



CHARLES GOOD

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A notable character among the pioneers was Charles Good, or "Uncle Charley," as those who knew him best called him. He was one of the most widely known men in Polk County, and the least known, his eccentricities giving him great publicity, quite contrary to every element of his nature.

He was born on a farm in Coshocton County, Ohio, November Twenty-eighth, 1803. His parents were very, very poor. The suffering and deprivation enforced by poverty during his childhood days made a deep impression upon him, and early he resolved to place himself beyond its reach if industry, firmness of purpose, and good health could accomplish it.

When sixteen years old, he learned the trade of blacksmith, and worked fifteen years at the anvil and forge. He removed to Logan, Ohio, where he built the first brick building in the town. It was two stories high. On the lower floor, he kept a general store. The upper floor was used for a schoolroom.

In 1847, he concluded the Western country afforded a better opportunity for business, and starting overland in a buggy with a man named Jewett, he came, by the way of Burlington, to Fort Des Moines, and spent some time prospecting for a permanent location. He visited Monroe City, the "future Capital of the state," which the Legislative Commission of Quakers had located in Jasper County, where he found a splendid array of stakes set for lots, streets, boulevards, parks, etc., but no water within three miles, and the nearest house of a settler six miles away. He did not think it a good place for investment. He finally decided to cast his lot at The Fort, though it was but a mere hamlet, with little to attract a stranger.

While he was thus prospecting, his wife sickened and died. There were no railroads nor telegraphs, the mails were slow and far between, preventing

communication with him, and he knew nothing of his loss until he arrived at Portsmouth, near his home, and found she had been buried out of his sight.

In 1849, he married again, and with his family and spring wagon, drawn by two horses, he came back to The Fort, took a log cabin at the corner of Second and Elm streets, and started in the grocery and drug business, the grocery being on the same lot with his cabin. Later, he started a bakery on Second, just north of Market. Among his special customers were the Indians. They came into the store one at a time, Indian fashion. The first one would make his purchase, go out and tip another, who would follow and repeat the process. Thus they kept it up until the very last one filed in and out. Some of them were pretty good judges of pastry. They were always orderly and quite friendly. It was a novelty with "Uncle Charley," yet they were Indians, all the same, and a little uncertain.

Later, he built a two-story building on Second Street between Vine and Market. The lower floor was used as a merchandise and drug store; the upper floor for religious meetings.

I don't think he was ever suspected by anybody of being very worldly-minded, given to fashion, or faddish, but while he was selling drugs, a hair-dye agent came along one day, and, after exploiting its superior virtues, he stimulated "Uncle Charley's" vanity a little, by caressing that patriarchal beard, familiar to old-timers, and suggesting that as it was getting a little gray around the edges, it would look much better if dyed with his incomparable, non-tellable preparation, and restored to its original color. "Uncle Charley" yielded to his persuasiveness, and the whiskers were duly doped.

It so happened that a few days after, he started for Dayton, Ohio, to attend a very important meeting of his church people, who were very plain, zealous, religious folk. When he got there, his whiskers had changed to a sky-blue. A faithful brother church member, seeing them, reproached him rather sharply for showing such evidence of pride and vanity. So chagrined and mortified was "Charley," he whetted up his pocket knife—he had no use for a razor—and cut them off clean. No agent ever had a chance to say "hair dye" to him again.

Considering the time, he possessed a good knowledge of drugs and medicines, was well read in the United States Pharmacopoeia and United States Dispensatory. He had a private book of formulae, originated by himself, from which he compounded and sold a liniment and cholera cure for many years. There was a big demand for cholera cure in the early Fifties all over the West. I remember going one day with my uncle, a physician, in Michigan, to see some cholera patients in the country. Of nearly a dozen he had visited the day before, he found all but one or two had died since he left them. The streets in Chicago were crowded with carts carrying away the dead.

In 1855, a law went into effect prohibiting the sale of spirituous liquors, except by an agent appointed for the entire county, by the County Judge, and then sold only for medical, mechanical, and sacramental purposes. Doctor D. V. Cole was appointed the agent for Polk County. Officers were detailed to enforce the law. Several seizures were made. One day, officers swooped down on a room north of "Charley's" drug store, where they found forty barrels of high wines, which he had just purchased in Cincinnati for a vinegar company, to be made into vinegar.

The barrels were rolled down on 'Coon Bottoms, and set up on end in an imposing row. A large crowd quickly gathered to see what was up. Brandt, whose "front" name is Isaac, the well-known apostle of Father Matthew, and a Big Sachem of the Good Templars, happened to be at Perkins' store, next door to Good's, doing some trading, and he joined in to witness the onslaught. When the officer's sledge smashed in the head of a barrel, the spirits flew in all directions, and Isaac got his share of it. When it was all over, Isaac went home, and one of his little tots climbed into his lap to greet him, but soon, with a sniff or two, backed off, and said: "Papa, where have you been; I smell something like whiskey."

The seizure was the talk of the town, and troubled Good considerably, as the contraband stuff was found on his premises, though it was not his. On the records of the County Judge is an entry that, "James Stanton, Constable, be allowed seventeen dollars and thirty-five cents for prosecuting, draying,

stowing, handling, beheading, and burning forty barrels of red-eye belonging to the Des Moines, Polk County, Vinegar Association."

Good was one of the most optimistic men in Des Moines respecting its growth and prosperity. He firmly believed—and often said—that it had more real merit, and natural resources, than any other town in the Middle West, but he was often greatly displeased with the unbusiness-like, disjointed system of its municipal government. He verified his faith by early investments in town lots, timber and farm land. He purchased the block on what is now Grand Avenue, from Second to the river, and on Second, built a two-story residence for a home, where he resided during his life. His wife deceased in 1863, and it was lovingly cared for, for twenty-three years by his youngest daughter, now the wife of Doctor C. Nysewander.

