

JOHN HAYS

PROMINENT among those who tramped down the weeds and brush at Fort Des Moines—in fact, all over Polk County—in the very early days, and helped materially to transform the scene first presented to him, in 1846, of a row of whitewashed log cabins strung along the Des Moines and 'Coon rivers, and eastward only a wide expanse of timber and brush, to a prosperous and beautiful city, was John Hays.

Of Irish parentage, born in Virginia, raised on a farm, educated and fitted for a school teacher, which profession he followed two years, in 1846, he determined to abandon his place in Missouri—he was opposed to the slave-holding element in that state—and find a home in Iowa among a more liberty-loving people.

Mounting a pony, he took an Indian trail across the uninhabited prairies, and followed it to "Raccoon Fork," arriving in February.

The little hamlet contained less than a hundred souls. Judge Casady's census of June of that year gives thirty-four as comprising the entire male population, not one-half of whom were married. John was seeking a job. The first man he met was John B. Saylor, who had started a Settlement, now Saylorville, who advised the selection of a land claim and farming as the best opening, the business demands at The Fort not being very flattering. He therefore made a claim at what is now Polk City, built a log cabin, and began the development of a farm, but two months later, receiving a good offer—he always had an eye to the remunerative dollar—sold the claim, and moved to the Saylor Settlement, where he purchased another claim, and began again to grow up with the country, with the usual trials, discouragements, and privations of the pioneers on a farm.

Early in 1848, he came to The Fort, and, with a splendid Saylorville girl for a housekeeper, took a log cabin with one room, on Second Street between Walnut and Locust, which was standing

as late as 1880, and engaged in teaming, but soon after joined "Uncle Jimmy" Jordan in buying and shipping live stock, a business he continued for fifteen years with good and substantial profit.

All animals had to go on foot to Keokuk. He drove the first lot of hogs from Polk County to Keokuk. He learned a lot about the innate cussedness of the animal before he got there, and was ready to accept the apostolic assertions of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, that they were "possessed of devils."

In those early days, the stock buyer seldom had much capital. He would go over the country and give his promissory note for the animals he purchased. When he had a sufficient number, he would drive them to Keokuk, often requiring several weeks, and sometimes attended with great difficulties and dangers from storms and absence of bridges. There were also meager facilities for handling live stock—stock platform scales had not materialized. An old-timer relates that he was obliged on one trip to weigh his hogs with the old-fashioned steelyards. He took the breeching from the horse's harness, made a swing in which the hogs were suspended, and weighed one at a time. Prices were low, compared with the present. If he got a dollar and a half to two dollars per hundred pounds, he did well. On his return, he would make the circuit again and pay for the animals he had bought.

In 1848, John opened a butcher shop in one of the log barrack buildings at 'Coon Point, on Second Street, south of "Jim" Campbell's big grocery store, the first butcher shop in the town. The butchering was done in the shop, and the meat sales were held on Wednesday and Saturday, one good beef animal being sufficient for one week. This was a sort of side line for John, but in those days, business versatility was a necessity. He had a partner named Johnson, who looked after the shop. One day, John gave him the money to go to Delhi and buy a fat cow. He returned without the cow, saying she was wild and got away from him, but John, having more faith in the docility of Delhi cows, made an investigation, and found that Johnson had run up against a "hoss trot" and staked all the money on the wrong "hoss." That busted the first butcher shop in Polk County, and the partnership.

The Winter of 1848 was noted as that of the big snow. The snow came early and often, and was very deep. Wolves were quite

numerous in the dense timber and thicket along the rivers. The deep snow forced them, from hunger, to raid the premises of settlers, who were greatly annoyed by their onslaught on calves and sheep, there being very few barns or stables for protection against them. They would even attack teams along the highway. On Christmas Day, Hays, while going to Saylorville on horseback, was suddenly confronted with five long, lank, hungry fellows howling for blood. He had no gun or other weapon for defense. Releasing a stirrup from the saddle, he gave them a running battle for two miles, killing two of them. His terror-stricken horse, with every muscle strung to its utmost tension, finally outran the remainder. When the Old Settlers organized their Claim Club, in 1848, for protection of their land claims against claim-jumpers and speculators, Hays was a charter member. Land-grabbers gave the organization a wide berth.

John was very conservative, somewhat reticent, and not very optimistic respecting The Fort—had more faith in cattle and hogs than in corner lots. In 1849, he was offered the corner at Walnut and Third, where the Exchange Block now is, for seven dollars and a half, and he would not take it; could not see seven dollars' worth of future glory in the town. "Too far out"—but soon after he changed his mind and bought a lot at the corner of Court Avenue and Fourth streets, opposite The *Register and Leader* office, on which was one of the several high Indian mounds to be found in the town, for which he paid one hundred silver dollars, and on the mound he built the Cottage House, a one-and-one-half-story frame, which for five years he kept as a favorite sojourners' home, when it passed to J. D. Long. The name was changed to Avenue House, and for several years Mrs. Long was the beloved foster mother of many young people who made the house their home.

