

JAMES GOW WHOSE CENTURY OF LIFE IS NEARLY TOLD

Almost a Hundred Years of Life, of Which More than Half Have Been Spent in Nebraska, the Tale of This Man Who is Still Hale and Active in the Home of His Youth

OMAHA had not even dreamed of when James Gow, pioneer of Nebraska, passed his forty-second birthday. Fifty-three years Mr. Gow has lived in Bellevue while a city of 150,000 people has sprung up in the wilderness a few miles to the north. He was born on a farm in Washington county, New York, August 16, 1812. James Madison was president of the United States then. Washington had been dead only twelve years. The country was again involved in a war with Great Britain and was gaining glory on the sea and on the great lakes. Three days after the birth of Mr. Gow the famous frigate, Constitution, captured the British frigate, Guerriere. He was more than a year old when Perry gained his celebrated victory over the English and sent his famous message to Washington, "We have met the enemy and they are ours." He was 2 years old when the British burned Washington.

The place of his birth was full of historic association. Colonel Baum and his Hessians had marched across the Gow farm during the days of the revolution. General Burgoyne made his final surrender only a few miles from the farmhouse. James Gow was the fourth of an old-fashioned family of eight boys and four girls. His father was Scotch and a good type of that rugged race. The farm was good practicing ground for a rugged man used to battling with nature. It was stony and the soil was barren. Only by means of hard labor could the sturdy pioneers wrest from it a living.

James worked hard and managed to get a bit of schooling in odd times when the ceaseless grind became a little less pressing. At the age of 18 years he started life for himself, leaving home with nothing but the clothes on his back and a crude knowledge of carpentering. He found work in the neighboring towns and when employment became scarce there he tramped all through the state working as a journeyman and picking up additional skill in the branches of the trade. He worked for Ben Rathbun, who did so much in the building up of the city of Buffalo. He engaged also in the carriage making business and it is his pride that he has constructed everything in this line from a wheelbarrow to a railroad car.

When He Was Twenty-One

When James Gow had attained the age of 21 years there were less than fifty miles of railroad in the United States. The railroad was still regarded as rather a visionary undertaking by the conservative people of the day who shook their wise old heads mistrustfully and said it was an evil tendency of a corrupt generation that wasn't satisfied with the honest horses and cattle the Almighty had created to draw people about. The world had just been startled by the invention of the friction match. New York City had 200,000 people. Henry Clay, Daniel Webster and John C. Calhoun were the leaders in national statesmanship. William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips were in the height of their glory, while Longfellow, Whittier, Holmes and Emerson were just beginning to attract notice.

Chicago had not even attained the size of a village when James Gow was 21. The site where the big city now stands on the south shore of Lake Michigan held at that time only a two-story log trading post and a couple of other small log huts. Omaha? Omaha was unthought of, undreamed of. Its very sight was considered a great waste which could never be reclaimed to the use of a civilized people. There wasn't a white settler west of the Mississippi river. The time when the first white man would build his home on the present site of Omaha was still more than twenty years away.

This serves to show two things—the age of James Gow and the marvelous growth of the western part of America, especially Nebraska, and particularly Omaha. "The years of a man's life are three score years and ten." But James Gow had attained to that age a quarter of a century ago. He is now 96 years of age.

In the course of his journeying in the days of his youth back in the early part of the nineteenth century Mr. Gow penetrated the western wilderness as far as Michigan. He secured plenty of work there and when, with true Scotch thrift, he had saved up a snug sum of money, he journeyed back to the old home place, where he had left a girl behind him and on December 1, 1841, he married Miss Lucy M. Cleveland. The young people bade farewell to their respective barren farms and set their faces toward the west. They made their novel honeymoon trip by boat and stage through the nearly primeval wilderness by way of Canada and settled in the town of Birmingham, Mich.

Call of the West

With the money so thriftily saved young Gow bought land and heard of Council Bluffs and yielded to the call of the west. One of his brothers decided to accompany them to Nebraska. The entire journey had to be made by wagon for there were neither steamboats nor railroads in that vast primeval wilderness. With their families they set out in one light and one heavy wagon. The long trip was made without special incident. After wading through the deep mud of Illinois, he says, they struck the old Mormon trail in Iowa and four weeks after leaving Michigan they reached the east bank of the Missouri river. They visited a few days in Council Bluffs and then proceeded down the river to a point opposite the present site of Bellevue.

"There wasn't a sign of the hand of the white man on the west side of the river," he says, "and but little on the east. We met Peter A. Sarpy at his trading post only a few days after we reached a permanent camp. It was in the spring of the year and the Mackinac boats were coming down the Missouri from the hunting lands of the northwest laden with buffalo hides and the pelts of other animals. We drove down to Sarpy's trading post at St. Mary's and watched the rough trappers unload the skins secured during the long winter's hunt. There we met the famous Peter. He was a very agreeable sort of man, polite and pleasant. I learned to know him well after that. He loved to tell stories. But when he was intoxicated I must confess that he was not a very agreeable customer.

