



JEFFERSON S. POLK

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MEASURED by the tangible, observable, accomplished results, Jefferson S. Polk (or "Jeff," as he is familiarly called) must be accorded a prominent place among the builders of the city. He came here in 1855, from Kentucky, a young lawyer, twenty-three years old, with no capital except a college diploma, ambition, pluck and perseverance, and at once began the practice of his profession. His office was with Judge Casady, on Second Street, near Vine, then the center of business.

"When I came here," he said, a few days ago, "there was nothing here—no mercantile business, no manufacturers, no place for speculation. The only prospect for success was in hard work."

For two years he paddled his own canoe. Well educated, clear headed, deliberate, optimistic, positive, nervous, sanguine temperament, aggressive, plain of speech, called a spade a spade, not a brilliant phrase-maker, as "Dan" Finch was, inflexible as iron, in every undertaking, never accepting defeat so long as there was a shred of law or equity on which to hang a contest, he soon took a prominent part among lawyers as one not easily snuffed out. His practice was mostly confined to the civil courts. As with most sound lawyers, there then being few rules of practice or precedent, he preferred trial to the court rather than a jury, deeming a jury one of the most uncertain things in life. He was grounded in law, justice and equity. He despised a pettifogger.

Soon after the Spirit Lake Massacre, a letter from the business house of Hoyt Sherman & Company, at Fort Dodge, dated March Twelfth, 1857, to M. B. Hoxie, said that three men who had just arrived there from the lake, reported that the Indians were murdering men, women and children. The writer also said that a company of one hundred men had been organized to leave Fort Dodge at once for the scene.

It was also reported later that the Indians were moving south and intended to make a raid on Fort Des Moines. As there was no telegraph nor railroads, and the mail facilities were meager, the people were intensely excited. Mayor W. H. McHenry, Sr., at once called out all able-bodied men to turn out for defense. Four companies were organized, and placed in command of Captain John C. Booth, formerly in the regular army. Every available weapon of shooting capacity was hunted up, drilling began, and the whole town was aroused with military spirit. A beautiful stand of colors, painted by W. S. Wheeler, was presented to the Guards in a spirited, patriotic speech. For a week, pomp and circumstance of war, the fife and drum kept enthusiasm at high pitch. In the meantime, a meeting of citizens was held in the Court House on the Thirty-first of May, when it was determined to send scouts to the north to ascertain the true state of affairs. "Jeff" Polk, Alex. Scott, Brax D. Thomas, and others, volunteered to go, and they immediately started on horseback, fully armed and equipped for whatever might happen. They made a quick ride to Boonesboro, and found there no foundation for the rumors. The expedition was abandoned, and Polk went on to Fort Dodge, where the District Court was in session, and, on motion of "Dan" Finch, he was admitted to the Bar. The other scouts returned and reported that there were no indications of Sioux Indians within the state. The public excitement quickly subsided. The incident, however, disclosed the patriotism of the community.

History says the massacre at Spirit Lake was committed by Inkapadutah, as leader. A few days before that event, I happened to be at Wabasha, on the Mississippi River. The only white people there were the Indian Agent and a few attaches.

While there, Inkapadutah, then on his way to Spirit Lake, halted and put up his wigwam, not far from the agency. In company of the agent, I went there. We were given a cordial "How! How!" After a short chat with the agent, the old devil brought out his pipe, filled it with killickinnick (dried, granulated willow bark), lighted it with a flint, took a few whiffs, passed it to the agent, then to me, repeating it until the contents were burned up. It was a "peace smoke," a mighty uncertain one, said the agent

later, for he was known to be most deceitful and treacherous. He was full six feet high, spare frame, hair and eyes black as night, agile as a cat. It was said that were a person seated in the woods, the ground covered with dry leaves and twigs, he could approach him from behind without detection.

On the opposite side of the river was a band of Chippewas, deadly enemies of the Sioux, and *vice versa*. Occasionally, they would put out into the river in their canoes, when the Sioux would make a rush to get around them and capture them. As one came to the shore, from an unsuccessful rush, I saw a block floating downstream, and pantomimed him to shoot it. He quickly raised his gun and fired. The gun went into a score of pieces, some over my head, leaving only a part of the breech in his hands. He was a scared Indian. He had neglected to remove the plug put in the barrel to keep out the water when paddling. The next day, the Chippewas caught a Sioux, scalped him, and had a hilarious dance over it a few miles back from the river.

In 1859, Polk formed a partnership with Judge Casady and M. M. Crocker, making one of the strongest law firms in the district. In 1861, Crocker entered the military service, and the firm became Casady & Polk, continuing until 1864, when Casady retired and was succeeded by F. M. Hubbell, as junior partner, and for twenty-five years Polk & Hubbell was the synonym for push and enterprise in the town.

