



THOMAS MITCHELL

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THOMAS MITCHELL may be justly recorded as the godfather of Polk County. His generous, humanitarian heart embraced all men and all things. His very face was a smile. Everybody called him "Uncle Tommy."

He was born March Third, 1816, in Claremont, Sullivan County, New Hampshire, and was of Scotch-Irish descent. His father was a farmer, and Thomas spent his boyhood days on the old home farm, receiving such education as the common schools of that day afforded. When he was sixteen years old his father died, and he had to look out for himself. He got employment on a farm at eleven dollars a month the first year, and fourteen dollars a month the second year. In 1836, he got a job in a paper mill at four dollars per week. The next year he was paid the same, and eight cents an hour for overwork, and twelve hours was a day's work. In 1837, he went on the road selling books and paper for the Springfield Paper Mill Company. In 1839, he bid good-bye to his rock-ribbed native state, and started for the Mississippi Valley. He spent the Winter of that year in Saint Charles County, Missouri, on a farm, at fifteen dollars per month.

March Eighth, 1840, he arrived at Keosauqua, and soon after went to Fairfield, where he resided until 1844, when, in April, he came to Polk County. The whole country hereabouts was then under military control. He obtained a permit from Captain Allen, commanding officer of Fort Des Moines, to make a land claim and cultivate it, provided he would build a bridge over the creek now called Camp Creek, an important thing, as it was on the direct trail from Keokuk and Iowa City to Fort Des Moines, and, in the Spring and Fall, the stream was nearly impassable.

Near the creek and a grove of wild Crab Apple trees (now Apple Grove), he erected, with his own hands, a double log cabin of green timber, with a puncheon floor (split logs with the flat side up), and "pole" bedsteads, and there, with his wife and two small

children, no cabin nearer than Marengo eastward, Red Rock, in Marion County, southward, and "The Fort," twelve miles westward, he began his work of civilization, and laid the foundation of his later popularity and usefulness. It necessitated pluck and hard work. Trials and hardships were abundant. For nearly five months his wife did not see the face of a white woman.

As time went on, his cabin became the favorite stopping-place of travelers and immigrants. The latch-string was always out; his heart was as open as his cabin doors. Although he brought with him a good supply of provisions, the demands upon it made necessary frequent trips to Keokuk and Fairfield for corn meal and bacon, often over bad roads in inclement weather, and requiring many days' absence from home.

The demand upon his hospitality so increased that he was forced to make his cabin a tavern, for travelers would stop there, tavern or no tavern, and he was too kind-hearted to turn them away. Hungry, weary, and unsatisfied with stops made farther east, they would cheer up as they plodded on with: "Wait till we get to Tom Mitchell's, then we'll be all right." A good, square meal of bacon, corn bread and milk for twenty-five cents was sure. If the newcomer was poor, it was all the same, he was as welcome as those who paid, and was sent off with a hearty handshake and blessing. A prominent business man of this city, probably remembers one day in the early Forties, when, as a young man, late at night he reached "Uncle Tommy's" tavern, tired and hungry after a hard day's tramp, with but ten cents in his pocket, enough to pay for lodging only. He went to bed supperless. The next morning he arose, paid for his lodging, and was about to depart, when he was asked if he would not have breakfast. The aroma from the cooking in the kitchen was a sore aggravation, but he declined. "Uncle Tommy" suspected the real cause of his abstinence, and questioned him. Taking him by the hand, he told him to wait and get a good breakfast—just as welcome as though he had money to pay for it. He took breakfast, came to "The Fort," served several years as clerk in a store, and then went into business for himself.

Judge Casady says he took his first meal in Polk County in "Uncle Tommy's" cabin, after a long, weary day's journey, and it was one of the most satisfying he ever ate.

In the Spring of 1847, "Uncle Tommy" moved his cabin to the north end of Apple Grove, and, as the mail passed his place, it was made a post-office, and he the postmaster.

With logs and his own hands, he built the first school-house in what is now Beaver Township (then a part of Camp). He employed a teacher, paying her three dollars a week from his own pocket.

