



JOSIAH M. THRIFT

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An old-timer who came to Polk County when it was inhabited only by Indians, and who figured quite prominently, was Josiah Moffit Thrift. He was born in Virginia, in the year 1815, of English ancestry. His father was a planter, and slave-holder, who devoted most of his time to preaching at isolated stations. "When Josiah was five years old, his father disposed of his plantation, and purchased a large tract of land in Knox County, Ohio, on which he opened a farm. He gave his slaves the privilege of going where they pleased, or remaining with him as free persons, to be paid for their services, as were other employed persons.

On this farm, Josiah passed his boyhood days, with very limited opportunity for attending school. When sixteen years old, he became a clerk in the store of an elder brother, where he remained about two years. He then went to Mount Vernon, Ohio, and was apprenticed to learn the trade of tailoring, which acquired, he went to Cincinnati, where he entered the employ of a large tailoring firm, and there worked on the same bench side by side with the once President, Andrew Johnson.

In those days, to military posts or garrisons, were assigned tailors. Thrift, through friends, applied for an appointment as Garrison Tailor, a *defacto* Government officer, subject to change from post to post in like manner as any person in army service. He was appointed, and sent to Fort Madison, Iowa, arriving there in 1842. In 1843, he was transferred to Fort Des Moines, and arrived May Twentieth, with a detachment of soldiers, consisting of two companies of cavalry, or Dragoons, as they were then called, and two companies of infantry.

In November, he went to Libertyville, Jefferson County, Indiana, got married, and returned December Twenty-fourth.

At the close of that year, beside the officers and soldiers, there were the

Indian Agent, Beach, and his interpreter, Josiah Smart; the Indian Traders, Washington George and George Washington Ewing, and Ben. Bryant, their clerk; Phelps & Company, fur dealers; J. B. and W. A. Scott, William Lamb, and Alexander Turner, contractors to furnish hay and other farm products for the garrison, all of whom were stationed near where the packing-houses now are, and eastward. Of the garrison were Charles Weatherford and a man named Baker, blacksmiths; Thrift, tailor; John Sturdevant and John Drake, gunsmiths; Robert A. Kinzie, sutler. So far as civilization was concerned, such, then, was Des Moines and Polk County. Eddyville and Ottumwa each contained about a dozen families. Between them and Fort Des Moines, the area was as Nature made it, except trails made by Indians, while north of The Fort, no white man had made his abode, so that Mr. Thrift may be truly called the first white settler of Polk County and Des Moines, for he was the only man of the garrison who remained and became a citizen. In fact, he became a squatter at the start, for he secured a claim adjoining the so-called Thompson farm, both of which are now part of Union Park, on which he built a log cabin, wherein he began housekeeping with his young wife, and where, March Fifteenth, 1845, the stork brought them a daughter, Hannah Jane. The second birth in the same log cabin was that of a brother, William Hurlbut, the present Adjutant General of Iowa, who caught the first glimpse of this curious world of ours October Fifteenth, 1847, but kaleidoscopic have been the changes he has witnessed since, I think he will admit.

In July, 1845, young Black Hawk, with whom Thrift was on very friendly terms, was camped on the bottoms west of Thrift's cabin, where the Gun Club grounds now are. A few days after the murder of Colonel George L. Davenport, at Rock Island, July Fourth, eight men rode up to Thrift's cabin and requested lodging for the night. Thrift was suspicious of them, as their appearance did not indicate they were ordinary land-seekers, as they claimed to be, but he gave them permission to remain over night, with the understanding that they were to deliver to him their arms, which he would lock up in his smoke-house, stating to them that if they kept their arms, the Indians, who were nearby, would give them trouble. After disarming them

and seeing they were comfortably quartered, he quietly went down to the Indian camp and told Black Hawk of the circumstances and his suspicions, and requested that he have some of his young Indians guard his wife and child while he went to the garrison to consult with Captain Allen. He presented the matter to Captain Allen, and expressed his suspicion of the eight men, but was unable to convince him that there was anything unusual in their coming there. He therefore declined to interfere with their proceeding on their way. Thrift, returned to his home, found the faithful Indians on guard, dismissed them, and retired with his family. He arose at a very early hour the next morning, his wife prepared breakfast, and after the meal, one of the leaders said to Mrs. Thrift:

"What are we indebted to you for your trouble "You owe us nothing," she replied, with the generosity of all pioneer women.

"Hold your apron, then," said the fellow, and he pitched a twenty-dollar gold piece into it. The eight then mounted their horses and rode away to the north.

At eleven o'clock the same day, news came describing those men, and later it proved they were the murderers of Colonel Davenport.

Immediately prior to the Eleventh of October, 1845, when the country would be opened for settlement, squatters had come in and made selections of land on which they wanted to make their homes. Land speculators and sharpers, or claim-jumpers, as they were called, were also present, watching an opportunity to get possession by sharp practice of the selections made by squatters. For self-protection, the squatters held a meeting at John B. Scott's trading house, on Tuesday, October Fourteenth, the third day after the Government title expired, to organize a Claim Club, at which Thrift was elected Secretary. A committee was appointed to prepare By-Laws for the club. On Thursday evening following, the committee reported a code, consisting of ten sections, which will be found in the sketch of W. H. Meacham, page 245, Volume I. Captain Allen offered the following as Section Eleven, which was adopted:

"The Citizens' Claimants having met on October Fourteenth, 1845, pursuant to resolution of a previous meeting, herein mentioned, do here, in

full meeting, fully adopt all of the foregoing resolutions, and we do hereby resolve and proclaim that we will submit to and abide by all of these resolutions, and will protect and defend one another, each and all of us, in all that we have herein resolved and said."

