



CALVIN W. KEYES

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IN the early part of 1858, Calvin W. Keyes, who traces his family thread through eight generations to the first governor of Plymouth Colony, came into town, looked over the field, and, with the inalienable province of a Yankee, "guessed" he could "get a living here." He opened a general merchandise store down on Second Street, then the trade center. In September, he decided to make another venture. George Crawford joined with him, and they moved into what was called the "West" Building, just completed, adjoining the present *Register and Leader* Block on the east, then the only brick block on Court Avenue, except the Sherman Block, at the corner of Third street. They were jibed and jeered by the Second Streeters for their temerity in going so far away from trade—"couldn't pay their rent;" "might as well go to Adel."

Having gone out into the country—as it were—they concluded to do business with the country. The sheep industry was in its infancy. It needed boosting. Keyes, coming from Vermont, the home of Merino sheep, naturally inclined to the wool trade, and later in the Fall the firm, for the first time in the county, bought all the wool offered—four hundred pounds—and shipped it to a New England factory. Seven years after, five hundred thousand pounds were shipped from Des Moines.

In 1858, Napier, the County Judge, was building a new Court House. The East Siders had opposed the project with various dilatory tactics, hoping, it was declared by West Siders, to get the building on the East Side, but the Judge went on. The next year he got short of funds. Money was scarce. To issue bonds was the only source of relief, to which proposition the fight was resumed vigorously, but he won, and thirty bonds for one thousand dollars each were issued. They were not considered gilt-edged by investors—in fact, risky—but Keyes, being then a new-comer, and therefore not affected with the State House feud of 1856, he and Crawford,

with a firm faith in the growth and prosperity of the town and county, took twenty-two of the bonds at ten per cent interest, which quite surprised the East Siders, and Second Streeters as well.

Soon after opening the store in the "West" Building, Keyes bought in Boston the first barrel of coal oil brought to the town. It was shipped over five different railroads to Iowa City, and hauled from there by teams. It was sold to consumers for two dollars per gallon. It was extracted from anthracite coal, and known as rock oil. A few years after, when oil was produced from wells, it was sold for fifty cents per gallon, but it was received with great caution because of its explosiveness. A fellow blew into town one day from Adel, however, who had discovered a process to render the stuff non-explosive, and he did a profitable business, selling it for seventy-five cents a gallon, until it was discovered his prevention was the addition of common salt. He has been periodically succeeded by similar fakirs. Science has not yet discovered any process of destroying the explosive properties of the naphtha contained in kerosene, but legislative restrictions have so regulated its manufacture and sale that it has become the universal illuminant without "salting."

In those early days, there were no railroads, no theaters, no itinerating concert troupes and barn-stormers. For amusements, home talent was the only source, and there was plenty of it, for concerts, masquerades, dances, surprise parties, serenades, and the "mellar dramer." There was always something doing, memories of which abide yet with the old boys and girls. The three thousand people were contented and happy.

Mr. Keyes was a musical genius and always ready to "jine in" for amusement. In 1869, he organized the second brass band, Mosier's Band having blowed itself out. The aggregation consisted of Wilson T. Smith, Eb bugle; George Childs, cornet; Christopher Howell, ophicleide; N. W. Mills, piccolo; C. W. Keyes, bass trombone; Add. Hepburn, bass drum. The day after its birth, it was employed to furnish music for a public "doings" at the State House, and escorted a procession from the West Side thereto. Its repertoire comprised only one tune, "The Old Pine Tree," and it stretched that Pine tree front the Court House to the Capitol without a halt or break, winding up amid rapturous applause.

In 1860, Keyes imported the first pipe organ brought to the city. It was placed in the Episcopal Church, a small frame building which stood on the west side of Seventh Street at the alley north of Younker's store.

That was the year of Lincoln's first campaign for President. Politics raged at fever heat. Among the Lincoln supporters was Alexander Bowers, familiarly known as "Alex.," a German, weighing about three hundred pounds, brusque, active, somewhat pompous and authoritative. He had been for several years a freighter, hauling goods from Keokuk. He also carried money packages and other small parcels with notable trust and fidelity, to the great convenience of banks and business men. A package of twenty thousand dollars given him to deliver at Keokuk caused no more solicitude than if it were a pound of nails. In some way, he had become United States Marshal. He was a strong Lincoln supporter, a radical Abolitionist, and always active in politics. On the day of election, M. M. Crocker, Captain P. R. West, Wesley Redhead, C. W. Keyes, and nine others had formed in line at the polls to vote for J. C. Breckinridge, of Kentucky. "Alex." stood at the ballot box, watching, and as Crocker presented his ballot, "Alex." stopped him and declared that "no man shall vote for that Southerner, Breckinridge."

