

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.

The Year 1860.

Of all the years in the life of our nation, none were more fatefully eventful than that year of grace 1860. What I have to say of it in these personal recollections will be largely, if not entirely, confined to the little of its mighty history that was made in my immediate presence in Richardson county. It does not lie in my way to recount, if I possessed the ability and was properly equipped for the task, the events precedent in time that lead up to the result of the popular election held that year for president. It is sufficient to say that, not only the life of this government, but all others of like constituent elements possible among men, was determined thereby. Had the experiment (for the American Union was scarcely anything else in its first inception) failed, the age of superior rule by the people of a government by themselves, in their collective capacity, would have been indefinitely postponed at least, though probably not defeated forever, for that is a very long time. Besides, the time to write that history has not come. When it does, the writer will come with it, and the great story will be told comprehensively, and correctly. The most that any historian, writing concurrently with the events he is narrating can do, is to record the fact of their occurrence as they appear to him; but it is only after the storm has passed and reaction, so to speak, has taken place in the orderly operations of things, that effects can be intelligently measured and logically understood.

Cause and effect are very different things, yet both must be considered to understand either. Effects are "like poison laid to work a long time after," but until their work is done any story told of them would be incomplete and therefore of doubtful value. The French Revolution is a hundred and twenty years old in its violent and bloody occurrence, but the ultimate effects flowing from and out of it have not yet wholly transpired. The inimitable English classic put the proposition in a nutshell when he wrote his aphorism of "poison laid to work a long time after."

As heretofore recorded in these reminiscences we signaled the opening of this eventful year by having an act passed by the legislature locating the county seat at Falls City, and providing for a series of elections by the people to determine the question of its ultimate and permanent location. Something of the history of those elections has already been recited—all that would be of interest to the people of the current generation, though if I were writing for old-timers only, I might amuse them somewhat in the relation of familiar things in those days, in which only those actually participating would care to hear of. Maybe I will mention some of them anyhow.

Following the last election came the final legal contest to ascertain in a judicial way, which of the two contending towns had received a majority of the votes cast by the duly qualified voters of the county. The contest extended far into the summer and as stated in a former paper, ended in the triumph of Falls City. There have been some spasmodic efforts at intervals since to reopen the vexed question, but time, which is said to set all things even, finally wore out the desire to keep the county in a constant turmoil over a matter upon which the people had so decisively passed, and it ceased from the public mind entirely. Too much of any thing is not relished by anybody, which has led me to think sometimes, that too much glorious happiness in another state of which we have heard so much, would ultimately become monotonous, and unless changed in our nature so as to become substantially somebody else, we would, in the course of such an existence, want to go back to earth, wake up some of the old boys and have another of our monkey and parrot times of the long ago, when we were actively engaged in the agricultural business of sowing a fantastic cereal called "oats," of the untamed variety. This is mere fancy, but it has been in my mind, and now and again I have thought about it not a little.

In 1860 Falls City had grown some, but the discovery of gold at Pike's Peak the year before had taken from us a good share of our restless people—and every town and community has a lot of them, who are always on the "look-out" for that marvelous country where a pot of money is to be found at the end of every rainbow that spans its heavens—and though some of them came back, as they invariably do, others drifted away, and the tide that was setting towards the western sea engulfed

them, and they became a part of the lost things of the earth.

The nomination of Abraham Lincoln of Illinois by the republican national convention at Chicago, that met on May 16th of that year, as the candidate of that party for the office of president, was an inspiring circumstance that evoked the enthusiasm of every adherent of that party in all parts of the country, as much so in Nebraska as anywhere, notwithstanding its citizens were debarred participation in the election on account of their residence in a territory.

It will be remembered that the territorial governments of Kansas and Nebraska were provided for and erected under the administration of Pierce, and of course all the territorial officers were democrats; and to begin with, both territories were settled largely by democrats, but in 1859 the republicans held a convention at Bellevue in Sarpy county, and nominated Samuel G. Dally for delegate to congress to fill the vacancy occasioned by the death of Judge Fennor Ferguson, whose term of office would not expire until the 4th of March, 1861. Dally lived at Peru and had been a member of the legislature that met in the fall of 1858. He could make a pretty good stump speech, making up in self assertion and personal push and arrogance what he lacked in education and genuine ability. The nomination came to him much in the same way Bryan got his nomination for congressman from the first district in 1890. Nobody thought the democrats could elect anybody that year and no serious effort was made by the old standbys like J. Sterling Morton and others, and it easily went to Bryan, but in that year the prohibition amendment to the constitution came on to be adopted or rejected by the people and to make its defeat certain, Omaha, which was then a part of the first district, with a legal voting strength of about 9,000 actually cast over 19,000 against the amendment, and every one of the 10,000 illegal votes so cast was a democratic one, and all for Boyd for governor and Bryan for congress.

In 1859 nobody thought the republicans could win, and Dally was easily nominated on the first ballot, and to the astonishment of everybody was elected. He posed as a lawyer, but I

never heard of but case in which he was counsel, and to make plain the kind of lawyer he was, I will tell something of his performance on that occasion. He was attorney for a man accused of the crime of rape, and after reading the indictment Dally concluded it was bad and moved to quash it, giving as a reason therefor, because it did not charge that the crime was committed maliciously; that is, it was not charged to have been committed with malice. There were several amused faces in court when the ground of Dally's motion came to be known. The court remarked that that was the first time he had ever heard it contended that malice was an essential element of the crime of rape. It was not so at common law and it was very certain that the statute did not make it so, and the motion would have to be overruled. It would be difficult to conceive of a more ridiculous proposition, but it was not at all certain that Dally was conscious of it. He was nominated for the same office in 1860, the year I am writing about, and was opposed by J. Sterling Morton, who then held the office of Secretary of the Territory, an office that answered to that of our constitutional office of Secretary of State.

