

# WILLIAM F. SWEESY PIONEER HOTEL MAN AND FREIGHTER

Incidents in the Adventurous Career of a Man Who Helped to Blaze the Way for Civilization in the Great Empire of the Transmissouri Country and Has Lived to See Its Wonderful Development.

**A** GLANCE at the townsite of Omaha spread out before him as he stood, one March morning in 1856 upon the high school hill was sufficient to persuade William F. Sweesy to make it his home.

"I just decided that quick," says Mr. Sweesy with an illustrative snap of his fingers. "There lay the beautiful plateau, the primeval beauty of the wilderness just scratched with two or three straggling streets. Spring was breaking; the sun's rays were reflected from the thawing ice in the river. It was a magnificent sight and I was charmed. I had ascended that hill at 11 o'clock undecided whether to remain west or go back east. When I went down the hill at 11:30 I had positively decided to make this my home."

Within six weeks Mr. Sweesy had brought his family to Omaha and has resided here continuously ever since. He is still a hearty and vigorous citizen after years spent in the rough work of freighting goods across the plains to Denver, dealing with "bad men" in the west and with bad roads on the stage lines to the east of Omaha.

### Omaha His Objective.

"I go on in the morning. Better go with me," said the stranger.

"I will," said Mr. Sweesy and the next morning proceeded. The gentleman whose overheard remarks caused Mr. Sweesy to come to Omaha was William H. Reed, for many years a congressman from New York. Very bad roads west of Grinnell delayed them and it was six days later when they reached Council Bluffs. The following morning Mr. Sweesy walked down to the river. The ice was thawing and seemed about to break up. He was advised not to try to cross, but something seemed to draw him irresistibly to the other side. He took a cottonwood limb in each hand and, thus protected from falling through the ice if it should break, he made the passage. He walked straight up the high school hill, took a view of the city and made his decision. The next morning he was on his way back east to bring his wife to the new country.

He remembers some of the difficulties of stage travel in the early days. The roads were very muddy and the drivers correspondingly surly. There was "graft" in the good old days, too. Unless liberal tips were forthcoming at every mile, the driver was "unable" to make his horses pull through. There was a quiet little man, a sea captain, in the party. He smoked incessantly and said nothing. One day an especially disagreeable driver was encountered and when he burst out swearing, mindless of the fact that there were three women in the coach, the little sea-captain laid down his pipe, took off his coat, rolled up his sleeves and then shot like an arrow directly through the front window of the stage upon the boot. Before the driver recovered from his surprise the little man had a grip on his throat. He shook him like a rat and then, setting him down, took the lines himself. The horses went straight along after that. The driver begged with tears in his eyes to be allowed to hold the lines, as they drove into the terminal station and the little man finally allowed him to do this.

### Dangerous Trip Over River

But the difficulties were by no means overcome with the arrival at the railroad. Upon arriving at the Mississippi river opposite Rock Island, it was found that the water was so clogged with broken ice that a passage could not be effected by the ferry boat. The railroad bridge was then being constructed, but work had not progressed much beyond the driving of the piles. A single plank was nailed across the top of the line of piling. It was a question of stopping there indefinitely or taking the chance of getting across. Mr. Sweesy did not hesitate but walked the narrow plank above the swirling waters of the river. All went fairly well until he arrived in mid-stream. Then he was appalled to find before him a gap 150 feet, across which was only a frail rope bridge, swinging in the wind. A man, a "bridge rat," was at work near by and Mr. Sweesy employed him to carry his valise. Being thus relieved, he made the passage of the dizzy gap and arrived on the other side just in time to get on the last car of the daily train as it pulled out for the east.

Upon the twenty-eighth anniversary of his birth, May 5, 1856, he arrived with his wife ready to settle in Omaha. He immediately bought some lots at the southeast corner of Fourteenth and Douglas streets and erected a frame hotel, which he called the Tremont house. He managed it for a year. About the table in that hotel were gathered men who were to make history in the newly established commonwealth. Among the boarders were John A. Creighton, James Creighton, Edward Creighton, John I. Redick, Clifton Briggs, William A. Little, James Isard, Jr., Augustus Mason, J. J. Brown and R. A. Brown.

