

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.

Something More and The Last of The Old-Camp Ground.

There are two circumstances connected with one of the several camp meetings held on the Archer camp grounds, of which I made particular mention in my last contribution to these desultory recollections of matters and persons in the early days, that I deem of sufficient importance to be related before I dismiss the subject. I am aware that they can be of little interest to this generation, but it may not be so with the few who attended those meetings and yet linger among the living, not unlike the three or four old trees that yet stand on the ground, and in their day helped to shadow the people who worshipped there a half century ago. It is not impossible that what I write may bring to their remembrance, persons and incidents in connection with those assemblages of the religious people in those rude times, that have, by the lapse of years, become mistily obscure in their minds. If I shall succeed in doing nothing more, it will be enough to repay me for my labor, however uninteresting and unprofitable it may be in all other respects.

It was at the camp meeting held there in the summer of 1861, that I first met Rev. Henry T. Davis, of whom I have already made mention in a former paper of this series. The country had grown in population during the preceding three years, in the ratio of not less than three to one, and the congregations then in attendance were very much larger than they had ever been before. This was missionary ground and the Methodists were the first to occupy it, that is, as a church organization. There were, of course, members of other religious denominations among the first settlers, but their numbers were not great, and no effort was made for a long time to organize distinct societies for public worship according to their several rituals. Three of four Methodists anywhere make a church, and if they have no house especially devoted to congregational worship, they improvise their dwellings for the purpose in winter, and the groves, in summer. This has been the practice of that denomination since John Wesley planted it in America in the first half of the eighteenth century.

The church had become tolerably well organized in Nebraska, and was divided into two conference districts, one north and the other south of the Platte River. The one south was, and is yet, known as the Nebraska City district—though the country has since been subdivided into several such districts—and Mr. Davis was its presiding elder. He had never been in this part of the country before, and was a comparative stranger to everybody, except perhaps, a few of the local preachers. From what I since learned of his history, I should judge his age at that time, was something less than thirty, but he was very earnest, above the ordinary in matter of intelligence, and fairly well educated. From that day, till the day of his death, six or seven years ago, I knew him well and intimately, and I say it now in all sincerity, that of all the men that I have met and come to know, in or out of the church, he was among the very best. It may be, and I am inclined to think, was, owing to the strong and lasting impression he made on my mind at that first meeting, that influenced my estimate and regard for him while he lived, and has made his memory a thing for kindly remembrance forever.

The kind of sermons we had generally, as I have remarked before, were rather primitive, rustic perhaps would be a better word, though I must say I liked them on account of their simplicity, and want of educational polish, for they in every case, were redolent of sincere devotion, and breathed the spirit of true Christian piety. We were to have something out of the usual order at that meeting, but nobody but the young presiding elder knew what it would be. Those meetings usually commenced on Saturday night and continued all through the following week, ending on the night of Sunday of the second week. The weather was admirable, and the first Sunday's service saw the largest congregation of people in the beautiful grove that had ever assembled there. It was understood that the new presiding elder was to preach the morning sermon and everybody, myself included, were anxious to hear him. When the hour arrived for commencing the devotional exercises, the new preacher arose in the pulpit and in a clear and very pleasant voice, conducted preliminaries usual on such

occasions. When that was done, and the people had had a good look at the youthful minister, he announced his text, which I still remember. It may be found in one of the Epistles of the Apostle Paul, where he announced a fact which he very decidedly believed to be true, that after the house of this tabernacle shall be dissolved, he had a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. I do not give it verbatim, but all Bible readers will readily recognize it and know where to find it.

Upon this text the preacher delivered a discourse upon the immortality of the soul. It was a complete surprise to me, and quite an agreeable one withal. I expected one in keeping with the occasion, which everybody knows—who know anything of the old-fashioned camp or revival meetings,—are intended for the conversion of sinners, and to recruit the army of the faithful. It was so entirely different from anything I had heard in Nebraska, and on a theme that has occupied the attention and engaged the thoughts of men in all times, that it not only pleased me then, but it was one of the impelling causes that lead me in all the years since, to not only study the question for myself, but to examine the works of the great men of the world who have thought and written on the subject.

I cannot say that he advanced any new argument in favor of the affirmative of the proposition, but he gave many ingenious suggestions and reasons—in harmony with some given by others—for believing that the human soul is an eternal essence, uncreated and indestructible.

He first attempted to prove his position by premises furnished by holy writ, and secondly by those drawn from the whole body of nature around us. On the whole, however, the discourse, which was undeniably an able one, was largely made up of assumptions and conclusions from premises that lacked the essential element of demonstration. As for instance, he referred to the fact that Socrates, the world renowned philosopher at Athens, had proclaimed the doctrine nearly five hundred years before the Christian era, but omitted to give any reason advanced by that philosopher for believing so. Had he read the Phaedo, the dialogue given to the world by Plato, in which

the fact of the soul's immortality is asserted by Socrates, which I have reason to believe he had not, I am inclined to think he might have been in doubt whether the reasons given for the philosopher's belief are sufficient to establish its truth. To my mind all that is valuable about the assertion is the fact that the great philosopher made it. It is certainly true that he believed it, and it is not entirely certain that he was able to coin that belief into words sufficiently to become intelligible to others. People know many things of which they are unable to account to others, and for which they can give no reason.

