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In Retrospect

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The Majors War

Sometime during the year 1844, a family by the name of Majors migrated from the State of Illinois to the western part of Mahaska County, and formed what was known as the "Majors settlement". This family consisted of several brothers, two sisters, and their mother, a widow. One of the sisters was also a widow, and had two sons eligible to secure claims. In all, there were ten persons, each of whom claimed three hundred and twenty acres of land, amounting in the aggregate to five sections.

Having secured their claims, they were among the first to organize a claim club in that settlement, and adopt rules and regulations for the government and protection of claimants. But in 1847, when the land sales opened, one of the brothers, Jacob H. Majors, who seems to have acted as agent for the family, entered all their claims; after which, having abundance of means at his disposal, he proceeded to enter some timber claims belonging to John Gillaspy, Jacob Miller, and Peter Parsons. His plea was that he did not know the tracts were claims; but, after being informed that they were, he still evaded making restitution as required by the claim association.

[This account of the treatment of claim-jumpers is adapted for THE PALIMPSEST from an article by William Donnel published in the *Annals of Iowa* (First Series), Vol. VIII, in April, 1870.—THE EDITOR]

When the report of these transactions spread abroad, it created no little excitement among the settlers who feared a similar fate for all their claims. The Majors were a wealthy family and, if not checked, their example might embolden others to do the same.

In view of this alarming state of affairs, the claim clubs convened, passed resolutions denouncing the conduct of Majors, and decided upon a concerted movement to force him to deed back the claims above mentioned. He was a county commissioner and it was supposed he had many friends who might back him and show some hostility in his defense. This was the cause of the general uprising of the settlers in behalf of their rights. The central committee sent word to the various clubs, requesting them to meet at the residence of Jacob H. Majors, for the purpose of inducing him to make the required settlement. At the time specified a large number of people collected only to find that Majors had gone to Oskaloosa to attend a meeting of the county commissioners.

During the day the crowd was increased by fresh arrivals, and no little excitement prevailed on learning that the offender was absent. In order to induce him to come home a message was sent informing him that if he did not appear before sunrise the next morning his property would be destroyed. When night came without bringing the incorrigible Majors, it seemed evident that something more than gentle coercion would be necessary to bring him to terms.

Some of the company went home at night, but most of them remained to see what would happen. It is probable that Majors regarded their message as a mere threat, believing that no one would dare to render himself liable to punishment for a crime of such a grave character, and he therefore resolved to risk it.

Early in the morning the log stable was discovered to be in flames, and soon afterward the corn cribs and granaries were consumed with their contents. There was no live stock in the stable, but a number of hogs were either burned or killed by the more violent members of the mob who were not disposed to make idle threats. Majors, hearing that his property was being destroyed, sent word that he would deed the land back to the claimants, and with this promise the settlers dispersed to their homes.

Majors reconsidered the matter, however, and not only failed to fulfill his agreement but had warrants issued for the arrest of some of the more prominent leaders of the mob. Peter Parsons was apprehended and taken to Oskaloosa, and the report went abroad that he was in jail there. It was also rumored that indictments had been filed against about fifty others, among whom were George Gillaspy and John B. Hamilton.

All this was calculated to arouse the indignation of the people to a degree that rendered it unsafe for Majors to remain at home, and he found it prudent to keep out of the way as much as possible. The

settlers called another meeting to rendezvous at Durham's Ford, and from thence to go to Oskaloosa, release the prisoners, and punish Majors. It was late on Saturday when the summons came. The following morning a large number of armed men collected at Knoxville, resolved to stand by the settlers' rights at all hazards. A flag was prepared, showing the "stars and stripes", and inscribed in large letters, "Settlers' Rights".

This company reached the neighborhood of Durham's Ford that day and remained there until Sunday, some camping out and others putting up at the houses in the neighborhood. More settlers arrived from both Mahaska and Marion County, some on horseback and some in wagons, swelling the number to about five hundred. When all were together and organized in a kind of military order with arms, flag, fife, and drum, they presented a rather formidable appearance. To make an impression that would be likely to secure the object of the expedition without serious difficulty, the horsemen were drilled as cavalry.

Thus the army marched into Oskaloosa, reaching that place at about the time the prisoner was to be tried. Arms were deposited in the wagons, under guard, and infantry and cavalry formed in the public square. When this threatening demonstration was observed and its object made known, the trial of Parsons was indefinitely postponed, and he was released without bail.

I. C. Curtis, as spokesman for the settlers, stated the object of the visit, and was answered by R. R. Harbour of Oskaloosa, in behalf of the authorities. Then followed other speeches and replies that consumed the afternoon and were probably intended to kill time rather than to effect any definite compromise, thus giving the excitement a chance to cool.

