



CAPTAIN F. R. WEST

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AN early settler and prominent man in business affairs was Captain F. R. West. His title was gained from his former connection with a Packet Line on the old Pennsylvania Canal, long ago abandoned.

He came to Des Moines in 1854, with some capital, and at once made investments in real estate, a large portion of which is now in North Des Moines.

In 1856, he built what is now the *Register and Leader* Building. The ground floor was occupied by B. F. Allen's Bank, the rear portion by the United States Land Office, the second floor by the Congregational Church, the third floor by the *Journal* newspaper. The east half of the building was occupied by Keyes & Crawford for general merchandise, and for many years by Randolph and John Knight for a dry goods store, and was the center of attraction of matrons and maidens, who wanted something to wear; it was the headquarters of Fashion.

In 1857, when the whole country was staggering under one of the worst financial panics known in history, the Western states were flooded with currency turned out by "wild-cat" mills. It had little or no foundation, and included every form of "red-dog," "stump-tail," "wild-cat," and other rotten bank circulation. It would be gathered up by speculators and land sharks, and used in business transactions in isolated communities. While there were circulating notes of Eastern and Western states, having some value, many were based largely on bonds of Southern states, of uncertain value, so that the financial condition of the state was deplorable. Business men made haste to get their currency into a bank at the close of each day, with no assurance it would have any value the next morning, for the banks would accept it only at what it was worth from day to day. It was not uncommon for a merchant to send a package of the stuff to Keokuk or St. Louis to pay for goods,

and be informed that most of it was worthless on arriving at its destination.

The new State Constitution of 1857 authorized the Legislature to provide a system of legitimate banking and the issue of bank-notes. In accordance therewith, an Act was passed providing for a State Bank, with branches in different localities, to meet the demands of business. In 1858, the first branch was established at Des Moines, with B. F. Allen, President, and Hoyt Sherman, Cashier. In 1861, Sherman entered the United States military service, and West was elected Cashier. The bank did an enormous business, its deposits at one time amounting to one million seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars. In 1865, it was reorganized under the National Banking Law, as the National State Bank. In 1876, the Captain purchased most of the stock, surrendered the charter, and established an independent bank, as F. R. West & Sons. In 1877, he became heavily involved in his effort to help Allen, husband of his daughter, out of a financial struggle, and he finally went down in the whirlpool which swallowed Allen's millions and wrought financial wreck and ruin all over the state.

For eighteen years, as a banker, the Captain, by his safe, wise and conservative business methods, had the support and confidence of the entire business community, and his great personal sacrifice to aid in avoiding an inevitable fate was deemed by many as without reason or justification.

In 1861, he was selected as one of the Commissioners of Iowa War Claims, arising from the clothing and equipping of Iowa soldiers during the Civil War. So complete and just was their record the State had no difficulty in settling its war claims.

In 1855, when the college of the Lutheran Church was located here, the Captain was one of the Board of Trustees, and was elected President. The project got to the cornerstone-laying stage, and succumbed to the general adversities of 1857.

In September, 1853, the first real Fair of the Polk County Agricultural Society was held, on the old Fair Grounds, on 'Coon bottoms, at the foot of Ninth Street. A slim and primitive exhibition was held in the previous October, in the Court House yard. Captain West was one of the Society Directors, and was very active in promoting the Society.

At that September meeting, there were shown several fine thorough-bred Shorthorns, several fine woolled sheep, and of corn, wheat, potatoes, and other vegetables, as fine specimens as have been seen at any Fair since. The women gave it the cold shoulder, exhibiting nothing.

In 1855, the Captain was elected a member of the City Council, when Barlow Granger was Mayor. There were no wards then, and no scrimmages over a division of funds, the Council representing the city at large. In 1857, the city having been re-incorporated, he was elected Alderman for the Second Ward.

While he was in the Council, the city was in a bad financial condition, as were all other communities. The prevalence of "wild-cat" currency had demoralized business generally. The city was badly in debt, and how to pay it with a currency having no specific value over twenty-four hours, was the problem. After much deliberation, it was decided that the city do a little banking on its own account, by issuing "City Script." Well-executed notes, in sums for One, Two, Three, and Five Dollars, were issued, and furnished a convenient and acceptable circulating medium in the local trade and city business affairs. Having served the purpose of its creation, it was withdrawn without loss to anybody.

Occasionally, a bonfire was made of it, as witness the following, found among Sherman's papers after his decease:

"Received of L. P. Sherman, Treasurer of the City of Des Moines, One Hundred and Twenty-nine Dollars of City Script, which has been signed and in circulation.

"J. A. WILLIAMSON,

"G. W. CLEVELAND,

"J. H. McClelland,

"Committee Appointed to Burn the Same.

"February Twenty-first, 1859."

He was public-spirited and helpful in many ways to advance the welfare of the community. When the scrimmage came for the location of the State House, he evidenced his preference for the West Side by subscribing ten thousand dollars to have it put on Grimmel's Hill. Especially was he helpful to young men engaged

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in safe, legitimate business, who sometimes got into cramped conditions and needed extension of credit, for business was then done, perforce, largely on credit. Application to the Captain for aid would be met with the inflexible rule of the bank forbidding the indorsement of negotiable paper by any officer thereof—he was a man of few words and very quiet—but if the request was worthy, a letter of credit would be quickly given, good at the bank, for the amount and time necessary to keep the young man on his feet.

In 1876, when the Equitable Life Insurance Company, now one of the best financial institutions in the state, was incorporated, the Captain was made one of the Trustees.

His first place of residence was in a small frame house on Third Street, nearly opposite Judge Casady's first bank building, now occupied by Colonel Eiboek's *Staats Anzeiger*. In that house, January Thirteenth, 1854, his daughter, Arathusa, was married to B. F. Allen by Elder J. A. Nash, who was the favorite marital splicer in those days, and probably married more people than any minister in the state during his lifetime. The occasion was a brilliant affair. The bride's schoolmates were all present and showered her with kisses, for she was beloved by all. The music was furnished with an old-fashioned square piano—not a "grand square"—which came with the family, and the first piano brought to the town.

Soon after, the Captain purchased of L. D. Winchester the first brick dwelling erected on the west side of Des Moines River. It was one-story, on the block now occupied by the Valley National Bank, and there "Billy" Moore was married by Elder Nash, in December, 1851, with all the concomitant hilarity known to the unconventional early settlers, for in those days, "Billy" was one of "the boys." When the hands of the clock had reached midnight, an incident occurred, which—well, ask "Billy" about it.

In that house, the Captain and his good wife lived until 1875, when it was torn down. Their home was the center of frequent and most enjoyable social functions. They were both of large physique—the very embodiment of genial good nature. Mrs. West was a special favorite with young people. She was a home-builder, beloved by everybody, ever ready and zealous in any movement for

the good of the community. During the Civil War, she devoted nearly all her time to the immense labor and service of the Soldiers' Relief Commission.

In taking a retrospective view of the pioneer days, the wives and mothers should not be overlooked. The trials, deprivations and struggles they endured entitles them to honorable mention. While men fashioned and reared the civic structure, the mothers moulded and formed the character of those who are now among our best, most enterprising citizens. In those early days, there was no distinction nor caste, except the nobility of charity; no aristocracy but that of magnanimity. Bound together by the common tie of sympathy and a common interest, there was more real humanity among the pioneers than we have now in social life.

In 1883, the Captain and his wife celebrated their golden wedding, which was attended by a large gathering of old-timers and friends. They never overcame the shock of the financial wreck of 1877, and they passed their remaining days in the quietude of their home. She went to her long rest in 1895, and he a few months later.

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by L. F. Andrews

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