



JAMES C. JORDAN

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TO continue the record of the location of the Capital at Des Moines, mention must be made of James C. Jordan, or "Uncle Jimmy," as everybody called him, one of the most prominent among the early settlers, and closely identified with the growth and prosperity of the county and town.

He came in the early Fall of 1846, and selected a location about six miles west of The Fort, in Des Moines Township, which then embraced what are now the townships of Saylor, Valley, Bloomfield, Webster, Lee, Grant, Allen, Four Mile, Delaware, part of Clay, and The Fort. His claim was between 'Coon River and Walnut Creek. The first night, he camped under two large Oak trees, where he later erected a log cabin. It was an ideal spot for a person of rural taste and habit. His cabin was large, and furnished with "battened" doors, and window frames made from lumber purchased from Parmelee's mill, near Carlisle. His near neighbors were in Dallas County. Later, he replaced the cabin with an elegant dwelling, where, as in the cabin, there was ever a broad hospitality, a hearty welcome to rich and poor, white or black. His latchstring was always out, and many a weary or storm-beaten traveler found cheerful welcome and comfort therein, for "Uncle Jimmy" was a friend to all mankind. He passed through all the vicissitudes of pioneer life in those days. Sometimes the empty flour or meal box necessitated a long trip to Oskaloosa to get a supply. For meat, the surrounding timberland provided deer, squirrels and coons—the skins of which were legal tender at the stores for groceries and dry goods, and they were not an insignificant source of revenue, either. The boys used to tell this of one of "Uncle Jimmy's" raids on coons. One day, he, with others, had driven some coons into a large hollow tree. A fellow would reach in, grab a coon by the tail, and throw it out for his comrades to quiet with a club. Finally, "Uncle Jimmy" made a grab, but the coon

had turned, and he got hold of the wrong end, which laid him up a week for repairs.

The Winter of 1847 was very severe, and wolves were a source of much trouble to settlers on bottom lands along the streams. "Uncle Jimmy" walked to The Fort nearly every day to make and build a rail fence around Hoxie's big cornfield, which lay along what is now Grand Avenue and west of Twelfth Street. He was the architect and builder of what was the most aristocratic residence at The Fort. It was at the corner of Twelfth and Walnut streets, and at an acute angle to the street, there being no platted streets then west of Seventh Street. It was built of hewn logs, covered with clapboards; had a lean-to on the west side and big brick chimney. It was surrounded by several large trees. There being but two other houses visible from it—one, Doctor Grimmel's, where Saint Ambrose Catholic Church now stands, the other where Cownie's Glove Factory is—it was a conspicuous landmark for many years. In 1849, it was sold to S. G. Keene, a dry goods merchant, and was the center for social functions and frolics, Mrs. Keene being fond of amusements and very popular with the young people. Some of the "old girls" tell of lively times had there—things said and done which would not comport with present society exactness. The old house was torn down in 1876.

In 1849, "Uncle Jimmy" built, at or near Valley Junction, the first schoolhouse in what is now Walnut Township. The work was done by Samuel Hiner, a brother of "Jack" Hiner, who so mysteriously disappeared in 1869. It was of logs, and cost him sixty-nine dollars. He was a firm believer in the school and church as promoters of civilization and good government, and his labor and purse were freely given to each.

In 1851, the flood year, Walnut Creek, like all other streams, was unprecedentedly swollen. Bridges were carried away, fording was impossible. Flour and meal got short. To go to mill, the grist was placed on the back of a horse, which swam across. The owner could wade or swim.