Very soon after the military abandoned "The Fort," it became apparent that organization for good government, good roads, and management of other local affairs was necessary. Under the Territorial government, counties were first organized along the Mississippi River. As other counties were formed, they were attached to the older counties for judicial and election purposes, until they were able to take care of themselves. Thus, Louisa, Washington, and Mahaska were attached to older eastern counties, but with Polk it was different. It had been so largely settled and well governed by the Claim Club, it was able to maintain a separate municipal government. There was no nearby county to which it could be attached, and it was given an independent existence without probation. It was *sui generis* in that respect. To give prestige to its importance, it was given jurisdiction over all territory in the state north and west of it, and the several counties subsequently carved out of it were attached to Polk until they could go alone.

In January, 1846, the Legislature organized Polk County, fixed its boundaries, selected Commissioners to locate its county-seat, provided for an election to elect county officers, and apportioned it into election precincts, but without clearly defined boundaries. Camp Precinct, in which "Uncle Tommy" lived, embraced nearly all the southeast part of the county, or what is now Camp, Beaver, and Four Mile townships. "Uncle Tommy's" house was the polling place. There was no registration, no challengers. The voter rode across the country, cast his ballot in "Uncle Tommy's" hat, and went his way.

Daniel Trullinger, who lives on Morton Street, says he first saw the site of Des Moines, June Twenty-Eighth, 1843; made the brick used in the foundations and chimneys of the garrison buildings; worked through the Summer for one dollar a day, and went away;

came back in 1846, arrived at "Uncle Tommy's" just in time to vote, which he did within fifteen minutes after arrival. Forty-two votes were cast at that precinct. "Uncle Tommy" was elected the first Sheriff of the county, to serve until the next election, in August, when he was reelected.

At the April election, the candidates for County Surveyor were A. D. Jones, a wide-awake, shrewd fellow, who had been at "The Fort" less than five weeks, and a man named Woodward, who, it is said, represented the country. Jones spent the entire day at "Uncle Tommy's" place, working for himself, but didn't get a vote. Woodward received a majority of the total votes cast, but, by a system of mathematics not uncommon in those days, he was counted out, and the place given to Jones. The entire vote of the county was one hundred seventy-five.

The next day after the election, the District Court for the first time convened in room Twenty-Six, in one of the log buildings which was being used for a public school, the teacher, a Miss Davis, having to vacate for the court. On opening court, "Uncle Tommy" was ordered to hunt up twenty-three good men for the Grand Jury. Catching them on the run, with no time for toilet making, the next day he brought them into court, "Uncle Jerry" Church being coat-less, for which he explained to the court that the Sheriff was in too big a hurry to allow "dressing up."

The jury was charged by the court, whereupon they went down to 'Coon River, sat on some logs, discussed the generality of things in general for an hour, decided there was nothing doing for the court, made due report of their finding, which was accepted, and they were discharged. The court then adjourned to September.

At the September term, "Uncle Tommy" captured his first prisoner, an indicted man, who had escaped from a Missouri jail. A mob gathered to rescue him, but "Uncle Tommy" and his deputy, "Pete" Myers, eluded them, and the next day delivered him to Missouri officers, who were on his trail.

Immediately after the passage of the Act organizing the county and creating a Commission to locate the county-seat, public sentiment was aroused respecting the location. Speculation relative thereto had been rife for some time—even prior to the legislative

enactment. Jeremiah Church, or "Uncle Jerry," as everybody called him, laid out a town, two miles down the river on the west bank, and named it Dudley. He established a rope ferry over the river, to draw travel that way, and with great expectations, waited the coming of the locating commissioners.

Doctor T. K. Brooks, who had purchased the land occupied as the trading post, and William Lamb, who owned a farm adjoining, where the packing-houses and starch works are now, laid out Brooklyn, a town of magnificent distances, and picturesque attractiveness. Another town on the river, below Dudley, was named Jericho, with a vigorous horn-blower on its walls.

