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# Magnolia

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## Magnolia

Before me is an old law. Its musty legality is softened by the blunt phrases of pioneer days. Its title announces its purpose as "An Act organizing certain Counties therein named"; and its content provides for the fulfillment of the titular promise. From the pedantic diction of modern legislation it is refreshing to turn to the simple instructions that "Abram Fletcher, of the county of Fremont, Charles Wolcott, of the county of Mills, and A. D. Jones, of the county of Pottawattamie, be, and they are hereby appointed Commissioners to locate the seat of Justice of the county of Harrison"; that they are further instructed to meet "at the house of A. D. Jones, in the county of Pottawattamie" and proceed to locate the proposed county seat of Justice "as near the geographical centre . . . as a suitable site may be found." What unembarrassed discretion was granted by the Fourth General Assembly! How delightfully simple were the directions for the creation of a new government! But if one turns the page, he will read there a brief restriction—"the county seat of Harrison shall be called Magnolia".

In response to these unquestionable instructions, the three commissioners met on the first Monday in March, 1853, to discharge the duty which had been laid upon them. 1853! Less than seventy years

ago! But there were no railroad tracks, or telephone or telegraph lines within the State at that time, and Iowa land was selling for \$1.25 an acre. The tiny hamlet of Kanessville, which grew out of an encampment of Mormons making their difficult exodus to the West, had just received the name of Council Bluffs. Omaha was a village on the outskirts of civilization; Sioux City, scarcely more than a name used to designate an Indian trading-post; Des Moines, a cluster of small cabins known as Fort Des Moines, and boasting among its homes the civilizing influence of a brick courthouse. This was western Iowa, when Magnolia, "the little city on the hill", had its birth.

As a commercial and civic center Magnolia was full of promise. It was in the very heart of Harrison County; it was the authorized seat of justice and government; and it soon became a lively, energetic, frontier town. At Magnolia the first district schoolhouse in the county, a structure of hewed logs, was built. The first mill to do actual business was located on the Willow River, not far from the county seat, and as early as 1858 Magnolia possessed a Masonic Lodge, the first in the county.

The first post office of the county was established at Magnolia. Until 1855 the nearest post office was located at Council Bluffs, and the only way to obtain letters was to call for them. Great was the excitement when some fellow-citizen journeyed thence and brought home the village mail in the crown of his

hat. Then a stage route was established running from Council Bluffs to Sioux City, and Magnolia became one of the important stops. The town was highly indignant, however, when after barely a dozen trips, the Western Stage Company was subsidized by citizens of the rival village, Calhoun, so that Magnolia was "star-routed" and supplied by a side mail. But this incident did not have the effect which Calhoun had expected, for Magnolia, instead of being disheartened, bent every effort toward improving itself — an exertion which left its rival in the dim background of inferiority. Other stage routes came to the town and thus many times a week brief snatches of the world's news, somewhat belated but of unimpaired interest, were brought to the village.

Within a few years it numbered some three hundred inhabitants who enjoyed the privileges and endured the hardships which western Iowa offered to her sturdy, self-reliant children during the middle period of the West. Three dry-goods stores provided a part of their food and the bulk of their clothing. A tailor, a shoe dealer, two jewellers, ten carpenters, and one plasterer added a touch of development to the community. Its bodily ailments were healed by two physicians, one of whom was famous for his efficacious remedies — a potion with speedy results known as "Thunder and Lightning", and a mixture of herbs called "Bog Hay", which was prescribed — it is easy to imagine, with varying formula and effect — for fever and ague. Two

ministers cared for the spiritual welfare of the community, and six attorneys supported themselves by tangling and untangling legal snarls. An earnest teacher generously distributed instruction and discipline among the children in a room which measured twelve by fourteen feet, described as being constructed of "cottonwood boards set on end", and possessing "one window-opening with a 'greased paper' for light".

For the sum of two dollars a year, the early settler might read of the world's events as published in the "Magnolia Weekly Republican", "a very newsy, neatly printed journal", founded in 1859, by George R. Brainard. The itinerant, as well as the permanent resident, was well cared for in Magnolia. If he were travelling "a horseback", he might have his horse shod at any one of the four blacksmith shops, while he indulged himself with one of the famous meals served by the kind old landlady at Peter Barnett's boarding-house hotel—a meal such as Magnolia alone remembers how to serve to-day. If he were obliged to "stay the night", the traveller was sure of a merry evening and "right good cheer" within the log walls of the Bates House. He might even visit the village artist and have his daguerreotype taken as a surprise for the folks at home.

