



ELDER JOHN A. NASH

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TO the zealous, philanthropic labor of Father Bird, Elder Nash and Father Brazil rightfully belongs the founding of the religious and educational element in the social life of this city, as evidenced by the ninety-six houses for religious worship and the sixty-two schools.

Rev. John A. Nash, or "Elder," as he was familiarly called, came to Des Moines January Third, 1851, as a Baptist missionary preacher, fresh from college, and made his home in a log cabin where Walter Reed's harness store now is, on Walnut Street. The first Sabbath after his arrival he was invited to preach by Father Bird, and then began that strong and unusual friendship so notable in their after lives. It was indeed remarkable. Always united in thought and deed for the religious and educational advancement of the community, they walked or rode together over their circuit, heartily greeted everywhere. As an instance of this fellowship, on one occasion when Father Bird was going away to be absent several days, he wrote the Elder as follows:

"Rev. J. A. Nash, *Dear Brother*—In case of death of my wife during my absence, I wish you to conduct the funeral service, with such assistance as you may select. My lot in the cemetery is Number One, in the northeast corner.

"Yours, as ever,

"Thompson Bird.

"Des Moines, October Twentieth, 1865."

Quite singularly, the good woman outlived them both.

The diversity of their belief on some doctrinal points was often the source of quaint humor, though both were firmly grounded in their faith. Once, they were going away some distance on horseback, and, arriving at a stream which had been filled by hard rains, they stopped to consider, when the Elder said:

"Brother Bird, you are better acquainted with this stream than I am; suppose you go over first."

"That is the first time I ever knew a Baptist to attempt to force a Presbyterian into a stream," said the other, with a smile.

At another time, when departing from an evening meeting during a heavy downpour, the Elder said:

"Brother Bird, it is raining hard."

"I always supposed you were not afraid of water," was the quiet response.

Immediately on his arrival, the Elder began the formation of a Church, and January Eighteenth, with a few of his faith, at the log cabin of John Reichenecker, was organized the First Baptist Church. He was elected pastor, and plans were formed to secure a meeting-house. In 1848, the County Commissioners donated a lot on Mulberry Street, between Fifth and Sixth streets, where Shank's undertaking rooms now are, for a Mission Baptist Church, conditioned that a building of frame, brick or stone, not less than twenty-four by thirty feet, be erected thereon before January, 1851. The conditions having failed, and to prevent a reversion of the gift, William McKay purchased the lot and deeded it to the Church, and measures were at once taken to build a house. The membership was small, and generally poor. Funds came in small contributions; brick had to be made by hand, and lumber hauled from Burlington. Progress was slow. The Elder worked like a laborer, but never faltered nor lost faith. Optimism was his peculiar trait. He met the future always with a smile. Finally, after many delays and discouragements, the building was completed in 1856. The seats were plain pine boards with straight backs, and oil lamps were used for lighting.

The membership increased so that in 1866 a larger edifice became imperative. The old site was impracticable; and, as with all the others, the church was kept busy getting away from the encroachments of business and trade. A location was selected at the corner of Eighth and Locust streets, and a large, fine building erected, but before its completion, the Elder resigned the pastorate to devote his time to educational work.

In 1853, he began a select school, to give a higher education than could be obtained in the public schools. There were no school-

houses. The County Commissioners granted the use of a room in the Court House, and there Des Moines Academy, the first high school in the town, was held, until 1855. The school at once became overcrowded and popular. It was subsequently removed to Ninth Street, just south of University Avenue, and finally to the corner of Seventh and Center streets, under the title of Forest Home Seminary. In 1863, Elder Nash withdrew from the school, its management passing to Leonard Brown, until 1866, when the school was closed.

In May, 1855, at a meeting of the State Conference of the Lutheran Church, it was decided to establish a college for that denomination. A site was purchased on Pleasant Street, between Fifteenth and Sixteenth, where Younker's residence now is, and a building commenced. The corner-stone of what was to be Iowa Central College was laid May Twenty-third, 1855. Money and material were scarce, progress slow, and after many delays and reverses, the project was abandoned, and Elder Nash got possession of the property, through purchase by the Baptists of the state, completed the building, and in November, 1865, opened the University of Des Moines. He devoted his time and talent, as President, Professor, Teacher, Solicitor, or in any capacity, to aid in establishing the institution on a firm foundation, and lived to see it fully equipped and affiliated with the University of Chicago, a notable testimonial of his labor and zeal. It is now Des Moines College.