There were several lots in the early 'Fifties which were "too far out." Solomon McCain owned the block where now the Citizens' National Bank is, and he offered it to the genial Falstafian Esquire, Absalom Morris, for an old silver-cased watch, but the Esquire couldn't see anything very attractive in a "cow pasture." Finally, after several banterings, McCain told him to "keep his old pewter watch."

J. L. Mason, managing engineer of a ladies' hat emporium on Locust Street, has been thinking cuss words for twenty years over a mistake he made in solving the difference between foresight and hindsight, as related to buying corner lots. He used to run carding machines in that good old "Deacon" Perrior's woolen mill on the East Side. By getting up before the roosters crowed, working fifteen hours a day, with no lay-off except Sunday, the loyal Baptist deacon closing the mill on that day, he had accumulated a little surplus cash which he decided to invest in town property. He was offered the corner of Seventh and Walnut, where the Hub shoe store is, for twenty-five dollars, but somebody down in Bentonport, where were the River Navigation locks and dam, and a railway station on the Valley Road, that was to be, offered him two corner lots with a house on them for the same money. J. L. thought that was better than one lot and no house, and he made haste to get possession. He sees things differently now, and thinks cuss thinks every time he passes that Hub corner.

Hays was a charter member of the First Baptist Church. In 1848, the County Commissioners donated to the Missionary Baptist Church a lot at the northwest corner of Sixth and Cherry, on condition that a frame, brick, or stone building, not less than 24x30 feet, be erected thereon within two years. The band of Baptists was very small, and poor. It was not until February, 1851, that a church organization was perfected, with fifteen members, but one of whom, I think, is now living, and steps taken to build a meeting-house. In the meantime, the time limit of the lot donation had expired, but Judge William McKay, another charter member, purchased the lot to prevent its reversion to the county. Business changes rendered the lot undesirable. Two lots were offered at Locust and Fourth, for five hundred dollars, but refused, the price being deemed exorbitant, an estimate fully confirmed, as they afterward went into the Savery House deal at three hundred dollars. A lot was finally selected on Mulberry Street, opposite the Court House, where Shank's undertaking rooms are, for which the original lot, donated by McKay, and sixty dollars were given, and then began the erection of the church. Progress was slow, money and material were scarce. For six years, the members struggled amid

delays and discouragements, until March, 1856, when the church was dedicated.

In 1851, the Board of County Commissioners was abolished and their powers and duties vested in a County Judge. At the August election, Forgis G. Burbridge was elected the first Judge of that court, and Hays was made bailiff of the court. His length of service is not shown in the records.

In 1859, was one of the most strenuous political campaigns in the history of the state or county. It was the first struggle between the Democrats and Republicans. Samuel J. Kirkwood, subsequently the War Governor, was put up to make his first run for Governor. His opponent was Augustus Caesar Dodge, the nestor of his party, and known by everybody in the state, while Kirkwood was almost unknown, but he worked his way to the front and good graces of the people, and the Democrats suffered a defeat which has not been recovered. Hays generally had a hand in all the politics there was going, and he was as shrewd as the best of them. He kept Barlow Granger and his crowd busy guessing and keeping up their fences. He was the Republican candidate for Sheriff, the most profitable office in the county, and was elected by a big majority. That was the beginning of a new order of things. The County Judge System, by which the Judge controlled all public affairs of the county, was relegated to oblivion, and all county business vested in a Board of Supervisors. The Judge was limited to probate matter. From that day to this, the Democrats have never elected their ticket in Polk County, or in this city. John served two years. Having helped to wind up the Democratic Party was glory enough, and, having accumulated considerable wealth, he decided to retire to private life. In 1870, he purchased a large fruit farm a few miles south of the city, where he resided until his death, in 1890.

Politically, John was a Whig. His first ballot was cast for "Tippecanoe and Tyler, too," in 1840. On the organization of the Republican Party, he united with it, and to the end of his days, the Democrats found him a formidable foe in all political campaigns. His long years of stock-buying trips over the country put him in touch with the farmers, and being genial, sensible, honest, and a farmer, too, he had to be reckoned with, but he was not an office-seeker.

Socially, he was affable, jolly, but not loquacious; always active and helpful in all moral and educational projects, and a highly esteemed member of the Masonic fraternity.

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