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Among the old-timers, none are better conversationalists or more large supplied with reminiscences than the old stage drivers, for they went through the country with their eyes and ears open, and rubbed up against all sorts of people.

I fell in with one of them a few days ago, Martin Lambert Burke, a full-blooded Hibernian, born on the "Auld Sod," who held the reins over some of Colonel Hooker's nags across the prairies and wild wastes between Des Moines and Fort Dodge, when the latter was in its swaddling clothes.

Born in Ireland, August Tenth, 1830, he came to America when seventeen years old, and stopped at Columbus, Ohio, the headquarters of the Western Stage Company, operating lines in Ohio and Indiana, westward on the trail of emigration, slowly retreating when overtaken by the iron horse. On reaching Indianapolis, in 1854, the company decided to take the field in Iowa. They purchased all the right, title and interest of the Frink & Walker lines, which were operated from Keokuk to Des Moines and Dubuque, and, in 1855, sent thirty empty four-horse coaches and drivers to Knoxville, Illinois. Fifteen of them went to Burlington, and fifteen to Muscatine. Burke was in the Muscatine assignment, and he didn't like it, for his chums were all in the Burlington assignment, so he began working his way to them. Arriving at Ottumwa, he was put on the box and drove between Chariton and Ottumwa three months, during which time he got on the warm side of Parmalee, the road agent, who was transferred to Des Moines to take charge of what was called the "Fort Dodge Route," from Des Moines to Cedar Falls, via Fort Dodge, and brought Burke with him. From 1855 to 1862, Burke drove on that line. In 1862, Colonel Hooker, superintendent of the company, transferred him to the line from Des Moines to Indianola, as driver and express messenger, where he served two years. R. K. McMasters was the agent of the United States Express Company in Des Moines then.

But facts and incidents are best told in his own way:

"On the Fort Dodge line, we started from here on Third Street, just across the alley from the Everett House, on the west side of the street. The Everett House was once called the Marvin House. We crossed the river somewhere between what is now Court Avenue and Walnut Street—forded it when it was low, and when it was frozen, we not only crossed on the ice, but used to come on the ice from Thompson's Bend clear down. After we got on the East Side, we went over along the bluff, past the Small House, and went on out by Thompson's Bend, through Saylorville to Polk City, then to Bell's Point, which is between Madrid and Luther, then to Boonesboro. There we met the coach from Fort Dodge, and each driver turned and went back—I coming back to Des Moines and the other driver going on to Fort Dodge. At that time there was only triweekly trips. Sometimes, in case of accidents or increase of travel, I would go on to Fort Dodge. We would leave Boonesboro—that, was before they changed the town over to Boone—go north through Mineral Ridge to Hook's Point, then cross Boone River in a ferry, when the river was high, or ford it when low, then to Brushy Creek, then to a station kept by a man named McNeely, and from there on to Fort Dodge. The stations for changing horses were at Polk City, Boonesboro, Bell's Point, Brushy Creek, and Fort Dodge. The hotels at the stations were kept at Polk City by a man named Harter; at Bell's Point, Jesse Hull, who was a fine man; at Boonesboro, Eli Keeler, and the first man who kept a hotel there; at Hook's Point, Isaac Hook; at Brushy Creek, a man by the name of McNeeley; at Fort Dodge, it was the Wahkonsa House.

"All the time of my service, the routes were operated by Colonel Hooker. He had under him what we called "road agents," who looked after the drivers and kept them straight.

"Tri-weekly trips between Des Moines and Fort Dodge were made until after the railroad reached Boone; after that it was daily, and sometimes it was two or three coaches a day, depending upon the amount of travel or the season of the year.

"We delivered passengers in Des Moines at the Everett House, kept by Absalom Morris, or wherever they wanted to go. I remember one time taking a passenger so far out on Locust Street, the houses were so scattered and

far apart, I thought I was making a trip back again to Fort Dodge.

“There was an old pontoon bridge across the Des Moines, between Grand Avenue and Walnut Street, but no permanent bridge. There was no bridge across Raccoon River when I first came here, but before I quit driving, a bridge at the junction of the rivers had been built. Alex. Scott started to build a bridge across the Des Moines, south of Court Avenue, but did not finish it, and I do not know what became of it.

