

# GEORGE L. MILLER WHO IS CALLED "FATHER OF OMAHA"

Career of the Man Who Has Devoted His Life to Building Up Omaha from Its Original Condition as a Frontier Post to Its Present Proud and Commanding Position as a Center of National Commerce

**T**HE father of Omaha. Pre-eminently this title belongs to Dr. George L. Miller. Omaha has been his life passion. Others may have struggled for wealth, for professional success or for political success or for political preferment. But he has struggled for Omaha. It is the propaganda of which he has been the faithful and persevering apostle for more than half a century.

Educated to be a physician, he early gave up ministering to human patients in an eastern city and followed destiny's finger pointing to the west, where he found, as a patient more suited to his genius, a tiny settlement upon the edge of the wilderness. Omaha was a puny infant when Dr. Miller came here in 1854. In the years following it had all the illnesses common to infant cities and through them all the young physician brought it safely. Several times in the city's adolescence, desperate diseases assailed it, threatening life itself. But, with skill, courage, hope and indomitable perseverance Dr. Miller fought off each disease and drew the city back from the gates of death.

George Laforest Miller was born in Boonville, Oneida county, N. Y., August 18, 1830. His parents were poor, but of that hardy and thrifty class fitted to combat the rigorous climate and natural disadvantages of the frontier. In that country of poor soils and hard winters he grew up bearing his part in the slow fight of the settlers for a living. It was a hard life, but it gave him a constitution which was to prove useful in later years of busiest activity. When 16 years of age he left the farm and went to Utica to take a position in a woolen mill. There hard work and a "full dose of homesteadness" over separation from his parents and sisters soon brought on a desperate illness. Dr. Hiram Hoyt, the physician who nursed him back to health, offered him a position in his office where he would have an opportunity to read medicine. The young man accepted. Five years later he entered the College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York City, from which institution he graduated in 1852, the third in his class.

### Early Practice and Marriage

He practiced his profession in Syracuse for two years, where he held the office of city physician and physician of the poor house. It was shortly after the death of his mother and when his father, who had already ventured into the west, was lying ill in Keokuk, Ia., that he decided to go west. He had been married in 1853 to Miss Elizabeth Dickinson. He left his young bride with relatives in Ann Arbor, Mich., and went by railroad to St. Louis, thence up the river to Keokuk where he joined his father, who had recovered from his illness. They went by stage, a journey of 320 miles, to Council Bluffs. The trip in those days took five days and four nights. There were less than a dozen people there at the time of their arrival, October 19, 1854. The prospects were not bright for a young physician seeking a practice. The forceful eloquence of Governor Thomas B. Cuming had much to do with bringing Dr. Miller to the settlement as a permanent resident. He went back to Ann Arbor, brought his wife to Omaha and took up his residence in a little cottonwood cabin located near the present junction of Twenty-fourth and Cuming streets.

It is a matter of history that the first of his few patients on the frontier was an Indian pappoose. Largely as a joke, the doctor had hung the beautifully gilt-lettered sign of his profession in front of his cabin. A warrior of the Omaha tribe, which was then encamped here on its way to the annual hunt, saw the sign and asked another white settler what it meant. When he learned it was the sign of the white medicine man, he gave a whoop and, calling the doctor, hurried him off to the wigwam where the pappoose lay sick with pneumonia. The babe, however, was in the last stages of the disease and beyond medical aid.

### Service to the Territory

Being a naturally bright man, well educated and having business ability and up-to-date ideas, Dr. Miller was a valuable acquisition to the settlement, and took a leading place at once. He was chosen clerk of the territorial council when it met in January, 1855, in the first capitol building, which then stood on Ninth and Douglas streets. On many a night after he had finished the duties of his position, he walked across the trackless prairie to his little cabin at Twenty-fourth and Cuming streets, a candle placed by his wife in the little 7x9 window being his only guide. It was during these early days that he served for a few weeks as surgeon in the army commanded by General Harney. Three steamers came up the river one day carrying troops to Fort Pierre. The officer in charge of the expedition landed and sought out Dr. Miller. He told him that an epidemic of cholera was raging among his soldiers and that he had failed to pick up the surgeon who was supposed to accompany the expedition. Dr. Miller refused to go away and leave his wife. The officer offered to provide for taking Mrs. Miller along and finally Dr. Miller agreed. His services on the boats were a godsend to the soldiers.

