



GEORGE SNEER

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Polk County was generally the objective point of pioneers to make a home in a new country and improve their condition. Some, however, came from the force of circumstances, and of such was George Sneer, a very prominent personality in the early days of the city.

He was born in Washington County, Maryland, May Third, 1835, of German parents, who wrote their name Schnerer, in accordance with German nomenclature. His father died before his birth, and when he was two years old, his mother married Doctor F. C. Grimmel, a German physician.

In 1839, the Doctor moved to Taylorville, Ohio; in 1840, to Lancaster; in 1843, to Chapel Hill, Perry County, and in August, 1846, to Raccoon Forks, traveling with teams, camping out at night, and arriving about ten o'clock at night, October Fifteenth. There was not a place in the little hamlet to get shelter, and the night was passed in camp. The next day, shelter was found in the Guard House of the garrison, and there the Winter was passed, the windows being decorated with iron bars.

The Doctor at once made claims for a large area of land lying north of what is now Grand Avenue and west of Fourth Street to Ninth. George was then eleven years old, eight years of which had been passed in three different Ohio settlements, with little or no opportunity to attend school. On arrival here, he went to work on a farm, and it was not until 1850, when fifteen years old, that he began to acquire an education, by attending the first public school in Des Moines, with Charles L. Anderson as teacher, and later under the excellent tutelage of Judge J. P. Casady, Judge Byron Rice, and Elder J. A. Nash. He cared little for the usual sports of youthful days; was inclined to the more practical side of life. He was a close observer of men and things. One of his first and most impressive astonishers was the

big snow in the Winter of 1848, which is remembered distinctly by every pioneer of Polk County. It began to snow early in November, and continued until December Twenty-fourth. The average depth of snow was three feet until February. In the meantime, there were frequent driving storms, rendering it impossible for settlers to get from one place to another without danger of getting lost or freezing to death. There were but few settlers in the county, so there were no beaten paths or tracks. That was the first and only instance in the county that the snow was so deep and cold so severe as to cause suffering and want generally in the country, the settlers being practically snowbound in their cabins all Winter.

Referring to the weather and peculiarities of the present Spring—which is being quite notably discussed as unprecedented—I am reminded of the record of the county from 1839 to 1870, a period of thirty-one years. It shows the latest appearance of frost ranged from April Fifth to May Twenty-sixth; its earliest appearance from September Second to October Twenty-third. An exception was the year 1863, when there was a frost each month in the year. During that year, the latest frost occurred August Twenty-fifth, the earliest, August Twenty-ninth. During those thirty-one years, the latest frost occurred twenty times in April, ten times in May, and once in August. The earliest frost occurred nine times in September, twenty-one times in October, and once in August. Except in 1863, no frost was recorded in the months of June, July, and August.

The Winter of 1856-1857 was an unusually severe one. A record kept by John F. A. H. Roberts, near Rising Sun, says:

January Fourteenth, mercury thirty-five degrees below zero.

January Seventeenth, mercury thirty-six degrees below zero.

February Tenth, mercury thirty degrees below zero.

April Eighteenth, mercury four degrees below zero.

Robins made their first appearance June Tenth.

Hundreds of immigrants who had come into the county in the Spring of 1856 were so disgusted with the climate, they pulled up and left the country.

In opposition to the snow is the rainfall. The largest rainfall in any one year since the county was organized was in 1851, when it was seventy-four

and forty one-hundredths inches. The least in 1854, when it was only twenty-three and thirty-five one-hundredths inches. The greatest rainfall in a given length of time was in August, 1851, when, between the hours of eleven o'clock p. m., of the Tenth, and three o'clock of the Eleventh, four hours, the fall was ten and seventy-one one-hundredths inches. The greatest snowfall was December Twenty-first, 1847, twenty and fifty one-hundredths inches. December Twenty-eighth, 1863, the snowfall in twelve hours was fifteen and ten one-hundredths inches.

The flood of 1851 washed away the west bank of Des Moines River from near the dam to the confluence with the 'Coon, thus throwing the channel westward, and causing the difficulty which it is now proposed to overcome by cutting a new Channel below "the forks."

In 1857, George purchased a farm in Valley Township, where he remained until 1860, when he returned to the city, and at once began doing things in the building and real estate line. Of nervous, sanguine temperament, with a sound mind and body, active, energetic, a good mixer, he at once became a prominent factor in public affairs.

