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In This Neglected Spot

If a motorist, driving along Primary Road No. 17, were to turn off the pavement about half way between Mallard and Emmetsburg, and go eastward over the highway that winds, often in defiance of section lines, along the river bottom toward the town of Rodman, he would pass through one of the oldest cemeteries in Palo Alto County—and never know it. This pioneer burying-ground lies on a knoll, just west of the Des Moines River, unfenced and unmarked. The prairie grass above some of the graves surrendered to the plow a score of years ago. In the road itself and in the fields on each side sleep the pioneer dead, unnamed, many unknown and forgotten save for vague memories in the hearts of a few of the oldest families.

Late in the fifties several Irish families settled along the Des Moines River, among them being the Mulroneys — Patrick, Kieran, and Joe — Thomas Dawson, and Thomas Tobin. They were later joined by other families—Irish, German, and American—and thus the settlement grew. There they erected rude log cabins and provided shelter for their stock; there they planted their fields, hunted, fished, visited back and forth, talked politics, welcomed newcomers, and reared their families; and there also they buried their dead.

The graves were dug at the top of the knoll, as high as possible above the sloughs that covered the lower places. Close at hand was the trail they called a road, it, too, clinging to the high places because the going was easier. It must have been a peaceful and beautiful place, with its long prairie grass that turned from green to russet as the season advanced, and the abundance of wild flowers—anemones, buttercups, and violets in spring, roses and prairie lilies in summer, and asters, sunflowers, and goldenrod in autumn. To this hill they carried them—children and the aged, Catholic and Protestant alike—and laid them away without even the comfort of religious service, for there was neither priest nor preacher in this new land.

But the entire community mourned as one family. Neighbors laid out the dead and dug the grave. Bob Shea would bring his carpenter tools and fashion the coffin out of rough pine boards. He would plane the splintery planks to a satiny smoothness and gather the fine shavings together and pat them into a pillow at one end. Then he would line the box with whatever suitable material was at hand. When the time arrived, neighbors would bear the remains to the cemetery.

At the head of the grave they would put a wooden marker. But the frost and snow of winter and the heat and rains of summer soon rotted these crude monuments. People moved away, discouraged by the hardships of this settlement and fascinated by

the fancied advantages of others. So the graves became neglected and forgotten.

Probably the first person to be buried there was Thomas Tobin, known as "Papa Tom", the father of the Thomas H. Tobin whose generosity made possible the erection of Saint Thomas's Church and Saint Ellen's School at Emmetsburg. On August 4, 1859, he died. Others who followed to this cemetery were two small children of Thomas Dawson, several Mulroneys children, Mrs. Lynch, Mrs. Snyder, Maggie Hefley, Adam Rund and his first wife, and many more whose names are no longer known.

One tragedy is associated with this place of sorrow. When Thomas Dawson, a member of the famous Northern Border Brigade, first came to Iowa, he brought his wife and two small children. He had no money, but he did have a wagon and two good teams with which he earned a living. He hauled brick for the courthouse which John M. Stockdale contracted to erect at the proposed town of Paoli and for the foundation of the old courthouse at Rolfe, in Pocahontas County. Through his friendship with Captain William H. Ingham, he secured a great deal of work and made many long hauls for him to Spirit Lake, Estherville, and Cherokee.

During his absence his family was not left unprotected, as Thomas Brophy, Mrs. Dawson's father, made his home with them. It was his task to care for the stock and to keep wood chopped for the fires. Though a very religious man who "put

his trust in God", he nevertheless kept "two old muskets loaded and a double-barrelled shotgun ready for action, as they were all in terror of the yellow-faced Sioux."

On the eighteenth of March, 1863, he took his ax to the home of Thomas Tobin, about a mile away, to sharpen it on Mr. Tobin's grindstone. Before he left he put on a stout, "old-country jacket", and as one of the buttons was off, his daughter sewed on another, remarking as she did so that it didn't match but that it was the right size and would do very nicely. A storm came up before the ax was sharpened, and Mr. Brophy unwillingly allowed himself to be persuaded to stay the night. The next morning there was a lull in the storm and, against the advice and entreaties of the Tobins, he started home about noon, carrying his ax in his hand. They watched him go with many misgivings. Scarcely had he left before the storm began again with redoubled fury, and he was never seen again.

It was useless to try to find him when the blizzard was over. The grass on the wide prairies was as high as a man's head in some places. Then, too, there was the possibility that he had fallen into the river and drowned. But in the summer of 1865, his ax was found about three miles east of the present town of Mallard. In 1866, John Anderson, lately mustered out of the Union army, came to Iowa seeking land. He took up a homestead on section fifteen in Powhattan Township, Pocahontas County, just

east of where Plover is now located. As he was walking over it to get the lay of the land, he stumbled on a heap of human bones. Numerous prairie fires had passed over the spot, but the remains were easily identified by some non-combustible articles that the old man had carried in his pocket and, pressed down into the matted grass, was the very button his daughter had sewed on the morning he went away. A small shred of the cloth still clung to it. He had wandered about thirteen miles before being overcome by cold and exhaustion.

The relatives had his bones interred by the side of the Dawson children, but the grave was left unmarked and by and by the exact location of his final resting place became almost as uncertain as the first. Several families planned to remove their dead to other cemeteries as Mr. Tobin had done with his father's body in 1876, but the transfer was attended with so much difficulty the project was abandoned. The proposal to have suitable markers erected was also discussed, but a question arose concerning the ownership of the land. When the township was surveyed and the road straightened as far as feasible, the section line cut off part of the plot and left many of the German graves in the roadway. Something might have been done about the road at the time, but the persons most interested had gone away and, to quote an old adage, what was anybody's business became nobody's business, so nothing was changed.

In 1925, the highway was graded and gravelled. A son of one of the members of the early Irish colony reminded the county engineer of the existence of the graves in the road, but in the absence of a formal protest little or no attention was paid to the problem. Perhaps it was thought that the bodies were so deeply interred they would not be disturbed but the scrapers did uncover some of them, and road work ceased until a new grave could be made inside the fence for all of the bones unearthed.

Nothing remains there now to indicate that half a century ago people had a most human interest in the spot. Only two or three old posts with fence-rail holes bored through them, standing at rakish angles, mark the last resting place of those pioneers. Their lives, it is true, were but a watch in the night of Iowa's history, but they had their struggles of daily existence, their problems of obtaining food and shelter, of winning a home, and of rearing their children. They persisted because of their integrity, and in their lives of honest effort they set high standards of citizenship. There they lie, still steadfast and serene, as the busy modern world goes by unnoticed.

EVANGELINE S. COWMAN