Manifest Destiny was for many years the bane of the city, the evidence of which can be seen to-day on East Walnut Street, from the bridge to Sixth Street. It drove investments and business improvements over to Locust Street, where they could be made at reasonable prices.

When the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad reached Marshalltown, representatives came to Des Moines with a proposition to bring the road to the city. It was the prevailing sentiment that the Chicago and Rock Island was sure to come; that one road from Des Moines to the Missouri River would be more than sufficient, there being no towns, and little else than wild, uncultivated territory beyond. The proffer was made to bring the Northwestern here for a bonus of thirty-five thousand dollars, and right-of-way into

the town. It was received with a wink—the index finger pointing to the State House—and the information that the Capital of the state was not buying railroads, nor giving prizes to induce them to do what good business sense should prompt them to do without aid. They would be heartily welcomed when they arrived. Soon after, the Union Pacific offered a big bonus in gold to the road across Iowa that first made a connection with it at the Missouri River. Then began one of the most vigorous events in railroad building known in this country. The Northwestern made a straight shoot for Council Bluffs, thousands of men were put to work, and it was nip and tuck for the locating engineers to keep out of the way of the graders and track layers. So, also, the Rock Island. The Northwestern got in a few days ahead. That is why the Northwestern main line did not come to Des Moines.

In 1867, Mr. Polk and others organized the Equitable Life Insurance Company. The following year, he was elected Secretary and held the office fourteen years. The company is one of the strongest financial institutions of the state, and after nearly forty years, holds the faith and confidence of the public, consequent upon the conservative, wise and trustworthy foundation. F. M. Hubbell, one of the organizers, took the first policy issued. It is still standing.

In 1871, Mr. Polk organized the Des Moines Water Works Company, with a capital of three hundred thousand dollars. Works were at once erected, and the city supplied with water by the Holly System, which is still in use, and without a parallel in any city of equal size in the United States, for efficiency and purity of water. Soon after, the works passed to Polk & Hubbell, and, in 1880, to a joint stock company.

It is by the street car system he has become most conspicuously identified with the growth of the city—a system unequaled for completeness, utility, and liberality of service, in any other city in the Union.

In 1866, under a perpetual charter, granted the Des Moines Street Railway Company, on all streets in the city, he, with F. M. Hubbell, Doctor M. P. Turner, and U. B. White, built the first mile of street railway in the city. It was from the Court House,

on Court Avenue, to the foot of Capitol Hill, that being the main business street. It was the narrow gauge. It was an innovation in public affairs—in fact, ahead of time. There were no pavements; the track was laid on the surface; the cars were small; the motive power, horses or mules—principally mules, as they could stand the plunging, sliding and floundering in the clay mud better. Though the charter required the speed should not exceed six miles per hour, on turning corners the horses must walk, and, to prevent rear-end collision, cars must be kept two hundred feet apart, there was never any undue haste. Human life was well safe-guarded by the staid stateliness of the consistent mules. The only instance of exposure I know of, was one day, when a car was passing off the east end of the bridge. A drove of cows were coming in from pasture, when a couple of big dogs made a plunge at them, stampeding them in every direction. An excited heifer made a break between the mules, knocking them right and left, and went through the car, the driver escaping by side-stepping, likewise myself—the only passenger.

The second year, the track was laid up the alley, by Doctor Priestley's residence, to Walnut Street, thence west to Fourth on the West Side, thence to the place of beginning, thus forming a loop road. It was a great convenience for women and children, and for men—when not in a hurry. After a couple of years, Polk & Hubbell sold their interest to the Doctor, who continued to operate it, but that is another story.

In 1887, under charter of the Broad Gauge Street Railway Company, H. E. Teachout and G. Van Ginkel began building a horse car line from the East Side, on Locust Street. Simultaneously, Van Ginkel and John Weber procured a charter for a road from 'Coon River to Sevastopol, and both companies began to branch out, and crowd the Doctor, by going on, or paralleling streets occupied by him, until he disputed their rights to use animal power on any street in the city, and the courts sustained him. Teachout then electrified his system, and the contest between the two companies was vigorous. There were red, blue, green and yellow cars, to designate the different lines and routes to people awaiting at the street comers, there being no central station, and confusion became worse confounded.

In 1888, a charter was granted to E. T. Likes and Lowry Goode to build and operate the Belt Line Railway, with steam motive power, in North Des Moines, beginning at Locust Street on First, thence north along the river to Highland Park.

The same year, Polk procured a charter for the Rapid Transit Company, to operate a steam, cable, or Paton System, on all streets, and built a road on Ingersoll Avenue from Seventeenth Street to Greenwood Park. The first motive power was a small Baldwin locomotive, which proved inefficient. He went to Chicago, purchased a gasoline engine, installed it in a motor car, and run the first gasoline motor on any railway in the United States, but, like the "Baldwin," it was only equal to seven horses, couldn't climb the hills, and was abandoned.

