

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.

ANOTHER MIDNIGHT RIDE

In my last I gave my experience of a night ride to Brownville to visit the United States land office, and told how our driver became bewildered and allowed his team to wander from the trail, and in the darkness of a moonless night, become lost. I now propose to relate a similar experience at a later date, but in the same summer, when a party of young fellows, myself among the number, undertook a night journey to St. Stephen, a town on the Missouri, of which I have before made mention. That trip was not made in the night from choice, but rather in haste, and to prevent a tragedy if possible. Word had come to town late in the afternoon, that an alleged horse thief had been captured *flagrante delicto*, and that there was great danger that the infuriated citizens on both sides of the river, would hang him unless prompt and effective interference was made to prevent it—accompanied with an urgent request of the better disposed people over there, that Falls City would assist them in maintaining order.

A party was soon formed to go to the scene of the difficulty, and to do the best we could to prevent mob violence. It was dark when we started, and though the sky was clear there was a bank of cloud low down on the western horizon, along which, fitful flashes of summer lightning could occasionally be seen, but there were no positive indications of stormy weather during the night, and we felt no apprehension on that account.

St. Stephen was seventeen miles, or thereabouts, to the northeast, and our way led through Archer, but from there on, there was no particularly well defined road, no bridge over any of the numerous small streams we were obliged to cross before we reached our destination, and no human habitation by the wayside.

The first trouble we encountered was at Half-Breed creek. The driver had missed the crossing and we were delayed an hour or more in finding it, or at least a place to cross the team and wagon over, and about the same experience attended our efforts in crossing the two or three other small water courses that ran over our route or trail. It was about as dreary and monotonous a ride as one can imagine. We were crossing the Half-Breed tract, which, outside the towns along the river, was entirely destitute of inhabitants. To add to our other vexations of that solitary night ride, about two o'clock in the morning a great black cloud, like an immense sable pall stretching around the western horizon, and reaching high up towards the zenith, came looming up with vivid flashes of lightning and deep bellowing thunder. It was the first thunder storm I had seen on the prairie, and though it differed in nothing from other storms of the kind I had seen before, yet coming upon us suddenly in that lonely waste, and in the silence of the night, putting out those twinkling points of light hung high in the heavens, making the darkness more intense and dreary, and moving toward us with swift and thunderous strides, it was at once a scene of awful grandeur and indescribable beauty.

We expected a sound drenching if nothing worse, but to our great relief, the surcharged cloud, obeying some change in the atmospheric conditions,

veered to the northeast and passed us without discharging much of its superabundance of rain on our party.

With the coming of the dawn we were able to determine—or those acquainted with the country were—our exact whereabouts, and the right course to pursue to reach our point of destination. Our wanderings must have been irregular as to direction, and zig-zag as to our mode of following it, as when we came to the Winnebago branch, the last before we entered the timber surrounding the high hill overlooking the Missouri river, on which the town was built, we found we had strayed far north of the true course, but we soon reached the right trail—there was no road—and shortly before sunrise, found our way into town. It was mostly built what there was of it, on a ridge that sloped slightly to the north while the side of the hill next the river descended abruptly and so steep that a wagon road had been dug along the side for convenient passage for wagons and the vehicles to and from the ferry on the river. About half way down, a saloon building had been erected, on piles driven into the hillside, and blocked up one way and another, so as to prevent it from sliding into the river. A little above the ferry landing and on more level ground by the river, was another saloon. There was a store on the crest of the ridge, but the chief points of interest were the two saloons overlooking the swift flowing river below. Early as was the hour the little hamlet was full of excited and drunken men, and had been all night.

Scores of others were stretched on the ground in the oblivious sodden sleep of intoxication. In after days it has fallen to my lot to be in many strange hard places, where the moral lights burned dimly, or had gone out altogether, but never in all my life have I ever seen anything to compare with what I saw in that frontier town, on that peaceful summer morning. Men with drink crazed brains, and murder stained hands—for they had hung their victim in the darkness of the night before, in the woods west of town—were raving like mad, demanding more drink, and stupidly exulting in the work of death they had lately performed, and wishing they had another to hang with the dead man, to keep him company. I felt that the world had stepped back into the middle ages, and I was witnessing one of those horrible exhibitions told by chroniclers, of the deadly feuds between Norman and Saxon races, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, on the blood stained soil of old England.