In 1854, Jordan was nominated for State Senator, to succeed Doctor Hull. He at first resisted the nomination, but finally yielded on the earnest request of Whigs, and Free Soil Democrats—the

Kansas-Nebraska issue being before the people. The Legislature had to elect a United States Senator, which added great interest to the contest, as the Whigs were getting numerous enough to be counted upon. Jordan's opponent was Theophilus Bryan, of Guthrie County. The Democratic candidate for United States Senator was Augustus Caesar Dodge, of Burlington. The congressional district embraced all the state south and west of the north line of Marshall County. At the election, on the face of the returns, Bryan had a majority. He was given the commission, took his seat, and voted for Dodge for United States Senator. The Whigs soon after discovered that down in Jasper County, just before election, there had been employed on streets and roads a large number of aliens, whose names had got on the poll books. A contest was made, the votes re-counted, and Bryan was eighty-five votes short. He was ousted, and because of some irregularity in the vote for Dodge, it was also set aside. Jordan was seated, and voted for James Harlan, who was elected Senator.

On taking his seat, Jordan at once resumed the work of his predecessor, Doctor Hull. He introduced the second bill to remove the Capital to Fort Des Moines. Bills which had been before the Legislature in 1846 and 1848, were to remove the Capital to a more central point in the state, the location to be selected by a special commission, a proviso inserted to make it possible to prevent it coming to Fort Des Moines. The first commission selected were all Quakers. They did their work admirably. They chose a spot down in Jasper County, on an open prairie, punctured with gopher holes and inhabited with prairie dogs, six miles from the Des Moines River, and several miles from a settler's cabin, laid out the future Capital, sold corner lots, put the money in their pockets, and went home. Their report to the next Legislature of their doings was so permeated with evidence that they had been defiled by the "world, the flesh and the devil," the whole business was repudiated, the money paid for corner lots returned to the purchasers, and the gophers and little dogs left undisturbed.

When the Quakers' report was submitted, McFarland, who subsequently became the notorious Judge, moved that the report be referred to a special committee to report how much of the site selected was under water and how much had been burned up.

Jordan's bill was specific; it designated Fort Des Moines as the objective point. Immediately it was loaded with amendments and dilatory motions. Naturally, Iowa City had cause for objection, as it robbed her of considerable prestige as the Seat of Government. Marshalltown, Newton, Oskaloosa, and other towns were ambitious for the prize, but Jordan, with his genial, conservative ways, and the aid of his colleagues in the Lower House, and active lobbies from The Fort, carried the bill through, the Seat of Government to be located by a commission, within two miles of the junction of the Des Moines and Raccoon rivers. To placate Iowa City, she was given the State House, then uncompleted, for a State University.

In 1850, he was reelected as a Free Soiler. When the Kansas-Nebraska contest and the Fugitive Slave Law were exciting the people, and John Brown's agents were shipping negroes to Canada over the Underground Railroad, there were several stations in Polk County. The tricks and devices practiced to escape the vigilance of slave-hunters, close on their track, were numerous and often ludicrous, for there was a strong pro-slavery sentiment in the county, the *Statesman* frequently giving voice to it in vigorous editorials, denouncing the opposition to the Fugitive Slave Law, with special anathemas against the Methodists. In fact, Slavery existed here at one time. Joseph Smart, the Indian Interpreter at the Trading Post, went to Missouri, bought two negro women, brought them here, and kept them for some time as servants. When he got through with them, he took them South and sold them. Jordan was born and raised in a slave state, yet always abhorred slave-holding. He was a staunch Methodist, and during the John Brown raid, his home was always open to the fugitive. At one time, Brown, with twenty-four negroes, were quartered there, and it required good engineering to get them disposed of, for the stations were at many angles. There was one with Reverend Demas Robinson, a pioneer Baptist preacher, in Four Mile Township; another at Grinnell, and at other places. Frequently, to elude the hunters, the negroes would have to be returned to stations passed, and routed another way.

In 1858, when the Des Moines branch of the State Bank was organized, the first authorized by law to issue bank-notes, Jordan

was a stockholder and elected one of the Directors, and thereby became largely interested in and identified with town affairs—in fact, he was always considered a part of the city. He was several times elected a member of the county Board of Supervisors, and would have been continued *ad infinitum*, but he got tired of it.