It was during that campaign that I first saw Mr. Morton, and I thought then, as I did many times afterwards, that he was the meanest democrat I ever saw. A republican in his estimation was something more than infamous, nor was his opinion in that regard changed or modified during all the dark days of the Civil war, which he repeatedly denounced as not only unconstitutional, on the part of the Lincoln administration, but every act of the government in trying to enforce its authority and maintain the integrity of the union was also condemned by him as unauthorized, barbarous and cruel. Had he lived in any loyal state, and talked as he did here on the outskirts of civilization, he would have found his way to a military prison in short order. But here little attention was paid to him as he was powerless for evil, and comparatively harmless. There seems a grim sarcasm in the fact that such a man should be honored in his death with a monument by people who love the memory of Abraham Lincoln, who was abused in his life and shot to death in the same spirit that actuated the enemies of the nation in denouncing the war to save the union, both north and south.

The result of that election as shown by the face of the returns, was that Morton had been elected, but it turned out that in Leau qui Court County, up on the Niobrara, a stupendous fraud had been committed. There were only about six legal voters in that county, but Morton's

agents and friends procured a return of the poll from that country showing that he had carried it by about 220 majority, or something like that. Dally instituted a contest and proved these facts. They were laid before Governor Samuel Black, and although he had issued a certificate of election to Morton, when he became satisfied that he was not legally elected he revoked his former certificate to Morton, and issued one to Dally. For that act Morton never forgave Gov. Black, and when the latter was killed at York Town in Virginia, in McClellan's peninsular campaign in the rebellion when gallantly leading his command against the rebel forces, Morton actually exulted over the fact in a paper he was publishing in Nebraska City. When Gov. Black, democrat as he was, surrendered his office as governor of the territory to his successor, Gov. Alvin Saunders, appointed by president Lincoln, he went to his old home in Pennsylvania, procured a commission in the volunteer army of the Union, raised a regiment of soldiers, went to the front and lost his life in the defense of his country, but who has ever said anything about rearing a monument to his memory? Not anybody that I ever heard of. The man who kept up a fire in the rear, the chief copperhead of the territory, won his spurs slandering the great president and his loyal army, and dying distinguished by people ignorant of the truth, as though he had in some signal way earned a monument for patriotic service performed for his country. It is not a very great feat, of patriotism to hold a civil office in time of peace, but it is something for a man to be true to his country even in private station when traitors were making war to destroy it, and Morton was not. These facts are mentioned here that sycophants of all degree, who delight in chiseling on brass or stone wondrous heralds of fame, whether deserved or not, may be estopped from denying the truth of history.

Morton was a great man by marriage. The Joy family of Michigan built railroads and became rich and powerful, and Morton made the hit of his life when he hitched himself to their car and went whizzing through the world at record-breaking speed. Bryan sidetracked him however, and then he got mad, and pretty nearly changed his politics before he became a democratic saint. The man of "ink and wind" will lose two feet or so off his monument for doing it.

But to resume, when congress met in extraordinary session at the call of president Lincoln on July 4th, 1861 both Dally and Morton appeared armed with a certificate of election as delegate in congress from Nebraska. As Dally held the last in the series

the clerk of the House recognized it as the authoritative document and put Dally's name on the roll of members elect. That gave him the seat, and Morton was compelled to become contestant instead of Dally, and the advantage to that extent was against him. Two other circumstances also stood as lions in his path, viz: the fraud his friends had committed in his favor in Leau qui Court county, and the changed political complexion of the house, brought about by the secession of the Southern States and the absence of their congressman from that body. He was allowed however, to conduct his case in person, and to make a speech in the house in advocacy of his right to sit instead of Dally, in which speech he emptied all the vials of his wrath on the head of Dally, whom he accused of putting up the political cards against him and inciting Gov. Black to nullify his first certificate by issuing one to Dally; and by roundly abusing his party and official associate in Nebraska, Samuel Black, for turning him down in favor of a black republican. Morton could use that adjective as applied to his opponents, with what he believed to be, tremendous effect. But it was no go. Morton didn't get the seat and he never went to congress.

This made him more sour than ever, and all through the war he talked like a man who would have been glad if the South had succeeded in breaking up the Union.

His intense partisan zeal and personal egotism outweighed everything else, and blinded him to the natural effect of his intemperate expressions on the subject of the Civil war. I trust I do his memory no injustice in what I have here written, for I certainly have no such intention, but the facts recited I know to be true of my own personal knowledge. There are others yet in life who know them to be true quite as well as I do.

The great year of 1860 saw Lincoln elected president and the Union actually dissolved so far as a state resolutions could accomplish that object, but there was a man and a people, descendants of the worshippers of Odin and Thor, to reckon with before the fabric that Washington and Hamilton had built could be torn down and destroyed. The reckoning came, and the regenerated Union, stronger than ever still stands and will stand forever.

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