



R. W. SYPHER

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ONE of the very first merchants to open a store in Des Moines was R. W. Sypher, who came early in 1846. He occupied a double log cabin on the Phelps Fur Company claim, about a mile east on the plateau, near the river, as all trade and business, outside of the military garrison, was in that direction. A double log cabin of the settlers was different from that at The Fort. The settlers' cabin was composed of two cabins of equal size, with a space between equal to the size of the cabin. The space was roofed from cabin to cabin, the space being utilized for a storage shed. At The Fort, the structures were the same, except that the space between the cabins was walled up with logs, between which ports, or loop-holes, were made through which soldiers could thrust their guns when necessary.

Sypher's store was stocked with groceries, dry goods, hardware, queensware (now called crockery), boots, shoes, glass, nails, and everything liable to be needed in the community, and was largely advertised in the *Star*. Immediately the soldiers leaving, he built a frame store at the northwest corner of Second and Vine streets, adjoining that of Frank Allen. He soon began to branch out by establishing branch stores at Booneville (now Boone), and other places, and became a merchant prince. His greatest source of trouble was the River Improvement dams, down at Bonaparte, which obstructed the passage of steamboats then, and to-day the fish. His goods required frequent replenishment. There were no railroads, the land roads were often impassable for teaming from Keokuk and Burlington, the nearest source of supply, and more than one hundred and seventy miles away.

In June, 1851, the year of the "great flood"—nothing like it before nor since—the whole country bordering the water courses was under water. The pioneer settlers made their claims along rivers and creeks. The flood destroyed all hope of making a crop.

At The Fort, affairs were in serious condition. Food supplies were scarce; there was no flour. Keokuk and Burlington had an abundance, but their merchants and shippers were not disposed to assume the expense and risk of sending merchandise and supplies up a wild, turbulent river, obstructed by half completed dams, and completely damned by river boatmen. It became apparent that relief could come only by home industry. Accordingly, Sypher, Colonel J. M. Griffith, W. T. Marvin, who kept the Marvin House, on Third Street near Walnut, and others planned to go to St. Louis, charter a steamboat, and get supplies. A small, flat-bottomed skiff was made, and Griffith, Marvin, Peter Myers, a politician and speculator, Hoyt Sherman, Postmaster, boarded it, the last two as supercargo, not being personally interested in family supplies, to float down to Keokuk, where they arrived on the fourth day, tying up at night wherever they could reach an accessible place to get "grub." From Keokuk, they went to St. Louis, where they chartered a stern-wheel steamboat, loaded it with a cargo of flour and general merchandise, and started for home. On arriving at Bonaparte, they met the River Improvement Company's submerged dam. Several ineffectual attempts were made to get over it, but the rushing torrent was too strong. The cargo was transferred to a warehouse, and another trip made to St. Louis to get a boat that could climb dams.

The *Caleb Cope* was secured and soon reached the stored freight, which was put on board and the trip completed without delay, arriving on the Fifth of July.

The Star said of the coming: "The steamboat *Caleb Cope* arrived Sunday with a large barge, heavily laden with flour, salt, iron, nails, groceries, and dry goods. This will relieve the wants of the community."

The whistle of the steamboat was the signal for a stampede from the churches to give it a welcome, which was done with waving 'kerchiefs and cheers. It was an important event, in which the entire community was gastronomically interested.

The next day after the arrival, the Captain invited the people to take a picnic excursion on his boat up the river. With the understanding that no refreshments, liquid or otherwise, would be served

on the boat, about fifty prominent citizens, and their feminine belonging's, with well-filled lunch baskets, and "something else" to add cheer to the occasion, accepted the invitation, and, as one of the party said to me last week, it was an hilarious and spirited affair.

After the boat had got under way, "Billy" Moore came up the hatchway in his shirtsleeves, and very distraught. He had been in the hold looking for a special brand of calico, of "fast color," wanted by one of his country customers, and had expected to get off before the boat started. He insisted on being put ashore, as he was not "dressed up for company," and his store was open, but he was informed that no stops were to be made. The clerk came to the rescue, furnished him a coat, soap and water did the rest, and, in good presentable shape, "Billy" "jined in." He got so elated that he declared he would start a bank, and began to throw gold coins to the fishes. Between Beaver Creek and Thompson's Bend lies nearly two hundred dollars he sowed as they went along.

Mercantile business in those early days was done very unlike what it is now. It was largely barter and credit. Money was scarce, much of it "wild-cat." Settlers were generally poor, yet strictly honest; markets for what they produced were far away. Often family supplies were exhausted, and badly needed. To get them without money was vexatious. On one occasion, a merchant swapped two pounds of salt for a bushel of buckwheat, and the settler was glad to make the trade.

In 1849, the County Commissioners made a contract to build the first county jail. It was 24x15 feet, two stories. It was a double wall of logs, the space between the walls filled with stone. One of the contractors died during the construction, and the contract was transferred to Sypher, who finished it. It stood where the east end of the Union Depot now is, and cost seven hundred and fifty dollars.

In May, 1852, The Fort having been incorporated as a town, Sypher was elected a member of the Council, and served one term, declining re-election for business reasons. There were no wards. The Council met in the Court House.

In 1855, when the State Commissioners came here to locate the Seat of Government, Sypher took an active part in the effort to

secure the location on Grimmel's Hill. He subscribed ten thousand dollars to be paid to the state if the West Side won.

In 1856, the Lutheran Church decided to establish a denominational college here. A corporation was formed, and Sypher was elected one of the Trustees. Land was purchased, a building partially constructed, when the hard times and panic of 1857 came, the project was abandoned, and the property sold to the Baptists.

Sypher had a large number of sails spread, and found it necessary to begin furling some, to weather the gale. He had a clerk named Tyler, to whom he intrusted much of his financial affairs. Tyler robbed him of a large sum of money, ran away to Nebraska, where he joined the notorious Small gang of horse thieves, who stole Nebraska horses, ran them into Iowa, then stole Iowa horses and ran them into other states. Tyler finally got into the penitentiary in Nebraska and died there. His stealings and the panic necessitated Sypher closing his affairs. Practically, it put the whole town out of business. As a retrospective rhymester puts it:

“We all remember how, in 'Fifty-seven,  
All enterprises seemed to have a leaven  
Of failure in them. Then came the panic,  
That scattered banker, merchant and mechanic,  
Professors, Christians, sinners—people all  
Participated in the general fall.  
Blest was he then, and free from all this shocking,  
Who made a banker of his wife's long stocking.”

In 1860, the firm of Newton & Keene, merchants in Exchange Block, at Third and Walnut streets, having failed, Sypher was appointed assignee, and closed up their business.

In 1874, he opened a coal shaft south of 'Coon River, which he operated until his death, in 1879.

He was an enterprising, public-spirited, prominent citizen, social and genial. His home on Fourth Street, where the Brinsmaids' store is, was the headquarters for social functions. It was an open house to young people, and some gay times were had there, for Mrs. Sypher was immensely popular. Many of the participants in those frolics have ceased to be, but I think “Tom” Hatton, “Friday” Eason, Mr. and Mrs. Ed. Clapp, and “Tac” Hussey

will remember some of the gatherings there. They will never be duplicated.

The query is often made as to the origin of Eason's nickname, "Friday." When he was a youngster among the Vermont hills, he was a vigorous book reader. Robinson Crusoe was his favorite, and its leading character, "Friday," was his ideal hero, the splendors of whom he so strenuously and persistently impressed upon his playmates, they dubbed him "Friday," and it has stuck to the present day. He accepts it with genuine good humor, and some of his best friends don't know his real name.

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**by L. F. Andrews**

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