Subsequently, he purchased the old German Methodist Church building, on Locust Street, moved it to the corner of Second Street and Grand Avenue, repaired and fitted it up for a Mission Sunday School and other religious purposes.

On the eastern portion of the block, near the river, he planted an orchard, in which were apples, grapes, pears, peaches, plums, cherries, crab trees and berries, an overweaning temptation to the "small boy," and a source of trouble to "Charley."

About two years ago, the old home and the Mission School lots were sold to J. S. Polk, and will be the site of the new splendid passenger station of the Interurban Railway.

In May, 1850, he made the contract for thirty-one acres on University Avenue, between Fourteenth and Seventeenth, of Benjamin Saylor, for which he traded the two horses and wagon which had brought him from Ohio. The wagon was pretty wobbly and weak in spots, and one horse was so short-necked he had to get on his knees to drink from a brook. The land was bought for timber purposes, it being deemed too far away for residences. Later, he planted one-half of the tract in fruit trees and grapes. There are several "middle-aged boys" in Des Moines to-day who could certify to the quality of the grapes they "swiped" when "Uncle Charley" was not around. Said one of them, a few days ago: "I pulled some of the largest and

finest bunches of grapes I ever saw out of that vineyard. The temptation was too much for a boy, with his usual appetite. I knew very well 'Charley' would have given me all I wanted by asking, but that is not the boy's way of doing, generally." One-half of the tract is now owned by the Park Board. The east half is divided into residence lots as "Northwestern Heights."

In 1853, Good purchased the block which now bears his name at Fifth and Walnut. When the Des Moines Improvement and Navigation Company was engaged in obstructing the river beyond all hope of navigation, Colonel George Gillaspy, Treasurer of the company, frequently visited Fort Des Moines, the head of navigation, and Judge Casady persuaded him to make an investment in the growing town. November Twenty-fourth, 1849, Obadiah Higbee purchased from the County Commissioners Lots Four and Five, in Block Thirteen, at the corner of Fifth and Walnut, for forty-five dollars. In July, 1851, Gillaspy purchased the lots for one hundred and fifty dollars, remarking that possibly he could sell or give them away some time. All west of Eighth Street was fenced in with rail fences and planted with corn. October Fifteenth, 1853, Gillaspy sold them to Jenkins W. Morris for five hundred dollars, and November Fourth, following, Morris sold them for six hundred and fifty dollars to Good, who bought them for an investment, pending the growth of the town. In 1881, he erected the block bearing his name, now valued, I understand, at four hundred thousand dollars.

When the Original Town was platted, all lots ran east and west, and fronted on the streets running north and south, except those on Court Avenue. The lots were 66 x 132 feet, two lots making a quarter block, or 132 x 132 feet.

All Good's investments proved highly remunerative, and he became quite wealthy.

A marked trait of his character was his deep religious conviction. While he read many other books, he read the Bible whenever opportunity offered, and committed much of it to memory. Several well marked and worn Bibles now in possession of his children evidence their use by him. It was his custom to write references and his thoughts thereon. Thousands of pages

of such writing were found among his papers. He preached occasionally (sic) at different points in Polk and adjoining counties, also in southwestern Iowa, Ohio and other states. Every four weeks, he held religious service in his Second Street home, lodged and fed those who attended from abroad, until he purchased and fitted up the old German Church building. He espoused the faith and doctrines of the Brethren in Christ, and so zealous was he, he once went with his wife in a carriage to Dayton, Ohio, so that they might join that church, there being none of the faith in the West. Here he perfected a church organization, and after his death, his old home on Second Street was sold and three thousand dollars given to the church. Another lot has been purchased on Ninth Street, and preparations are being made to erect a new building.

While many thought him close in dealing, and somewhat penurious, he gave many thousand dollars for church and charitable uses, and always with the strict injunction to say nothing about it—to “keep it dark.”

He was passionately fond of children. He could not see them in want or suffering. When the Mormons were going through Des Moines, hauling their household goods in push-carts, accompanied with their hungry children, whose bare feet were bleeding from contact with the frozen ground, he gave them shoes and provisions from his store, remembering vividly his boyhood days when he had but a crust for a day, and the Sheriff carried away household goods and kitchen utensils his mother so much needed. Every Sunday, so long as he was able, he visited his Mission School and took presents to the children.

He was industrious, and greatly pleased when he was most busily engaged. He could do blacksmithing, carpentering, stone or brick laying, and was an enthusiastic fruit grower. He had great physical vigor and strength, at the age of seventy-eight assuming the task of building the Good Block. At one time, with little to do, when the foundation of his block was being put in, he laid some of the stone under the Rogg portion. Sometimes, if hired hands had little to do, he would have them move a pile of lumber or stone from a spot they had placed it the day before to another place, just to keep them at work and not lose their time and pay, which was only one of his eccentricities so much misunderstood.

In business affairs, he guided himself by the strictest moral principles, living by a law which permitted no compromise with honor. At times, it gave to his character a severity which led many to misjudge him.

Socially, he was genial and companionable with those who got on the warm side of him. He entertained many from far and near who came to the old home to see "Uncle Charley." He was not a member of any clubs or fraternal organizations.

Politically, he was an Abolitionist, but not a partisan. He voted for the best men of all parties. He was opposed to all wars, and, as a matter of religious belief, took no part in the Civil War.

He deceased March Twenty-seventh, 1898.

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