“The first stage barn was south of where the Rock Island Depot now is. It was the old barracks the soldiers left, with two or three wells, etc. The buildings belonged to two brothers, Henry and Jacob Bunn. The stage company built a fine, new barn and shops, I think it would be, south and west of where the Union Depot is, about two blocks. The shops were divided into five departments, one for building and repairing coaches, another for painting, another for harness-making, another for ironing coaches, and the other for shoeing horses. It was near where old Judge William H. McHenry used to live. It stood on the south side of the street. We used to sleep right across the street from the Judge’s house. The Judge was a very sociable man, and I knew him well. The last time I saw him was when he delivered a speech at Madrid, about a year before he died. I knew the McHenry boys when they were small. They were fine physical specimens, built for most anything—good, big, overgrown boys. They had a boy running with them by the name of Morris, son of the hotel-keeper. They were around the barn a great deal, and whenever a circus had been in town, they would come down to the bam and us drivers would fix up a platform for them, spread dry hay and some blankets over it all, and make a place for them to turn handsprings on, and one of the McHenry boys—I don’t remember which one—and the Morris boy, were especially good performers. Maybe they have forgotten it.

“The first office agent under Hooker when I came to Des Moines was a man named Smith. He looked after the waybills and passengers, took the fares, and saw that everything was all right before the stage started. The next office agent was A. T. Johnson. A. B. Woodbury had charge of the

coaches, and everything at the barn and shops. Whenever a driver came along, no matter whether he worked for the company or not, Woodbury would take care of him until he got work.

"Colonel Hooker was one of the grandest men I ever knew, or had anything to do with. He certainly knew how to handle men. He was very companionable, and talked to us like he would to anybody. He often got on the box here in town and drove around, for there was plenty of room west of the Court House, and he was a good driver.

"At one time, three passengers, Mrs. Sherman, wife of a banker at Boone; her child, and the mother of Mrs. Sherman or her husband, I don't remember which, rode with me from Des Moines to Boonesboro during a cold wet Spring, and I was afraid they would freeze. I gave them my buffalo robe and overcoat, and tried to keep them comfortable. They were to take the other coach at Boone—we always called it Boone—and I told them not to attempt to cross Boone River, but they were in a hurry to get home, and when they came to the river, a young man attempted to take them over in a boat. They had a lot of mail, which was put into the boat, and so overloaded it that it went down, and the two women and child were drowned. The young man jumped and left them to their fate.

"The Winter of 1856-1857 was too cold to talk about. Deer and elk came into Fort Dodge; they ran in the streets, driven in by starvation and cold, and they killed them with clubs. One time that Winter, an old man was riding with me, and I thought he would freeze in spite of all I could do. I remembered hearing that if you could make a man mad, it would warm him, so I slapped him in the face, and it nearly made the tears come in my eyes when I did it, but I had to warm him up. When we got to the station at Mr. Hull's—Mr. and Mrs. Hull were good, kind people—I got him in there and warmed him up, but they would not let him go on that day, and kept him until the next stage came along. He was quite an old man, from the state of Massachusetts. I was young then, and never suffered from the cold. I wore calfskin boots, and would slap my hands around me to warm them up, shifting the lines from one hand to the other, but the passengers inside in

extreme weather would get pretty cold. I had a buffalo robe, but I soon threw it away, for I could not be bothered with it in braking. I lost my way one night in the Winter, about three miles this side of Boone. There was a severe snowstorm from the northwest. We used to drive past the home of a man named Lucas—he is living yet—ninety years old. He had some improvements east of his house, and there was some vacant land between where we used to travel, and the storm drove me east of the place. I did not know where we were, and the storm coming in the faces of the horses drove the leaders off to the east. I was afraid to rein them, thinking perhaps they knew better than I did where we were. I did not know until I drove into some plowed ground, and then came to the house of William Payne. He had a brother, Thomas, there, who knew me by my voice, and I knew his voice. They wanted me to stay all night, but I would not. A light could be seen some distance away at the farm of the Widow Dycus, and I told them if I could get there I would be all right and know where I was. I had a coach load of passengers and I was as anxious to get through as they were. Mr. Payne said he would stand at the door and watch the shadow of the coach. If it kept between him and the light he would know that I was all right. When I got to Boone, several of the settlers were making ready to go out and see what had become of me.

“I left Des Moines after breakfast in the morning, as soon as the passengers could be gathered up, and would get to Boonesboro—when the roads were good—at three-thirty or four o’clock in the afternoon; if the roads were bad, it would be eleven or twelve o’clock.