"On June 26, 1854 I crossed the Missouri the first time. There was an unoccupied house right west of the present railway station and we moved into that. I had a team and as teams were very scarce in the country I found profitable employment bringing goods over the river and doing hauling of various kinds.

Fourth of July in 1854

"On July 4 of that year we had a big celebration here. Settlers came in from far and near and Peter A. Sarpy himself gave an ox to be roasted for the Indians. There were about 900 Omahas camped on the bottom land along the river to the north of the settlement at that time. One of the first things I did was to pay my respects to Logan Fontenelle, chief of the tribe. He was half French and half Indian and he inherited from his father all the politeness of the French race. He was not the grunting, unresponsive creature that most of the full blooded Indians are. He dressed like white men. I remember one thing Fontenelle told me on that occasion. Pointing out to the Missouri river he said that 200 years before, the Father of Waters had its course over against the bluffs on the Iowa side. I did not believe it at that time, but I do today, for even in this short half century I have lived here it has moved westward and is still moving in the same direction.

"Logan was much beloved by the Omahas. I remember his funeral here in Bellevue. He was killed, you know, in a fight with the Sioux while he was leading his people on one of their buffalo hunts. His body was brought back amid the lamentations of all the people and the funeral was attended by a large concourse of people from all around, not only Indians, but whites, for he held a high position among the people of both races. Stephen Decatur stood at the grave and delivered an eulogy. And then all the white people went away and left the Indians to say the final words over their best loved chief. One of them with a wonderful gift of oratory delivered an



JAMES GOW.

oration lasting some hours and then the all went sadly back to their tepees."

The second house in which Mr. Gow and his family made their home was built of cottonwood logs. Mr. Gow bought it from Joseph La Flesche, a Ponca chief, for \$10. This house is still standing in Bellevue and, with its old fashion somewhat disguised by means of modern siding, is used as a home.

Mr. Gow remembers the winter of 1855-56 very distinctly, with its great fall of snow and its long continued and severe cold. The little settlement was alarmed frequently during those days with rumors of Indian uprisings and the scattered settlers to the north,

south and west would come rushing into the village for protection. Bellevue was the great headquarters for the Omahas and there the government school and mission was located. Mr. Gow was a close personal friend of Rev. William Hamilton, the Presbyterian minister in charge of the school.

"Many's the time I've seen Mr. Hamilton riding or running through the brush catching the little bronze colored scholars," he says, "and many a one I've seen him carrying, kicking and scratching and crying into the place of learning. In the winter he didn't have much trouble to get them to come to school, but in the spring and fall it was a pretty hard job.

Reminiscences of a Pioneer Builder of Churches

HIGH on the honor roll of western pioneers whose courage and self-sacrifice made possible the advantages and opportunities the present generation enjoys, must be written the name of Rev. William Kelly, the venerable Omaha priest who died last week at the patriarchal age of 87. Ambition, adventure and fortune, singly or collectively, were the inspiring motives of the pathfinders. Fame or fortune spurred them far beyond the outpost of civilization. For one or both they penetrated the trackless plains, explored mountain fastnesses, faced not only the hardships and privations of life in the wilderness, but the constant menace of hostile Indians. Among them were men of heroic mold—strong, determined men who almost unconsciously fashioned the die from which half a dozen states were cast.

Our hero was cast in a different mold. He sought neither fame nor fortune. Adventure had no attraction for him. The motives which prompted civic pioneers to go and dare had no place in his plan of life. The mad scramble for rich mining camps which he often encountered did not swerve him from the path of duty. There wasn't a trace of selfishness in his make-up, hence the feverish scramble for material gain found him immune. But he was ambitious for the cause to which his life was consecrated. All the material wealth which came to him during his active life as a priest, and it was a great deal, was devoted wholly to bettering mankind. He eschewed self from all his work. He entered the ministry a poor man and passed to his reward poor in worldly goods, but rich in achievement.