### Real Estate Attracts Him

The real estate business early attracted the attention of Mr. Sweesy and he has been engaged in it more or less in Omaha ever since his arrival here. He has seen the values of lots in the business district increase many thousand per cent. At one time he bought the lot just west of the present Board of Trade building for \$400, including a brick structure then standing there. Today the same lot is worth from \$125,000 to \$150,000. In 1857, when the small town thought it was in the midst of a real estate boom, he bought the property at the southeast corner of Sixteenth and Douglas streets, paying \$1,600 for the lot alone. It is now worth 100 times that price.

The western freighting business attracted Mr. Sweesy in 1859 and what he does not know about that important factor in the upbuilding of the west is not to be found in the books. He made his first trip from Omaha in 1859, going in company with John A. Creighton, the late General Thayer and J. J. Brown. It was a hazardous undertaking for only four men to brave the perils of the plains, but the outcome was successful. Mr. Sweesy took a wagonload of groceries out and in Denver traded the goods for five wagons and ten yoke of oxen, which transaction indicates what five wagons were worth in those days. The successful outcome of this enterprise led Mr. Sweesy to continue in the freighting business, and, with his five wagons as a nucleus he built up a great organization which carried goods from Missouri river points (Omaha and Nebraska City) to Kearney, Fort Cottonwood, Fort Laramie, Denver and Salt Lake. It was a profitable business, as one wagon would hold five tons of goods and the freight from Omaha to Denver was from 13 to 15 cents a pound. There is much lore of the early day transplain freight trains that is of interest. Twenty-six wagons made a train, this particular number being so designated because it was a convenient number to form into a circle or corral



WILLIAM F. SWEESY.

at night for protection against the Indians. From two to six yoke of oxen were hitched to each wagon. There was a driver for each wagon and a trainmaster who was the boss of the whole train. There were two kinds of freight, mule or fast freight, and oxen or slow freight. Oxen always traveled at a walk, while the mules would go at a run and covered the ground nearly twice as fast as the oxen. In the winter when there was no grass on the plains to provide fodder for the animals, only mules were used. The grain for their feed had to be carried along. Fast freight from Omaha to Denver cost from 15 to 20 cents a pound and slow freight from 12 to 15 cents, though in times of Indian outbreaks the price would often go much higher.

He did a considerable volume of business with the Mormons in Salt Lake City. This was particularly profitable because he sold, not only the freight, but also the wagons and oxen, at good prices. For this trade the "Shuttler" wagon was used. Their capacity was only about half that of a "prairie schooner," but they were the only kind of wagons the Mormons would buy.

After his business was well started Mr. Sweesy acted only as manager of it, making trips from one place to another by stage. The stage made the trip from Omaha to Denver in six days and nights. These trips were not as tiresome and monotonous as one

might think. With \$15,000 or \$20,000 worth of gold dust on his person and the country full of Indians, to say nothing of white highwaymen, he had enough to think about. Mr. Sweesy brought hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of the yellow dust from the west for Kountze Bros.

### Heavy Weight of Gold Dust

"I sometimes had as much as ninety pounds of gold dust on my person," he said. "I had it strapped around me, I had it in my pockets and I had two bags hanging by a rope from around my neck. Over it all I wore a big cavalry overcoat buttoned and I had two good revolvers in a handy place, though concealed from view. On the stage passengers were allowed twenty pounds of baggage, but in my grip I kept just a little of my personal wearing apparel so as to disarm suspicion. Sometimes there would be another passenger carrying gold on the same coach and, if so, we would always get together and make some arrangement for relieving each other. One would sleep while the other watched. At first I endured the whole discomfort of the stage, sitting in the seat nearly all the time from start to finish. Later I learned a valuable scheme. By tipping the driver I got the privilege of sleeping in the boot, which was a large space back of the driver's seat generally filled with mail

bags. I'd get in there and wrap up in my blankets and sleep as snug as a bug in a rug. After I learned this I didn't mind the trip, though the weight of the gold dust on my mind made it somewhat of a strain."

Indians began to get very troublesome in 1862, and every stage that ventured out was accompanied by an armed guard of four United States cavalrymen and two other soldiers. The latter rode on top of the stage and the horsemen scouted about in front and to the sides. Every stage in those days bore bullet marks and passengers often amused themselves digging out the bullets with their knives. When the Indians became so daring that the service was discontinued altogether by order of the government, Mr. Sweesy continued his trips, going overland with his wagon trains. As far west as Kearney wagon trains were permitted to go singly, but when they left there they had to be prepared for the worst. No wagon train was permitted to proceed west from Kearney alone, but had to wait until another arrived from the east to accompany it as a means of mutual protection. At that point, also, a government rifle was strapped to the side of each wagon in easy reach of the driver and plenty of ammunition was provided. These guns were returned to the government when the trains reached Kearney on the way east.