During all this time Majors was present but not accessible to those who most desired to see him. In the evening he again promised to comply with the demands of the settlers, and the next morning redeemed his pledge by furnishing deeds to the persons whose land he had entered. Whereupon the army disbanded.

This was regarded as a final settlement of the war. It was all that had been contended for. But Majors was not satisfied with such a conclusion. He was in a rage. He considered himself a persecuted man, and the fire of revenge thus kindled in his breast rendered him indifferent to consequences. A mob had followed him, destroyed his property, and forced him to surrender land that he had claimed. The law was evidently in his favor, and to the law he would appeal. His offense was such as to demand redress, and his persistent refusal to make restitution voluntarily rendered coercion the only effective means to that end, yet the uprising was unauthorized by civil law.

Not long after this Majors prepared to bring the matter into court, but his action was so unpopular

that it was found almost impossible to secure the arrest of persons indicted. A friend of Majors had been defeated in an election of sheriff in Mahaska County and the officer who was authorized to make the arrests usually managed to notify the intended prisoners when he should call for them. Consequently, when he did call, they were often absent and their whereabouts unknown.

Majors was repeatedly advised not to prosecute but he persisted in doing so, thereby subjecting himself to the cumulative wrath of his enemies who finally determined to put an end to his legal threats. For this purpose a select company was sent in search of him, with orders to seize him wherever he could be found, and convey him to Knoxville. Majors, conscious of his danger, did not remain at his home, but frequently stayed with a friend who lived a few miles southwest of Oskaloosa. To this place the detachment went, but not finding him there they continued the search until they discovered him in a sawmill near the mouth of Cedar Creek, a little south of Bellefontaine. He was at work in the mill, sawing his own lumber. It was observed that he kept a gun near at hand and carried it with him when he had occasion to leave the mill, if only for a moment. Thus it was evident that great caution was requisite to effect his capture without serious consequences. To this end the men secreted themselves near-by, and sent one of their number, who was an entire stranger to Majors, to decoy him out, if pos-

sible, or throw him off his guard, until the others could steal in and seize him. The plan succeeded. Majors was soon engaged in conversation with his visitor, who had come to inquire after estray horses, and never noticed that the stranger stood between him and his gun.

Now was the crisis! Ere the victim was aware of the presence of another person, he felt himself seized by strong hands and carried out of the mill. As speedily as possible his captors tied him upon a horse, and then set out for Knoxville. On their arrival another select committee took charge of the prisoner. They were blacked, so that their identity could not be easily ascertained, and to this day, but few of those familiar with the circumstances can give their names.

By this committee he was taken about a mile north of town near the site of the county fair grounds where a preparation of tar and feathers was in waiting. There they stripped him of all his clothing, and applied a coating of the tar and feathers to his naked body. Over this they drew his clothing, and then completed the job by adding another coating of the same materials, giving to the wearer a very portly appearance. He was then permitted to go his way, with the admonition never to repeat the offense for which he had been thus severely punished.

Far from intimidating Majors this episode only made him the more indefatigable in his efforts to convict the leaders in the various assaults upon him.

The feeling against him as exhibited by the recent occurrence in the vicinity of Knoxville afforded such little prospect of success in Marion County, however, that he resorted to the courts of Mahaska County where he fancied public sentiment was more favorable. After a number of failures, he finally succeeded in obtaining bills of indictment against a number of individuals who had been disturbers of his peace during the claim difficulties.

A young man named Bush was among those indicted. Bush had incautiously allowed himself to be arrested, contrary to a well-understood arrangement, and entered into bonds to appear at the next ensuing term of court at Oskaloosa. Notwithstanding Bush's indiscretion, his friends resolved to stand by him, as they were solemnly pledged to aid and assist their associates in every emergency growing out of the claim war.

Accordingly, they made arrangements for the approaching trial. One of their number, who strongly resembled Bush in personal appearance, was chosen to represent him during the trial of the case. This was a bold step, but they ventured upon it.

At the sitting of the court, Bush and his substitute were surrounded by their friends. When the case was called, the impostor responded, took his seat in the criminal box, and plead "not guilty" to the indictment. In the progress of the suit, however, it became necessary to identify the prisoner at the bar as the real offending Bush. The similarity between

the two individuals was at first embarrassing, then inexplicable, and the court finally lost its temper and dismissed the case. The ruse was so successful that the case was literally laughed out of court, to the utter confusion of Majors and his attorneys, who were unprepared for this sharp practice.

At this turn of affairs when everything had seemed so promising, Majors was chagrined and discouraged. He made no further efforts to prosecute his tormentors, being convinced of the impossibility of securing a conviction in a community where the hand of every man was arrayed against him. Soon afterward he left the country to seek kindred spirits in Missouri.

WILLIAM DONNEL