



ROBERT S. FINKBINE

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In these days of grabs, grafts, and speculation by those having control of trust and public funds, it is pleasing to record at least one person who was proof against all temptation, and his name was Robert S. Finkbine, or "Bob," as he was familiarly called.

Though not an early settler of Des Moines, he was a pioneer of the state, and closely identified with its growth in many directions. He came to Iowa from Ohio in 1850, settled at Iowa City as a builder, for which he had fitted himself by education and experience. His quaint, old-fashioned ways attracted the attention of Governor Kirkwood, another of like ilk, and they became warm, firm friends. He established a reputation there by his skill and integrity in the construction of some of the State University buildings, the College for the Blind at Vinton, and county buildings elsewhere.

In 1864, he was elected Representative to the Legislature, and served two terms. As a law-maker, he was alert, clear-headed, had the courage of his convictions, courteous, affable, put on no frills, jolly, an inveterate joker, brusque, blunt of speech, never talked to the galleries, and made lots of fun for the staid and stately solons of the House.

Though not gifted as a speech-maker, his Teutonic frankness, genial temperament, and honesty won the esteem and confidence of every member of the Legislature, for he could be relied upon to support every measure of practical benefit to the people, and make those not ridiculous—a peculiar gift he had.

In those days, there was an abundance of grabs and speculations. It was not uncommon—in fact, it was the custom—on the opening of the session, for each member to find on his desk a package neatly wrapped, enclosing a pocket knife, a gold pen, a portfolio, an eraser, or some other article possibly useful.

The custom became so uniform, the expense so considerable, and the

inquiry so frequent as to where they came from, the Eleventh General Assembly deemed it best to legalize it, and one day a resolution was presented, requiring each member to be furnished a good pocket knife. Hoyt Sherman offered an amendment by adding, "at a cost not to exceed two dollars." Another member moved to amend the amendment by including "a good shaving cup and brush." Another member wanted sheep shears, until finally the thing got so farcical it was dropped, but each member got a pocket knife, penknife, eraser, and gold pen, and the regular reporters for daily papers also got a pocket knife or gold pen. I was then reporting for Chicago, Saint Paul and Saint Louis papers, and was given a pocket knife, all of which "at a cost not to exceed two dollars."

It was the custom, also, for the members to vote themselves daily newspapers and the necessary postage to send them to their constituents. One day, the question came up to fix the number that should be ordered for each member, when amendments at once began to pile up to limit it to those printed in the state, to those loyal during the war, to twenty, twenty-five and thirty. It was finally decided that each member should have thirty dailies, three of which may be published outside the state—there were but twelve dailies published in the state—or their equivalent in weeklies.

The expense for newspapers furnished the Eleventh session was thirteen thousand, two hundred and ninety dollars and fifty-nine cents; for postage, ten thousand, twenty-one dollars and fifteen cents. For the next session, the Twelfth, the expense for news-payers (sic) was twenty-three thousand, seven hundred and two dollars and twenty-nine cents; for postage, sixteen thousand, two hundred and twelve dollars and thirty-three cents. Members also had letter stationery, with printed headings.

During the session of 1864, Dubuque got short of water, and called a convention to consider the improvement of the Mississippi River. The Legislature was invited to attend. The member from Buchanan, in the House, resolved, "That this Assembly accept the invitation." The going, and how, was another question. After considerable maneuvering, the "gentleman from Linn" moved to lay the whole matter on the table, which was lost, when the "gentleman from Black Hawk" moved to amend the

acceptance with, "provided that there shall be no expense incurred to the state, either as per diem or traveling, or for postage." He did not tell the House what the probable expense for postage would be, but his amendment was defeated, whereupon another member came to the rescue of conscientious scruples by moving that, "No member shall be regarded as under any moral or pecuniary obligation to draw his per diem or postage for the time of such absence." It was adopted, forty-six to thirty-five, and the House went to Dubuque to "improve the Mississippi River."

On another occasion, the House adopted a resolution to furnish each member with a copy of "all Supreme Court reports now on hand, or to be published during the present term," to which Pete. Ballingall, an efficient and popular Democratic member, wanted to amend by including the doorkeepers, but the Republicans didn't seem to appreciate Pete.'s efforts to educate the masses.

In 1872, the Fourteenth General Assembly abolished all allowances for newspapers, stationery, pocket knives, or other perquisites, and it did another thing: Prior to that time, members had received five dollars per day, and the sessions were prolonged until near May, for, "between hay and grass" on the farm, five dollars a day was a better thing. Since then, when the Legislators assemble, they divide five hundred by five, and when the one hundred days have expired, they are ready to go home, and, as "unfinished business," lots of bills, most of them deservedly, go into the waste basket.

