



JOSEPH B. STEWART

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Calling the roll of pioneers of Polk County, none would receive greater meed of praise and esteem than Joseph Bufton Stewart, who, for nearly half a century, was a prominent personage in the civic and social life of the community.

Born August Twelfth, 1821, near Saint Charles, Missouri, he passed the days of his boyhood with his parents, subject to the somewhat predatory life of his father, who was a surgeon in the United States Army, where he served many years. In 1805, when the United States acquired the Territory of Missouri, he was located at Saint Louis. He served in the War of 1812, and in 1814, while on his way to Prairie du Chien, was wounded by the Indians at Rock Island. He deceased in 1834.

In 1835, when fourteen years old, Joseph removed with his mother to Fort Madison, then in the county of Demoine, and being a part of Michigan Territory. The following year, the county of Lee was carved out of Demoine County, and what is now the State of Iowa was made a part of Wisconsin Territory. In 1838, the Territory of Iowa was carved out of Wisconsin, so that Joseph had the distinction of having lived in three territories and two counties without having changed his residence. When he went to Fort Madison it was in what was known as the Black Hawk Purchase, and contained more Indians than white people.

During his early manhood, Stewart engaged in pioneer farming, until 1846, when he engaged in mercantile pursuits. In 1851, he was running a warehouse on Des Moines River at Croton, when the State Board of Public Works was improving the river by a system of locks and dams, and who succeeded, after a miserable failure, in getting the most vigorous damning ever vouchsafed by an outraged people to public officials.

At Croton was one of the dams. The steamboat *Add. Hine*, bound up for

Fort Des Moines with a cargo consigned to B. F. Allen and Jonathan Lyon, who were running a general merchandise store on Second Street, arrived at the dam. The river was so low it could not get over the dam, and it was necessary to unload and put the cargo in storage until another rise in the river, for there were no railroads, a delay which involved much discomfort and want to the people at The Fort. Part of the freight was a large lot of wooden shoes consigned to the Hollander town of Pella, which was stored in a blacksmith shop. The next Spring, came the biggest flood ever known on the river. The shop and wooden shoes floated off to the Mississippi.

In 1853, Stewart was induced by friends and relatives of T. A. Walker, Receiver of the United States Land Office, to come to Fort Des Moines, as Chief Clerk in the Land Office. In May, 1854, on the resignation of R. L. Tidrick as Register of the office, Walker was appointed as his successor, and Judge P. M. Casady was appointed Receiver. Stewart was *defacto* Chief Clerk of Walker, but so implicit was Casady's trust in him, he made it a rule of the office that Stewart should receive and handle all the money which came into the office, whereas Walker was an active politician, and sometimes, on convivial occasions, "lost his bearings." All money received was gold and silver. The rush of land-seekers was so great that the daily receipts were often twenty-five thousand dollars, for which Casady was personally responsible, under heavy bonds, with no safes nor safety vaults as are made now, the office being in Exchange Block, at Third and Walnut. It was the custom, when the receipts reached twenty-five thousand dollars, to send it by special messenger and guards to the sub-treasury at Saint Louis, a trip fraught with weariness and danger, but not a dollar was ever lost by the Des Moines office. The hotels were crowded day and night by land-buyers and speculators, the latter doing a big business traveling over the country, making "selections" of unentered land, and then selling them at good figures to those who wanted to enter them at the Land Office, the buyer preferring to pay a good price rather than make the search. It developed, however, that sharpers were selling "selections" they had not made, and of which they knew nothing. Stewart, having familiarized himself with the field-notes, maps

and business of the Land Office, opened an office for selecting and entering land for settlers, who were willing to pay good fees for the exercise of his good judgment and honesty in selecting land for them. He also engaged largely in buying and selling real estate, and soon accumulated considerable wealth. He was optimistic, had firm faith the town would grow and become of some importance.

