

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 Broad Axe, Falls City's First Newspaper

In the month of December, 1858, or somewhere about that time, J. E. Burbank and Sewell R. Jameson started a newspaper at Falls City. It was called "The Broad Axe," and was a sort of continuation of one they had operated at Centerville, Ind., the former residence of the Burbanks and Jameson. They had a small hand press and some type, and Jameson being a practical printer the enterprise was set on foot to help Falls City, and to amuse, if not instruct, the people in this part of the new political community of Nebraska. About the same time A. D. Kirk started one at Rulo, which he called "The Rulo Guide," and it was not long before a fierce newspaper war broke out between them of a grossly personal character.

From a dog fight to a newspaper war, or any other conflict, great or small, in which prowess, valor, grit, and gallantry may be displayed, the sympathies and partisan zeal of the Anglo-Saxon are sure to be enlisted, and if he can in any way get into the row himself, he will be all the better pleased. This republic is one hundred and thirty-three years old, and in that time has fought successfully five wars, two with the parent nation, England, one with Mexico, one with Spain, and one with the Filipinos on the other side of the earth; and for three hundred years has carried on an almost continuous war with the native Indian tribes found in possession of the North American continent when discovered by the Italian navigator, Columbus, in the closing years of the fifteenth century.

Besides these five foreign wars, and the long drawn out Indian wars, there was fought another in the decade of 1860, that out-ranks all others in the matter of the destruction of life and property, in the long history of the world. It was that one precipitated by the secession of most of the slave-holding states from the American Union, and the attempt to set up a new republic out of the territory of the old one. But this was a family fight between people of the same blood and from a common ancestry. It was Anglo-Saxon against Anglo-Saxon, but the established government with its superior resources, and commanding influence among the nations of the earth, prevailed in the end and the Union remained intact.

This digression aside, I remark that the newspaper controversy—principally about nothing—between those papers, ultimately drew the people of the two towns into it, and the sentiment of place hatred between them, became intensely bitter and remained so for many years afterwards. The ancient wars between the old-time Scottish clans were no more vengeful in the hearts of their people, than it was among the inhabitants of the two hamlets whose rivalry had immediate respect only, to which could show the greatest population, and in time to come be selected as the seat of government of the county. I have already told in another paper in this series, what followed the election in April, 1860, which finally resulted in giving the county seat to Falls City, and I need say no more on that head.

The row between the "Broad Axe" and the "Rulo Guide," was like most other shindys on the frontier, ridiculously absurd, senseless in its conduct, and superbly indecent, not to say downright obscene, in the general matter contained in both. The public taste being in keeping with the low vulgarity indulged in by those paper-wad champions, rather relished the weekly showers of mud and filth they threw at each other, as in the public estimate the battle of the rival towns was supposed to be involved in the issue—and besides they liked the fun. In all essential respects the contest was not unlike a similar one recorded by that imitable caricaturist, Charles Dickens, in the Pickwick Papers, over an election at Eatanswill, between Pott of the Eatanswill Gazette and Slurk of the Eatanswill Independent, but I lack the powers of description in a sufficient degree to present those Nebraska inky belligerents and their tempest in a teapot, as the great Englishman pictured the two Eatanswill social scabs, and clothed them with his own mantle of deathless fame.

Pott and Slurk—Dickens was happy in his selection of names for his characters. Pott and Slurk—synonyms for disgust or contempt—a whole commentary in themselves—were in fact intended as types of two classes that somehow manage to be always

in the front in the operation of a certain kind of public slander sheets, that an over-indulgent government tolerates under its guaranty of freedom of speech and of the press. That such people may be held responsible in the courts for abuse of that privilege is a very poor remedy, as most of such cattle are generally execution proof, and judgments against them, in most cases, are worth no more than what the boy shot at—nothing. Mr. Dickens was of opinion that full length portraits of such fellows was a better illustration of their effect on society, and a decidedly more ample punishment for their offenses against private character, than prosecutions for libel on the criminal side of the court, or suits for damages, on the civil side. Hence, his masterpieces, Pott and Slurk, prototypes of all their despicable kith and kin all over the globe, drawn to life in the Pickwick Papers, that in its day went laughing round the world, and which will never cease to amuse while there are people on the earth with any appreciation of the ridiculous in their compositions. The lash of ridicule, wielded by an hand no less powerful than that of Byron himself, has rid civilized society of much of that pestiferous race, despised of gods and men, but not entirely.

That wrangle between the pioneer newspapers of this county was however, a very harmless affair, but being the first, is entitled to mention in these papers. The editors themselves were not bad fellows, but, were very different in temperament, tastes and mental make up. Of course, nothing in this world can last forever, and the storm of paper pellets spent itself in the course of a few months, principally for the reason that both editors retired from their posts, and the war cry died out for a time, to be renewed by others on the tripods, more fierce than ever, till the county seat question was settled, when the "Guide" faded out of existence and was heard of no more.

The "Broad Axe," however lingered along for ten years or more, and like a river I have seen in the mountain districts of the Pacific Slope, would sink out of sight in spots, to reappear further on, and continued that desultory, intermittent sort of existence, till by some process of newspaper metempsychosis, it passed

into another under a different name, and this, the first of its kind, of long time happy memory, followed the "Guide" to the shadowy land of dead newspapers.