He was elected to the legislature in 1855 from Douglas county, which then included Sarpy county. He took a leading part in the struggle to retain the capitol in Omaha, where Governor Cuming had located it. Active and powerful interests were at work to move it elsewhere and these interests nearly succeeded. This was the first of a series of battles in which Dr. Miller took a leading part and in which Omaha was snatched by the closest margin like a brand from the burning. The young man was elected to the territorial council, or upper house of the legislature the following year and served four years, two of them as president of the body.

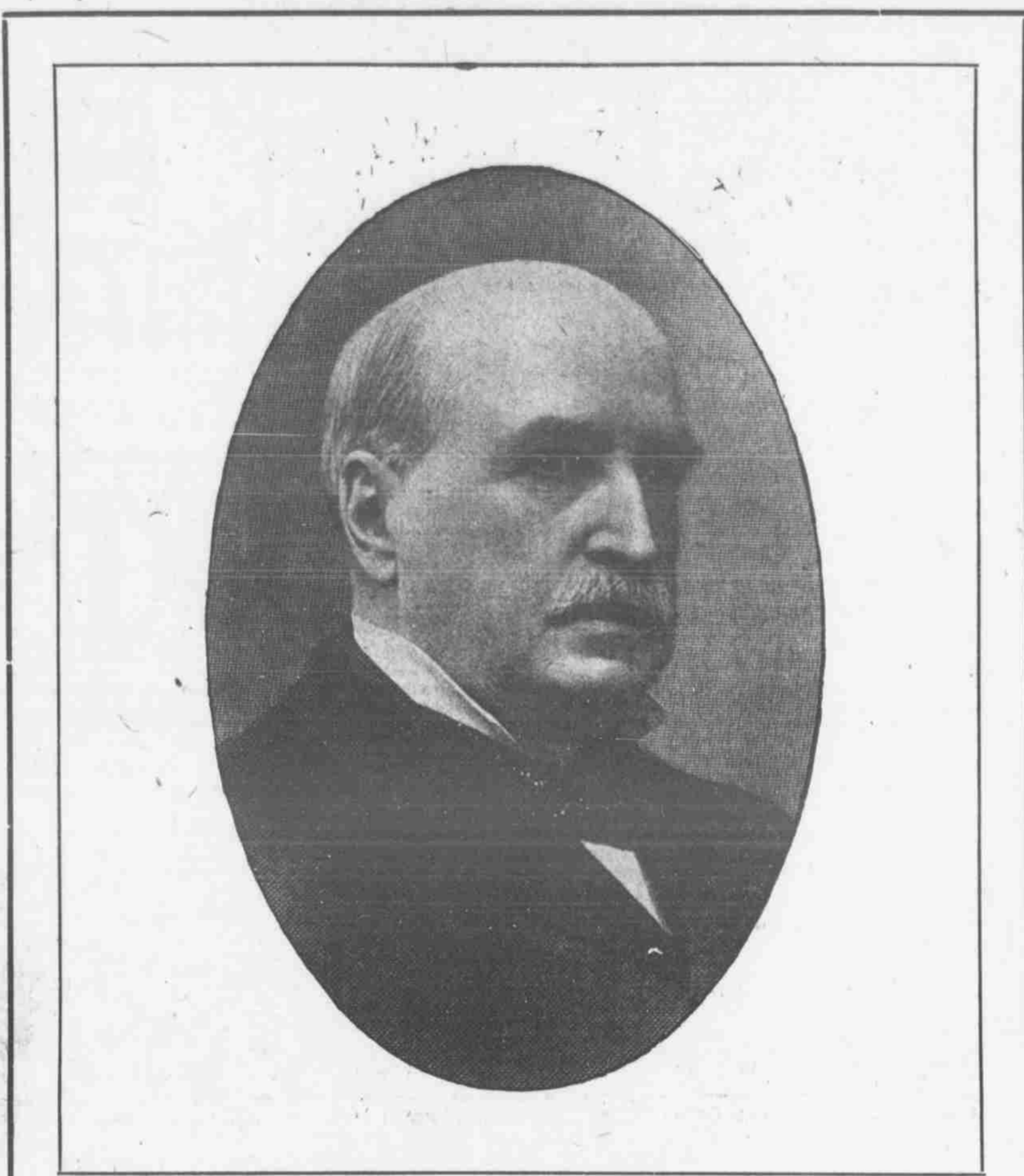
### In Financial Straits

The panic of 1857 overtook him and several eastern men while they were erecting the Herndon House, the first pretentious brick building in Omaha. It is now the Union Pacific headquarters building. This financial crisis left Omaha almost depopulated. It seemed that the settlement struggling for life must perish. Dr. Miller went with his family to St. Joseph for a breathing spell. The fires of the great coming conflict between the north and south, which had been smoldering for several years, were beginning to show the angry glow of real flame. The great struggle which was to drench the country in fraternal blood was about to break. Missouri was at the time a debatable ground. Colonel W. H. R. Cundiff, editor of the St. Joseph Gazette, was known to be a strong southern sympathizer. He found it necessary to make a trip south and asked Dr. Miller to write for his paper during his absence. He was a Douglas man, favoring conservative procedure rather than the radical action advocated by Lincoln, and wrote along this line. His editorials were distasteful, therefore, both to northern and southern radicals.