September Eighth, 1857, he laid out and platted three hundred and sixty acres on the East Side, northeast of Governor's Square, and made it an addition to the city, but the financial crash of that year caught him with a heavy indebtedness, yet he never faltered, and with good management until the coming of the flood-time of business, he canceled all his obligations and was the possessor of considerable wealth.

In February, 1858, when the Legislative Committee met to investigate the charges made by West Siders that the Commissioners who had located the State House in 1855 on the East Side had been bought with bribes of money and town lots given by East Siders, Stewart was called before the committee to show how Guy Wells, of Lee County, one of the locating commissioners, came in possession of certain lots on the East Side, near the State House grounds. The lots disclosed in his testimony could not now be got for several hundred thousand dollars. On being sworn, he testified as follows:

"Question.—Did you appear before the Mayor and Aldermen of Des Moines City some several months ago, to have a change made in the assessment of lots on the east side of the river that had been made to you?

"Answer.—I don't think I ever appeared before the Mayor and Aldermen when they were in session. I can say, however, that I requested one of the Aldermen—Tidrick, I think—and the Treasurer, to see if the change could not be made. My reason was, the land had been assessed by the acre in one tract to myself and others. Several undivided interests had been conveyed to other parties prior to that time, some perhaps a year before, and, as the tax amounted to about one thousand dollars, I desired to have the change made so that I could pay my part, and not pay for all the entire interest or assessment.

"Question.—Was Mr. Wells interested in any part of the property you had so assessed?

"Answer.—He was.

"Question.—To what extent was he interested?

"Answer.—To the extent of ten acres, from the Twentieth day of December, 1854, which was the date of the bond. It was not conveyed to him by deed till it was divided. It was conveyed since the first of September, 1857. He paid for it some time before—one-half on the Thirtieth of December, 1854, and the other half on the First of November following. The price he paid was thirty-five dollars an acre—a good price at that time.

"Question.—Where did that ten acres lay, in reference to the Capitol?

"Answer.—It was an undivided interest in what was known as Stewart's Addition.

"Question.—Was that land sold to Wells at the time of the passage of the Act for the removal of the Capital?

"Answer.—It was during that session of the Legislature. A verbal agreement was made before.

"Question.—How soon after that was Wells appointed one of the Commissioners?

"Answer.—I don't know exactly about the appointment.

"Question.—Was there any contingency in the verbal agreement?

"Answer.—None.

"Question.—Did you know, or was it not the talk before he was appointed, that he would be appointed?

"Answer.—If so, not more than a week or so. I think not.

"Question.—Did no one so state—no one from Iowa City?

"Answer.—I don't know that I heard his name mentioned.

"Question.—Do you know of any other property that Wells claims to have an interest in?

"Answer.—I do not.

"Question.—When the land was sold to him, did you suppose he would be appointed?

"Answer.—I had not the least idea of it.

"Question.—Did you not expect that Wells would use his influence with the legislative delegation?

"Answer.—I did. I supposed it would result in that."

On cross examination:

"Question.—Did not Wells pay full price, and even higher than others who purchased interest in that land?"

"Answer.—He did pay as high or higher than some land in the same tract sold for.

"Question.—Did Judge Wright pay as much as Wells?"

"Answer.—No; he had it five dollars per acre less.

"Question.—When did Wright get it?"

"Answer.—About the time of the passage of the law."

On re-direct:

"Question.—State if any of the Commissioners owned any part of the addition in which you spoke of Wells as being interested in.

"Answer.—Yes; I believe I made a conveyance of some lots to the extent of five acres. That interest he purchased of Van Buskirk, at about four hundred—or from three hundred to five hundred per acre. The purchase was made by Goodrell, in the Summer or Fall of 1856.

"Question.—Did you see the money paid?"

"Answer.—I did not. The interest had been owned by Baldwin, of Fairfield, and by him sold to Van Buskirk. The deed was made to me by Baldwin. The reason why I know it was purchased by Van Buskirk was that he got the deed and gave it to me, and I gave him, I think, a bond for two and a half acres. There was a bond given by Van Buskirk to Goodrell for five acres. I lifted that bond, and gave Goodrell a bond agreeing to convey the lots to him when the tract was divided.