Thrift followed the Captain with another section, to-wit:

"*Resolved*, By this meeting, that any Citizen Claimant who shall subscribe his name to these resolutions shall be adopted as one of the Community, or Neighborhood, who have made them, and he will be entitled to all privileges herein guaranteed, and also to our mutual and joint protection."

The entire code was adopted, with the understanding that it involved a vigorous fight against unscrupulous rascals and wily speculators, with probable shooting. Seventy names were subscribed to the Bill of Rights on the spot. A standing Executive Committee was elected, of whom Thrift was one, to put the machinery of government in motion, and thus civilization and civic government in Polk County was born. So just and equitable was this code, it was later confirmed by the Government and courts of the state when state government was established.

April Seventh, 1846, was convened the first District Court in Polk County, the county having been organized the day previous. Thrift was brought in by "Uncle Tommy" Mitchell, the Sheriff, as one of the Grand Jury. The Judge's docket for that day shows the following record:

"TERRITORY OF IOWA, POLK COUNTY DISTRICT COURT. *April Term, Wednesday, Two O'Clock P. M., April Seventh, 1846.*

"And now, on yesterday, the Marshal of said territory returned his venire for a Grand Jury, on the part of the United States, in and for said County of Polk, together with the jurors aforesaid, all good and lawful men, and said Grand Jurors, on the part of the United States and the Territory of Iowa, retired in charge of Lewis Whitten, a sworn officer for that purpose, to consider of such matters as may come to their knowledge according to their charge, and, after being absent for some time, returned into court, and informed said court that they had no bills or presentments to make, and that

they had not further business to engage their attention. It is therefore ordered by said court that said Grand Jurors be discharged.

"And, there being no further business for this court at this term, it is ordered that this court adjourn till the next term in course of law.

"J. WILLIAMS, *Judge.*"

In 1850, Thrift resigned as Garrison Tailor, the Government not having assigned him to another garrison, possibly had forgotten him entirely as one of its adjuncts, and he joined the vast caravan going overland to the gold fields of California. Two years later, he returned *via* New York to Fort Des Moines, arriving in the early part of the Winter of 1852-1853. He then re-opened his tailor shop on Second Street, where he remained until 1850, in the meantime giving, as the "old boys" now say, better clothes than are made in these days.

In 1856, he removed to a farm, about three miles north of Boonesboro, the County Seat of Boone County, where he cultivated the soil until 1860, when he went to Pike's Peak, where he engaged in mining for a year, then returned, purchased a farm adjoining Boonesboro, and soon after moved into the town and became one of its leading citizens.

In 1861, he was commissioned by Governor Kirkwood to recruit volunteers to put down the Rebellion. He succeeded in recruiting two hundred and fifty men. He paid, from his own purse, for their subsistence and transportation from their homes to the rendezvous at Davenport, amounting to several thousand dollars. Subsequently—when requested by the Governor to file a claim for his disbursements, he refused, declaring that he was willing and able to do that much for his country.

He went with his recruits, was mustered into the service, and was assigned to the Sixteenth Iowa Infantry. Its first engagement was in the battle at Shiloh, April Sixth, 1862, where, not having been attached to any brigade, it, with the Fifteenth Iowa, fought on their own hook, and on the first day, when the flanking swoop of the enemy swallowed up the Eighth, Twelfth, and Fourteenth Iowa, and stampeded several others, the Sixteenth

suffered very severely. Thrift was severely wounded, taken prisoner, and confined as a prisoner of war until April, 1863, when he was discharged, a physical wreck, from which he never recovered. It is somewhat singular that, only a meager history of the Sixteenth is extant, but sufficient, is of record to show that it proved one of the most valorous of the entire army.

Upon his discharge, Thrift returned to Boonesboro, was elected Mayor, and proved a capable and popular official. His retiring message to the Town Council was considered by citizens as valuable and is still carefully preserved.

In 1873, he removed to California, hoping to benefit his health, but his wounds and the vicissitudes and exposures of his army life had so sapped his vitality, he deceased in Sacramento, in July, 1881.

Socially, he was of generous temperament, amiable, popular with the masses, who esteemed him for his strict integrity and honesty. Domestic in taste, he was devoted to his family, and a most earnest lover of children. He was always greatly interested in public schools and churches. Handicapped by his physical disability, he was forced to forego much activity in social affairs of the community which his public spirit prompted. He was a member of the Masonic order, and his descendants believe he was a charter member of the first lodge instituted in Des Moines.

Politically, he was first a Whig, but when the Republican party was organized, he joined it and remained a member all his days. The only public office he held, so far as I know, was that of Mayor of Boonesboro.

October Thirteenth, 1907.

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