Returning to Omaha early in 1860, he helped to recruit the First Nebraska regiment and later was made post trader at Fort Kearney, where he resided until 1864. In that year he was the democratic nominee for congress, but was defeated after a strenuous campaign, in which he was compelled to go about making speeches under the protection of arms. The rankling recollection of this campaign against the South Platte mobs, together with the editorial experience which he had gained in St. Joseph, led him to launch the Omaha Herald in 1865, of which paper he was the able editor for twenty-three years.

### Begins His Real Work

From this time the young man redoubled his efforts in behalf of his adopted home. The great and decisive events of the building of the Union Pacific railroad were about to take place. Destiny seemed again to have thrown him into the vortex of affairs and the events which resulted in the establishment of Omaha as the eastern terminus of the great Union Pacific railroad have an interest



GEORGE L. MILLER, M. D.

as absorbing as that of the most fascinating novel. The construction of the Union Pacific marked an epoch in the history of the nation. It has been pronounced "the greatest national enterprise in the history of any modern age or nation."

### Fight for Omaha

In the fight to make Omaha the eastern terminus of this road Dr. Miller bore a leading part among those who fought Omaha's battles. It was largely his foresight, prescience, good judgment and tenacity that brought final victory to Omaha in spite of the opposition of the entire state of Iowa and many points in Nebraska. He early established friendly relations with the railroad and in all the years following he maintained this friendship. As far as natural advantages were concerned, Omaha was badly handicapped. The bluffs to the west offered the greatest barrier to building into the Platte valley. The formation of the banks of the river were not favorable to the construction of a bridge. Either Florence or Bellevue would have been a much more natural site for the eastern terminus of the great road.

To make matters worse, many citizens manifested a short-sighted hostility to the road. T. C. Durant, the great master mind that overcame the obstacles and accomplished the first practical work of construction, was denounced as a boodler and corruptor. And this was done at a time when his financial resources were actually nothing and while he was struggling desperately to build the "first forty miles," the completion of which would entitle him to a government subsidy for the rest of the road. During those days, Dr. Miller, with several other leading citizens, remained his friend, upholding him in every possible way. The straw that broke the camel's back of Durant's patience was a demand made by a man of \$30,000 for a piece of land which wasn't worth \$30. Durant came to Dr. Miller one day, and flourished in his face an order from President Andrew Johnson changing the eastern terminus of the road from Omaha to Bellevue. There is much unwritten history at this point, but the vital fact remains that Durant did not take advantage of the order.

### Struggle for the Bridge

When Silas F. Seymour, consulting engineer of the road, came on a visit to Omaha accompanied by his son, George, Dr. Miller gained the friendship of both of them, taking a particular liking to the young man. When the two were about to return east, he took the boy into his private office and made him promise to notify him by telegraph when the board of directors of the road should officially locate the bridge over the Missouri river. The general opinion was that this would be built at "Train crossing," its present location, which had been designated by George Francis Train, but the directors had not said anything definite on this point. A few weeks later Dr. Miller was sitting in his office one day when a telegram was handed to him. It read:

"Bridge located at Child's mill yesterday by board of directors."  
"GEORGE F. SEYMOUR."

A few words in which lay the fate of Omaha. Child's mill was several miles south of the town. Upon the location of that bridge depended the question of whether Omaha was to be a farm or a metropolitan city. Probably no message was ever sent that meant as much to Omaha. Dr. Miller closed his desk, put on his hat and went to the office of Ezra Millard in the Omaha National bank. He invited Mr. Millard to go with him to the office of Augustus Kountze in the First National bank. When they were behind the closed doors of Mr. Kountze's private office he handed the message to Mr. Kountze and asked him to read it aloud, which he did.

It was a time for action and events moved rapidly—so rapidly that sixty of Omaha's leading citizens met that evening and the following day a committee of eight men was on its way to New York

upon what seemed like a lost hope. The instructions of the committee, however, were to secure the relocation of the bridge at any cost.