"Question.—What was the date of the bond from Van Buskirk to Goodrell?"

"Answer.—I think it was in the Summer of 1856.

"Question.—Is this Baldwin of Fairfield a brother of the one who testified here the other night?"

"Answer.—I have heard so.

"Question.—Do you know who Baldwin bought the land of?"

"Answer.—He bought it of me.

"Question.—What time did he pay for it?"

"Answer.—Some time in 1854 or 1855—in the Winter or Spring.

"Question.—Was it after the law passed for the re-location?

"Answer.—It was in the Spring of 1855. He paid me thirty-five dollars per acre for it.

"Question.—Had Van Buskirk any other property on this side of the river?

"Answer.—I don't know of any, except in the three hundred and sixty-two acre tract lying northeast of Capitol Square, in Stewart's Addition.

"Question.—What interest had Van Buskirk in that tract?

"Answer.—I know of his having fourteen acres at one time. He bought and sold a great deal in it.

"Question.—What interest, had he at the time of the location of the Capitol?

"Answer.—I think five acres—I don't know.

"Question.—Do you know of Street having any interest here since the location of the Capitol?

"Answer.—No, sir.

"Question.—Do you know of the Commissioners receiving anything, either directly or indirectly, for locating the Capitol on the east side of the river?

"Answer.—I do not."

At the close of the examination, Mr. Stewart explained to the committee his reply to a query the first day, as follows:

"When Miller asked if I expected Wells to use his influence to remove the Capitol [State House], I will reply further that he, Wells, never made any proposition to use his influence, and that I never required it or spoke of it at all as connected with that transaction—that all our conversation on the subject of the removal of the Capitol at that time, and before, was his conviction that the Capital [Seat of Government] would eventually come here, at this town or near it."

The committee decided that the fact that Wells owned a small tract of land near where the location was made had no force, inasmuch as he purchased it long before the location was made or the law passed under which he was appointed a Commissioner.

In 1864, the First National Bank was organized, with Stewart as President. It had a capital stock of one hundred and fifty thousand dollars, and was

made a United States Government Depository. In 1868, he sold his interest to B. F. Allen, and retired from the bank. During his presidency, the bank, at two different times, cashed a check for five hundred thousand dollars, a notable occurrence in those days.

In 1886, when the Iowa and Minnesota Narrow-Gauge Railway Company was organized by B. F. Allen and sixteen other prominent business men and property holders, for the purpose of getting better transportation connection with the surrounding country, Stewart was one of the incorporators. In 1869, the road was bisected, and a new company, the Des Moines and Minnesota Railway Company, incorporated, who took the north half from Des Moines to Ames. Stewart was one of the incorporators, and was elected one of the first Board of Directors. In 1873, he was elected Vice-President of the company. Later, J. J. Smart, a railroad builder, which Stewart was not, was elected Vice-President and Superintendent, and Stewart Secretary, as more in line with his practical experience.

In January, 1867, when the Equitable Life Insurance Company was organized, Stewart was elected one of the Board of Trustees.

In 1869, he was elected a member of the City Council, to represent the Second Ward, which then embraced all the West Side between Vine and Locust streets. In 1871, he was re-elected, but he was not adapted by nature or inclination for the vexations of such a thankless office, and two terms were enough for him.

In 1872, the first organized effort to "boost" Des Moines was made. The business men of the town came to the conclusion that "Manifest Destiny" did not build cities. The Chicago and Northwestern Railway Company turned a deaf ear to it, and built its main line westward forty miles north of the city, which caused the people to sit up and take notice. A meeting of citizens was held on the Twenty-fourth day of May, in that year, at which a Citizens' Association was organized, with "Tom" Hatton as President; L. W. Dennis, Vice-President; Albert L. West, Treasurer. Standing committees were elected, with the following as chairmen of each: Finance, Hoyt Sherman; Municipal Affairs, N. B. Collins; Taxes, J. B. Stewart; Railroads, Samuel

Merrill; Home Manufactures, J. A. Ankeny; Publications, R. S. Inness; Improvements, John A. Elliott.

