



ISAAC BRANDT

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Of those who have had something to do with the growth and prosperity of Des Moines is Brandt, known by the "generality of mankind in general" as Isaac. To accost him as "Mr." would be a breach of custom. He came here in the Winter of 1856, in one of the "jerkeys" of the Stage Company, and he now can show the receipt for seventeen dollars, dated January Thirtieth, paid for the jolts and bumps received *en route* from Iowa City. He was reconnoitering. After inspecting the town for a short time—it was not very encouraging, for there were no bridges over the rivers, the town was sparsely settled—he made a four days' walk to Council Bluffs—he was in a hurry to find a better place. His ardor weakened, and his walk back was made in five days. He decided to abide here. He went East for his family, to close up his business affairs, and returned in April, 1858. Houses were scarce, but after much quest, he found a small wooden shanty with two rooms, on Seventh Street, on the East Side, where he lived for a time. On seeking a spot for a permanent home, he found a lot at the northeast corner of Twelfth and Keokuk, now Grand Avenue, on which was heavy timber and several Wild Cherry trees in full bloom, near the present Capitol grounds, which pleased him, though unattractive for a home. The grounds were covered with dense timber and thicket, in which, the Fall previous, rabbits, quail, and pheasants were shot, and a few rods south on Twelfth Street was Walker's Lake—good for duck hunters in season—which is now Franklin Park. Keokuk Street was simply a trail through heavy timber. On the West Side, Sycamore Street ran up against "Charley" Good's orchard, which lay along the river. There Isaac felled the big trees, dug out the stumps, retained the cherry trees, built a house—there were none east of it—and named the spot "Cherry Place."

He at once went into mercantile business in a two-story brick at the corner of Fourth and Locust, where is now the Lakota House. It was built by Harry Griffith ahead of time, on what was a blackberry patch, and was called "Griffith's Folly." In the Spring of 1862, there was a flood, and the whole East Side was under water. Members of the Legislature were carried in boats from the West Side to the old Capitol. The steamboat *Little Morgan* came in one day, landing at 'Coon Point. Among her cargo were eight casks of glassware, fourteen cases of dry goods, two boxes of boots and shoes, one hundred barrels of salt, two hogsheads of sugar, and four crates of crockery consigned to Isaac. How to get them to his store was the problem, as teams could not be used, but the steamer solved it. She backed down stream a short distance and headed for the store, where she tied up and the goods were delivered directly (sic) into the south door.

Very soon after his arrival, Isaac became interested in educational affairs, and in 1858, at a mass meeting of citizens, he offered a resolution recommending the organization of the Independent School District of East Des Moines, which was adopted, and he was made one of the Directors.

He was a dyed-in-the-wool Abolitionist, and belonged to the original stock. He was a personal friend of John Brown, and during the exodus of negroes from Kansas and Missouri he was a Conductor on the "Underground Railroad," and his house was a regular station. Brown came here very early one morning, with four negroes, covered with cornstalks, in his wagon. After refreshments, and discussing the schedule of further stopping-places, they had a parting handshake over a small wooden gate at the back yard. Isaac still has the gate, and the colored people are waiting for him to die, so they can get it, for during life he will not part with it.

The migration of the negroes was attended with many difficulties, though the friends of Kansas Free State perfected plans deemed sufficient to get the "emigrants" safely to destination. George D. Woodin, of Indiana, was General Manager, with the late Judge Seevers, of Oskaloosa, and Lewis Todhunter, of Indianola, in the Central District.

There was here a very strong pro-slavery sentiment, in those days, as many of the early settlers came from slave-holding states. The country was

full of secret agents and slave-hunters, so that the utmost caution was necessary to get the "passengers" through this Division. They were packed in sacks, boxes, barrels, coffins, under loads of straw, or cornstalks, men in women's clothes, and women in men's clothes. There was little daylight travel. It was not uncommon that, secreted about "Uncle Jimmy" Jordan's place, near Valley Junction, could be found a number of "passengers," waiting for a clear track. Then they would come to Isaac's place, thence go to Reverend Demas Robinson's place on Four Mile Creek, thence to "Uncle Tommy" Mitchell's, thence to Grinnell, thence to Cedar County, the terminus of this Division. The old settlers here will probably remember one occasion when Brown came to Grinnell with eleven negroes, stopped over Sunday, and made a speech in the church, detailing the wrongs of Kansas. The *Statesman*, the Democratic paper here, came out with a sensational article, headed in big letters: "The John Brown Raid! Hell Broke Loose!!" in which Brown was depicted as a murderer, robber and horsethief.