Father Kelly's life resembles in many respects the career of Father Pat Manogue, who became the "minor bishop" of Nevada. Beginning as a miner among miners in Virginia City in the middle '50's, he studied the lives of his associates, read books while others played the game, and when sufficient means were secured he left camp for college, returning in a few years a priest to devote his life to the welfare of his former fellow workmen. Father Kelly landed in the United States in August, 1856, as a member of the Order of Christian Brothers. His mission was to secure assistance for the home of the order in Ireland. His experience on reaching the middle west convinced him that he could render more effective service for religion by becoming a priest. The following year finds him in the seminary at Cape Girardeau, Mo., and two years later he had completed his studies and was

ordained in Omaha June 25, 1859, by Bishop James O'Gorman. The Catholic church in Nebraska and the west was then in its infancy. Just four years before, May, 1855, the first mass was celebrated by Father Emonds of Iowa on the present site of Omaha. The following year, 1856, churches were built in Omaha and St. John, Dakota county. A few months before Father Kelly's ordination the vicariate of Nebraska was established and Rt. Rev. James O'Gorman, a member of the Trappist order at Dubuque, Ia., appointed bishop. The vicariate embraced what is now the states of Nebraska, Wyoming and Montana, an area of vast proportions populated by buffaloes, Indians and a fringe of white people along the Missouri river. It was the destiny of Father Kelly to range over this vast region, following each succeeding wave of population, ministering to the spiritual needs of his people and cheerfully sharing their hardships and privations. His experiences were many and varied, thrilling and amusing, and often full of danger. Only a few of them are definitely known. Rarely could he be induced to talk about old times, and then only with some friend who happened to share or witness the experience. So strong was this trait of self-encasement that even his associates at the old cathedral could not secure a connected story of his pioneer life.

Simple and unassuming in his own ways, Father Kelly assumed that his fellow men were similarly constituted, and this trait made him the victim of friendly jokes. Along in 1862 he was on duty at the Rulo mission, Jim Lane's freebooters and jayhawkers made frequent raids into southern Nebraska, appropriating horses, cattle and other movables. Settlers were aroused and in a shooting mood. After one of these raids Father Kelly late one evening arrived at a settlement below Nebraska City, where he was well known. Before he could reach the house where he was to stop he was surrounded by several men who blustered about the activity of horse thieves and insisted that he was a suspicious character. Shook and almost speechless, the priest protested his innocence and begged the privilege of proving his identity. This was granted grudgingly. Arriving at the door of a home, the jokers left the priest telling his story to the head of the family, dodged around the building and entered the apartment by the rear door. Seeing his captors face to face, the priest's fears vanished and he joined in the laughter of the jokers, though with many cautions against repeating the performance.

The building of the Union Pacific railroad brought Father Kelly in contact with a greater variety of life than was possible in the peaceful missions along the Missouri. All shades and conditions of men and some women followed the great steel highway as it advanced over plains and mountains. Towns were created in a day and flourished for a time. The end of each division became a metropolis for a brief period and attracted the fustian of humanity which fattened on the earnings of the construction gangs. The principal street was a line of dance halls, gambling parlors and saloons. Life was of less value than the coin of a gambling table. The rattle of the chips, the discordant music of dance halls and the ribald song often were silenced by the crack of pistol shots. In following his line of duty Father Kelly observed all shades of border outlawry, often shocking in its abatement, but over and around it shone the strength of sound manhood which gradually increased and mastered each situation and brought order out of chaos. In this uplif Father Kelly exercised the potential force of a minister. He was a peacemaker of the highest class. But he was not always successful. On one occasion he strove to quiet a row in a grading camp, but the combatants had their guns unlimbered. The shooting began. When the smoke of battle lifted it is related that the priest came out from beneath a table. On another occasion he visited the construction camp at Dale Creek. A desperate row was brewing at the time. Several blankets had been stolen from a washline near a boarding house. One man was suspected, watched and finally released. Under the unwritten law of self-preservation which prevailed in all camps there was classed a high crime and proof of theft often meant death. The accused man confessed, and while doing so the enraged victim covered him with a rifle. Luckily for the thief, one of the party knocked the rifle out of range and the ball went into the air. The culprit had yet to face the penalty the camp might decree, but before further action was had the peace-making priest reached camp and settled the difficulty. Next morning the culprit, unharmed, was put on the road to Denver and warned not to come back.

Cheyenne, the present capital of Wyoming, was platted in the spring of 1867. The railroad was completed to the townsite a few months later. Before winter set in there were 5,000 people in the town. It was the warmest collection of humanity on the footstool. The young city was all and more what Cy Wafman wrote of Creed:

It is all day in the daytime. There is no night in Cheyenne.

Father Kelly, as usual, followed the railroad into town and promptly set about the task of building a church. In performing this task he had the active co-operation of good and bad, the latter class as liberal as the former. In going the rounds one day seeking men with good hearts and generous purses, he encountered a typical "bad man," with two howitzers in his belt and a scowl that seemed to say, "I'm a killer, I am." Father Kelly did not scare. There were men inside the door and he wished to see them. The bad man interposed and roared, "Who are you—what do you want?" The priest explained. With an oath and a "Come with me," the bad man grabbed the priest by the arm and piloted him through the gambling parlor, introducing him to each sport in turn and at the same time delicately hinting that a liberal donation would save trouble. The bad man insisted on showing the father through every gambling joint in town, repeating in each the same operation and confining where persuasion failed. Father Kelly used to say that this was the only hold-up he witnessed without protest.

