



CHARLES WEITZ

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I CANNOT avoid mention in these reminiscences of old-timers of friend Weitz, who, from his genial nature, good humor, and sociability, was known as "Charley" by everybody here in the early days.

He was born in Schotten, Germany, about thirty miles from the city of Frankfort, in Hesse-Darmstadt, May Fourth, 1826. His father, Heinrich Weitz, was born in the same locality, and spent his entire life there. The son, Charles, one of four children, attended school until he was fourteen years of age, and was then apprenticed to a cabinet-maker, with whom he remained for two years. At the termination of this apprenticeship, he took his future entirely in his own hands, and started out full of ambition and vigor, to increase his knowledge by visiting most of the large cities in Germany, France, and Switzerland. He not only added this to his equipment for success in his chosen vocation, but also developed a broader mental culture, an ambition characteristic of his entire life. He learned to speak French and English as fluently as he did his native tongue. In 1847, he was drafted into the army, and served two years during the War of 1848. In 1850, he determined to visit the New World, so in the Spring of that year, he and his brother, Christian, sailed for New York. There he remained but a short time, coming west to Ashland, then to Columbus, Ohio, where he began to work at his trade in earnest. A chance newspaper item caught his eye, telling of the removal of the Capital of Iowa from Iowa City to Des Moines. He concluded that the Capital of Iowa would be a good place to plant himself and grow up with the country. Accordingly, he sailed into Des Moines, early in 1855, in a prairie schooner, propelled by two mules, so he says, crossing Des Moines River on "Meek" Scott's flat-boat, there being no bridges. His first move was to find a place to live. Houses were scarce, and most of them contained two or more families.

Being a carpenter, he decided to build a house for himself, and meanwhile domiciled as best he could. He purchased a lot on the corner of what is now Eighth and Pleasant streets, for which he paid five hundred dollars, a big price at that time for so isolated a spot, but he wanted to live in the shadow of the State House, which was to be placed on Grimmel's Hill. He didn't know the East Siders as well as he does now.

The lot secured, the next move was for lumber, of which there was none in the town. He went down the river several miles, selected and bought trees, had them cut down, sawed into lumber at Newcomer's mill, hauled it here, and built a small one-story house of two rooms. He had got it enclosed when, about the middle of May, Dan Wieser, a cabinet-maker, well known in early days, made his appearance in search of a job and place to live. So soon as he got across the river, he accosted the first man he met, which was down near Second Street, with:

"Can you tell me where 'Charley' Weitz lives?"

"Do you see that small new house away out yonder in the grubs, on the side hill? That's his house," was the answer.

Dan. was not long in reaching it, and making known to "Charley" his wants.

Early settlers were hospitable and kind. There was not much refinement, but there was generosity, good fellowship, and community of interest which prompted them to help each other. So "Charley" offered Dan and his wife half of his house, and to feed them until they could get a better place.

There being no machinery here for making what is called "matched flooring," loose boards were laid to set the stove on, a few others on which to set a dry goods box, used for a table, also for a cupboard, which, when the meal was over, was pushed into a corner and the boards shifted about to set the bed on. Scats were improvised from whatever was handy. The walls were not plastered. The lumber was green and filled with sap. It so shrunk in drying that when the Winter storms came, the snow drifted in, so that it was often necessary to turn out in the night and move the bed and the floor, repeating the process if the wind shifted, or sleep under a snow-drift. One night, Dan. turned out, stepped on the loose end of a board, which tipped up, landing him in the cellar.

In due time, came an increase in "Charley's" family, and more space was required. The small house was removed, and a larger one, of two stories, erected to accommodate his seven kids. It was sufficient for several years, but was removed and the present elegant and modern residence erected.

"Charley's" second objective point after landing was bread and butter. His first job was putting the windows in the basement of the Savory House (now the Kirkwood), which the genial host of that hostelry may be pleased to know was first used for cutting, curing and packing pork.

"Charley" had difficulty in getting work to do. For some reason, the bosses would not employ him. He therefore decided to be his own boss. His first contract was to build a drug store down near 'Coon Point, on Second Street. It was built, with all its inside fittings, of black walnut lumber. He thus became the first building contractor in the town. His merit as a mechanic, integrity and good fellowship soon secured him abundant business, and for many years he has been one of the largest contractors in the city.

Among the most notable buildings to his credit that I can recall are the Catholic Church, on Sixth Avenue, in 1856, where the Pitcairn Block now is; the German Catholic Church, on Second Street; the Hawthorne School building (now Olive McHenry), Seventeenth and Crocker streets; Garfield School building, on Third Street; Valley National Bank; the original Good Block; Rollins Block; Masonic Temple; Des Moines National Bank; Younker's store and Harris-Emery Company's store, on Walnut Street; the hospital at the County Poor Farm; Kratzer Carriage Works; Brown-Hurley six-story building, on First Street; J. I. Case farm implement building; Schmitt & Henry Furniture Factory, and the Fair Grounds Stock Pavilion, and residences by the hundreds.