In the meantime, he built a road on Walnut Street, where the Great Western crosses, to the Fair Grounds, and operated it with a steam locomotive for some time.

In 1889, he purchased the franchises and property of the Des Moines Street Railway, Broad Gauge Street Railway, and Sevastopol Street Railway, and consolidated them with his Rapid Transit Railway. Soon after, he purchased the Belt Line franchise, and at once began the installation of an entire new system, with points of excellence not found in any other city in the United States. A central station was established, at which every car arrives and departs, and voluntary universal transfers given from one line to another. Every car passes the Post Office and Union Depot, and all cars on East Side lines pass the Northwestern depot.

In 1895, he secured the right—reluctantly granted—it was too sudden for Uncle Sam—to carry the United States mail. Letter boxes were put on every car, into which mail can be placed at any street crossing, while the car is in service, and no matter what may be the speed, the car must be stopped to receive it. Arriving at the waiting-room, it is gathered from the boxes by a postal clerk and deposited in the Post Office every trip. This is a public benefaction, possessed by no other city—it is another "Iowa idea."

A special hobby with Polk, always, has been faith in Des Moines and interurban railways—roads radiating in all directions, to bring towns within a radius of thirty miles in close connection with the city by cheap, rapid and frequent transit.

In 1874, he gathered together the odds and ends of a projected road to Minnesota, existing mostly in air and on paper, changed the name, and laid a narrow-gauge track to Ames. The motive power was steam, electricity not having been demonstrated to be sufficient for such use. While building this road, he purchased and laid out the town of Sheldahl. Having completed the road, he turned it over to Callanan, Smart, and others, as the Des Moines and Minnesota Railway Company, who extended it a few miles and sold it to the Chicago and Northwestern.

His next move was in 1881-2, to build a narrow-gauge steam road to Waukee, when he was joined with a syndicate of Polk & Hubbell, J. S. Clarkson, John S. Runnels, and others, known as the Wabash Syndicate, who extended the road to Panora and Fonda and built the branch from Clive to Boone.

During the same period, the syndicate built the Des Moines and St. Louis Road, from Des Moines to Albia. It is now a part of the Wabash System.

The syndicate also organized and built the Des Moines Union Railway, which is operated as a connecting and transfer line with all the trunk lines in the city.

It is probably little known that Polk secured the right-of-way and subsidies for building the Des Moines Valley Road.

Having perfected his street railway system, and his narrow-gauge steam roads gone to the big trunk lines, he formed a syndicate of himself, G. M. Hippee, George B. Hippee, his son-in-law, and Harry H. Polk, his son, organized the Interurban Electric Railway Company, and built the lines from Greenwood Park to Valley Junction, to Colfax, and to the Army Post, all of which will be extended and equipped for freight service, and of incalculable benefit to the country as well as the city.

Politically, Polk is a Democrat, of the independent variety. Often solicited, he refused public office. Law practice, and large, diversified business transactions were sufficient for him, and it is a significant fact that every business enterprise organized by him—many of which he now has no connection with—has gone on keeping pace with the city growth.

As a lawyer, he ranked with the best. In the early days, laws were construed more liberally by the courts than now, but, grounded

on equity and exact justice, he maintained them with a persistency and obstinacy which became notable. "Jeff" Polk in a law case involved law and equity. It was "fifty-four, forty, or fight." Every opposing lawyer understood that. Judge McFarland was just that kind of a lawyer, and a good one.

All the lawyers of those days are loaded with incidents of the Judge, who was troubled with a periodic thirst for corn-juice. One day he called Crocker, a partner of Polk, to the bench, while he went out to get a thirst-stopper, usually accessible in another room. So soon as he left the bench, the courtroom was like a schoolroom full of boys when the teacher is out. There was more fun than court. When the Judge returned, the lawyers were gathered about the stove, and among them was a fellow with his hat on. The Judge, who was a tall, stout, strong man, seeing him, seized him, jammed his hat down over his face, and thrust him outside the bar, with: "Now stay there, d__n ye. The next time you come into my court, take your hat off."

As a citizen, Mr. Polk has always identified himself with every effort to advance the civic, social, moral, and educational interests of the city, exemplifications of which are numerous and conspicuous.

As a religionist, he probably would not pass an examination in the Westminster Catechism.*

August Twenty-eighth, 1904.

*Died November Third, 1907

Transcribed from:

PIONEERS OF POLK COUNTY, IOWA AND REMINISCENCES OF EARLY DAYS

by L. F. Andrews

Volume I

Des Moines, Baker-Trisler Company, 1908