That service was of real value to me, for, besides being a something unlooked for, it set me on a train of investigation and research that might otherwise have been indefinitely postponed, or never undertaken, and which I have continued with some industry ever since.

He, like many others before and since, erroneously gave the Grecian philosopher the honor of being the author of the doctrine that the human soul is immortal. Herodotus is authority for saying that the Greeks borrowed the idea from the Egyptians, and it is now known that the Brahmins centuries before that time believed in, and taught the same doctrine.

In the argument between Arjuna, the ancient ruler of India, and the Holy One Krishna, as found in the Bhagaved-Gita,—an episode in a Bahman Epic—the god in urging the king to give battle to his enemies who were being led by his kinsmen whom he was reluctant to kill, assured him, that though he might kill, he could not destroy them, saying: "There is no existence for what does not exist, nor is there any non-existence for what exists." That is to say: what does not exist, cannot exist, and what does exist, cannot cease to exist. This is the perfect idea of immortal existence, and comprehends the spreading universe, and all that is therein contained. All science is agreed that what we call matter is indestructible. If that be true, and there is abundant proof that it is, why should the soul, the intelligent, living, essence of the creature man, be less durable than the frail earth house in which it is confined in this state of existence.

My own notion of the fact is, that no human record has been kept of when and where the doctrine of immortality was first promulgated, but rather, that man as such, has the fact revealed to him in and through his own nature, that is, that the consciousness of continual existence inheres in the soul itself, and is a part of that knowledge which trans-

cends all experience. However, I do not wish to enter into a discussion of the question here, even if I were competent to do so, which I am not, but to tell of a strange experience of mine in a wild waste, on a pleasant Sunday in a day when I, and all the world about me was young, but now far away in the past. I shall never forget that sermon nor the place at which I heard it. It was like finding a bunch of fresh blooming roses or a cool spring of water in a desert.

I talked with Mr. Davis about that sermon many times since, but not till after the circumstance had become hazy and indistinct in his memory. He seemed to be astonished at the accuracy of my recollection of what he said on that occasion after so long a time. It was not a mere matter of memory, but because my whole attention was enlisted in the subject matter of the sermon, the manner of its delivery, and the man who was delivering it. If the dead, like the ghost of Hamlet's father, are permitted to revisit the scenes of this life, I have thought many times of the solid satisfaction those people surely take in coming back to the spot on earth where they made their first start to heaven, and in holding phantom camp meetings on the old grounds over Archer way, under the whispering trees, in the stillness and solemnity of the night.

The other circumstances to which I referred was a kind of mixture of the sublime and the ridiculous. It was so strangely ludicrous, pathetic, laughable, solemn, fun-provoking, tragic, and around farcial comedy, as to be wholly unlike any other experience of my whole life. It came about in this wise. As we all know the Civil war became a fixed fact in the spring of 1861, shortly after the inauguration of Mr. Lincoln as president of the United States. Some engagements between the hostile armies had taken place, including the battle of Bull Run, which proved so disastrous to the Union forces, before the date of holding the camp meeting I am writing about. It was very natural to expect that something would be said about the situation at this meeting, or at least that some good brother or sister might pray for the country of Washington and his compatriots in the old Revolution, but strange to relate, not a word was uttered in sermon or prayer about our national trouble.

Nobody said anything about that however, and the daily and nightly exercises went on at the camp ground, precisely as though the nation was at peace with all the world instead of being threatened with territorial disruption and national death. This state of things continued till the afternoon of the second Sunday,

when an adjournment over to Falls City was had, to hold a night meeting there to talk over the project of building a church in the near future. The meeting was held in an empty house, and not a very large one, somewhere near the middle of the block, south of the present post office. There was a pretty large attendance of quite orderly people, and at the proper hour the services commenced with a song or two and then a prayer by a good old Methodist preacher from the town of Peru in Nemaha county, of the name of Burns. The old man had a good deal of the spirit of Bunker Hill about him and a decided love for the starry banner that was then being shot at by some discontented people down south in war-like array. The petition he put up was much like others we are accustomed to hear on such occasions, but pretty soon the repression that had kept everybody silent on the matter that was uppermost in the minds of everybody during the whole camp meeting week was thrown aside, and the E. Pluribus Unum side of the man of God turned up when he asked the Father to bless our president and the brave men—he did not get any further, for at this point bedlam broke loose, with stamps on the floor, clapping of hands and wild yells of "Bully for you," "Give 'em Hell," "Hurrah for Burns," etc. Cheers for Lincoln and the boys in "blue," etc. The old father's prayer was never finished, and all thought of a serious religious meeting was thrown to the winds, and the balance of the evening, after quiet was restored, was devoted to speech making of a patriotic character, in which Elder Davis, and I think every preacher in attendance participated.

It transpired that the silence of the camp meeting on the subject of the war, was the result of the subordinate preachers waiting for the presiding elder to lead off on the subject, and that his silence arose out of the fact that he was a stranger to the people whose temper touching a question, which in some localities was a delicate one, was unknown to him, and he was unwilling to mar the harmony of the meeting by introducing a theme that might prove a firebrand among them, hence he had allowed the meeting to proceed leaving it to some other gentleman better acquainted with the people to set the patriotic ball in motion. Father Burns did that to the queen's taste.

In the course of my life I have seen many public meetings of all descriptions, but never one that at all resembled that. The conditions that differentiated this from all others, will not, in all probability obtain again, and it is to be devoutly hoped they never will.

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