There were others, and all rivals of "The Fort." The Legislature being in session, they sent a strong lobby to secure the county-seat elsewhere than at "The Fort" certain, and at Brooklyn if possible. The principal objection to "The Fort" was that it was not central enough—too far north and west. The delay and procrastination of the locating commissioners intensified the struggle of the lobbyists. Judge Casady was the Senator from this district, and being a resident of "The Fort," he kept close tab on the Brooklynites, who, failing to make much progress, came home, and "Uncle Tommy" decided to have a hand in the game.

One very cold morning in February, he and Doctor Fagen started on horseback for Iowa City, over the bleak, desolate prairie, one hundred and twenty miles away, without fee or hope of reward. They made their first night's halt at Bennett's cabin, about four miles east of what is now Newton, nearly frozen, jaded and hungry. Refreshed with corn bread, bacon and sleep, they went on. Arriving at the Capital, they joined Casady in a scheme to fix up the geography, and in a few days secured an amendment to the Act of January Seventeenth, by which a tier of townships was set off from the east side of Polk County to Jasper County, and a tier of townships from Warren County added on the south side of Polk.

In the deal they unwittingly "foozled" the congressional district boundaries, causing considerable political strife until 1853, when the townships were restored to their original position, with which Doctor A. Y. Hull figured conspicuously. But that is another story.

Having laid the foundation for the settlement of the county-seat question, "Uncle Tommy" came to "The Fort," and, to personally identify himself therewith, during the Summer built a cabin of hewn logs, between Market and Elm near Fifth, which stood as a landmark, notably from the three large Poplar trees near it, until 1880, when it was torn down to give room for the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad depot.

Immediately after the State was organized, it became apparent that the Capital must be removed farther west. Fort Des Moines was rapidly coming into public notice. Bills were before each succeeding Legislature to secure a re-location, but the conflicting interests of rival localities caused defeat, and it was not until 1855 that it was located, and then not at Fort Des Moines, but "within two miles of the junction of the Des Moines and Raccoon rivers," for the putting of "Fort Des Moines" in a legislative Act in those days was like shaking a red rag at a bull—a signal for a fight.

During all those years of dilatory contest, "Uncle Tommy" was an active participant for Des Moines.

When the county was first organized, it was politically Democratic. "The Fort" was the political center. Barlow Granger, Judge Casady, and R. L. Tidrick controlled political affairs. Barlow was the Grand Sachem. His office was the seat of power, and special care was taken that no Whig got a place. Sometimes citizens would make an effort to elect a Whig, who was eminently qualified, deservedly popular, on purely personal grounds, and succeed in getting a majority on the face of the returns, but Barlow usually had a card up his sleeve to play, which won the game. Polk County embraced a large territory "for election purposes," and a poll list from some far-off, forgotten precincts would come straggling in, actually without seal or the signature of election officers, even after the elected Whig had received his commission, and the Democrat was counted in, but nobody got mad about it. The emoluments of office then were not worth a vigorous contention.

In 1848, however, the Whigs put up a game to win. It was the election of President and Congressmen. The congressional candidates were Daniel F. Miller, of Keokuk, and William Thompson, of Henry County. Kaneshville (now Council Bluffs) had been

made a voting precinct. The Mormons, who had been driven from Nauvoo, had made a settlement at and near Kaneshville. To get their vote was the problem. It was quite evident they held the balance of power. The Democrats got at work quick with every possible device. The Mormons were poor; money would talk. Monroe County Democrats sent John Webb there, and it was soon given out that he had the Mormons "fixed." The Whigs learned their scheme, and W. H. Seevers (later Judge of the Supreme Court) sent a special messenger to "Uncle Tommy" with a big purse and notice that, "The Democrats are buying the Mormons like hogs, at so much per head. We must outbid them." "Uncle Tommy" had a scheme. The control of the Mormons lay with the leaders of the Church. In July, 1845, when on their pilgrimage from Nauvoo, three hundred of them, leaders included, halted for a rest of several days at his tavern, weary and hungry. They pitched their tents and raised their banners. "Uncle Tommy," as host, distinguished himself by his kindness and hospitality, and sent them on their way rejoicing.