To his selection of sober and self-reliant men to handle his trains Mr. Sweesy attributes his remarkable success in escaping from the Indians. More than once he came upon the circle of smoldering ruins that had been a wagon train, surrounded by the charred corpses of the drivers. But none of his men was ever killed, nor did he ever lose a pound of freight.

### Railroad Ends Freighting

With the advent of the Union Pacific railroad there was no further need of wagon trains and Mr. Sweesy disposed of his mules and cattle. He was appointed register of the government land office at Omaha and occupied that position from 1868 to 1870. Following that he was in the real estate business until 1875, when he was appointed United States marshal for the territory of Wyoming, which was largely populated with "bad men" at that time. He lived in Omaha while occupying this position and made trips to Wyoming whenever business demanded it. Hold-ups by "road agents" were frequent. While he was returning from a trip to Rawlins, as the stage was leaving Laramie, a hand was thrust through the window and a demand made for "hands up." Such an order, backed by the muzzle of a revolver, was always obeyed very promptly.

"Some of the people thought it was 'Doug' Blackburn," said Mr. Sweesy, "but I knew it wasn't. I could see this fellow's hand tremble as he held the gun and I knew he was a green hand. 'Doug' was the boldest and baddest desperado of those days and his nerves were steady as iron. Well, we all got out and, as luck would have it, they got only \$16 from the whole outfit. They knew I was the marshal and didn't touch me. After they had searched all they ordered us back in the coach. The had taken a bottle of whisky from one man and this proved their undoing. It was heavy stuff, as most of the whisky of those days was, and they got drunk on it. They tried to steal some mules from a mule camp and were captured in the attempt. When I reached Cheyenne I had a telegram from Laramie saying they had two of the highwaymen in charge. I ordered them brought on to Cheyenne. There I found that one of them was 'Phony' Ryan, rather a desperate fellow, though not very successful. He was sent to the penitentiary for life. Three years later, when I was in my home in Omaha, the bell rang and, opening the door, I found 'Phony.' He was a mere shadow. He had been pardoned and told me he was going home to die, and there were tears in his eyes as he shook hands with me and went away."

Since retiring as marshal in 1879 Mr. Sweesy has been active in real estate circles. He has also done considerable building in the city. One of the large structures erected by him is the Brunswick hotel, which he built in 1891, at Sixteenth and Jackson streets.

### Time Treats Him Gently

Time has treated Mr. Sweesy gently. In a few months he will enter his eightieth year, but his face is ruddy and his step as light as that of a man twenty years younger. His spirit, too, has remained young. He has a hearty laugh, he is ready with a joke and he looks on the world cheerily. When he goes abroad all the children say "hello" to him, while he pats them on the head and inquires how they are getting on at school. If he sits beside a friend in the street car and talks to him, he emphasizes his remarks by patting him on the knee. Mr. and Mrs. Sweesy had three sons, John F. and Charles C. live in Chicago. William Sweesy died four years ago.

Today, half a century after he viewed the beautiful landscape from the high school hill and decided to make Omaha his home, Mr. Sweesy admits that in his wildest dreams he never expected to see the city attain its present size within his lifetime.

"I knew it would get to be a great city some time," he says, "but I did not expect to live to see it. It has far exceeded my expectations. The city is going to grow faster in the next fifty years than it has in the last fifty. Within a few years I believe there will be 200,000 people here. It is like a snowball—the bigger it gets the more rapid it grows."

## Causes and Issues of the Religious Strife in France

**W**HAT is the so-called Separation law that has caused such a stir in France and at the Vatican and excited widespread discussion wherever the Christian religion prevails? What is the exact purport of the various acts passed by the French government leading up to the present measure that is being enforced? Is the movement wholly anti-Catholic, or is it one designed primarily for the preservation of the state from monarchical and ecclesiastical domination? Does it mean that the French people, or a majority of them, fear a re-establishment of anarchy, or is the law the outcome of the organized efforts of those citizens and politicians in France, particularly in Paris, who have no friendly feeling for Christian religions, and particularly for the Roman Catholic church?

