



GEORGE A. JEWETT

GEORGE A. JEWETT

An old settler who has had part in the development of Polk County and Des Moines in a quiet, yet none the less potential way, is George A. Jewett, a Hawkeye by birth.

Born in Red Rock, Marion County, September Ninth, 1847, of mixed ancestry (to be precise, three-eighths English, one-fourth Scotch, one-eighth Welsh, one-eight French, one-eighth Hollander)—he passed his first ten years on a farm, and attended the common school. A favorite camping-place of the Indians was near Red Rock, and George made himself chummy with the Indian boys. While they could beat him shooting with bows and arrows, and riding ponies bareback, he could beat them at marbles, but they soon taught him to become a very good arrow-shooter, and he does not believe he ever had more real enjoyment than he had with those children of the forest. Referring to the sources of amusement in his youth, a few days ago, he said his Uncle, Simpson Matthews, had a team of buffaloes with which he used to haul heavy loads from Keokuk.

Following the failure of the river improvement scheme, came the project, in 1857, for a railroad from Keokuk to Fort Des Moines, with its hopes and expectations intensified by the money panic and procrastination in building it. Great was the discomfiture of the Red Rockers when the road went to Pella, and left them out in the cold, it being so contrary to all custom.

In 1857, when George was ten years old, his mother removed to Pella, so that he and a brother could attend the University there. He entered the Primary Department, and later took a regular course. Dean A. N. Currier, who, for forty years, was one of the professors in the State University, was one of his teachers.

In 1861, when the Rebel shot fell on Fort Sumter, nearly the entire school enlisted in the army, Dean Currier going with his boys. George offered

himself, but was rejected because he was four years short of the age limit. His brother went through the war, and at the close mysteriously disappeared, and was never heard of afterward.

On his rejection from the army, George left the school and went to work on a farm, where he remained until 1865, when he went to a commercial college in Chicago for a six months' course in book-keeping, and in August, of that year came to Des Moines, walking from Pella, as Colonel Hooker charged ten cents a mile to ride in his coaches, George's purse being short on dimes. Arriving at the top of Capitol Hill, he looked westward over the landscape, as did Harrison Lyon, in 1852, and was so well pleased, he decided to make it his future home. He crossed Court Avenue bridge, paid an entrance to the West Side of one cent toll, and became a denizen.

His first movment (sic) was for a job as bookkeeper. After searching the town over for several days, and finding none, he footed it to Boonesville, where his uncle, Joseph M. Thrift, father of Adjutant General Thrift, resided. After carefully quizzing him a few days, his uncle advised him to go back to Des Moines and stick, and he walked back again. A few days later, he sauntered into the store of I. & J. Kuhn, when a man named Wolfe, an entire stranger, asked him if he wanted a job. George informed him that was just what he was very much in need of. As was the custom of the pioneers, to help one another, Wolfe gave him a letter of commendation to Brown, Beattie & Spofford, agricultural implement dealers at First and Court Avenue. He got the job at twenty dollars a month and board, and remained with the house eight years, the business having finally passed to William Dickerson, whose daughter, Jennie, became famous as an opera singer.

In April, 1872, he assisted Coryden E. Fuller, John A. Elliott, James Callanan, Samuel Merrill, John W. Ulm, James B. Heartwell, John M. Coggeshall, John M. Owens, M. T. Russell, C. C. Carpenter, Brown & Dudley, I. N. Thomas, and J. G. Weeks in organizing the Iowa Loan and Trust Company, with a limited capital of one million dollars, to make loans on real estate securities, with which he remained until he went into the lumber business. The company is still doing an extensive business, having, as shown by its last official report, deposits amounting to two million, five hundred and

fifty thousand, seven hundred and ninety-one dollars and forty-eight cents.