Taking the purse from Seevers' messenger, he added half a hundred dollars to it, called up his deputy sheriff, "Pete" Myers, who was no slouch in politics, gave him a fast horse, and told him to go to "The Fort," get more money, and then go to Kaneshville, "without stopping." With the money raised, a newspaper office was purchased and presented to Orson Hyde, the church leader, and *The Guardian* was at once issued, as the "Protector of the Rights of the People"—first the Mormons, second the Whigs.

Immediately after the election it was rumored that the Mormons had voted solid for Miller. Albia had been selected as the place to count the votes, and Judge Jonathan C. Hall, of Burlington, to watch the count for the Democrats. The poll books were in custody of one Pickett, a Mormon. Kaneshville, though a voting precinct, had not been attached to an organized county. "Pete" Myers, Doctor Brooks, and Charley Van got their heads together for protective purposes. They decided that, to make the Kaneshville vote legal, Pickett, on his arrival here, *en route* to Albia, should be made a public officer, and sworn in as the organizing sheriff of Pottawattamie, such county then being only in embryo.

Barlow and his coadjutors got onto the scheme, and suggested to Wallace, the County Clerk, a radical Democrat, that he resign, which he did instanter. When Pickett arrived there was no County Clerk to install him as organizing sheriff. "Pete" and Charley put the screws to Lewis Whitten, Deputy Clerk, and "persuaded" him to do it. Pickett then went to Albia and delivered the poll list to Dudley C. Barbour, County Clerk, who had heard of the Whig newspaper scheme. He threw them on the table, and requested Pickett to go back and sit down awhile, as he was busy and not ready to receive the lists. A crowd was present, there was also confusion, politics and whiskey. Judge Hall came in later, approached Pickett, chatted with him a few moments, and asked for the poll list of Kaneshville, but it was missing—couldn't be found. As the poll list had not been officially received, the canvass went on; Thompson was declared elected, was given the commission, and took his seat. The Whigs were wild with rage, and Miller at once made a formal contest for the seat before Congress. A committee, after investigation, reported that Miller was entitled to the seat, to which Thompson demurred, on the ground that a majority of the Mormon vote was illegal, aliens, etc. He asked, and was granted, ninety days to get proof thereof. Depositions were taken before Judge Charles Mason, ex-Judge of the Supreme Court, a just and upright man. On one occasion, Miller raised a question of jurisdiction in the case, when Mason quickly drew a lot of papers from his pocket to verify his position, and out of them tumbled the missing poll list. Explanation was made, the Judge declaring he received them honestly, but how he was not at liberty to say. Judge Hall was then put on oath, and said that when he arrived at Burlington he found the poll list in his saddle-bags; how they got there he knew not. He delivered them to Thompson.

The contest was continued to April, 1850, when a congressional commission, sitting at Kaneshville, found every vote cast for Miller was legal. Thompson was ousted. Miller then ran again, and was re-elected.

Orson Hyde and Almon W. Babbitt, of Illinois, known as the fighting Mormon Congressman, were summoned before Brigham Young, at Salt Lake City. Both were vigorously denounced by

Young for their political pranks. Hyde was dismissed from the Church; Babbitt snapped his fingers at Brigham and went his way.

In 1849, when Barlow started his hebdomadal *Star*, "Uncle Tommy" paid him the first dollar in money received on subscription.

In 1852, the Polk County Agricultural Society held its second Fair on the District grounds at Horseshoe Lake, on 'Coon bottoms; the first was held in the court-house yard. "Uncle Tommy" was a Director of the Society, and, with a Mr. Bennett, exhibited seventeen fine Durham cattle, the first brought into the county. He was also elected one of the managers of the state Society when it was organized in 1853.

The same year, he and Isaac Cooper were appointed executors of the first will filed in the county—that of John L. Frederick, an early settler. The will fixed their pay at one dollar and fifty cents per day.