Crocker, of spare, frail physique, stepped quickly aside, pale with excitement, eyes Bashing, threw off his coat, and said to "Alex.":

"If you want ever to vote again, stand aside; get away from this."

Old-timers, familiar with Crocker, the snap of his eye, his fearlessness, will readily realize what "Alex." quickly discovered, that trouble was brewing. He went away.

I believe that was the last time either of those thirteen men voted a Democratic ticket.

In 1861, Keyes decided to relieve the farmers of their surplus hogs. He bought two thousand at one and one-half cents per pound, killed them in a small packing-house up on the Saylor Bottoms, built a flat-boat, loaded it with forty tons of pork and lard, and, with himself as sailing master, a crew of five roustabouts, started

it down the river to Ottumwa, where transfer to the railroad was to be made. When within one mile of Red Rock, the boat was scuttled by a sharp rock, and sunk in ten feet of water. Keyes and crew got themselves safely on shore, where they remained two days, sleeping on the sand, and eating raw salt pork, with roily river water as a thirst slaker, until a flat-boat was sent up from Ottumwa with a push-pole crew. The pork and lard was hoisted on board of it, and safely delivered at Ottumwa.

In 1862, when the public heart was stirred with efforts to secure commissary aid for the soldiers, Keyes, who was a leader in musical affairs, and the singers of all the churches, volunteered to give a grand concert to raise funds for such aid. The only hall large enough for such an event was the third floor of the Sherman Block, at Third Street and Court Avenue. Hoyt Sherman, owner of the hall, had joined the army, leaving the custody of the building with "Alex." Bowers, who refused to permit the use of the hall for the concert, even at a good rental, for which refusal he would give no reason. So opposite was it, to the well-known patriotism and generosity of Sherman, the singers were indignant. It was generally believed that "Alex's" refusal was because he thought some of the singers were prominent Democrats, for he abhorred a Democrat.

The County Commissioners, however, came to their relief and offered the free use of one of the large unfurnished rooms in the then new Court House. The settees—churches didn't have pews then—were all taken from the Methodist Church on Fifth Street, and two days of vigorous work given by the singers to fit up the courtroom. The concert was a great success. The poet laureate of that day, a well-known lawyer, whose familiar face is seen on our streets every day, and whom time later proved a better District Judge than poet, improvised a song for the occasion, which was sung by a quartette of "picked men," to the tune of "Gideon's Band"—it was so printed on the program. Add. Hepburn—everybody knew the jolly Add.—was given the last verse, which ran:

"They say this new Court House of ours
Is about as big as Alex. Bowers."

Alex. nursed and kept his wrath against that "Gideon's Band" to the end of his days.

During the same year, there was great excitement in the town and country over the call for enlistment in the army. Though the response was prompt and liberal, there was a strong undercurrent of opposition. There were quite positive indications of the presence of Knights of the Golden Circle. Union sentiment was rapidly crystallizing into measures for its suppression. One day, Frank Palmer, editor of the Register, had a private consultation with one of the most vociferous of the suspected clan, and in very positive, emphatic terms, told him that he could either join the army and stand up for his country, or go to jail, and within a very few hours, too. Coming from a person of such well-known, genial nature, left no other inference than that there was something behind it. The man joined the army, made a splendid record as a soldier, won high distinctive honors, came home, and became one of our most honored and influential citizens.

In 1869, Keyes built a two-story frame store on Court Avenue, next east of the present Purity Candy Factory, opened a crockery store, and imported from England the first one hundred crates of queensware that came to the city.

In 1870, he instituted a valuable public benefaction in the making of sugar-cured hams by a special process, which now seems to have become a lost art. For a dozen years or more, his Des Moines hams were in highest favor all over the West, even so far as San Francisco.

In 1879, he cut along Des Moines, Raccoon, North and Middle rivers, one hundred cars of Black Walnut logs, which were shipped to New York City, probably the last of that kind of shipment from the city.

Having raised others to assume the burden of business, he has for many years ceased from active life, and is enjoying a well-earned rest in a community which he has helped in many ways.

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