

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.

"Tenting on the Old Camp Ground."
"The faintest vestage of a shrine
Of any worship, begets some thoughts
divine."

The first I ever heard of the English poet Byron, the author of the above couplet, was at a Methodist camp meeting away back near the place of my nativity in an older state, and mixed up with the dimly remembered things of my infancy. The preacher that Sunday was a Rev. Mr. Andrus, an accomplished pulpit orator, and a scholar of the highest attainments.

I did not know that then, but I came to know it in after years, when the reverend gentleman had climbed to the very top of professional excellence, power and influence in the religious world.

Among other beautiful things said by him that day, in his felicitous word painting, was his reference to the incomparable genius of the poet named, and the wrong use he made of it—of his power of expression, second to none of the Greek and Latin poets, and equal if not superior to the Bard of Avon. It is too long ago, and what he said too imperfectly remembered, for me to attempt its reproduction here, and if he had failed to utter the words I will presently repeat, I should probably not have remembered his sermon at all.

He believed, or affected to do so, that Byron was thoroughly bad and essentially wicked, and in a voice of earnest entreaty warned young men of the evil example of such a man—a very human diamond, seductive as the serpent in the garden, brilliant as the sun, and therefore all the more dangerous on that account, "otherwise," hissing the words through his teeth, "in the name of the great Englishman you will surely urge your way to hell."

Those words have never left me, but were the efficient reason for my examining the works of the poet for myself, for my own satisfaction and for the exercise of my own judgment; and that having done so with what critical power I possess, I am constrained to say that the eminent divine was wholly mistaken in his moral estimate of what the world of letters has long ago acknowledged, one of the greatest, if not the greatest poet who ever wrote in any language.

Like all the race of distinctively representative men in all times, he came in for his share of abuse and misrepresentation (to call it by no harsher name), and died the worst traduced and slandered man of his time. It is the common fate of genius, for the world has always thought better of itself when engaged in storming its prophets.

The plain simple meaning of the lines quoted above is, that every spot on this old rolling globe of ours, upon which men have worshipped God, has become holy ground. Bad men, those who are of the real hardened wicked, do not subscribe to that kind of doctrine; and that is all that need be said on the subject.

The foregoing reflections are not entirely irrelevant to the purpose of this contribution to my reminiscent history, as I shall endeavor to make plain as I proceed. It is a fact within the experience of all who have attained to the years of maturity, though they may not have accounted to themselves for the knowledge, that the association of time and place with persons and events of concurrent existence, is quite as important as the persons and events themselves. As it is impossible to think of persons and events out of time (I use the last term in its popular sense) and out of space, we attach as much significance to the one as to the other, and posit them all together as one common whole. For example, we cannot think of the piece of earth on which the never-to-be-forgotten battle of Waterloo was fought, without associating with it the mighty armies that contended there on June 18, 1815, and the illustrious generals who commanded them, the slaughter that was done, the resultant destruction of an empire, and the end of the meteoric military and civic career of that strange human mystery, who in his day, strode the world like a very colossus.

Similarly, with every other physical event possible in nature. Time and space—that is place—are mere conditions under which we posit things and so render them comprehensible in consciousness,—the one of sequence the other of co-existence.

The popular understanding concerning time is illusory and all wrong. There is no such thing, yet we can not think of anything dissociated with some place, and unrelated to some other thing or event, prior or subsequent in occurrence or being. Relation and sequence, therefore, con-

stitute the intangible something we call "time."

But it is not of these abstractions I intend to deal in this paper, though they come in my way for mention, as explanatory of the idea I have in mind.

To the north of our city, and about two miles distant as the crow flies, is a secluded spot in the breaks of the Muddy, that possesses for me a peculiar interest.

It is the old Methodist camp meeting ground of fifty-four or fifty-five years ago. Just when the spot was dedicated to that use, I am unable to tell, but according to my best information on the subject, the first meeting was held there either in the summer of 1855 or 1856. The site of the camp is located between two ravines and on land sloping gently from the high ground to the point where the two ravines meet, forming a larger one that runs off to the north and out into the valley of the Muddy.

At the time I saw it first, over a half century ago, it was covered with a grove of young trees, just thick enough on the ground to form a canopy over head with their mingled foliage, sufficient to afford a sort of cool twilight shade in which the people could congregate, locate their tents, pulpit and altar, with such rude seating for the accommodation of the congregation in their devotions, as the scanty facilities at hand for the purpose, would allow.

The arrangement of things always seemed to be entirely satisfactory, and everybody in that contented frame of mind, which, on such occasions is peculiarly conducive of pious contemplation and reverential worship. It was a kind of benediction to watch those people, or any people so situated, suffering privations, but making the most of everything; clinging to a master hope, stronger than life itself, that reaches all the way from the blight and wilderness of this world to the "land of the dead," to the promised haven of rest—for of all such, is sublimity personified.

Assume for a moment that they may possibly be mistaken, and that the reality touching the future existence of the children of men "after the fitful fever of this life," is over, shall prove to be something radically different from what they believe it will be, what of it? Is not everything in the present state of exist-

ence more or less uncertain; and is it not true that nothing remains precisely the same for any considerable length of time, but is constantly and forever in a state of unrest and change?