It was too much for me, and I told the others of our party that I would not stay in that town a single hour, for the whole of it. They agreed with me, and we turned about and drove some half a mile out to the house of Mr. Stephen Story, the sole proprietor of the town, and after waking the people asked to feed our horses, and if the accommodation could be furnished, we would like some breakfast for ourselves. The requests were conveyed to Mr. Story, who coming out to our conveyance in the road, in a generous and hospitable manner invited us in, and gave directions for the care of our horses, and in due time a substantial breakfast was put before us, to which we did the usual and hearty justice common

to hungry boys. From that day to the end of his life, I knew Stephen Story intimately and well, and I have this to say of him, that he was a law respecting citizen, a generous open-handed friend and neighbor, but misplaced in St. Stephen. He denounced the lawless conduct of the people down town, and had done all he could to prevent it, failing which, he had left and gone out to his home, before the murder was committed.

As well attempt to control the mad waves of the sea when the winds are at war with them, as to attempt to talk sense, or reason or justice into the heads of a drunken mob, deaf to every appeal of our common humanity, and fatally bent on mischief.

Reared in a peaceful, law-abiding, christian community, I had no idea of the real simon pure devil that lurked in the ignorant unrestrained denizens of our western frontier, nor how thin the crust of civilization was that incased some at least, when the strong arm of the law was no longer available in the interest of civil and orderly conduct. Those infuriated men, like the tiger, had tasted human blood, and the spirit of murder ran riot everywhere. One man, the king of the place, and the worst of the lot, struck another on the head with a "sling-shot", an instrument made of a mass of lead and covered with leather with a handle to wield it, from the effect of which the man assaulted, died sometime afterwards. Fights and quarrels continued all night among those not placed *hors du combat* by whiskey—that mighty force, which yet rules in the wet towns and cities of Nebraska, and wherever else in the country, the guzzlers of that liquid hell-fire are in the majority.

St. Stephen was not an ex-

ception, but rather the rule that is as old as the human race. I have often wondered why God made man at all. His lot is a hard one—or we think it is—from start to finish; and no agency conceivable in nature, could work more assiduously than he does, constantly and forever, to make it harder. And now after nineteen hundred years of the highest and most advanced civilization known in all history, there does not walk the world today, one perfectly contented human being in all its wide expanse.

As german to the reflections just indulged in, let us see how man's creation was accounted for, as well as the reason for it, in a vanished and dateless age. I have seen in an old book, older than the Bible, it was known as the traditions of the Elders among the strange people who produced it, but in the literature of the world, is now known as the "Talmud", a fanciful account of man's creation. It is very pretty in the reading, but for want of space I quote but little. This substantially: When God was about to create man, He called the three ministering Angels that wait constantly upon the throne, Justice, Truth and Mercy, as a kind of advisory board, and asked: "Shall we make man?" Justice and Truth answered:

"Hear us, Almighty King, create no more. The glorious harmony of the heavens which Thou has sent to earth will be disturbed, destroyed; he will desecrate Thy sanctuaries, and profane Thy altars. Thy peace will be disturbed, the flow of blood will follow sure his coming. O God, create him not, for with man Thou sendest falsehood to earth, confusion, horror, war will blot the earth" &c. Then it is written, silence fell upon the contesting hosts as the Angel of Mercy appear-

ed before that awful presence, and on bended knees sweet was the voice which said entreatingly:

"Oh, Father, create Thou man; make him Thine own noble image. With heavenly pity will I fill his heart, with sympathy towards every living thing impress his being, and I will watch over him forever."

Then out of the quietness that fell upon all in Heaven, came the Divine words: "We will make man, and he shall be a child of Mercy."

This, as a picture of poetic fancy, is a gem in itself, but like other gems, not of the imagination, has been made the subject of larceny, now and again, and thereby hangs a tale.

About the middle of the last century, a cruel and cowardly murder was committed in one of the rural districts of Kentucky. A northern man, and in those days that meant an abolitionist, was teaching a school down there.

