anything to do in the day time, but to kill time, and the necessity for a night journey that we might have more daylight in which to do nothing, seemed to me to savor a little of the absurd. However, that was the way they put it, and if I was to get to the land office without walking, I must go with them, and it was so arranged. We accordingly procured a team of horses and a lumber wagon, into the bed of which, some new mown prairie hay was put to sit on or sleep upon during the night, as circumstances or inclination might require. It was dark before we got started, probably, at that season about eight and a half or nine o'clock in the evening. Where there are five or six, as with our party, to make a journey of the kind, there are always more or less delays in getting everybody ready, and as we were not exempt from the common experience in such cases, it was far into the "shank" of the night before we got off. There was no well defined traveled road, but as all the party except myself, had been over the way many times before, no difficulty was apprehended in finding and keeping in the right and usual route. It was a beautiful night, moonless but clear, with the starry hosts above in splen-

did array, making the atmosphere almost as luminous as the moonlight could have done. Added to this was a warm soft breeze from the south, laden with the indescribable smell of the prairie, sweetened with the scent of millions of wild flowers, whispering of the summer and of the seed time and the harvest. Harvest! What was there in all that wild waste to harvest but prairie hay, with never a cow to eat it?

Well, as there was no beaten road the horses could travel no faster than a walk, and we calculated the trip could be made in about seven hours, which would bring us to Brownville about breakfast time.

For the first hour or two, and until we all got sleepy, the conversation was about claims, and what each expected to do with his own, the number of cattle they would have, to be pastured on the unoccupied common, as though nobody but themselves would ever come to take it up as they were doing; and in all their vague notions of the future greatness of the country, the idea that it would one day be a solid net work of highly improved farms, with no public common upon which to graze their imaginary herds, never seemed to have a place in their minds. Our party, as I remember the fact, consisted of five persons, and there may have been another, but I cannot be sure. It was made up of Jesse Crook, Josiah Koken (a claim speculator in a small way), a fellow by the name of Solomon Plummer, (our driver), myself and may be another, but if so, I have forgotten his name. As the hour waxed late, all but the driver, who claimed to know the trail sufficiently to follow it in the darkest night he ever saw, to use his own assertions, cuddled down in the hay and fell asleep. I knew no more till I heard a loud and not very complimentary talk to the driver, going on outside the wagon, and finding myself alone, got out too. The team had come to a full stop, and I was not long in discovering that we were lost on the prairie. The driver had allowed the horses to wander from the path or trail, probably because he too, had gone to sleep, and as there were no land marks to indicate to a native where we had gotten to, the general opinion was, that we camp till we found from which quarter of the heavens the sun would rise in morning, then only a few hours off. I was the only one not lost. As I knew nothing of the country, all places looked alike to me. The only thing lost was the way to Brownville. Like the Indian in the lumber region who, acting in a confused and bewildered sort of way was asked if he was lost, answered: "No, wiggeup lost, Ingin here."

While the rest of them were swearing at the driver, I took a look at the prospect myself, and as I knew nothing of the country, I took a look at the stars to see in what quarter Charles Wain was to be found. This, as most people know, is the seven stars in the constellation Ursa Major, called the "Dipper". I found it by looking all around the horizon, and the situation was made plain to me at once. I then told them the horses were headed to the southwest, and if they kept in that direction far enough, they would probably land on the Rio Grande, about where Gen. Taylor crossed that river a dozen years before, to invade Mexico. They wanted to know how I knew that, and I told them.

The pointers in the Dipper always show Polaris, or what, in common speech, we call the north star. Plummer, who was out of humor with everybody, using a strong and not very elegant expletive, wanted to know how I found it out, and to put him, if possible, in a better humor, I replied that I learned it in about the same way he had that night, somebody told me. So we got in the wagon, turned the horses about face and in a very short time Plummer informed us that he was back on the trail which proved to be true, as in about an hour afterwards, (the dawn was then breaking) we came in sight of Nemaha City, just over the Little Nemaha, and without further adventure, reached Brownville in time for breakfast.

When the land office opened we went in, transacted our business, got acquainted with the officers, who were both from the south, and very pleasant gentlemen, affable and accommodating, mixed with that whole souled sociability that seems a part of the southern character, and then went to look at the town. It was rather lively and decidedly fast. I have seen something like it in western mining camps, although unlike them in one particular, every other man I met was not loaded with Colts revolvers and bowie knives. Whiskey and land warrants were the principal commodities on sale in the market, and a rushing business was done in both. A land warrant for 160 acres was sold for \$280, at five per cent per month, or sixty per cent per annum, not a bad interest when paid by the other fellow, but something awful where you have to pay it yourself. That applied to sales made on time or deferred payment.