That organization gave a fresh impetus to business, and secured valuable improvements, but it lacked the vitalizing power of the present booster aggregation. It was bounded on the east by Des Moines River, a distinction with a difference. The ghost of the State House fiasco, and the Court House scrimmage, still hovered in the gloaming.

Socially, Mr. Stewart was genial, unobtrusive in speech or action, companionable, fond of society, highly esteemed, and always actively interested in social affairs of the community. He was one of the coterie—the Shermans, Spoffords, Inghams, Peeds, Terrys, Kassons, Loves, Keyes, Tuttles, Robertsons, Wests, Polks, Syphers, Hippees, Deweys, Mills, Nourses, Withrows, Hookers, Finches, Rices, McKays, Allens *et al*—in their improvised entertainments and amusements. There was always something doing to kill time and drive away the blues, for they were a jolly crowd, very few of whom are with us now. Mrs. Bina Wyman—she was then popularly known as Miss Lunt, a very demure schoolma'am, with mirthful proclivities, one day, when scanning the pictures that hang on Memory's walls, recalled one of the notable social events. It was a surprise party, given one cold Winter night, to Reverend Doctor Peet, the beloved pastor of the Episcopal Church, who lived on his little "farm," on the river bottoms about opposite the present City Railway power house. The snow was deep, the road very narrow, with a steep bank on either side, so that the least swerve meant an upset. With her in Mr. Hoyt. Sherman's big sleigh, drawn by a span of high-steppers, was Mr. Sherman, his driver; Mrs. Sherman, and Mrs. B. F. Allen. Mrs. Sherman was very carefully carrying a pail of cream, closely watching the track, and all was going on merrily, though a little scary, when Mrs. Allen was suddenly missed. A halt was made, and she was found sitting in the snow in the middle of the road. "After some arguing and coaxing," said Mrs. Wyman, "we got her back into the sleigh, and drove on, reaching our destination in safety. The house was brilliantly lighted, a great wood fire in the fireplace, and a group of friends present, who welcomed us with old-fashioned hospitality.

How we did enjoy that supper—every one brought their supper—and the games and charades that followed! There were Colonel and Mrs. S. F. Spofford, Colonel and Mrs. E. F. Hooker, Mr. C. W. Keyes, Mr. and Mrs. John Mitchell, Misses Ella and Abbie Mitchell, Miss Kate Stanley, Mary and Lucy Love (Mary was Miss Ella Quick's mother), Judge Byron and Mrs. Rice, Mr. and Mrs. 'Dan' Finch, Miss Mary Calder (Mrs. Rice's sister), Mr. and Mrs. John A. Kasson, Mr. and Mrs. Ira Cook, Warren and Tac. Hussey, Libbie and Abie Cleaveland, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas F. Withrow, Mr. J. B. Stewart, W. S. Pritchard, the Callanans, Inghams, Reeds and Terrys."

Mr. Stewart was a liberal giver to all worthy objects in civic, church, or school affairs, and especially for the relief of soldiers during the war period. It is a fact that so generous and abundant were the donations to "the boys" at the front, they requested it to be stopped and turned toward their families at home, but the people at home kept the soldiers' families supplied with great liberality. At one festival, December Thirty-first, 1864, there was received seven thousand, two hundred and sixty-one dollars and thirty-five cents for the relief fund.

Politically, Stewart was a Democrat, but in no sense a politician. He was not a member of any fraternal organization, his strong domestic temperament being better satisfied with the attractiveness of home and its inmates, than with clubs and societies. He was not a member of any church, believing that true religion consists in right living rather than loud professions.

He deceased May Tenth, 1899.

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