Eternity involves the idea of a changeless and an eternal rest, which is nothing more than the notion, if such is admissible, of complete non-existence—the Nirvana of the Buddhists.

The earnest Christian, who believes that the heaven of his hope is a place of rest, peace and everlasting conscious happiness, is, by anticipation as much in the actual enjoyment of it in his worship on earth, as he will be in the house of the many mansions awaiting him in the great hereafter. To disturb such a belief—or dream if you please—is to commit the unpardonable sin.

Tear a man from his illusions—and human life is largely made up of them—and he has died twice.

The camp meeting is a Methodist institution, and a creature of the American frontier. I had visited many such before I came to Nebraska, but this one over north differed in one marked particular from all I had ever seen. There were no very old people in the congregation. I doubt whether there were any as much as fifty years old. The class in the middle life, both men and women, predominated. The battles of this world, whether between contending hostile armies, or the pioneers and the unsubdued wilderness, are all fought, and forever will be fought, by young men. That fact sufficiently accounted for the youthful appearance of the people I met for the first time in large assembly, on the Archer camp meeting ground in the late summer of 1858.

It was an interesting experience, and entirely new to me, for I was looking on my kind with the naked eye, dissociated from social conventions and fashion flummeries with which, in another place, I had been familiar. The weather being warm, the men were mostly in their shirt sleeves, as though their religious devotion was a kind of undress function, that could be best performed without the incumbrance of a coat.

There was a faint suggestion of fashion in the hats and dresses of the women, but it was in the past tense, and referable to some other place and time. But they were all neat, comely, and adorned with that inherent womanly modesty—characteristic of the mothers who have produced and nursed the greatest race of men the world has ever known—the Anglo-Saxon. I liked that camp meeting and went there every year as long as it lasted. The preaching was much in keeping with the surroundings and conditions, a little primitive, very

simple, but decidedly earnest, and above all was sincere and sympathetic, the kind of sermon or message of encouragement one traveler in the night and storm of a sin troubled world, would be likely to deliver to his fellows. Those preachers, and most of the people, who year after year, worshipped in that beautiful grove in the early days, have long been at rest, but the shrine remains, there to preach, in voiceless language the resurrection and the life, while the world stands.

According to my best recollection, the last camp meeting over on the Muddy, was held in the year 1865, but I do not vouch for the absolute correctness of this statement. The reason for believing it true, is the fact, that in 1866 the first Methodist church building in Falls City was erected, and I am certain no camp meeting was held over there after that date. I have never been there during all the forty-five years that have elapsed, till one day last week.

After I determined to write of that time, and before doing so, I concluded to visit the old camp grounds and see what it looked like. I was careful to take no one with me who knew anything of those meetings, or anything of the spot where they were held. This was done that I might from recollection alone, hunt out the place, and the location of points of interest such as the spring from which the water supply of the people was obtained, the pulpit and the and the space devoted to the seating of the congregation.

Accordingly, on last Thursday morning I procured a team and buggy, and looked about for some fellow as idle as myself to go with me, and found one in the person of Jim Nausler, who, I knew was engaged in a very different kind of camping in the swamps of the South about the time those Archer camp meetings were being held, and pressed him into service with the bribe of a cigar or two, and the promise of a ride in the country. Agreed, and we went. I didn't know exactly how to get to the ground, as the country all about it has been fenced up since I used to go there, but I knew the general direction and trusted to accident and circumstances for success in the enterprise.

Whoever would go there, can do so in this wise: Go north from town to the corner of the Jones farm, turn east for probably a half a mile to a neighborhood road running north; follow that till a wire fence is reached near the west ravine that runs by the old camp ground; go through it by a gate, and then through another gate in another fence running north and south, and from there along the edge of the grove to the top of the ridge east and he will then stand on the

southern end of that ancient place of worship. The place where the pulpit and altar were situated, is probably about fifty steps south of the meeting point of the two ravines I have mentioned, and just south of that and pretty nearly all over the sloping space between the two ravines, were located the seats for the congregation and the tents of the faithful in attendance.

If the place was cleared of debris, fallen limbs, underbrush, and some of the lower boughs of the trees lopped off, with seats, altar and pulpit restored, it would look precisely as it did forty-five years ago, when I saw it last. The grove does not seem to have changed at all, and yet, I know that the present growth of trees are not those, except perhaps three or four, knarled, crooked and broken trunks that still stand like "sentinels forgotten on their posts," that were there at the time of which I write. It required little effort of the imagination to repeople this neglected spot with the long dispersed and shadowy congregations that, annually met here. The place is barren of interest without such association, and to think of one, is to think of both.

Blot out the intervening years, and the grove and the camping ground are just the same as of yore, but what of the people who worshipped in that wood? Gone, except the youngest of them, out of life and out of the world, while the spot they consecrated to an holy use, is unknown to the masses, forgotten by many, and neglected by all.

I shall have something more to say on the same subject.

A Narrow Escape.

Edgar N. Bayliss, a merchant of Robinsonville, Del., wrote: "About two years ago I was thin and sick, and coughed all the time and if I did not have consumption, it was near to it. I commenced using Foley's Honey and Tar, and it stopped my cough, and I am now entirely well, and have gained twenty-eight pounds, all due to the good results from taking Foley's Honey and Tar. Kerr's Pharmacy."

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