The roll of its editors brings before me many faces familiar in recollection; faces of men who in another time, were co-pioneers on the western border, and participants in the work of laying the foundations of the present great and prosperous state of Nebraska. Sewell R. Jameson, its first, retired soon after its establishment, to take the office of Receiver of Public monies in the land office at Brownville, which place he held for a time, with no particular credit to himself, or anybody else. I shall not attempt to write his biography. It is already written in the last lives of that mighty host of the dead from a social custom, sanctioned, or at least permitted by the laws of so called Christian men, and the story of one of those is, in all essential respects, an exact duplicate of all the others. In a lonely grave on a high hill near old Brownville and overlooking the broad sweep of the Missouri, as it rolls its unsightly, muddy, floods steadily down to the sea, rests all that was mortal of that young man, once of high hope, of good intellect and good intentions, but of no more account now to the busy throng of the living, than the senseless clods that cover the frail, wasting body, beneath them. "What is man that thou art mindful of him, or the son of man that thou visitest him," when man himself is neither mindful of his kind, or merciful to it, but is even cruel in his disposition to, forgetfulness and neglect.

Mr. Jameson was succeeded in the "Broad Axe," by a tramp printer named Irving, a young man with some ability and a fair education, but the social custom mentioned had laid its withering hand upon him early in the race, and failure was written against the enterprise from the start. However, he ran the paper at intervals for a year or two, and then threw it up and left the country. The next to take hold of the "Axe," was a farmer named L. B. Prouty, who lived out on the Muddy near John R. Dowdy's present farm. Mr. Prouty had learned the printers trade when a boy, and was well equipped for the business of a country editor. Anyway, he took up the job sometime in the latter part of 1861, and held it down till 1865, or thereabouts, and was succeeded by Norman Pierce, from somewhere in Kansas, who was a better printer and a better editor than any of his predecessors. About that time Arago was assuming great importance as a growing town, and its leading citizens induced Pierce to move the "Axe" office

down there to help boom the then metropolis on the river. He did so, and operated the paper there for several months, but with little profit to himself or the town. Norman liked beer too well, and as there was an unlimited quantity constantly on tap and within reach, and as much of his ads and subscription were paid in that kind of currency, the editor did what he could towards getting away with at least what he considered his share, and it finally got away with the newspaper business itself, and the office was brought back to Falls City.

The press and material belonged to Jameson and Burbank, but they allowed any person who would undertake the job of printing a paper, to use them without cost, hoping that some one would make a success of it and buy them out. This I think took place, but it was near the close of the decade of 1860, but as I am not writing of that time, the fact is not important at this moment.

The next and the last of the "Broad Axe" editors, was Judge Jonathan James Marvin. I have it in mind that he took charge of the office about the year 1866, but I cannot be accurate as to time, as I have no data at hand by which to fix it, but it was somewhere thereabouts. As run by him it was a different paper to any previously published in the town. First, because it was free from all personalities, and was devoted to the publication of the current news of the day, interspersed with articles of literary subjects at intervals, that lovers of the higher orders of literature would be delighted with, as in a new country as this was then, books of the bells letters kind were scarce indeed. Second, because Judge Marvin was the most accomplished, classical scholar then in Nebraska, or that has ever been in it since for that matter, and the products of his pen were marvels of style and elegance, such as is never met with in the ordinary rough and tumble country publication.

He had been educated in one of the Canadian colleges, but himself was a native of the state of Vermont, and chose the law as his profession in life, studying in the office of his grandfather, Judge James, who had been Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of that state. He came of a race of great lawyers, but I was always of the opinion that he made a mistake in trying to be one himself. I suppose there is some place in the world for every man who has the misfortune to be born into it, but sometimes, and generally a good many times, the wrong man gets into the wrong place, and failure, or at least, incomplete success follows, for which the man himself is held responsible and unjustly so.

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To me it appeared that Judge Marvin with his great attainments, and splendid poetic fancy, for he was a poet in every fiber of his nature, should have been on the editorial staff of some literary magazine of the higher order, where his powers of critical analysis, equal in grasp to that of Poe or Willis, could have had full play and the world of letters would have been enriched by the circumstance.

Untoward fate ordered his destiny otherwise, and it may be that I am mistaken, though I hardly think so, but I am very certain that he was out of his rightful element trying to practice law in a rude frontier community, or indeed in any other, as his tastes and natural instincts fitted him for a field of operation as widely different from the pugilistic contentions of a legal forum, as the sunshine of high noon differs from the darkness of the midnight hour.

I have no apology to offer for what I have said of a man whom in life I admired and respected, and in whom I saw, what I know many others did not see, an intellectual giant that fate had enabled pigmies to bind, as the Lilliputs bound a Gulliver, with fetters woven of their ignorance and narrow prejudices, mere threads of gossamer, but in combination with a social order as foreign to his nature as he was foreign to it, was sufficiently powerful to break his spirit, and hold him in its brutal clutch with the tenacity of death itself. He was among them, but not of them, and they killed the aspirations of a soul too lofty for vulgar appreciation, and the pearls he cast before the human swine of his environment, shared the fate pre-

dicted for all such, by one whose word is the law of this world.

Such was the man who had editorial charge of that first newspaper enterprise in our city, during the last years of its existence, and until it was swallowed up by one on a larger scale, but not of superior character. Inoffensive, modest, and retiring, its editor quietly went about his duties, harming no man, but doing the best he could for the town and its people, and whether that was much or little, it was done in kindness, and with a view only to the betterment of his fellows and the community in which he lived. He was a citizen of Nebraska for thirty-two years, most of which time he lived in Falls City, and if he ever by word or deed placed a thorn in any man's breast I never knew it, and I think I knew him as well as another.

He gathered little gear in the shape of this world's goods, but he accumulated something better, something he could take with him out of the wilderness—ideas, the only commodity man can possess that has real value. From 1865, when he came home from serving his country in the Southern war, till 1891, he went out and came in with his neighbors hereabouts, in peace and harmony; grew old on these streets, and died regretted by all. That cannot be said of many who have lived and died in this stormy little burgh.

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