Robert was made chairman of the Committee on Ways and Means, which had cognizance of the multifarious schemes respecting state finances. He was cautious, critical, and economical, but when it came to suffering humanity generally, he was more liberal. He sent to the House one morning his report on a subject he had been wrestling very seriously with—for him:

"The Committee on Ways and Means, to whom was referred the petition of John Clayton, of Dallas County, have had the same under careful consideration, and have instructed me to report that they have given the subject their best attention, and have unanimously concluded that the petitioner could never have been a member of the popular branch of this

General Assembly, for, if so, he would not have fallen into the mistaken idea that the members thereof needed watching. Your Committee fully concur in the prayer of the petitioner, that this General Assembly should do something for the sake of 'suffering humanity generally,' and the petitioner particularly, to lighten the burdens of taxation. To accomplish this end, we are assured by the petitioner that 'he will ever pray,' and we recommend that he do so, 'without ceasing.' There is one positive declaration in the petition which suggests itself to the minds of the Committee as being strictly true, and particularly applicable to the members of this General Assembly; it is that, 'this thing of working two hours a day don't pay,' and we submit this part of the petition to the careful consideration of the House, trusting that in its wisdom it may devise some means to make it pay. We are confident that, could the petitioner witness the earnest zeal, untiring energy, and unyielding perseverance displayed by members of this House in their honest and industrious efforts to regulate everything, from the laying out of a township road to reconstructing the General Government, he would admit it unnecessary to pray for 'working members.' We recommend, however, taking all the circumstances into consideration, that the prayer of the petitioner be granted."

In 1872, the Legislature elected Robert one of the Commissioners to erect the new Capitol, and, though a builder of some experience, the Board, with some doubt as to his fitness for so important an undertaking, elected him Superintendent of Construction, but it was not long before it was discovered, greatly to their surprise, that he knew all about stone, iron, wood, and labor, and their value in building; that he was not an architect, but, given a specific plan or model, and he would produce it in marble, stone, or iron, as imperishable as the material of which it was made; that he had a trained mind, capable of elucidating difficult problems. That was an acquisition which enabled him to meet the many exigencies which arose by reason of defects in the plans of the architect, or processes of construction, so he became the master mind of the work—what he decided was the ultimatum—with one exception. When the matter of gilding the big dome came up, he was very strongly opposed to it, not only because of the great expense, but it was

simply ornamental, to show off, but when he was convinced that it was an important plan of a majestic structure, he accepted it, and was therefore the more determined that it should be well done.

I was a frequent, almost daily, visitor to the building, and became quite familiar (sic) with its progress. I recall one instance of his skill. The plans called for a single stone for the entablature over the columns at the north and south porticos. He determined the stone would not bear the strain of the immense load above it. Architects in other fine buildings had remedied similar difficulties by placing an iron girder under the stone, thus putting an unsightly blemish on the structure. Robert, to avoid that, threw an arch over the columns, from which heavy iron rods were brought down and fastened to the stone by lewises (a dovetailed iron wedge fitted into a dove-tailed tenon, similar to those used in hoisting heavy stone), and the whole imbedded in masonry.

Another instance was in the rotunda of the main corridor. The architect's plans showed a complete circle therefor. Robert concluded the supports at the intersection of the four halls, on which the central dome was to rest, were not strong enough to bear the weight, and they were enlarged, which explains the break in the circle at these points.

Another instance was that of the arches in the main corridor. The architect, Piquinard, who died soon after the work began, also designed the Illinois Capitol, and there was some similarity in the plans. In the Illinois building, these arches were made largely of stucco, and on the floor above them, during construction, barrels of water were standing, which leaked, and the water seeped into the stucco beneath. One day, a laborer was pushing a loaded wheelbarrow, when the floor gave way, and he went down to the floor below. Robert, to prevent such a contingency from any cause except an earthquake, built his arches solid, of hard-burned brick, laid in cement.

The most notable characteristic of him was his probity and integrity. Chances there were, hundreds of them, to have profusely feathered his own nest, but he could not be bought nor sold, and contractors for material soon

found that he knew his business. Numerous instances occurred illustrative of this, which have never been given to the public, for he had no press agents, though he was a good fellow with the press scorpions. All attempts to pump him were met with a question—he had a habit of asking questions of all persons on all subjects, or he would parry with a joke or jest, for he was always loaded with fun.

On another occasion, an Eastern firm was requested to give prices for some iron stairways, involving several thousand dollars, which was done, and found to be pretty steep. Robert wrote them that their figuring man must have been out of town when their figures were made. They sent a man here on the first train to attend to the matter, and on comparing Robert's figures with those of the bidders, there was a difference of only twenty dollars.