In 1846, Congress granted to the State of Iowa the alternate sections of land on each side of Des Moines River, in an area of five miles wide, for the purpose of improving the navigation of the river from the Mississippi to Raccoon Forks. The land was to be sold at the highest market price. In 1847, the State organized a Board of Public Works, the Slack Water Navigation Company came into being; dams were partially constructed at Bentonsport, Croton, and Keosauqua; stone was quarried all along the river for several years, but the only evidence of progress was the regularity with which the public lands were demanded and turned over to the companies improving the river.

In 1854, the State, through its functionaries, the Board of Public Works, having disposed of nearly all the land embraced in the grant below the "Forks," and incurred a debt of seventy thousand dollars, sold out to Bangs & Company, of New York, who agreed to assume the debt, take the land grant, and complete the river improvements; but in 1854, they abandoned the work, secured a franchise as the Keokuk, Fort Des Moines and Minnesota Railway Company, and started the building of the road, reaching Eddyville in 1861, where it practically stopped for want of funds. In 1862, the Legislature granted the Des Moines Valley Railroad Company what little of the grant lands were left, and had not been sequestered or stolen outright, to complete the road to Des Moines. This gave new impetus to the railroad question, which was agitating the whole country, and Des Moines especially. Immediately, there was a rumor that a strong effort was being made to divert the road away from Des Moines, by an offer of big bonuses. The company was short of funds, and needed the money. Calvin Leighton, who was interested in the road, and friendly to Des Moines, quietly told Judge Casady, Jordan, and others that a fund of seventy thousand dollars would secure the completion of the road to Des Moines. Jordan, who had increased his land area to eighteen

hundred acres, and was raising, buying and shipping cattle by the hundreds, at once offered to be one of two hundred to raise one hundred thousand dollars. It was done; it cost him over one thousand dollars. So pleased was Keokuk, she got the subscribers to the fund there, gave them a grand ovation, an excursion down the Mississippi, and jollied them extravagantly. The road was completed, the first passenger train entered Des Moines on August Twenty-ninth, 1866. It stopped on the East Side, there being no bridge over the river, and was greeted with a large crowd of people, who had waited long and patiently for the coming of the first railway.

"Uncle Jimmy" was an ardent Methodist. His cabin and his later elegant mansion were the Mecca of circuit-riders and preachers. They liked his yellow-legged chickens and sumptuous table spread, for he was a good provider.

All his life, he was an earnest church worker and liberal supporter of churches, colleges, schools and the ministry. Under his cabin roof, religious services were first held in Walnut Township. In 1862, he organized a chapel and built a church, which was called the "Jordan." After a few years, its location was changed, when he and his wife joined the First Methodist Church, in the city, and practically became citizens of the town.

In 1862, during the Civil War, a rumor came that a band of Missouri bush-whackers were on their way to loot Des Moines, and there was great excitement. The banks at once sought a refuge for their funds. Those of the State Bank were removed to "Uncle Jimmy's" place, where he cached them beyond the probability of seizure. The marauders, however, ran up against some of Uncle Sam's "blue-coats" and didn't get here.

In 1865, the maintenance of the indigent, deserving poor people of the county had become a serious question. Hitherto, their care and support had been farmed out among divers persons, and the expenses were frequently exorbitant. A more economical system was demanded by the taxpayers. The County Supervisors, therefore, decided to purchase a Poor Farm, and Jordan, Doctor Brooks, and D. C. Marts were elected to purchase one hundred and twenty acres, and the same is a part of the present provision made for the care of the poor and incurable insane persons of the county.

In 1868, he joined the Brotherhood of Early Settlers, and when the Old Settlers' Association was organized, Jordan was elected one of the Vice-Presidents, and was always an active member, and present at all its social functions.

In 1879, he was elected a member of the Lower House of the Eighteenth General Assembly, which inaugurated the fight against oleomargarine, for pure butter, established the State Pharmacy Commission, State Board of Health, and Coal Mine Inspection, in which he took an active and helpful part.

Having accumulated abundant wealth, Jordan, during his later life, disposed of much of his land, lived on Easy Street, dividing his time with the town and his rural home, until he went to his Eternal Home. November Nineteenth, 1904.

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