



S. A. ROBERTSON

## SAMUEL A. ROBERTSON

EARLY in the Spring of 1856, there strolled into the town a young man not twenty years old, looking for a job. Having learned it was the Capital of the state, that a new Capitol was being built, he thought there must be a chance to join the body politic and grow up with the country. Securing lodging at the Marvin House, on Third Street, where Harbach's Building now is, he went out to reconnoiter the place and interrogate the inhabitants. It did not require much time; there was not much of a town. All its business was done below Third Street, mostly on Second. He concluded there was nothing doing, times hard, money scarce; that there was no place for him, and, like Barlow Granger, he gathered up his carpet-sack, shook the dust of the town from his feet, went on board a steamboat lying in the river, and started for a more promising location. On the boat, he met J. C. Savery, to whom he related his experience. Savery told him he was just the man he was looking for; that he was on his way to St. Louis to get plans for a big hotel, and if he would go back, he would give him the job of building it. The young man thought that was a good thing. He left the boat at Pella, came back, has grown up with the town, and had a conspicuous part in its growth and prosperity.

So soon as plans were completed, he began work on the Hotel Savery, now the Kirkwood, but soon after, money and material being scarce, the work was stopped. The Court House was then being constructed, and he went to Isaac Cooper, the contractor and builder, for work, and was given a place at two dollars and a half per day. Cooper used to say he would lay more brick in a day, and better, than any two men on the job. After working three months, without getting any pay, the Fourth of July came, and a big picnic was planned to be given at Horseshoe Lake, then the popular place for all outdoor social events, and he decided to take it in. He hunted up Isaac, explained the situation, emphasizing it with the statement

that he had promised his wife to go, and must have some money. Isaac responded with: "I am dead broke;" but, searching his pockets, he fished out a gold dollar—the only money everybody "salted" when they got it—which was given him.

On another occasion, his wife being in Cincinnati, Mr. Robertson planned to bring her home. He laid sidewalks during the Summer and accumulated about two hundred dollars. The country was flooded with "stump-tail," "red-horse," "wild-cat," "brindle-pup" currency of doubtful character, it being the special prayer of every banker each day to have it checked out before the closing hour. He therefore went to James Callanan, who was running a bank, and asked for money that would be good until he could reach Cincinnati.

"The best I've got is Illinois currency," was the response.

The Illinois currency was listed by bankers then as "Western Mixed," which included all the "wild-cats," but, as it was the best in the bank, he took it, and started for Cincinnati. Arriving at Saint Louis, he stopped at a hotel, and in the evening met a man who was manager of what is now the "Big Four" railway system, to whom he told his destination. His friend gave him a letter which was said "might be of some use to him." The next morning, when he went to pay his hotel bill, his Illinois currency had depreciated to nothingness—wasn't worth a cent. He borrowed enough to pay his bill, and ten cents for ferriage across the river, trusting to luck to get further. Having been considerably connected with railroad building in Ohio, he thought he would try it on the Superintendent of a Cincinnati road for transportation, but he was rebuffed with a complacency which quite upset him. Pulling the friend's letter from his pocket, he gave it to the obdurate functionary, who, after reading it, said it was good for any favor desired on their line. The letter was signed by a man who once ran for President—George B. McClellan.

Returning, Mr. Robertson began to branch out as a contractor, but money was scarce, people couldn't pay their taxes, work on the Court House was held up, the city had no money, and was issuing script of fractional amounts, which soon became unpopular and went out of circulation, the money in use being the "red-dog"

variety, and of little value. As an incident, a man was driving into town one day, on Woodland Avenue, with a load of wood, when he was halted by a citizen who asked the price of the wood. "Four dollars a cord, gold; in banknotes, cord for cord."

To keep business moving, he made a contract with Martin Tuttle to build a house and take his pay in groceries; another with "Billy" Moore for a house, to be paid for in dry goods; another with Stacy Johns, to be paid for in boots and shoes, and it is still standing, at Fifth Street and Grand Avenue, and known as the "Montague Treatment" place. Another contract was made with W. S. Terry, to be paid for in harness; another with John Hays, for which he took a note, which he sold to Judge Williamson for a house on Woodland Avenue, the first home he owned in town. By this time, he could pay his workmen in orders on his several credit depositories, which they were glad to get. "Talk about hard times," said he one day, when in a reminiscent mood, "the present generation don't know what that means. I worked nine months at one time, and received only thirteen dollars in money. A laboring man had to take his pay in trade. If he got money—banknotes—he had no assurance it would buy him a pound of bacon the next day."

