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Frank R. Wilson

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# THE PALIMPSEST

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## Boyhood on the Farm

In February, 1838, Robert Wilson and his wife crossed the frozen Mississippi and settled one mile east of where Columbus City was later built. Wapello, which was to become the county seat of Louisa County, lay to the south, and Columbus Junction was later established to the north. Straggling Sauk and Fox Indians still camped about his cabin. Martin Van Buren was the President of the United States.

Robert Wilson's westward trek began in Belfast, Ireland, in 1821 when he, with two brothers, a baby sister, and parents, boarded a sailing vessel for America. The vessel ran into such violent storms that its journey to St. Andrews, New Brunswick, required nearly two months. Unable to get a boat at St. Andrews, they boarded a coast-wise vessel at Eastport, Maine, only to be delayed by a dense fog in Penobscot Bay. During another violent storm on the way down the coast the skipper was tied to the mast to keep him from blowing overboard.



The long journey across the sea had so weakened Robert's mother that she died in Philadelphia. The distraught family was assisted by Quakers, who buried the mother and helped them obtain a one-horse wagon in which they journeyed onward to Wheeling, West Virginia, where they boarded a steamboat for Rising Sun, Indiana. Soon they joined relatives in Ripley County.

Robert's father had been a skilled builder of linen mill equipment in Belfast, and he and Robert worked in cotton mills in Kentucky for several years. In 1837, Robert married Nancy McCray at Connersville, Indiana, and moved to Iowa.

Robert Wilson was a man of wide interests. He became a successful farmer in Louisa County, amassing a fair-sized fortune for those days. He had the largest library in the county, was the first to have a top buggy and to import ornamental evergreens. More important, he invented a tubular stove for which he secured a patent. His ventures were not always successful, however. When N. W. Burris laid plans to build Burris City on the banks of the Mississippi where the "Great Air Line Railway" was to cross, he asked Robert Wilson to help him finance it. Wilson invested \$20,000 but lost his money when most of the city was washed away by a rampaging river and the railroad could not get its financing.

Robert Wilson died in his late fifties leaving three sons — John Byron Wilson, founder of the



Wapello *Republican*; Alonzo Wilson, who homesteaded in Kossuth County before moving to Gosper County, Nebraska, where he died; and Milton Robert Wilson, who, after marrying Anna Roth in Columbus Junction, drove for seventeen days in a three-horse wagon to Woodbury County. Mrs. Wilson, who had been a member of a Pennsylvania Dutch group, went to Sioux City by rail later. The eighty acres they had purchased sight unseen were found to be worthless, and to secure a better farm they went into debt. A Sioux City lumber dealer named L. C. Sanborn loaned Wilson money to build a house. Twice grasshoppers wiped out Wilson's crops, but Sanborn was always ready with a helping hand.

Milton Robert Wilson retired to Sioux City in his fifties and died at the age of 79. Mrs. Wilson lived to be 86. They had three sons — George Byron Wilson, who, with his six sons and daughters, farmed more than a thousand acres of land east of Sioux City in Woodbury County; Chester H. Wilson, who is retired after 42 years of service in the Sioux City post office; and Frank Robert Wilson, the subject of this sketch, of Washington, D. C.

Youngest of three brothers, and having no sisters, I early became my mother's helper. I learned to cook and keep house, even to bake bread when my mother was back in eastern Iowa visiting her relatives. My father was fond of music. He



bought an organ and sent me to a neighbor woman to take lessons. Later, when the organist at our schoolhouse church died, I was offered the position since I was the only one who could play. I accepted on condition that I be permitted to select the numbers and practice week-days.

I have many memories of pleasant and tragic events in the neighborhood. An epidemic of diphtheria swept the community. The Buckner family lost four children within two weeks — all schoolmates of mine. I remember their father riding horseback through a snowstorm to borrow money for the funeral expenses from my father.

The hazards of winter were many. To get through snowdrifts on our mile-long walk to school we used stilts. Nearly frozen when we arrived, we spent the first two hours of the session around the pot-bellied stove. On the day of the great blizzard of 1888, I was kept at home, but my brothers trudged to school. The storm got so heavy that my father bundled up and tried to bring the cattle home. The animals refused to leave the straw-stack haven, and father came home loaded only with icicles. My two brothers did not come home that night. We thought they must have stayed overnight in the schoolhouse, but John Diediker, who lived near the school, took all twenty of the pupils home and bedded them down on the floor.

Summer had more pleasant aspects, particularly



when the neighbors joined forces to work on the roads to pay their road taxes and to help each other with threshing. One day father sent us boys to replace the cap sheaves on the oat shocks after a heavy windstorm. I picked up a stray bundle which concealed a big rattlesnake that struck at me and hit the sheaf. He was soon for the ages. And I was barefooted.

My father's Scotch thrift came in good stead one year when we had a severe drought which kept the ears of corn from fully maturing. He rigged up a four-wheeled device with blades extending from both sides and with a seat that would hold two. This device was horse drawn, and two of us sat on top to grab the stalks and drop them at the proper place for shocking. We cut up 110 acres. My father then had the wheels of a wagon reduced to half-size, so that during the winter we could tip the shocks onto the wagon. Most of our neighbors failed to take these precautions, and soon they were asking father to buy their cattle. We accumulated nearly 150, and I will never forget that winter's job of hauling fodder to a hungry herd. Father had us scatter the fodder on a hill of lifeless clay, and for years that hill continuously wore a cloth of magnificent blue grass. Prairie chickens came many miles to pick up the stray kernels. My father would permit neither us nor the neighbors to kill them.