“The Postoffice in Des Moines was in the Sherman Block, on Court Avenue, and the Postmaster was Wesley Redhead. The Postoffice at Bell’s Point was kept by Joseph Cadwallader.

“I had many prominent men ride with me, often beside me on the box. Among them were Cyrus C. Carpenter, John F. Duncombe, Major Williams, John A. Kasson, General Orville Clarke, John Brown, ‘Dan’ O. Finch, “Timber” Woods, Judge C. J. McFarland, and a great many others. I knew Judge Casady intimately, Judge Cole, B. F. Allen, and all the early settlers. I knew

'Laughing' Hatch well. The Clarksons never rode with me, that I know of. Governor Gue often did. Old Father Clarkson was, in his kind of way, sociable on the streets, and sometimes would reprimand us boys if we did not do right.

"We used to do some horse racing in the vicinity of Madrid. That was the only kind of gambling I did. Some of the parties are living yet, among them Cornelius Grigsby and Jacob Murray.

"In those days, the little fields were cleared from the timber, the early settlers preferring timber land along the river. There was not a farm on the prairie from Polk City timber up to the Widow Dycus' place, where I got lost. It was all unfenced and unfarmed.

"Wild turkeys were plentiful; there was some deer, and in the Winter I have seen half a dozen wolves following the coach, but they would drop off when we came near settlements.

"During my stage days, there were drinking places where liquor could be had at Des Moines, Fort Dodge, and Boonesboro, and more or less was drunk by almost everybody. It was for sale in the grocery stores. Here in Des Moines, at some place on Second Street, there was plenty of it in the 'groceries,' as they were called. I remember one nice, old fellow, named Carroll, who kept a 'grocery' in Boonesboro, and had liquor for sale, but would not sell it to men who were in the habit of drinking or getting intoxicated. The boys used to get me to go to him and get liquor for them, and I always had to tell him I wanted it for a sick horse, but I had to buy with it something that was supposed to be mixed with it later for medical purposes. I always bought soda, and sometimes I had my pockets filled with packages of soda, which I distributed to the women at Bell's Point to make biscuits. The last time I fooled him, he remarked: 'I should think you would get rid of that horse, he is always sick, and must be expensive.' That was too much for me, for he was so honest and sincere about it that I was ashamed to impose on him again. I remember a case where a fine old fellow named Bowman got drunk, and Carroll had him arrested and fined. It was on Saturday. Bowman paid his fine, and on Monday, Carroll had him arrested again for being drunk. When the trial came on, Bowman pleaded his own case. The state was represented by John Deidrich. Bowman's defense was

that it was the same drunk for which he had been arrested on Saturday—that he had not yet sobered off—and, as he had been fined once, he could not be punished twice for the same offense. The Judge agreed that it was true, and he was released.

“I knew Mr. Ingham, who lived in those days at Algona, and who, I understand, is the father of Mr. Ingham of *The Register and Leader*. A fine man he was, too.

“I quit driving stage, I think, in 1867; but while I was driving I found a piece of land which the River Land Company had not stolen, in Douglass Township, near Luther, of which I cleared and cultivated a little, and the boys used to accuse me in a joking way of farming with the stage horses, but I was never guilty of that. When I left the stages, I went on my farm, and I have been there ever since.”

Politically, Burke is a Democrat. He says that he went up to Bell’s Point. “They were all Hulls and Whigs. The Hulls had all the girls, so I became a Hull—that is, a Democrat—but I will vote for Cummins for Governor, anyhow.”

Socially, he is genial, companionable, of humorous temperament, well stocked with the proverbial Celtic wit, a good citizen, prominent and popular in the community where he lives, as evidenced by his election for eighteen consecutive years as Roadmaster and Constable, and would be serving yet, but in 1900, he says, “The Swedes got scared over the Australian ballot, and didn’t know how to vote for me, and I got knocked out.”

He has been vouchsafed a generous length of years, vigorous health, a clear head; has lived to see the prairies all “fenced and farmed,” his old station, Boonesboro, gone to wreck, eclipsed by the railroad city of more euphonious name, and the river, where he used to cross it in a scow, spanned by a structure of marvelous engineering skill. Here, in Des Moines, all trace of his stage driving days is completely obliterated and lost, even the river being unrecognizable.

October Fourteenth, 1906.

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