Sometimes it was necessary for emigrants to be doubled back on their track to avoid detectives who were close on their trail, but none were ever caught and returned, for the doctrine was very early established that there was no property in slaves in Iowa, in the first case decided by the Supreme Court, that of "Ralph," on *habeas corpus*, in 1839. Ralph made an agreement with Montgomery, his master, in Missouri, by which he was to come to Dubuque and earn money and pay five hundred dollars for his freedom. He worked four years and earned the money, but concluded to keep it. His master then came after him, had him arrested and brought before a Justice of the Peace, charged with being a fugitive slave. The Justice was preparing to deliver him when he was estopped by a writ of *habeas corpus*, which brought the case before Chief Justice Mason of the Supreme Court, who held that it was not an escape, but an emigration by consent of the master; that Ralph owed the debt for his freedom as though it had been incurred for purchasing a horse, and ought to pay it, yet for non-payment, he could not be reduced to slavery as property in Iowa. "But," said the court, as a sort of placation, "if his master can get him back to Missouri without the aid of the

courts, the Iowa courts will not interfere.”

Despite this decision, slaves were held in Des Moines as late as 1845, without objection. Joseph Smart, who had a Fox squaw wife, was Indian Interpreter for Beach, the Indian Agent for the Government. He went to Missouri, bought two slave women, brought them here, and when he got through with them, took them back and sold them.

Isaac has always been a teetotaler, never having tasted alcoholic liquor, ale, wine or beer, nor tobacco. He early identified himself with the Order of Good Templars, which flourished extensively at one time, and in 1862, was elected Worthy Chief of the Grand Lodge of the state, and served five full terms.

In 1867, he was appointed Deputy State Treasurer, and served six years. In those days, the Legislature was very liberal with grafts. Members and newspaper reporters were supplied with newspapers, gold pens, and pocket knives.

Being largely engaged in the real estate business, Isaac, in 1870, became a “Granger,” and was made Master of Capital Grange, Number Five, Patrons of Husbandry.

In 1873, he was elected as Representative to the Legislature, known as the “dead lock” or anti-monopoly General Assembly. The House consisted of fifty Democrats, forty-five Republicans, and five “on the fence.” To elect a Speaker and organize the House required fifty-one votes. How to get them was the problem. The men “on the fence” held the balance of power, and must be reckoned with. Jake Rich, Chairman of the Republican State Committee, an astute politician of Dubuque—what he didn’t know about politics was not worth learning—and leading Republicans held a council to select a candidate for Speaker. John H. Gear, of Burlington, was selected by the Republicans. The Democrats selected J. W. Dixon, of Wapello County, as their candidate. The first ballot gave Gear fifty votes and Dixon fifty votes, to the great surprise of the Democrats, and the satisfaction of the Republicans. For ten days the balloting went on without change of a vote, when Gear received seventy-nine votes.

Isaac was highly commended for his management, and on making up the committees, he was made Chairman of that of Ways and Means, and Cities

and Towns, and a member of the committees on Compensation of Public Officers, and of Insurance. The session was a strenuous one from the start to finish. The Anti-Monops were out for reform, and retrenchment of salaries and expenses. The previous Legislature having ordered the erection of a new Capitol, and appropriated one hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars per year to build it, they denounced it as an extravagant waste of public money. I can still see—being daily on the spot—Lucien Quintellus Hoggatt, the spectral member of the House from Story County—shaking his long, bony fingers at the Republicans in protest against their contemplated “robbery of the farmers of their hard-earned dollars.”

Isaac kept quiet. It was not long before some of the reformers had axes to grind. Isaac ingratiated himself into their good graces by assisting them in all possible ways, and if any of their special bills came before his committees, they were invariably recommended for passage, and later, on the floor, he would favor them with his voice and vote. I also think he used the “grip” of Grange Number Five to some advantage. For his good offices, they pledged him their support when he needed it.

The opportunity came when he introduced his bill for an additional appropriation of two hundred thousand dollars to hasten the erection of the Capitol. It astounded the Anti-Monops, and Lucien Quintellus Hoggatt was inexpressibly indignant, but they were under obligations to Isaac that they could not honestly repudiate, and the bill passed by a vote of seventy-two to sixteen, twelve members dodged. The Senate cut it down to one hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars, and Isaac let it go at that.

