



REV. THOMPSON BIRD

## REV. THOMPSON BIRD

STANDING on a street corner, seeing the street cars, the arc and incandescent lights, the "devil wagon," the tall and stately marts of trade, in every direction the concomitants of a prosperous, contented, enlightened and healthful municipality, the mind of the old-timer naturally harks back to the days when things were not thus; to the early days and the struggles, privations and untoward experience thereto; to his coadjutors and co-workers who laid the foundation for this present superstructure, and he calls the roll of them. There was Alex. Scott, Doctor Brooks, Father Bird, Ezra Rathbun, R. L. Tidrick, Judge Rice, Jonathan Lyon, Judge Casady, Barlow Granger, "Billy" Moore, Esquire Michael, the Hippees, the Maishes, Captain Harry and J. M. Griffith, Judge McKay, Doctor Grimmel, Isaac Brandt, Isaac Cooper, Wesley Redhead, Judge McHenry, Dan. Finch, Jeff. Polk, Ed. Clapp, Ira Cook, Lamp and Hoyt Sherman, W. H. Meacham, S. A. Robertson, Conrad Youngerman, J. B. Stewart, Father Brazil, "Jim" Savery, R. W. Sypher, Captain West, Doctor Hull, C. D. Reinking, Doctor Turner, L. Harbach, Frank Mills, Colonel Spofford, Madison Young, Frank Allen, Charley Good, Judge Williamson—all prominently identified with the origin, growth and prosperity of the city, and not only them, but their good wives as well, for be it known that upon them often fell trials, sacrifices, privations and burdens of pioneer life most grievously. Luxuries—even ordinary needs for housekeeping—were sadly wanting. Cooking was done in kettles and skillets, in fireplaces built of rough stone, mud and sticks; furniture was scarce, and with hammer, saw and axe, from old boxes, slabs and timber, must be improvised tables, stools, benches and shelving. At times the flour and meal got short, the roads were bad, streams flooded, mills fifty to an hundred miles away. To get to them and return was a task of days and weeks. The only relief was the "hominy block," which consisted of a log

Vol. I—(2).

about four feet long, with one end dug out in shape of a druggist's mortar, and a pestle made of a stick with an iron wedge driven into one end to crush and grind the corn into meal. Meat abounded in wild game, and in season ducks could be gathered at Sherman Lake, where the old county fair ground was, at a pond and slough where the Rock Island depot now is, and at Dean's Lake near the packing houses. There are good housewives now living in luxurious homes in the city who have not forgotten the hominy block bread. Some of them may remember a certain big picnic at which there was but one loaf of wheat bread, all other bread being made from corn.

They were sturdy, generous, industrious, frugal, honest, plain people, engaged in home making, but they builded better than they knew. Most of them have gone to their final rest, but they are represented yet by their children—vigorous, forceful business men of the city. Some of them are with us yet—honored, respected, and, with contentment, basking in the sunset of a life well spent.

The writer feels assured that by common consent a distinctive place should be given Rev. Thompson Bird, or Father Bird, as he was familiarly and most reverently called, known and loved by everybody. He came here in 1847 as a missionary preacher of the Presbyterian Church. His field was the southern half of the state, traversing it generally on foot, preaching in the cabins of pioneers, sharing their frugal hospitality, their joys and sorrows. It was not uncommon for him to walk twenty miles to preach in some new settlement, and at one time he walked to Cedar Rapids, over one hundred and thirty miles, with blistered feet, to attend a meeting of the synod of the Church. He organized churches wherever he went, probably a greater number than any other person in the state. While in this work, he laid the foundation of and organized the first church of that denomination in the city, of which there were but six members. He at once set about building a place for worship. It was a laborious task, often saddened by the shadows of failure. The people were poor; contributions small and far between, but with these pittance, the selling of a portion of his library and other valuables, and with the aid of his estimable, cultured wife, who taught a private school, to get money for the

building, after six years he succeeded. It was a small, unpretentious structure, occupying the lot south of the present Western Union Telegraph office on Fourth Street, in which he served as pastor until it was burned, in 1867.

The church building completed, a bell was needed. By a clever device it was secured. He had gathered a large collection of autographs of prominent men of the country, and these he offered to Doctor Sprague, of Albany, New York, if he would provide the bell, which offer was accepted. It was not a large bell, but its tones were as sweet to the villagers as are now the chimes of Saint Paul's. It was melted and lost in the burning of the building.

As the years passed, his physical powers weakened until, stricken with paralysis, he reached the end January Fourth, 1869. He was a lovable man, cultured, genial, charitable in all things, yet firm in his opinions, zealous ever in the advancement of Christianity, education and the upbuilding of society. He manifested great interest in civic affairs, and was one of the commissioners to form the first town charter and the first school district. He was a wise counselor, an exemplar of the best in manhood; specially fond of children, and they of him. So it was he won the reverential title of "Father" from old and young. His impress upon the early formation of society was probably more indelible than that of any other man. It can be truly said that he, with Elder Nash and Father Brazil, were the fathers of the Church and founders of the religious element prevailing in the city to-day. In perpetuation of the memory of Father Bird, the city has given his name to one of the public schools.

When dirt was cheap, he purchased the block between Locust, Third, Fourth and Center streets, for two hundred dollars, and built a log cabin thereon, adding thereto by his own hands—for everybody had to be a jack-of-all-trades—as his family increased. There he lived many years, to the end of his days. A portion of the field was cultivated, and the writer hereof has a vivid recollection of one night during a severe thunderstorm, when it was so dark the way could be seen only when the lightning flashed, of going up Fourth Street, and at the corner of Locust tumbling over the rail fence among the potato vines. From the sale of building

lots and the rapid growth of the town, Father Bird became a wealthy man.

No mention of him would be complete without reference to his wife and co-worker. As a school teacher for several years, she had much to do with moulding the character of the children, all who in after life bore testimony of the loveliness of her character and beneficence of her tutelage. In the social life of the community she was beloved, revered and known in her later years as Mother Bird. She went to her rest in 1901, having passed her ninetieth year.

April Tenth, 1904.

**Transcribed from:**

**PIONEERS OF POLK COUNTY, IOWA AND REMINISCENCES OF EARLY DAYS**

**by L. F. Andrews**

**Volume I**

**Des Moines, Baker-Trisler Company, 1908**