In 1858, a unique gathering assembled in Magnolia, for in the autumn of that year the Harrison County Agricultural Society held its first county fair. It was not the kind of an exhibition which goes

by the name of county fair to-day. There were no gambling games or soap-box enthusiasts in evidence. The objects of attraction were "the products of soil and barnyard, with a sprinkling of homemade wares and domestic articles". It was a wholesome gathering amusing itself with the ever-popular sports of horse and foot racing.

In pathetic but inspiring contrast to this merry-making was the county celebration held in Magnolia on July 4, 1862, during the agonizing period of civil war. Men, women, and children — many with sad faces and sadder hearts — assembled from all the adjoining counties and even from Nebraska, bringing with them wagon-loads of food. Harrison County has never again seen such a dinner! The air was filled with music and patriotism, and a huge homemade flag flaunted its cambric stars and stripes to the admiration of the throng, in the midst of which might be found the skillful-fingered women who had bought the material at the general store, and who had cut and fashioned the bright banner which symbolized to all, their stricken and contentious home land.

Who will deny that Magnolia was the hub of activity and that Magnolia directed the affairs of the county? The shrewd godfathers of the little village had made no mistake when they selected this centrally located, thickly wooded, and well-drained tract for the seat of justice of Harrison County, but events conspired in such a manner as to check its logical growth and to cause it to evolve not into the

promised civic center, but into a tiny inland town. When Magnolia was platted, not a railroad had yet been constructed a hundred miles west of Chicago, and it could not be foreseen that within a few years, indeed by 1866, the Chicago and Northwestern line would have laid its tracks across the State in such a way as to miss Magnolia altogether. This was a death-blow to commercial expansion and activity—the little city was cut off from the throbbing artery of trade, as a consequence of which came the ultimate transfer of the courthouse to the neighboring village of Logan. All of this did not take place at once, nor did it come about without a struggle. Many contests had raged between Magnolia and Calhoun, Missouri Valley, and Logan at various times with regard to moving the county seat. Magnolia had retained control, however, until 1875, when Logan, seizing the psychological moment, again proposed a transfer to her own city and won by a doubtful majority of two votes. The county records were moved to that place where a courthouse was built in 1876.

Magnolia had reached her prime, the apex of her growth. One would expect the city to die and slowly disappear. Contrary to all expectations, such has not been the case. To be sure, its population has remained practically constant for many years—the census of 1920 showed 299 inhabitants—but the town itself has undergone many changes. Scarcely any of the old landmarks remain; in fact, Magnolia has been practically rebuilt during the past fifteen

years. Many of the store-buildings are made of brick, and cement sidewalks line the most important streets. The city is lighted by electricity, and at night, its cluster of street lights may be seen for miles around. Since the persistent intrusion of the automobile, the seven miles between Magnolia and the nearest railroad have become a negligible distance. A motor-bus makes two trips daily to Logan and back, carrying passengers and mail.

The pride of the town is a large consolidated school-building, modernly equipped in every way, where all the children in a district of twenty-five square miles, from the tiniest primary pupil to the young men and women preparing themselves for college, receive training on an equality with that offered in our city institutions. There are seven busses, dubbed "kid-wagons" by the juvenile passengers, which transport the youngsters to and from the great schoolhouse, many times the size of the next largest building in the village.

Magnolia's spirit is one of loyalty and allegiance. Company C, 29th Iowa Infantry, was organized there in 1862 and gave splendid service during the Civil War. A few of the veterans who still live in the community assemble on Memorial Day to show reverence for their comrades who have gone ahead. During the recent war, Magnolia provided her quota of men for the army, and offered her services in other ways, as did the thousands of small towns and villages throughout the United States. Her war-record is one to be proud of.



Once a year, in August or September, Magnolia dons festive attire, and assumes a gala-day appearance. This day is known as "Old Settlers Day", and is the time when the pioneers, their children, and their children's children assemble to listen to roll-call, to hear speeches, to exchange reminiscences and to feast upon the fat of the land. This is the day when Magnolia indulges in maternal pride of her sons and daughters. Like other towns, she has her favorite son. Newell Dwight Hillis, pastor of the Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, New York, was born and reared here. His tribute to his early home provides a fitting conclusion to an article on this small pioneer town which went through a rapid growth, a more or less rapid decline, but which seems to have settled, at last, into a state of immortality:

"Since those far off days in the old Magnolia high school I have seen many cities and countries, and studied and lingered in many libraries, colleges and universities. I owe an immeasurable debt to certain great books, to noble authors and educators. But my chief intellectual debt is to my father and mother and sisters and to the old friends and students in the old Magnolia high school. For neither time nor events have ever lessened my conviction that the scholar is the favorite child of heaven and earth and that the old book, and the old scenes, and the old friends are the richest gifts that God has vouchsafed to me in my earthly career."

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