Soon after the House was organized, Mr. Madden, the other Polk County member, introduced a bill to let the public printing to the lowest bidder by contract. Isaac was accused of being the author of it. Frank Mills was doing the public printing, and as it was a very fat job, there was a vigorous stirring up of the members over the bill. It went to the Committee on Printing, which reported adversely to it, but Isaac secured its placement on the calendar for a special day hearing, and when it was taken up, he disproved the accusation against him by getting the bill so amended as to fix the printing at ninety

per cent and the binding at eighty-five per cent of the cost then paid, and as amended it passed.

As Chairman of the Committee on Cities and Towns, Isaac engineered through the House a Senate bill authorizing cities and towns to improve alleys by contracts let to the lowest bidder, a measure which has proved to be of great benefit to Des Moines.

He also secured the passage of a bill requiring all lands when laid out in town lots to be free from all incumbrances before being platted, thus assuring the purchaser they were not plastered with judgment liens, mortgages, or delinquent taxes.

In 1877, he was elected City Alderman, in the Fifth Ward, and the West Siders—not so much as a mark of respect as fear of his influence and persuasive powers—got him elected President *pro tem* of the Council. They wanted to keep him “off the floor.”

In 1880, he was a candidate for Mayor, but he very soon ran up against Des Moines River. He was on the wrong side of it. The old river feud was still extant. The West Siders rose up against him, and he was defeated by Colonel W. H. Merritt, a Democrat, though he carried the East Side by a large majority.

In 1884, the Twentieth General Assembly appropriated fifty thousand dollars to purchase ground for the permanent location of the State Fair, this location to be given to the city donating a like amount for buildings and improving the grounds.

Instantly, there was a vigorous contest for the prize. Cedar Rapids was in it, with the most effusive declarations and promises, but Des Moines, with the prestige of six continuous successful Fairs, her central position, and the promise of the required donation, won the prize. The grounds were purchased, two hundred and sixty-six acres, at a cost of forty-six thousand and nine dollars and twenty-five cents. An effort was then made to raise the donation fund from the city, but it failed. Isaac, always ready to help the town, took hold of the proposition, and secured subscriptions to the amount of fifty-five thousand, six hundred and ninety-six dollars, of which he collected fifty-one thousand dollars and delivered it to the State Agricultural Society.

The permanent location of the Fair Grounds led to notable changes in the geography of the city and improvement of streets. Somewhat elated with his

success, Isaac was one day standing with some of his friends on the highest point on the grounds, which he called "Inspiration Point," and, looking westward at the splendid vista, he suggested the establishment of a boulevard one hundred feet wide, direct from the grounds to the city, to be called Grand Avenue, and soon after he secured the right of way for it, to the east end of Keokuk Street, at Eighteenth Street. From this point, Keokuk Street extended to the river; on the West Side it was Sycamore to Arch (now Fifteenth), thence Greenwood Avenue west to the city limits. Isaac then persuaded the City Council to change the names of these three streets to Grand Avenue, thus giving the city a beautiful street nine miles long through its center.

Were the present city dweller to read the names of the streets as given in the first City Directory, published (sic) in 1866, which I compiled, so great have been the changes, he would not know where he was at. In fact, there were then many families who did not know what street they lived on, so widely scattered were they.

In 1883, President Arthur appointed Isaac one of three commissioners to inspect two divisions of the Northern Pacific Railroad, and in 1890, President Harrison, in recognition of his long, active, influential service in the Republican party, appointed him Postmaster, and for four years he did good service.

Religiously, he is not a churchman. Though thoroughly instilled with all the tenets of the Westminster Catechism, by a good Presbyterian mother, and Biblical precepts by a rigid Dunkard father, he is tied to no sectarian creed. He believes in honesty, equity, justice, right-living, and giving every person a fair deal. He uses very mild "swear words" sometimes, for emphasis, in conversation.

And he has fads. He delights in gathering facts and incidents which make history, always accessible, and valuable to newspaper scorpions. He has sample copies of every national, state and county ticket of political parties from 1858 to date; the vote of each county and town election in Polk County from 1858 to date; the rules and regulations of each Legislature, with the name and postoffice address of each member, from 1858 to date. He formerly had three sample tickets that his father cast for William Henry Harrison for President, in 1840, but he gave one to Benjamin Harrison when

he was making his noted Presidential tour of the country, and his car was making a stop at the depot in Des Moines. He also has the record of the height and weight of his six "kids," taken on their birthdays, the girls from seven years to eighteen, the boys from seven to twenty-one years.

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