In 1854, came one of the most exciting political contests ever had in the county. The Democrats had nominated Judge Curtis Bates, successor of Barlow as editor of the *Star*, for Governor, and the Whigs had nominated James W. Grimes, of Burlington. The presidential election the previous year had shown that Polk County was close—that thirteen votes would defeat the Democrats. Where to get them was the question. Local pride, and the prestige given Des Moines and the county in the nomination of Bates, was an important factor which Barlow and his coterie did not fail to pound into the ears of susceptible Whigs—Democrats didn't need it. As election day approached, the Whigs were in despair. "Uncle Tommy" and Granville Holland put their heads together one day, and decided that something must be done. This is what was done: They went all over the county, bought all the hogs they could find, paying one and one-half cents per pound—a high price then—hired sixteen good Democrats to drive them to Ottumwa, the nearest market, starting them so as to arrive at their destination the day before election. "Uncle Tommy" and Granville went down with a team, sold the hogs on their arrival, gave the team to the sixteen drivers, mounted two fleet horses, arrived home in time to put in good work at the polls and vote. The drivers did not get

home until the day after election. The county record shows the vote was: Grimes, four hundred fifty; Bates, four hundred fifty, and the Democrats for the first time were defeated.

In 1856, the Slack Water Navigation [Obstruction] Company, having sold its half-constructed dams, old scows, and other junk, to the state of Iowa, and gone out of business, and the State having entered into an agreement with the Keokuk, Fort Des Moines and Minnesota Railway Company (now the Valley road), by which it was to take the river land grant and complete the road, the Legislature appointed "Uncle Tommy," W. W. Belknap (later Secretary of War), and C. C. Carpenter (later Governor), a commission to transfer to the railroad company the franchises, rights, and privileges of the defunct Navigation Company, which was done with most distinguished consideration.

In 1858, "Uncle Tommy" was elected Representative in the Legislature, at its first session in Des Moines, and he secured the passage of a law to take out the crooks and curves in that holy terror to farmers and teamsters, in the Spring and Fall, the tortuous Skunk River, by which a large area of land was reclaimed.

In 1859, he was elected a member of the Board of County Supervisors, and held that office six years.

In 1867, he laid out the town of Mitchellville, became a resident thereof, founded and built a seminary, which for many years was a flourishing school, but, becoming overshadowed by the schools at Des Moines, went down, was sold to the State, and transformed into the present Industrial School for Girls. He also helped to organize the Universalist Church, and erected a meeting-house, in which the present engineer of our Weather Bureau Service, Professor Sage, was the preacher.

In 1868, at the organization of the Old Settlers' Association, he was a prominent factor, and was elected President.

In 1874, he was elected State Senator, reelected in 1876, and was one of the most efficient members of that body in support of all efforts to improve the educational and moral interests of the people generally, the county and Des Moines especially, for he was always deemed a component part of the Capital City he had so diligently labored to establish and promote.

Politically, he was a Whig, and an Abolitionist from birth. During the notable Free Soil fight in Kansas, his cabin was a well-known station on the "Underground Railroad" for negroes escaping to Canada. He was a humanitarian, a lover of good government, the church, and the school; public-spirited, of genial, sunny nature, beloved by everybody. His later years were passed in quietude until July Fifteenth, 1894, when he passed over to "the other shore," one of God's noblemen.

Religiously, he was a devoted Universalist, but his humanitarian spirit embraced all creeds. He loved a Methodist or Presbyterian as fervently as a Universalist. He gave largely and cheerfully to churches of all denominations, for, like Abou Ben Adhem, he loved his fellow-man.

Socially, his whole life was a benefaction to the county and the state. He made everybody about him, wherever he was, happier and better. The darkest night, the most tempestuous storm, the most piercing cold, could not prevent him serving his friends, and they were numberless, for he touched human life in Polk County in all its phases. For half a century his counsel was sought by leading men in the state in matters of public import, so widely known was his probity and honor. He was once wealthy, but he built and equipped school-houses, employed teachers, built churches, gave to good objects large sums—in fact, his whole life was a charity to do good. Through an unfortunate investment, he lost heavily, and died poor in worldly effects, but the richest man whose name is on the death-roll of the county or state—rich in true riches, an unsullied name, and possessing the reverence and affection of the people with whom he had lived.

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