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Mason City in Retrospect

[In 1947, W. F. Main of Cedar Rapids dictated the following reminiscences to Mrs. Kathleen H. Shepard of Mason City. — THE EDITOR.]

As I look back on a long and busy life, being now 87 years of age, I must give my reminiscences of a city that I knew and loved before most people now living there were born — dating back to the year 1871, which was the year that my family and I moved to Mason City.

I want to tell you of those early days in Mason City and Cerro Gordo County — the 1870's and 1880's. I want to picture for you the youthful pioneer city and county in which I grew up. I ask you to remember that I am not a historian. Nor am I objective. If what I have to say seems too personalized, if it seems to dwell too much on my own life, I ask you to realize that my picture of Mason City 75 years ago is a first-hand account. The things I say are my own experiences, and I tell them to you not with autobiographical intent, but in the hope that through my memories you can see the vigor, the thrift, and the vision I found in the men who built a prosperous city and county. I ask you to remember that I grew up not *in* but *with* Cerro Gordo County.

As I have said, I was first introduced to Mason City in 1871. How long ago was that? Well, it was more than three-quarters of a century ago. It was the age of chin whiskers and sideburns. Ulysses S. Grant was President of the United States. And only 17 years before, the permanent population on the present site of Mason City had consisted of *one* man, who had survived the winter only through the mercies of visiting Indians who shared their venison with him.

Mason City, Rock Falls, Clear Lake (in fact all the towns of Cerro Gordo County) were still in their teens in 1871. This city, as it was then, would seem primitive to you today. But it was a proud and wonderful place to us then; not only to me, who had come from a Minnesota farm, but to the first inhabitants who had themselves built roads, railroads, a telegraph system, schools, homes, churches, farms, mills, and presses where only twenty years before the virgin prairie lay completely untouched by the white man.

As I describe the city as it was in 1871, it sounds rustic. There were mud roads and board walks. We used kerosene lamps. The city square had no trees at all. There were farms between the business district and the Milwaukee depot. To the south were thousands of acres of wild land. Though it even then bore the name "Mason City,"

you probably feel the designation "city" was rather ambitious for a population of approximately 1,500 people. The population of the entire county was 4,700.

But my family had come to Iowa because of Indian unrest in Minnesota, and Mason City was to me a refuge and a metropolis. In Minnesota we had lived on a farm near the towns of Hastings and Cannon. My father had oxen which traveled only two miles an hour on dirt roads. Our post office was two and one-half miles away and at first we had mail once a month; later, it came once in two weeks; finally, once a week, which we thought was wonderful. During the twelve years I lived in Minnesota, I had visited each nearby town only twice. Our closest neighbor was two miles away at first, and as the country settled more, the neighbors were one-half to a mile apart. There were neither schools nor churches near enough for our attendance. Is it any wonder Mason City seemed like Manhattan?

The most wonderful thing of all to me was the fact that this city had an educational system, for I was twelve years old and had never had a day of formal schooling. The first school I attended was a two-story stone building, complete with belfry. It was located near Parker's Mill, which is now the 300 block of First Street Southeast.

There were two teachers and two classes, one for beginners and one for advanced students. I recall being placed in the beginner's class with the little children and was like a bean pole in a radish patch. I still flush when I remember the rapidity with which the little tots spelled me down! My first teacher was Martha Waldo, who afterwards married John Stanbery, a name familiar to all Mason Citians. My classmates bore such names as McNider, MacMillin, Hanford, Patton, Burns, Miller, Baker, Bradley, and Gale.

The school was later moved to Vincent's Hall downtown and there Delia Camp Fletcher was the teacher. Mrs. Fletcher died but three years ago at the age of 96.

Beyond the privileges of schooling, Mason City and the surrounding country offered paradise to a growing boy. There were thousands of acres of prairie around the city, and I hunted prairie chickens with an old army musket many times in the fall of the year. There were so many prairie chickens that when they flocked and were flushed, the sound was like thunder. Lime Creek and Willow Creek abounded with pickerel, bass, pike, jack salmon, shiners, and other fish by the millions. Bullheads could be scraped out by the wagon load. Some of them were very large and were as fine for table use as large river catfish.

Besides hunting and fishing, we engaged in the usual age-old boys' activities. We were steady summer customers of the old swimming hole on Willow Creek, west of Mason City. I often played pins or marbles for keeps with Charlie McNider, who usually won. And of course, I tried a cigar at a much too tender age — behind a circus billboard in front of the park on what is now Federal Avenue. We had the annual excitement of the circus, though the authorities once closed it because the female members of the cast performed in tights!

The Fourth of July was the occasion for a community picnic near Parker's Mill at which the city furnished a free barrel of lemonade. One Independence Day celebration included firing a cannon near the old stone school house. This great event was somewhat of a failure, for the powder all blew out the touch hole with a roaring flame which scattered the people and scared the horses.

Full as it was, the life of a boy seemed short in the 1870's. Your fifteen-year-old sons are sophomores in high school. You are probably planning two more years of high school and four or more years of college before you send them out to make their own way. I was on my own at fifteen. Before I left the county, fifteen years later, I was to have engaged in a variety of vocations, including:

hired man, corn husker at twenty-five cents a day, farmer, thresher, traveling salesman, constable and assessor at Rock Falls, and finally owner of a jobbing company in Rock Falls. My varied interests enabled me to meet and know well most of the men in the county. They were friendly, courageous men who helped and taught me a great deal.