When the Postoffice (sic) was remodeled, he was selected to do the work. He went to Washington, secured two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, made large additions to the ground area, added a third story and a clock tower, and returned thirty-nine thousand dollars of unused funds to Uncle Sam, for which unexpected favor and fidelity he was specially commended.

When the new Capitol was ordered built, he made a contract to furnish the stone, the statute requiring the stone must be from quarries within this state. A quarry at Earlham was selected by the Commissioners, and he laid a side-track to it. Another quarry was selected at Rock Creek, in Van Buren County, to which he built a railroad. From these quarries, immense quantities of stone were delivered. It was, in stonelayers' parlance, "green"—that is, filled with moisture, and with it the foundation for the building was laid. The Winter freezing so disintegrated the stone that in the following Spring, the foundation had tumbled into the pit, and hundreds of tons of uncut dimension stone blocks were broken into

fragments. Some of them can now be seen on Ninth Street, not far south of Court Avenue. He pocketed a loss of forty-eight thousand dollars in the transaction.

While at work on the Court House, he made plans for a County Jail and residence for the jailer, for which Judge Napier ordered he be paid ten dollars, but the jail succumbed to the hard times and was not built.

In 1864, he narrowly escaped an end to his life. He was standing in front of Ensign's stable, on Walnut Street, where now is the Dickenson Building, when a drunken soldier passed, threatening to shoot him, but he got away, while the soldier went on, and, meeting a negro, shot him. The soldier was spirited back to the army, came home after the war was over, but was never tried for murder.

In 1878, the city came to the conclusion to get out of the mud, and avoid being washed away by freshets. There were no pavements, nor sewers. In wet seasons, the clay mud was so deep and sticky as to render travel almost impossible, and in heavy rainfalls the rush of water did serious damage to streets and private property. Bird's Run, an open ravine, draining the whole northwest and central part of the town, was a perfect terror. A remedy was imperative, but how to get it was the problem. Public attention turned to Robertson as one having had large experience in public improvements, and though a Democrat of the radical persuasion, residing in a ward radically Republican, he was elected to the City Council, and at once so vigorously and persistently pressed the subject there and elsewhere that a general system of sewerage and paving was planned, and work begun. Bird's Run was harnessed within a wall twelve feet in diameter, over which was built the Auditorium, and intercepting sewers laid, to which have been added many miles of like construction. Robertson may be justly called the father of the sewer system of the city.

In 1890, he organized the Des Moines Brick Manufacturing Company, installed a large brick-making plant, and demonstrated the value of the clay industry, which has become one of the most valuable in the city, the superiority of its product being admitted all over the country.

He was a director and heavy stockholder of the Iowa National Bank, and for several years was its President. He is one of the

Board of Directors of the Royal Union Mutual Life Insurance Company. Latterly, however, he has withdrawn from all financial institutions.

During his forty-eight years' residence, he has been prominently identified with public improvements, financial interests, and every undertaking to promote the prosperity of the town, and in many ways may be said to be one of the most prominent builders of Des Moines, and especially as a contractor. On nearly every street in the city are public buildings, business blocks, and residences erected by him. Of the most prominent, which I can recall, are the Congregational Church, which stood where the Chamberlain Hotel now is; the Abom House, now the Iowa Hotel; three schoolhouses on the West Side; two on the East Side; the block at Fifth and Vine streets, occupied by the Hammond Packing Company; the block occupied by Chase & West, on Walnut Street; the Graefe House, on Walnut Street; "Billy" Moore's Opera House; basement story under the old Capitol; the original building now the Elliott Hotel, on Fourth Street; the present Savery House; the Robertson Block, on East Locust Street, and commenced the first Savery Hotel, now the Kirkwood, which was temporarily abandoned by the panic of 1857. Beside these, are hundreds of costly residences.

His correct business principles and trust of the people have secured to him a competency sufficient for the years which are to come to him.

February Twenty-second, 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**