It was during that visit I first

met R. W. Furnas, afterwards governor of the state, and for whom the legislature named one of its counties, and who died only two or three years ago. At that time and several times before, he was a member of the upper house of the legislature, and continued to be such as long as he desired the honor. He was also editor of a newspaper called the Nebraska Advertiser. Having visited his office in connection with some business in hand, made his acquaintance the while, subscribed for his paper for a year, with a very little political talk on the side, he kindly introduced me to the two leading lawyers in southern Nebraska—U. C. Johnson and Dan McGary, and some other gentlemen whom I knew from that day forward. Johnson went back to New York to die a few years afterwards, while McGary drifted off south during, or about the time of the civil war, and I lost him. Most of the people I saw that day have gone out of the world—are at rest in the old graveyard on the hill, many of them, and royal good fellows they were in their day. Furnas, and W. T. Den, a merchant, lived on after the town and their compeers were dead, and both of them were buried on the same day not long ago, in the same silent community. Horace Greely once said of Fennimore Cooper, that he just missed being a great man. Similarly, it may be said of Gov. Furnas, that he just missed being the best politician Nebraska ever produced, and but for his penchant for office seeking and holding, might not have failed. He always had an office, or public station of some kind, and was peculiarly constituted for getting and holding them, as much so as J. Sterling Morton was, for getting and holding them, and they both worked at the busi-

ness with untiring industry. Artemus Ward said, when he made the acquaintance of Mr. Brigham Young out in Utah, that he was the most married man he ever saw, and it is probable that if that pleasant humorist could have been made acquainted with our governor's office holding history, he would have concluded that the Hon. R. W. was the most public-trust-burdened man he ever saw.

But with all his weakness for office holding, Bob Furnas was an honest man and faithfully discharged every trust committed to his care, without any flourish of trumpets, or tricks of the demagogue.

It is not recollected that he fixed up a hen-roost outside of town, and called it a Rookery, after the style of the titled snobs from over the sea, nor built a house and called it a Hall, or a Lodge, in imitation of a lordly race not much in evidence in this country, except among the flunkey tribe—and their name is fast becoming legion. He never made preparation for canonization as a political saint, but lived with the people as one of them, and never sneezed when somebody else took snuff. And beyond all else he was a sound American, patriotic and true, in the hour of national danger. Had he been a blatant copperhead, and rebel sympathiser in Civil war days, like some I could name, the descendants of that by no means extinct race, would no doubt erect a monument to his memory, as they have done for others of that feather, but being only a plain old Union Soldier, his grave will remain unmarked, like thousands of others, and after a while, will fade out of the memories of men entirely.

Brownville, one time and another, had among its citizens, men who were prominent in

early Nebraska history. I have mentioned the two most distinctive lawyers at the time of which I write, but at a later date E. W. Thomas, O. B. Hewitt, James Bedford and some others figured in the bar with more or less prominence till J. H. Broady came among them, about 1867, and from that time forward till the town began to lose its own prominence, he and Thomas were easily at the head of the profession.

Broady went on the bench in 1884, and finally moved to Beatrice. Thomas had already come to Falls City, where he resided till his death, July, 1897. Broady afterwards located at Lincoln and died there last October, the last of the old Brownville Bar. Among those who were prominent in the politics of the territory, were T. W. Tipton and his son-in-law, Henry M. Atkinson. Tipton was a minister of the gospel, but in war times became a politician, and was elected one of the first senators from Nebraska after its admission into the Union. He drew the short term and was re-elected for a full term, forty years ago last winter, and—differing with his colleague on the question of which was the greatest man, and entitled to first consideration by the President—who rather preferred Thayer—war broke out all round and Tipton finally became a democrat, and that was the end of him. I had the misfortune to be instructed by the convention that was responsible for my election to the state senate, to vote for that gentleman for senator, which I did nineteen times in caucus and once in the legislature, and I have since regretted having done so more than nineteen hundred times, but what was the use? Two years afterwards, P. W. Hitchcock did the business for Thayer by buying enough of his sure pop votes to let him down with a thud, and that early statesman disappeared from the senate, and it became an orphan.

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