Six weeks of hard work by the Omaha delegation in New York brought no result. Other and powerful interests were at work, too, and the Omaha men got hardly a hearing from the board of directors of the Union Pacific. The work of Omaha was the more difficult because from the engineering standpoint, Child's mill was by all odds the best location for the bridge. That was a steel-bound argument that could not be overcome.

### At Durant's Home

One day Herman Kountze entered Dr. Miller's office in Omaha and handed him a telegram. It read:

"Send Dr. Miller to New York next train."  
"AUGUSTUS KOUNTZE."

A few evenings later Dr. Miller was in the elegant home of the great Durant, the railroad builder, now a millionaire. Omaha's star seemed to be in the ascendant, for this one man with whom Dr. Miller's influence would count, had just returned from Europe. When he came down and lounged easily and carelessly in his silk dressing gown upon a chair, Dr. Miller began his plea. He was forceful and eloquent and terribly in earnest. But Durant only shook his head. The bridge was located where it could be built to best advantage and the great man intimated that further talk was useless. Then the forceful young man who had come half way across the continent to see him, arose and crossed the room to where the millionaire was lounging luxuriously and carelessly. The young man's voice rang with earnestness as he recalled to the mind of Durant the days when he had been deposed from the vice presidency of the Union Pacific, when no man was his friend and when Miller had stood up for him against his enemies and with such effect that he was restored to the office from which he had been deposed. The great man was silent under this and when Dr. Miller had finished he thought awhile. Then he said:

"You see Dillon tonight and tell him to meet me at 10 o'clock tomorrow morning."

Friendship had won a victory where wealth and power had failed. In the morning Durant met Dillon and the board of directors. He was the great master mind and he dictated their action like a giant. He insisted that Omaha pay only the actual difference in cost of construction between the sites of Omaha and Child's mill. And the bridge was relocated at Omaha. It was a grand victory and Governor Saunders flashed to Omaha his celebrated message, "Sound the loud timbrel."

### Fight Not Yet Over

The contract was made immediately. Realizing the services of Durant, the committee authorized Dr. Miller to tender him \$50,000 in Douglas county bonds, a gift which Durant courteously declined.

Another critical point had been passed with victory for Omaha, but the city's supremacy was not yet established. Council Bluffs was the eastern terminus of the Union Pacific road. Whether it or Omaha should be the real terminus was now the great question, a question which hung in the balance for a long time. Eventually a committee was appointed to go to Boston and settle the matter with President Oliver Ames. No decisive results being secured, Augustus Kountze and Dr. Miller visited Boston later, fully instructed regarding the demands of Omaha in the matter. Dr. Miller frankly assured the head of the great road that they wanted either their demands or a fight.

On the night of the second day after their arrival in Boston the two Omaha men sat down in their hotel and Dr. Miller wrote out the demands of the city from the road. As a result of this it was arranged to meet the Union Pacific directors in New York. This

meeting took place three days later, Governor Saunders and Ezra Millard joining Mr. Kountze and Dr. Miller in New York. The contract was drawn up and agreed to by the railroad, as a result of which the great passenger station, headquarters and shops of the road are now in Omaha.

### His Aid to Farmers

Such was the part which Dr. Miller played in the great events which made Omaha. He was always active in agricultural development and the development of the mineral wealth of the western country. He believed in the state as an agricultural state at a time when many thought that it could never have any stand in that line. The country north of the Platte was generally considered a sandy waste. Dr. Miller preached the gospel of tree planting when many believed that only cottonwoods and maples would grow in this soil and he practiced what he preached by planting thousands in his beautiful place, "Seymour park," which are flourishing today. Through his columns he exploited the fact that the western hills offered ideal grazing places and that fine wool could be raised in the mountains at altitudes up to the snow line. The first lignite coal discovered in the mountains was brought by the geologist, Dr. F. V. Hayden, into Dr. Miller's office and dumped before his wondering eyes on the floor.

Dr. Miller's stand for sound money during the "rag money" craze of 1876 was illustrative of his far-sightedness. At that time the war bonds issued by the government were already redeemable and many people clamored to have them paid in greenbacks. The bonds amounted to more than a billion of dollars, and those in favor of greenback payment reasoned that such action would make money plentiful and bring prosperity. Dr. Miller's pronounced opposition to the plan found voice in editorials and his efforts were crowned with success, the state convention of the democratic party declaring in favor of sound currency and the national democratic convention of the following year placing a similar plank in its platform.

