

MICHAEL H. KING

GOING over the roster of those prominently identified with the growth of Des Moines, very few so impressed his personality upon it as Michael H. King, or "Mike," as he was universally called. He came here in 1856, at the age of twenty-four years. His first job was as clerk in the store of R. W. Clark. Soon after, he engaged as bookkeeper with Alex. Scott, who was running saw mills, mining coal, and promoting the removal of the State Capital to Des Moines, and locating the State House on the East Side.

While he was with Scott, in 1857, the Fourth of July was made memorable by a demonstration given by the Callithumpians, consisting of more than one hundred and fifty young fellows dressed in the most fantastic garb they could invent, headed by a musical band composed of John Boyd, with a fiddle; Lew Noll, a triangle; C. A. Rogers, bones, and "Jim" Miller, tambourine. Hugh King, a brother of "Mike," was general commander, and "Bill" Lancaster secretary of the aggregation. The band was carried on a big platform, built on a wagon. The music they made can be contemplated by the temperament of the fellows who made it. The procession paraded the streets, halting at the corners, when "Bill" would call the roll, and "Jim," as bandmaster would swing his baton for a blast of the most excruciating number in his *repertoire*. The crowd finally got around to the Demoin House, at Walnut and First streets, the only "first-class" hotel in town, where they were joined by a large number of citizens. "Mike" was called on for a speech. He gave a splendid oration, and proved himself a man for the occasion, to their great surprise—subsequently often repeated—for which he was given robust cheers, and a "solo" by the band. The Legislature having just before permanently located the Capital here, the people were jubilant. General Crocker also made an eloquent address.

"Mike" remained with Scott about a year, when he started in mercantile business for himself, but failed to meet his expectation. He was then elected Justice of the Peace for Lee Township, and served two terms.

In 1862, he was elected City Clerk, when Colonel Spofford was Mayor, and served one term. He then ran for Police Judge, and, though the returns showed his election, the Democrats, by some system of addition and subtraction, counted him out. He then became bookkeeper at Shepard, Perrior & Bennett's woolen mills, which were where the casket factory now is, near the east end of Locust Street bridge, where he remained several years.

In 1869, he was elected a member of the Board of County Supervisors, to represent Lee Township, and served one year, when the Legislature abolished the system of township representation and provided for a Board of three members, to be elected by the county at large, and "Mike," who was not as well known in the country as in Lee Township, for a time lost his grip in politics.

At a meeting of the Board, September Ninth, 1870, he offered the following resolution, which was unanimously adopted:

"Be It Resolved by the Board of Supervisors of Polk County, Iowa, That we cordially endorse the action of the President of the United States in recognizing the French Republic, and hereby offer our earnest wish for the triumph of the new Republic."

In 1872, the old Sixth Ward, which comprised all the territory from Des Moines River, between Grand Avenue and Court Avenue, to the east city limits, elected him Alderman, and he was reelected annually until 1880, when the term was changed to two years, and he was reelected each term until 1889, when he was elected, served one year, and in 1890, with Judge W. W. Williamson, was appointed by the Mayor on the first Board of Public Works, on which he served one year and two weeks, this completing more than nineteen years consecutive service in the City Council, a record I do not think can be duplicated by any city in this country. It is needless to say he had no opposition. He had abundance of it, both in and outside the Council. It was during his public service, was laid the foundation for a complete system of public improvements, water works, a fire department, sewerage, street lighting, bridges,

street grading, and paving. He was enterprising, energetic, aggressive, and had faith in the future. His policy was to build for the future, keeping present taxes low, and have the coming generations pay for the improvements and benefits which they were to enjoy. He was broad-minded and courageous in doing what he believed was for the public good. Often involved in angry, heated contests in the Council, and the target of bitter opposition, he was always calm, courteous, yet immovable, and invariably, by the logic and soundness of his premises, indomitable will, and imperturbability of manner, won his colleagues to his support. While these contests were waging in the Council, the taxpayers were denouncing him for his "Utopian extravagant schemes, concocted for the sole benefit of a lot of his satellites and grafters." A great hue-and-cry would be raised every year, that "Mike" King was running the city into bankruptcy, and plans were made to defeat his election, but his ward knew him, and at the first meeting of the Council, in April, he was there to answer to roll call.