Is it true that the republic as a patriotic body fears the machinations and the intrigues of Rome and the hierarchy, or is it true that the present agitation is merely a cloak behind which the enemies of Catholicism are working for the downfall of the Catholic church in France?

These are questions that have been raised by the passage of the final act of separation last month, which includes the nullification of the agreement with Rome under which religious services were carried on in France for more than 100 years. Some doubt has been expressed in certain high quarters as to the legality of this repudiation by the government, as the Vatican has never given its assent, but the state has proceeded to enforce the new law just as though no such agreement ever existed.

In considering what might best be called the news of this situation it will be well to keep in mind that practically no other religious denomination is affected by the separation law than the Roman Catholic church. It is true that the Protestants and the Jews of France come under

its provisions, but their number is so small proportionately there that they scarcely cut any figure in the controversy at all.

On the whole, the French people are nominally Catholics, at least, and it is only on comparatively rare occasions that they turn to other Christian religions. If they fall away from the Roman church they join no other denomination. In some classes, notably the aristocracy, where men and women do not practice their religion actively, they invariably insist on the ceremonies of the church on solemn occasions such as baptism, marriage and death.

Another thing to keep in mind is that separation in France does not mean what the divorce in the affairs of church and state means here. In America every denomination is free to go its own way peacefully and to manage its affairs as best suits it without any interference on the part of the government.

On the other hand, in France the separation law means primarily that the church is separated from the control of the property which belonged to it before the Revolution, which was confiscated during that upheaval and which was subsequently restored to the use of the church under the Concordat made by Pope Pius VII with Napoleon. Through the confiscation of this property again and the continued control of the stipends formerly paid to prelates, bishops and priests, the government not only does not divorce itself from the affairs of the church, but it tightens its hold on them, dictating the exact terms under which a priest may say mass or perform any other services.

Probably the chief objection that Catholics have to the separation law is the provision that practically takes from the hierarchy and other rulers of the church all authority in the matter of religious worship in France. The power of the pope in dealing with the spiritual affairs is

completely ignored, and fines and other penalties are prescribed for any infraction of the law.

In the first place, the old parish system is broken up and in its stead the law makes provision for the formation of associations to provide for the cost and maintenance of public religious worship. The law provides that these associations shall have religious worship for their exclusive object, but there is no provision for the religion or nonreligion of the members.

Associations of people that are entirely hostile to the Christian religion, or any other religion, might be formed under the law in cases where the regular parishioners refused to comply with its provisions by omitting to make the declaration required by the law of 1881. This law requires that no services or meetings of a public nature shall be held without due notice to the proper civil authorities.

As the result of the refusal of the Catholics generally to form these associations and the determination of the priests and bishops to ignore the command to give notice to the civil authorities when they are about to say mass or hold other services publicly the church in France has not only lost the stipends which under the Concordat were paid to the priests and bishops, but also the control of its property, which up to December 12 last it might have retained by forming the associations that the law prescribed.

Other results are that the bishops and priests have been driven from their homes, the seminaries have been dissolved, the theological students who were preparing for the priesthood have been conscripted for military service and the funds bequeathed for religious purposes by pious persons are in the hands of civil authorities. Priests who have undertaken to hold meetings in church buildings have been arrested and fined for neglecting to make the declaration required by the

law of 1881. Section 1 of the separation law says that the republic assures liberty of conscience. It guarantees freedom of worship, subject only to restrictions imposed in the interest of public order. It is to these restrictions exclusively that the Catholics so strenuously object.

Article II proclaims the suppression of public religious establishments, and Article IV orders that within a year from the promulgation of the present law the property, real and personal, of the monasteries (endowments), vestrymen, councils, consistories and other establishments of public worship shall be transferred by the legal representatives of these establishments to the associations which, conforming to the regulations of the general organization of the religious worship of which they purpose to assure the exercise, shall be legally formed according to the provisions of the article for the observance of that religion in the districts wherein the establishments are located.

The law also provides for the confiscation of all property used by the church for charitable purposes and the turning over of the same to public utility, the object of which is that of a like nature to that of the original foundation. This is interpreted to mean that the control of all charitable institutions, many of which were founded through private gifts, legacies and other donations, will pass forever out of the hands of the church.

In default of the formation of any association to take over the property of a public religious establishment the property is to be assigned by decree rendered by the council of state to the communal establishments for poor relief or public charity within the territorial limits of the ecclesiastical district concerned.

In the matter of pensions provisions are made

(Continued on Page Eight.)