In 1856, when the contest over the location of the State House was on, he was a radical West Sider, and subscribed one thousand dollars to the fund to secure its location on the West Side. When it was announced that the Commissioners had selected the East Side, George did not hesitate to declare, in loud English, that the Commissioners had been bribed, and he knew who got the swag, for he was a man who had the courage of his convictions, and expressed his opinions in plain, vigorous language.

In 1861, he was elected Alderman in the City Council, from the Third Ward; in 1869, City Clerk, and in 1870, Street Commissioner. In 1875, he was again elected Alderman, and took an active part in securing the grant of a charter to the Capital City Gas Company, in competition with the Des Moines Gas Company, which strenuously opposed the grant of the charter on the ground that the city had no authority to give it. After considerable litigation in the courts, the latter won, and the former being seriously embarrassed by the Allen bank failure, sold out to the latter.

George was re-elected in 1876, and served until 1878, and proved a serious obstacle to the multifarious schemes of Michael Drady and Mike McTighe, who hunted in couples, and run the First and Second wards for nearly a score of years.

In 1878, he was elected Mayor, and served two years. During his service, began important city improvements. There were no pavements and no sewers. He was a strenuous advocate of reform; that the city do something to get out of the mud, its stolid indifference, and the bad reputation given it abroad. Its streets were nearly impassable, and flooded during wet seasons. It was a battle royal, but a beginning was made. Mr. Chesbrough, a noted expert engineer, was brought here from Chicago to provide plans for paving and sewerage. His plans were elaborate, but his estimate of cost staggered the property owners, especially those who were content to get rich by the rise in value of their holdings without any expense to themselves. To be touched by a special assessment according to the improvement made to their property was a distinction with a difference. But, after a vigorous contest, the City Council accepted the plans, and a sixty-inch brick sewer was built along First Street from Locust to 'Coon Point; then on Mulberry and Court Avenue. During 1879 and 1880, the streets were in a chaotic condition. So soon as the sewers were in place, paving began, and in June, 1882, Walnut Street was paved with cedar blocks, from the river to Ninth Street.

While Sneer was Mayor, another advance step was taken in municipal affairs. The facilities for crossing the rivers were grossly inadequate. More bridges were imperatively needed. What there was, were tolled, and a nuisance, against which there was constant rebellion. Those living in the city did not think it just to be taxed to build and maintain that which was for the benefit of the whole county. Therefore, a proposition was submitted to the people to levy one mill tax for eight years to raise a fund to build four bridges and make them free. It was defeated, but in 1878, was again submitted in a proposition to levy one mill tax for five years, and it was adopted, the vote being four thousand, five hundred and seven yeas, three thousand, one hundred and sixty nays. A committee was selected on behalf of the city and

county to appraise the value of the bridges at Walnut, Court Avenue, 'Coon Point, and Seventh Street, which fixed it at one hundred thousand, three hundred and forty-nine dollars and nineteen cents. It was accepted, the bridges were made free, and have so remained.

With these manifestations of public spirit, the city took on new life, made rapid strides, and the *Daily Register* claimed improvements for the year:

Six hundred and fifty-three residences built	\$ 975,555
Fifteen business blocks	340,000
Improvements and repairs	55,495
City streets, sewers, etc.	67,529
Total	<u>\$1,184,039</u>
Coal trade increase	1,000,000

In all this forward movement, Sneer was conspicuously active. He had the faculty of boosting in a notable manner, and he gave to it his time and energy. He was also a large property holder.

Politically, he was a Republican on general principles, but in local affairs a little dubious, yet, whatever his position therein, there was no mistaking it. He was plain of speech; sometimes deemed erratic and cranky; but in all things he strove for the growth and prosperity of his adopted home. In 1884, he supported Cleveland for President, and subsequently identified himself with the Independents.

Socially, he was inclined to good fellowship; cared nothing for clubs or society fads as they go, but he was a prominent and active member of the Masonic fraternity, having been raised to the Thirty-second Degree. He was a member of Capital Lodge, Corinthian Chapter, Royal Arch Masons; Temple Commandery, Knights of Pythias, and a past officer of all of them. He was also a member of Des Moines Lodge and Ebenezer Encampment of the Order of Odd Fellows, in both of which he passed all the chairs.

He deceased in 1891.

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