While in the Council, he was engaged largely in railroad grading contracts for the Chicago and Northwestern, in Wisconsin, and the Rock Island, in Kansas and Nebraska. In 1884, he built the narrow-gauge road from Des Moines to Cainesville, now the "Q." road. He excavated the basement of the Capitol, and graded the entire grounds, removing over fifty thousand cubic yards of earth. Old-timers remember that on the south and west sides, the grounds were twenty feet higher than now, and covered with large timber trees. He also did a large amount of street grading in the city. It was not uncommon to see streets filled with his army of men, mules and wheel scrapers, a notable instance of which was High Street (sic), which originally was an ugly place. He gave employment to more men than any person in the city. When he had a job, he gave the work to the temperate, industrious, poor man, hence the plain, common people, the sturdy laboring classes, were his staunch and unwavering friends, many of whom had good evidence of his fealty to them, for sometimes the assessments made for street improvements would jeopardize their homes, and he would get the burden removed; yet he never used them for political or pecuniary advantage. In all of his various contracts or work done for the city,

whether under resolution of the Council or a written agreement, he filled the requirements to the letter. There were no constructive claims for "extras." As a member of the Council, he stood as a rock against all projects for possible "grabs." During many years he was Chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, and of the Committee on Streets and Alleys, and controlled the expenditure of large sums of money, yet there will not be found on the record the use of public funds dishonestly or without warrant or an equivalent in service. In some of his most extensive grading contracts, he lost heavily, but he made it an inexorable rule to pay his laborers first, and to that end he mortgaged his capacious home, which, after his death, was sold under foreclosure of the mortgage, and it stands to-day, on East Grand Avenue, unoccupied, a silent testimonial to his honesty and integrity.

In 1888, he, with Martin Tuttle, was appointed the first Board of Public Works of the city by the Mayor, for the term of three years, or, as the statute reads, "to hold the office until their successors are duly appointed and qualified." Before the term expired, Mayor Carpenter was succeeded as Mayor by John H. Campbell, a shrewd politician, who at once appointed a new Board. Of course, there was a contest at once. "Mike" was not a novice in the game of politics. He went to the courts for writs of injunction, mandamus, certiorari, or whatever he could get, claiming he had been ousted unlawfully, as his legal term had not expired. But the courts could find nothing in the statute which prevented Campbell from paying his political debts as he saw fit—in fact, gave him, by implication, the privilege so to do. He then sued the city for the two years' salary which Campbell had cut out, and the case went to the Supreme Court, where it was held that his service and salary ended when his successor had been "duly appointed and qualified." The statute seems to have been concocted for the special benefit of the game of politics. It was, however, subsequently radically changed.

Politically, "Mike" was originally a Republican, and was very active in political affairs. He was a good, common-sense speaker, and a good organizer, but in 1878, he became an Independent, and drifted off to the Green-back party, was chosen one of the editors of the *Daily People*, established to boost Gillett into Congress. "Mike" was the principal booster, and Gillett got there.

In 1896, "Mike" joined the "Pops," and was one of the delegates to the St. Louis Convention which nominated Bryan for President.

He was one of the organizers of the Irish Land League of Iowa, and was a delegate to the National League Convention, at Buffalo, during the visit of Parnell to America, in 1880. He secured a visit of the renowned English statesman to Des Moines. The Legislature was in session, and Parnell was specially invited to visit that body, which he did, giving a speech in both houses, an event which crowded the halls with people.

Religiously, King was a Catholic, an active, devoted member and supporter of Saint Ambrose Church, and parochial schools of the denomination, but he was catholic enough to include all other churches and schools as helpful to the betterment of social life.

In 1876, Father Brazil appointed him, J. S. Clarkson ("Ret"), John W. Geneser, J. B. McGorrisk, and John C. Reagan, a Board of Trustees, to build Mercy Hospital, which gave the city that splendid institution.

In 1893, he was appointed by Bishop Cosgrove as one of the delegates to the Catholic Congress at Chicago, during the World's Fair.

He died during the ceremonies of Memorial Day, 1902, leaving no heritage to his family, but the record of a kind husband and father, a public-spirited citizen, a friend of the poor, an honest, well-spent life.

June Fourth, 1905.

Transcribed from:

PIONEERS OF POLK COUNTY, IOWA AND REMINISCENCES OF EARLY DAYS

by L. F. Andrews

Volume I

Des Moines, Baker-Trisler Company, 1908