Early in 1868 Father Kelly, following the advancing railroad, paid a visit to the soldiers at Fort Steele. Returning from the post he was accompanied as far as Medicine Bow by John W. Coad, where they separated. The priest secured passage on a work train bound for Laramie. The train had covered about half the distance, when it encountered a fierce snow storm which soon brought it to a standstill. The light engines of those days, picnics beside those of today, were practically useless in bucking a snowdrift. Darkness fell on the snowbound train. Day succeeded night, each passing hour seemed to increase the fury of the storm. For three days and nights it raged unabated, filling gulches and valleys to unknown depths. Fortunately, the train carried a stock of provisions, which was considered sufficient for a moderate siege. The drifts around the train were not large, but they seemed mountainous at each end. As day after day passed without relief, provisions ran low and the amount doled out each day grew smaller. The besieged dug paths through the drifts to secure fuel. Meanwhile extraordinary efforts were put forth at Cheyenne and Laramie to reach the imprisoned train. Every available locomotive and snow plow

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"The whole tribe went away in the spring on the big hunt. Men, women, pappees, tepees, dogs and everything went away. The Indians trusted me pretty much and some of them used to store the government supplies—flour, coffee and sugar—in my garret while they were gone. They would always try to conceal the stuff so it was not visible to the naked eye and then shake a finger at me in parting and say, 'Ugh, Omaha steal.' When they returned after two months from the hunt they would come in and take the stuff away without so much as thanking me."

Fate of the Village

The years went on and the several settlements along the river grew and gathered strength like young Hercules. And the question arose upon which should fall the mantle of good fortune that would transform it into a great city. In Bellevue were men who believed nature had made the river bed and banks at that point ideal for the construction of a railroad bridge and that therefore Bellevue should be the site for the Union Pacific terminal. They also believed the same kindly nature had made the country there level and that therefore it was the ideal site for a great city. Meetings were held and great plans were made just as meetings were being held and great plans being made in Omaha and Florence. The story of this struggle in which the happy lot fell to Omaha is told.

But this never worried Mr. Gow. With true Scotch practicalness and conservatism he declared in one of those meetings of the optimists that they would "have plenty of room on a forty-acre lot for all the town they'd have in the next ten years." They laughed at him. And, had the fortunate lot fallen to Bellevue, they would have laughed best. As things turned out, however, he proved the better prophet.

Mr. Gow was elected county judge of Sarpy county in 1869. He was re-elected four other times, serving altogether ten years. During these years he lived in Papillion. He was elected to the lower house of the legislature in 1882 and served through the session of 1883. He was active in school work in the early days. He organized the first school district in the county, No. 1, located at Bellevue. This was in the fall of 1855. Though not a member of the church he has aided actively in church and charitable work.

Mrs. Gow died in 1860 and Judge Gow has never remarried. He has six children. They are William Gow, a farmer near Bellevue; Dr. Frank F. Gow, of Schuylerville, N. Y.; James Gow of Bellevue; Edward Gow of Bellevue; Mrs. Elizabeth A. Peters of Bellevue and Mrs. Lucy Durrie of Des Moines, Ia. He has twenty-five grand children and nine great grand children.

Marvel of Physical Health

Today, in his ninety-sixth year, Judge Gow is a marvel of physical and intellectual strength. He reads the daily papers and magazines; he hears perfectly; his complexion is rosy and healthful; his eyes are clear; his nerves are strong; he sleeps soundly and he spends most of the day out of doors walking about and taking an active interest in the same town in which he was interested before there was any such a thing as Omaha. He ascribes his health to the fact that he has always taken good care of himself and also to the salubrious influence of the Nebraska air and climate. His parents did not live to extraordinary ages and therefore the Nebraska ozone must be credited with preserving the life of this pioneer so far beyond the time usually allotted to mortal men for their earthly existence. He lives in the comfortable home of his daughter, Mrs. Peters, and rejoices in his distinction of being the oldest citizen of the county and the oldest pioneer of 1854 in the state.

Regarding the future of Bellevue, Judge Gow is an optimist. He believes that within fifty years at the outside Bellevue will be a part of the great city of Omaha, which will then have upward of a half million people. Omaha and Bellevue, says he, may be likened to Jacob and Esau of old. Omaha secured the blessing which by right of topography belonged to Bellevue just as Jacob secured the blessing which by right of birth belonged to Esau. Omaha has prospered and become rich even as Jacob did and now she is returning nearer and nearer to Bellevue as Jacob returned nearer and nearer to Esau. She is sending presents in advance as it were—not flocks and herds and men-servants and women-servants as Jacob sent, but street car lines, telephones, electric lights and such other things as a great city can give. And within a few years, declares Judge Gow, Omaha and Bellevue will meet and embrace and be part of one great city.