My mother once told me that in the early days



of struggle on the farm she used to help my father plant the potatoes. Since there was no one at home to take care of three baby boys, she took blankets to the field, spread them in furrows, and put the youngsters to sleep.

Through our farm ran a creek with the unique name of "Big Whiskey." The story was that the man who named the creek found a cask of whiskey which had been left on the bank by Indians. We dammed the creek for swimming, but often a heavy rainstorm broke the dam. We did not realize then that this muddy water was laden with rich soil headed for the delta. Last year, when I traveled by the rice lands in Louisiana, I thought of our contribution.

Probably the most exciting experience I had as a child was a runaway of a three-horse team while I was walking barefoot behind the harrow. Frightened by something — I will never know what — they ran about half a mile before they stopped at a fence, ending a very dangerous adventure.

In the early days an abundance of blue joint hay, as tall as a man, grew in many valleys. Continued cutting killed it out, and the growth of wild hay declined. My father was the first in the neighborhood to substitute timothy, clover, and later alfalfa.

Two national events of that day remain vividly in my memory. One day, while we three boys



were working in the field, father came riding out to tell us some startling news that he had just learned at the country post office. It was the sinking of the *Maine* in Havana harbor.

Another event that filled the whole neighborhood with excitement was the prize fight between Sullivan and Corbett in New Orleans. My father, a very religious man, was opposed to prize fighting, but when the paper came I sneaked a look over his shoulder. He was so absorbed he did not notice my great interest. The Sioux City Fire Department named its two fastest horses Sullivan and Corbett, and for several successive years this team won the state championship of the fire-horse races at the annual Firemen's Tournament.

Northwest Iowa at that time had a preponderance of GAR's who dominated the politics; the whole area had a Republican outlook. When my father was made township chairman of the Republican campaign, I went with him all over the township to nail up posters of William McKinley. My father drove us to Sioux City when McKinley and William Jennings Bryan made campaign speeches to great audiences. By that time my father was lending some money, and he became concerned over Bryan's 16 to 1 issue. One day I went with him to Sioux City to have a printer make up notes containing the words: "Payable in Gold Coin of the United States." Throughout this period the farms in northwest Iowa were



getting larger as machinery was introduced, and there was a constant flow of the less successful farmers to Nebraska and Kansas.

For many young people, especially those whose older brothers would take over the operation of the land, the future was uncertain. I wanted to go to high school, and the nearest one was at Sioux City, ten miles away. My father got me a bicycle, and I rode the twenty miles each day. Once my bicycle broke down halfway home, and the exposure gave me pneumonia, which made it necessary for me to remain home another year. My father told M. D. Nicol, an old friend who was a life insurance agent in Sioux City, about my problem. Nicol had one son younger than I. They lived in a fine home and kept a horse, a carriage, and a cow. He offered to make me a member of the family if I would take care of his chores, and thus I started high school again. Although I had been admitted conditionally, I never had to take an examination during the four years. For my last two years in high school I got a job at a boarding house making beds and waiting on tables. I became editor of the high school paper, manager of the football and baseball teams, and played left tackle. One day I published a poem I had written on the death of President McKinley. Fred Beckman of the *Sioux City Journal* staff saw it and asked me to come to see him. I began to write high school news for the *Journal*. I was



a member of the Sioux City debating trio that won the state championship from Council Bluffs.

After graduating second in a class of 88 students, I got a cub reporter's job on the *Journal* at \$8 a week. One of my first assignments was to collaborate with Jay Darling (who later became one of the great cartoonists of the nation, using the signature "Ding"). He drew caricatures of prominent citizens, and I wrote the texts.

Subsequently Fred Beckman was made editor of the Council Bluffs *Nonpareil* and asked me to go with him at \$12 a week; later this was raised to \$15. On the staff of the *Nonpareil* was a brilliant young man, George Fitch, who wrote a column entitled "Frolics of the Types." He was the George Fitch who later wrote the famous Siwash stories and contributed frequently to *Collier's* and other publications. Beckman later became editor-in-chief of the Des Moines *Register* and was a member of the School of Journalism at the State Agricultural College at Ames. Now he owns the Knoxville *Journal* which, since his retirement, his son manages.

After a year on the *Nonpareil*, I had saved \$90, enough to enter the University if I worked my way. I went to Iowa City and lined up some jobs, including the writing of the University news for the Iowa City *Republican*. I also wrote articles for Omaha and Sioux City newspapers and a few for the Chicago *Tribune*. At the Iowa City depot



I was met by a committee from the Beta Theta Pi fraternity, and I joined under the sponsorship of Darling and Fitch, who had been fraternity mates at Beloit College. By this time, 1906, Darling was the cartoonist for the Des Moines *Register*, and by 1917 his cartoons were being widely syndicated through the New York *Herald Tribune*.

The *Daily Iowan* then was privately owned. Its editor — Roy A. Cook of Independence — had angered the University football team, and a movement was started to publish a competing paper. During my first year I was made editor of the new paper, *The Old Gold*. Cook then agreed to sell, and I became editor of the *Daily Iowan* at \$25 a month. I also earned \$1.50 a week singing tenor at the First Presbyterian Church. Although I had been elected business manager of the *Junior Annual*, I decided to withdraw from the University because I was neglecting the classroom for newspaper work, which I liked better. About that time John W. Carey, city editor of the *Sioux City Journal*, telephoned me that George D. Perkins, owner and editor of the *Journal*, was about to give political battle to Governor Cummins. Offered a position, I returned to the *Journal*. The following year I was married to Philena Yutzy, whom I had known through my high school days, and who had come back to Sioux City after attending the University of Wisconsin for a year.

FRANK R. WILSON