During the first five years, though there was great demand for building, money was scarce, and that in circulation was mostly of the Eastern, "red-dog" variety, and Stevens' Agricultural Bank of Tennessee, a villainous "wild-cat," which went bankrupt in 1857, leaving "Charley" to hold its notes for a large amount.

Nearly all business was done on credit. Mechanics of all kinds were paid in orders on stores, which they were glad to get. In

1859, "Charley" employed ten men, who, with himself, worked the whole year, for which he only received in cash, four dollars.

But living expenses were cheap then. A good carpenter got a dollar and a half a day—the days were longer than they are now. Pork spare ribs were two cents per pound; hogs, seventy-five cents per hundred pounds. A good two-hundred-pound hog could be bought for two dollars and a half. The rivers abounded with fish, and the country with wild game. The staple food was corn meal, pork and bacon. The good housewife's pastry exploiting was limited to dried-apple pies, except in the season of wild berries and crab-apples. Everybody lived within his means, was independent, and happy.

As the years passed, "Charley's" business increased. He also invested in town lots, and became interested in civic affairs. His jolly temperament, honesty and strict integrity won him prominence in business circles. For many years, he has been a stockholder and Director of the Valley National Bank and Valley Savings Bank; also a stockholder of the German Savings Bank, of which he is the President.

During the scrimmage between the East and West sides over the location of the State House, in 1856, he was a West Sider, firmly believing the State House would be placed on Grimmel's Hill, and thus he had selected his lot for a home; but you could not buy it to-day for twenty thousand dollars.

In 1857, when the Lutheran Church, of which he and his family are active members, made an effort to establish a denominational college here, he was a liberal subscriber to the building fund, always taking great interest in educational affairs.

When the Civil War broke out, and regiments were being organized here, General Williamson appointed him to drill several companies of recruits. His experience gained in the German Army made his services especially valuable in putting the boys through their stunts. He knew more military tactics than the Colonels and other shoulder-strappers.

In 1886, he was induced to run for Alderman-at-Large in the City Council. He was elected and served two terms, which satisfied him with public office-holding. Though a Democrat, in a

strong Republican community, the property holders wanted the benefit of his common-sense and good judgment at a time when extensive public improvements were before the people. In the anxiety and haste to get out of the mud, the city had, a few years prior, paved several streets with cedar blocks, which made a very smooth roadway, pleasing to the eye, but, deceptive to traffic. They soon became defective, rotted at the bottom front accumulated moisture, and emitted an unhealthful, obnoxious gas, compared with which the perfume of rotten eggs was delectable. It was evident that a more durable material must be substituted. The development of the brick industry had produced a hard-burned brick, and "Charley," in his practical way, took up the subject with the City Council and suggested the use of such brick for street paving. It was adopted, since when cedar blocks have become a putrid reminiscence. The last of them, on East Seventh Street, having become so rotten as to be impassable, were removed a year ago.

In May, 1904, at the age of eighty-one, "Charley" turned over his business to his sons and decided to spend the remainder of his days on Easy Street, and enjoy the fruition of his good works in the town he had helped so conspicuously to build.

In looking over its records recently, Jonathan Lodge, Number One Hundred and Thirty-seven, Independent Order of Odd Fellows, discovered the fact that its oldest member, Charles Weitz, had been loyal to the lodge for fifty years. A half century of lodge loyalty merited some appropriate reward, so it was proposed that the lodge celebrate the event in fitting manner.

On the evening of October Sixth, 1856, "Charley" was initiated into the Order of Odd Fellows, in Fort Des Moines Lodge Number Twenty-five, and remained with that lodge until he organized the German lodge, Jonathan, Number One Hundred and Thirty-seven, of which he is now the only living charter member.

His efforts for the fostering and preserving of German thought, culture and refinement were so constant and so successful that the lodge, in remembering the anniversary, voted to honor him with the most elegant jewel that could be secured by them. The jewel was authorized by the Grand Master of the Sovereign Grand Lodge, and was made in Baltimore. It is the most elegant medal ever

made for a lodge celebration, and is enclosed in a beautiful case. Owing to "Charley's" feeble health, the ceremonies could not be held in the hall, with a joint meeting of the two lodges, as was planned, but was conducted by a committee of members at the comodious [sic] residence on Eighth and Pleasant streets. In a touching and appropriate speech, Colonel Eiboeck presented the medal and expressed the respect and regards of both lodges. "Charley" was most happy in accepting the medal, and with his hearty thanks expressed a hope that he would yet be able to attend another meeting at the lodge room.

The shadows of the coming night are gathering about him, and he is prepared therefor [sic]. His life in Des Moines has been characterized by sturdiness, honesty, sagacity, integrity, fair dealing in all his private and public affairs, zeal in the upbuilding of his adopted home by all the means tending to make it one of homes—characteristics which have won the most reverent affection of his family, honor and respect of his fellow-citizens, and esteem of everybody. No pioneer of Des Moines will leave to posterity a more notable testimonial of his having lived than will "Charley" Weitz.\*

April Second, 1905.

\*Died November Tenth, 1906.

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by L. F. Andrews

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