His name was Butler, and among his pupils was one from a wealthy family of the name of Ward. The boy had been chastised for some infraction of the rule, whereupon an older brother went to the school house, called the teacher to the door and shot him to death like a dog. In the trial that followed, John J. Crittenden, a senator in congress from that state, and an eloquent advocate at the bar withal, was retained with others, to defend the murderer Ward. In closing his address to the jury, he gave the imaginary colloquy over the propriety of man's creation as recited in the Talmud, with some rhetorical additions of his own, and let it go to the jury and the country, as though the splendid imagery was a creation of his own fancy, and it was so received. Numerous small bores of the bar all over the United



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States, have, on similar occasions, (I have heard several in Nebraska), made use of the same figure, and in further imitation of the Kentucky lawyer, gave it as their own. Plagiarism, like murder, will "out" sometimes. But enough of this.

St. Stephen, but why St. Stephen? St. Belzabub would have been more in harmony with the surroundings—had but a year or so more to live, and that was too long by just that time. Before that year ended, two agents of a German colonization society came upon the scene, purchased a thousand acres of land just south of the old town, and before the end of two years, completely absorbed the social excrescence on the hill, and it ceased to exist. Those German agents were Hon. Gus Deuerfeldt and Lewis Allgehware.

Mr. Deuerfeldt is yet a citizen of our county, in the enjoyment of an honored and hale old age, but Mr. Allgehware left us many years ago, and died, I think, in California. In my next I will give some of the facts concerning the town they established.

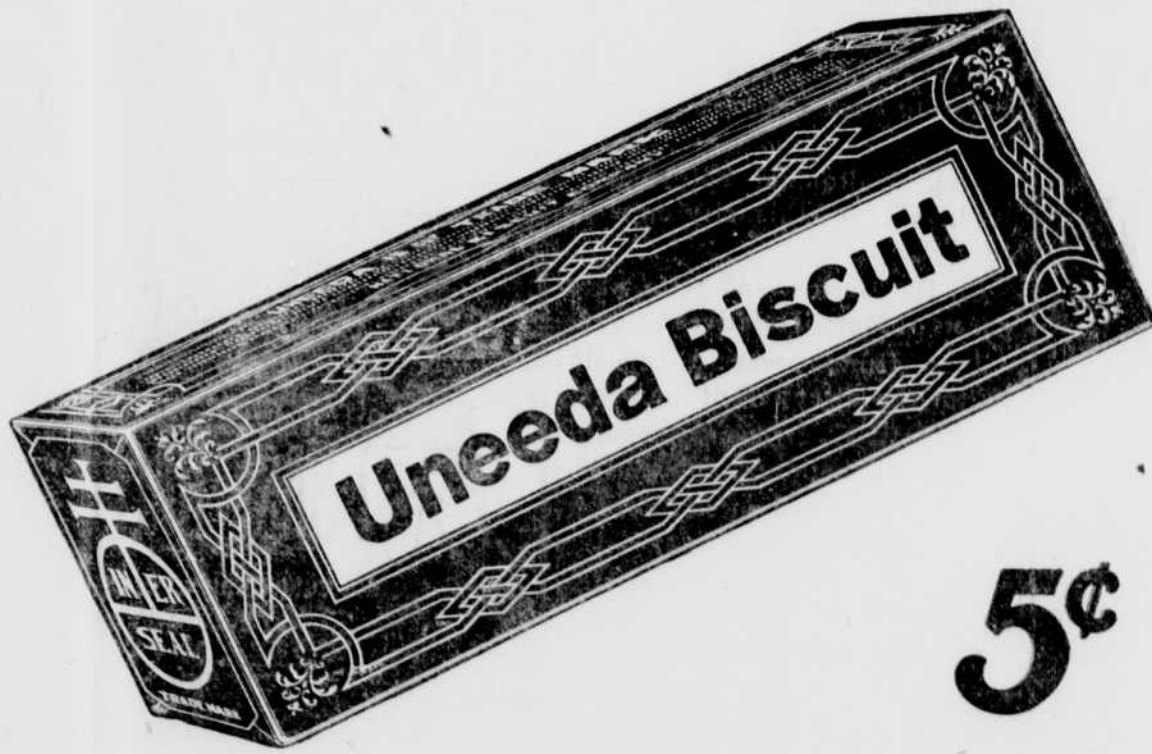
St. Stephen never got much better, nor much worse, it hardly could, but it came to an end like everything else in time, and few there are in life who remember anything about it.

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