One day, he saw a man unloading brick on the grounds, and asked him what he was hauling those brick there for. "For the Capitol," was the reply. "Tell your boss to find some other place to put them; I haven't any room for them here," said Robert. The brick were hauled away, and brick according to contract supplied.

When those large, red-granite columns in the main corridor were received, Robert inspected them and found they were a fraction of an inch too large, He at once notified the contractor that they were not according to specifications. The contractor came here and offered to make a deduction of about two thousand dollars if the place designed for them be cut away and let them in. Robert replied that those four corners were supports for the dome; to cut away an inch would greatly reduce their strength; that when the columns were made to conform to the specifications, they would be accepted and paid for, not before. They were taken back and the necessary change made, at great expense and loss to the contractor.

When the marble wainscoting for the grand stairway was received, it was found to be too large, and was rejected. Robert refused all compromises with the contractor, and he was obliged to send a large force of men from New York to recut the marble.

Contractors finally learned that the only hope of getting pay for material was in filling their contracts to the letter.

The sculptor who formed the twelve symbolical statues in the main corridor was a Frenchman, and a fine artist. The figures, though ideal, are

anatomically correct. He did his work in the room now occupied by the Railroad Commissioners, and kept the door locked against everybody except Robert, who one day invited me to go with him. The fellow was at work on the figure representing "Agriculture." He had formed a pig of the scrawny, long-haired, razor-back variety, from Missouri. Robert, seeing it, asked, "What is that?" "Peeg," was the reply. "That's no pig," said Robert, as he gave me a wink. The fellow instantly smashed the thing into fragments. Robert then furnished him a model of the Iowa variety.

One day, the Trustees of one of the state institutions came here to consult Robert respecting elaborate changes they wanted to make in one of their buildings. They brought a large roll of plans, which they spread out on a table, and were very sanguine of the utility and correctness of them, but they wanted his opinion of them. Robert chucked away a fresh quid of the Indian weed, shoved a cuspidor alongside of his chair, and sat down. He looked over the drawings carefully, read the specifications critically, and leaned back in his chair, firing a shot at the cuspidor.

"Well, what do you think of the plans?" was the first query.

"They are very nice and well drawn," replied Robert.

"What is your opinion as to working them out?"

"You can go on, gentlemen, and make your changes according to them, but the d—d thing will tumble down before you get through with it."

The plans were quietly rolled up and never heard of afterward.

The work on the Capitol was done by the day. Each man given a stone to cut was charged with it, and did not get his pay in full until it was accepted, but one cutter got away with Robert. He made a bad break in a stone for the cornice on the west side, over the House Chamber, but he cut it out and set in a block so deftly that it escaped detection until it had been in place some time. When discovered, Robert had it drawn out and replaced by another. It weighed several thousand pounds, but so perfect was the cutting that the exchange was easily made with a derrick.

When the Commissioners were ready to turn the building over to the state, Governor Larrabee employed several expert accountants to examine their records and accounts. After several months' laborious work, inves-



tigating an expenditure of three million, five hundred thousand dollars, embracing thousands of vouchers, contracts and bills, they reported a discrepancy with the balance sheet of the Commissioners of two dollars. It was never decided where the real discrepancy was, though Robert always claimed that Larrabee's bookkeepers had made a mistake in their figuring somewhere; that he never got the two dollars.

In 1879, the bridges were owned by the city, and toll was charged. To make them free, the county assumed a portion of the expense, and Robert was selected by the County Supervisors to make an appraisalment of the valuation of those at Walnut Street, Court Avenue, 'Coon Point, and Seventh Street. It was fixed at one hundred thousand, three hundred and forty-nine dollars and nineteen cents, which the county accepted and agreed to pay.

In 1880, he had become so identified with Des Moines, he moved his family here, and became an integral part of the civic community.

In 1890, he was appointed a member of the Board of Public Works, and served two terms, when he retired from active business.

Politically, he was a radical Republican, but not an office-seeker nor a politician, yet it must be admitted he was well posted in politics generally.

Socially, he was courteous, plain of speech and manner, evidencing his German ancestry; always effervescent with wit and humor; of high moral temperament; an ardent supporter of church and school. He was a typical pioneer, and materially aided as a lawmaker and citizen in building the social structure as he built the Capitol, to be approved by future generations.

He was a member of high standing in the fraternity of Odd Fellows. As a man of affairs, he possessed rare executive ability. As the builder of the Capitol, there was never even a suspicion of self aggrandizement against him, and the structure will stand an enduring testimonial of his ability, honesty, and integrity.

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