The Prospect Park Land Company, owning a large tract of land which had been annexed to the city on the north, donated a block at State and Ninth streets for a college site, and the Elder at once embraced the opportunity to merge his school into an institution of wider scope.

If solitude was deemed essential to a successful school, the location, at the outset, was certainly isolated enough, for northward was open, unoccupied space to Devil's Gap, a wierd (sic), uncanny place suggestive of spooks and goblins; on the east was dense forest, and the young women students were wont to tell of dexterous exploits in chasing will-o'-the-wisps over the field to the Gap on murky evenings. A few years, however, changed the scene to one of beautiful homes.

In 1852, the Elder was elected a member of the first Town Council, with Father Bird, and at the first meeting he presented a motion that he "be discharged from serving in the Council of the village," whereupon a member facetiously moved to amend the motion by changing the word "village" to "city," but the Elder would not have it so, declaring he would not serve. His resignation was accepted, and Judge Casady was elected to fill the vacancy.

The Elder was much interested in horticulture, and the second year after his arrival occupied a tract on Sycamore Street (now Grand Avenue), between Fifth and Sixth streets, where the Catholic School now is, extending north to Bird's Run and east to Isaac Cooper's lot, where the Water Works office is, on which was a nursery of fruit and ornamental trees and shrubs. Along the street he planted the row of Maple trees, which grew to immense size, and for years were the pride of the city, but, like his nursery, they succumbed to the ruthless hand of progress.

Abandoning the nursery, the Elder purchased a tract at Ninth Street and Forest Avenue, where he established an orchard and nursery and erected a commodious dwelling, where he lived to the end of his days.

In 1869, he was elected County Superintendent of Schools, served one year and resigned.

As he and Father Bird did all the marrying in the early days, it was natural that they should be recognized at the anniversary of those events. December Twenty-fifth, 1875, "Billy" Moore, Lamp Sherman and Doctor W. H. Ward celebrated their silver weddings. "Billy" was married by the Elder, Sherman by Father Bird, and Ward by Rev. Sanford Haines. The Old Settlers' Association gave each couple an elegant silver service set, three pioneer judges, Casady, Williamson and Phillips, making the presentation addresses, Elder Nash responding for the recipients, Father Bird and Elder Haines having deceased.

In 1884, the Elder was persuaded, against his wishes, to permit his name to go on the Prohibition Party ticket as a candidate for Congress, and though defeated, he ran ahead of the party.

While the life of the pioneer preacher was usually somber, there was sometimes a flash of sunshine in it. The Elder was wont to

tell this on himself: He was going to fill an appointment to preach in one of the settlements, and reached a double log cabin at night. He asked permission of the settler to stay over night, which was cheerfully granted. A wedding was on, the cabin was filled with guests, some of whom must stay over night, having come some distance. On disposing of them, there was left a small room just large enough for a bed. The door, also, could not be opened only sufficient for a person to squeeze through. With the smallness of room there was also a shortness of bedclothes. There was but one sheet on the bed. The Elder accepted the situation with thanks and his usual smile, turned in and slept soundly until early the next morning, when, before daylight, he was awakened by a shaking of his shoulder, and tugging of the sheet on his bed. Arousing himself, he said, with great surprise: "What is it? Is breakfast ready?" "No, but I must have this sheet to set the table with," said the hostess, as she gave it a final jerk and carried it away.

He was very popular with the little folk, and greatly enjoyed their Sunday School picnics, on which occasion he was a boy with the boys. When going to a picnic, the average boy takes his appetite with him, and the mothers often declared they could not understand how a boy could eat all day at a picnic and not suffer the consequences. When the time for lunch came, the Elder would say to the youngsters: "The boy who eats the most sandwiches will get the largest piece of pie." When they got through eating sandwiches, there was no room for pie, which explained the mystery to the mothers.

Resulting from an accident while attempting to board a moving train, he died in February, 1890, at the age of seventy-five years, leaving a record of having built more churches than any other man in the state, and the impress of a beautiful life everywhere. To perpetuate his memory, his name has been given to a public park on the block north of his late residence.

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by L. F. Andrews

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