The business district of Mason City was very small, but the merchants whose two-storied buildings lined Main Street were good businessmen, and their stores well supplied with the needs of the towns-people and the farmers. I recall the Tuttle and Ensign clothing stores, the Purdy grocery, the Shepard book store, the Keeney livery stable, Warbasse and Lee hardware store, and the Wright general store. The local photographer was named Kirk. George Whitney was the blacksmith. The Igem cigar store had a wooden Indian out in front. The First National Bank was established in 1881. I had occasion to know its president, H. I. Smith, very well since I always threshed his farms for him.

No description of Mason City business at that time would be complete without a pause to explain how rapidly the city was expanding. In 1870 three railroads into Mason City were completed: the South Dakota branch of the Milwaukee, the

Austin branch of the Milwaukee, and the old Iowa Central. Within the next year the population of the city doubled. According to the *History of Cerro Gordo County*, published in 1883, there were only 326 dwelling houses in the whole county in 1867. In 1875, eight years later, there were 1,335 — more than four times as many.

The main business of the area, then as now, was farming. The farsighted merchants, bankers, and money lenders, such as Alonzo Willson and H. Gage, aided and nourished the farmers to an extent which contributed much to the present-day prosperity of this county. These men enabled many a farmer who came here a poor man to build a comfortable fortune. The merchants frequently and freely extended a year's credit to the farmers, who paid up in the fall of the year when their crops were harvested. And if there was a bad crop year, the merchants would see the farmers through the next one, even though they were unable to pay their bills in full.

Men were poor then, by today's standards. I remember once supporting myself by husking corn for twenty-five cents a day. The J. I. Case Company once offered me \$75.00 a month to act as an expert servicing their threshers. That was a fabulous salary. Interest on borrowed money was as high as labor was cheap — 2 per cent a month.

If the salaries paid make you snicker, and interest rates make you gasp, the other prices charged in the 1870's will make you groan with envy. A corn-fed rib roast could be bought for six cents a pound; a boiling beef at four cents a pound; a whole front shank for soup for ten cents, with liver and suet thrown in free. Round steak was three pounds for a quarter; sirloin steak was the same price. First class pork sausage was about three pounds for twenty-five cents. Sliced ham was ten cents a pound. Ham butts were a dime. Bacon was three pounds for a quarter. Eggs were from five to eight cents a dozen. Spring chickens sold in the fall for three cents a pound, live weight. Prairie chickens were ten cents each. It was hard to sell ducks and geese.

During the eighties, when I spent the winters traveling around selling books to the farmers, I stayed many times in hotels where my wife and I bought a big dinner for twenty cents each. Our son's meal was free. A good room with three meals a day cost three or three and one-half dollars a week. A two dollar meal ticket was good for twenty-one meals.

I do remember one very high price, however. I hired a one-horse top buggy from the Keeney livery stable for the Fourth of July in 1882 to use in entertaining my prospective wife, a Rock Falls

teacher. I paid twelve dollars for the use of this horse and carriage for one day. Mr. Keeney explained to me that the reason for the big charge was that he was completely sold out and was letting me use the horse and buggy which belonged to his wife.

I have already mentioned the basic importance of the early farmer upon whose success, then as now, the growth of all other businesses depended. That they were successful was no accident of fortune. Most of them arrived in the country poor and fought their way upward by farming the hard way. They raised virtually the same crops grown in the country today: corn, wheat, oats, rye, and stock. But they had no tractors, no combines, none of the modern farming machinery.

I knew the Cerro Gordo County farmers well. In addition to farming myself for two years near Rock Falls, I threshed for other farmers for five falls, and spent the rest of the year traveling around selling and delivering goods to them. The farmers were honest and reliable. In all the time I threshed for them, only one bill for \$25.00 went unpaid. They were generous and friendly and boarded my crew well when we worked for them. There was only one farm at which we threshers refused to eat. That farm belonged to a Russian who was otherwise good pay.

Most farmers fed us well. I remember one man even served us fresh beef. I asked him how it stayed fresh in hot weather. He answered that he kept it in a barrel of sour milk. I have since been reliably informed that fresh meat will keep over several hours in hot weather if submerged completely in clean sour milk, enough sour milk being put in the barrel or other receptacle so that the meat is completely surrounded and the sour milk is six or eight inches above the piece of meat.

Because of the gratifying associations with the early farmers, the threshing business was a profession I enjoyed a great deal, hard and dirty though it was. I had a twelve-horse thresher which never broke down. I have threshed the whole fall from the last of August until it froze without having to stop my machine fifteen minutes on account of it being out of order.

Moreover, the threshing business was a profitable venture. I cleared as much as six or seven hundred dollars a fall, often making fifty or sixty dollars a day with the thresher. By the time I gave it up, I was a greasy, overalled thresher of prominence.

In 1888 the path of my life led me away from Cerro Gordo County and Rock Falls, where by that time I had established a small wholesale business. I moved south to Iowa City and Cedar Rap-

ids, where I engaged in the wholesale business on a larger scale. I have since made my home in Cedar Rapids.

But I have never lost my interest in this county. My wife and I still own her family's homestead, the Roebuck-Main farm near Rock Falls, where we lived a short time after our marriage sixty-five years ago.

I derive a great deal of pleasure from my occasional visits to Mason City. Most of the companions of my youth are now gone, but the city itself is to me an old and dear friend. To this friend, whom I meet again after long years, I gladly pay the tribute, "You've done well." But as I remember the labors of the spirited men who sent this county snowballing into the twentieth century to gain more farms, new industries, and an increasingly bright future, I must modify the remark, "You've done well," with "and why not? Look at the start they gave you."

W. F. MAIN