### In National Politics

In politics as in other things Dr. Miller's activities were of national scope. Aside from his work both as an editor and a politician in state affairs, he took a leading part in national affairs and numbered among his friends many of the leading men of the day. Had Samuel J. Tilden been elected president, Dr. Miller would have had a place in his cabinet. When Cleveland was elected to the presidency, Tilden and other influential men urged the appointment of Dr. Miller as postmaster general. He was a member of the national democratic committee for many years. In 1880 he voluntarily declined a position on that committee to give place to his close personal friend, the late J. Sterling Morton. Dr. Miller sold the Herald in 1887 to Hon. John A. McShane. But he was not to be satisfied with a life of ease and inactivity and took charge of the business of the New York Life Insurance company in Nebraska, in which position he continued for several years.

He served five years as president of the Board of Park Commissioners, and in that position had much to do with the acquisition of Omaha's system of parks and boulevards. President Cleveland appointed him in 1893 to the position of surveyor of the port of Omaha, and he continued in this place for four and a half years.

Dr. Miller rendered important services to the city and state by his activities during the exposition. He was chairman of a committee composed of J. Sterling Morton, John C. Wharton and himself, appointed to visit the east in the interest of the Transmississippi exposition, and he was president of the Greater America exposition.

Mrs. Miller died November 2, 1899, and on March 17, 1903, he was married at Arbor Lodge, the home of J. Sterling Morton in Nebraska City, to Miss Frances M. Briggs.

### Judged by J. Sterling Morton

To say that no single man has had more to do with the development of Omaha than Dr. George L. Miller is an extremely conservative statement. He has spent his life in one grand effort to boost and to boom the city. This he did for no selfish end. He never had much property. He might have made several fortunes, but he did not care for wealth. He fought for the city because he was a citizen and because it had been said that the city would perish. This is characteristic of the man. He has been described as a man who will "fight to kill." And such he is. When his paper was struggling along and people predicted that every day must be its last, he fought on with it, "because people were determined to see it fall." J. Sterling Morton's estimate of the work of Dr. Miller in building up Omaha is contained in an address which he made before the State Historical society several years ago, as follows:

"At no time did his faith or his persistent industry flag. It is my candid opinion that there is no instance in all the history of the northwest where the thought and pen of a single individual has done so much to build up any community as did the pen and thought of Dr. Miller for Omaha and Douglas county. If the present inhabitants of Omaha, numbering some 100,000, should each of them write an article setting forth the advantages, agricultural, commercial and manufacturing, in the state of Nebraska on each day of the week for six months to come, they would not have achieved as much manuscript and as much effectively good work in behalf of their homes as Dr. Miller performed in twenty-three years during which he so diligently labored for the building up of that community. No other man, either by the power of money, or by the power of brawn, or by the strength of brain, did as much to make Omaha city as this one man accomplished."

In drawing a character sketch of Dr. Miller the two points which stand out like peaks above the rest are his sanginity and his tenacity. These are two points of supreme importance to an empire builder such as Dr. Miller has been. When others threw up their hands in despair during the early days of the city, Dr. Miller was always ready with optimistic words. He boomed over with the buoyant enthusiasm and exuberant faith which animated his every nerve, fiber and brain tissue. The tenacity, the bull dog grip of the man when he had set his mind on something proved a quality which saved Omaha in several critical instances as already stated. He is a man, retiring and reserved except when his interest is aroused or he acquires a liking for a man. And he never acquires a liking for a man who is unworthy, for he is a remarkable judge of character.

### Well Sized Up

A writer who had known Dr. Miller for years wrote the following terse and expressive sketch of him a few years ago:

He is at once the kindest-hearted, tenderest-feeling and deepest-devoted friend any man could wish if he takes a liking to that man. He is strictly temperate in moral habits, conscientiously honest and carefully precise in aristocratic formality. As a citizen, he is generous, enterprising and highly respected. As a writer he is lunar caustic at one time and Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup at another. As an editor he is full of vim, vivacity and newspaper enterprise. For soft soldier he is immense; for twisting the king's English and original westernisms he has no equal, and for bitter, biting, short invectives he is incomparable. And, on the other hand, for kind words and good sentiments to a friend in need, he is unapproachable.

At the age of 76 years, Dr. Miller can point with a very pardonable pride to his record. He has seen the accomplishment of that for which he fought, and he declares it is the most satisfying sight which can come to the eyes of a man in his latter years. He is still the same hale, hearty, forceful man, and in his heart is the same love for Omaha, in his mind the same sanginity for its future. He is still the faithful apostle of the propaganda which he has so diligently and effectively spread for many years.

"The pessimist never built anything or accomplished any good," says Dr. Miller. "He is a pauper down and society has no use for him. The young man of today who lives in Omaha fifty years from now will see a metropolis of half a million people."