In 1873, George, as everybody called him, abandoned threshing machines, plows, and harrows, and became bookkeeper for H. F. Getchell & Sons, lumber dealers, at Eighth and Vine, where he served until 1879, when he formed a partnership with D. R. Ewing and Ed. S. Chandler, in the lumber business, at Sixth and Cherry, until 1881, when the Wabash Railroad Company wanted a station, and got possession of the lumber yard site under condemnation proceedings. The lumber company then purchased the block at Ninth and Grand, which, two years prior, had been offered the city for a park for ten thousand dollars, but the lumber company had to pay twenty thousand dollars for it. In 1906, George purchased all the interest of the Ewing Estate, Ewing having died, and organized the Jewett Lumber Company.

His life work thus far had been of a clerical or mercantile nature, but his dominant thought had always been toward mechanical industries. He wanted to do things, to see the wheels go round. In 1871, he organized the Des Moines Seale Company, with F. R. West, President; S. F. Spofford, Vice-President; Wesley Redhead, Treasurer, and himself Secretary. Its business was the manufacture of hay and stock scales, and did a good business, and, though it has passed through several changes, it is still in operation.

In 1888, he became interested in an invention for the application of a new principle in the construction of a typewriting machine, known as the "Duplex." He organized a company to manufacture it, and was made President. It was soon discovered that the keyboard of the "Duplex" was so unlike that of other machines with which users had become accustomed, the company devised another machine, and named it the "Jewett." It was well received, and took the highest award at the World's Fair in Chicago, and the first gold medal at the Paris Exposition, in 1900. During the past fifteen years, George has traveled over Europe in the interest of his machine, until there is not a civilized country on the face of the globe in which it is not in use, thus carrying the name of Des Moines to all parts of the world. As there is

but one Des Moines, there can be no question as to identification. The company has paid to labor in Des Moines over one million, five hundred thousand dollars.

Unfortunately, some time ago, Eastern capitalists, deeming it a good thing, began purchasing a controlling interest in the stock of the company, so as to remove the plant to their territory. For several years, George has been resisting their scheme, which has necessitated some litigation in the courts and retarded the growth of the company, but it is his aim yet to build a large factory in Des Moines.

Politically, he is a Republican. Before the War of the Rebellion, he was an Abolitionist, and as a driver, he once made two trips from the "station," at Nine-Mile House, between Pella and Oskaloosa, to a point near Monroe, on the "Underground Railroad," with runaway slaves going to Canada.

He never held any public office, except in 1866, Frank Palmer had him appointed a representative of the Smithsonian Institution, which then had charge of the weather service. Instruments were sent to him, and three times a day he took the state of the weather, which was printed every morning in the *Daily Register*, and every week he made his report to Washington. He was the pioneer of the Weather Bureau Service in Des Moines.

Socially, he is genial, courteous and of generous temperament. He has always been actively identified with the church and school life of the community. In 1878, he was one of the organizers of the Young Men's Christian Association, and was its first Secretary. Its meetings were held in the City Council chamber, in Sherman Block, at Third and Court Avenue.

He was an active participant in the founding of Drake University, in 1881, was elected one of the Trustees, and soon after Secretary of the Board, and holds both places yet. He has been a vigorous worker with General Drake, Carpenter, and Bell in the upbuilding of the institution.

He is a member of the Grant and Commercial clubs, but not of any fraternal organizations.

Religiously, he is a member of the Central Church of Christ. In 1866, he was elected Church Clerk; in 1881, Church Treasurer, and has held both

offices since those dates. In 1868, he was chosen Deacon, and in 1887 an Elder.

In 1887, he started a Mission Sunday School on the East Side, which culminated in the erection of a chapel at Twelfth and Des Moines streets. The same year, he, with the Reverend Doctor Breeden, founded the *Christian Worker*, a monthly paper devoted to the interests of the Christian churches of the city. Upon the departure of Doctor Breeden from the city, the Reverend Finis Idleman, his pastoral successor, has assumed the editorial chair of the paper.

September Fifteenth, 1907.

Transcribed from:
PIONEERS OF POLK COUNTY, IOWA AND REMINISCENCES OF EARLY DAYS
by L. F. Andrews
Volume II
Des Moines
Baker-Trisler Company
1908