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A Wise Time to be Born

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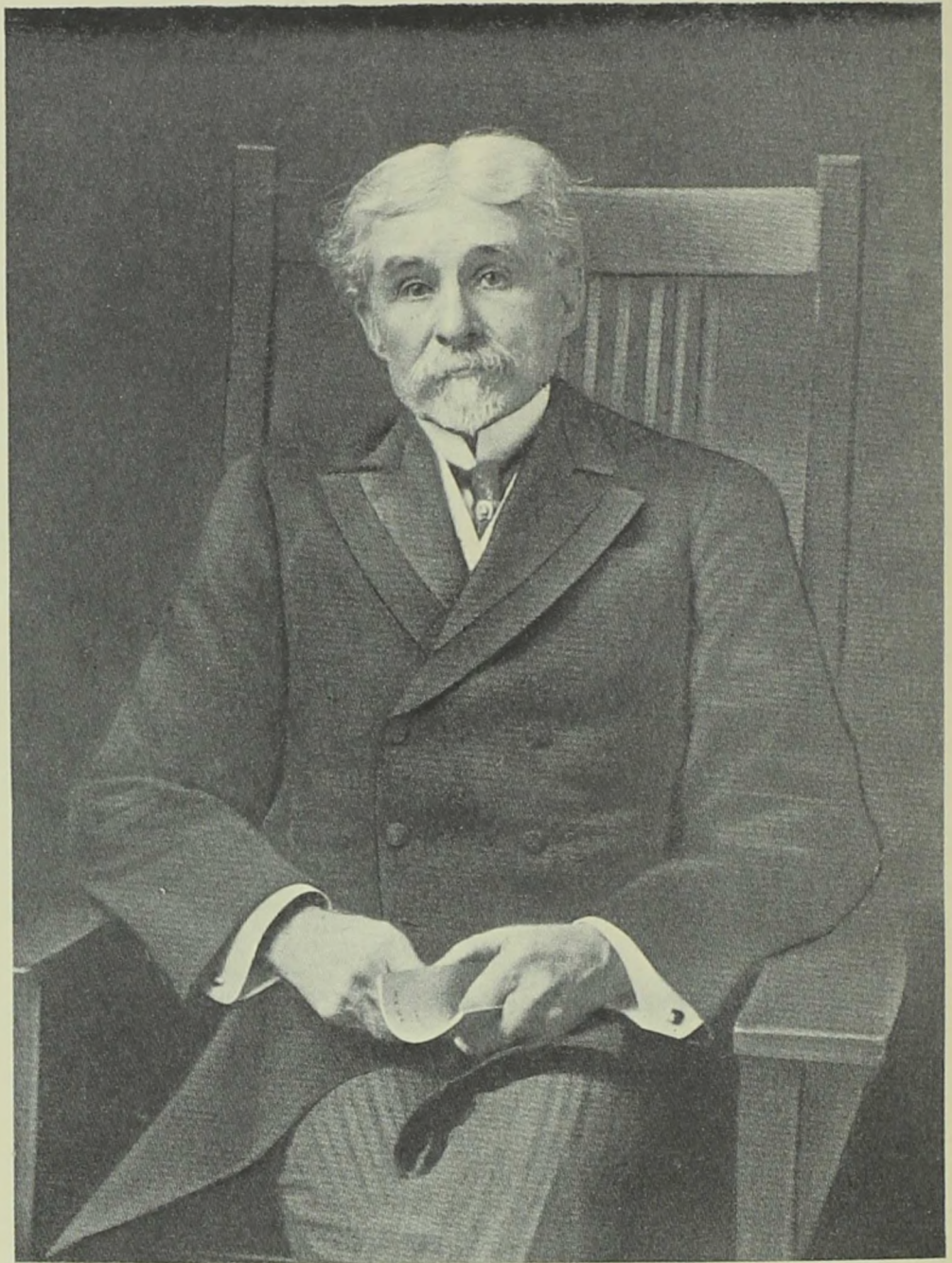
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J. Edmundson,

THE PALIMPSEST

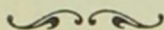
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A Wise Time to be Born

With rare prescience did he choose the time to be born. For who would wish to come into this world when the very title to the soil which first met his eyes was drifting about in uncertain allegiance? That little farm six miles north of what is now Burlington in Des Moines County, with countless others, had been a veritable waif amidst the primeval wilderness of the Mississippi Valley. First a part of the domain of Louis XIV, then of Spain's Charles III, then back to France — to Bonaparte indeed, who to spite England sold it to the American republic for ready cash with which to buy new eagles for the Imperial Guard, soon to grow resplendent under the Star of Austerlitz.

But that was not the end. This little plot in the Louisiana Purchase was still to be the victim of change. Uncertain of its destiny, it was swiftly in turn a part of the Territories of Indiana, Louisi-

ana, Missouri, Michigan, Wisconsin, and finally, in 1838, of the Territory of Iowa — settled at last and forever, and a fit spot from which to greet a new and strange world.

And so, everything being ready, on the morning of November 23, 1838, James Depew Edmundson, long of name but short of stature, took his diminutive place in the family oaken cradle before the great fireplace in the double log cabin on the primitive farm.

There was another reason why the child might with special fitness be born on soil that traced its title back to France. The pioneer mother, Priscilla Depew, who gave him birth, born in Botetour County, Virginia, on October 4, 1807, was one of a line that ran straight back seven hundred years to Duke Raymond DePuy, first Grand Master of the Knights of Malta. The father, William, was born in Harrison County, Kentucky, on October 5, 1805, removing to what is now Des Moines County, Iowa, in 1836.

The grandfather under the name William Edmiston (later changed by him to Edmundson), was born in Virginia on October 17, 1750. Serving in the Revolutionary army at the battle of Guilford Court House, he was struck on the head by a mounted British officer, and escaped only by feigning death. In 1794 he married Mary Cook,

eighteen years younger than himself. Soon afterward he settled in Kentucky, and in 1820 moved to Greencastle, Indiana, where he died in 1828.

Not long after James Edmundson was born, the family moved from the farm to Burlington and thence to Fairfield, Iowa. In 1843 the father, leaving the family at Fairfield, went into the Sauk and Fox Reservation, which was opened for settlement on May 1, 1843. It is said he plowed the first furrow in what is now Mahaska County. In that same year, on May 31st, the pioneer mother, Priscilla Depew Edmundson, made the supreme sacrifice in childbirth, leaving her two little boys — James, aged four, and his brother, William Jr., born on May 4, 1841. The children were taken back to Burlington by a maiden aunt and widower uncle, but in 1845 again joined their father at Oskaloosa.

William Edmundson was designated by an act of the Legislative Assembly in 1844 to serve as sheriff of Mahaska County. Having been elected to that office when the county was formally organized, he was again commissioned in 1845 to perform the services of sheriff in the organization of Marion County. One of the best known and most respected of the early settlers, he was selected as a member of the House of Representatives from Mahaska County in the extra session

of the First General Assembly, held in 1848 in the Old Stone Capitol at Iowa City. During the gold rush he joined the migration to California, where he remained five years before returning to Mahaska County. His very interesting diary of his trip across the plains in 1850 has been printed in the *Annals of Iowa*.

The boyhood of James was lived amidst the stirring events that marked the coming of the pioneers. Oskaloosa was directly on the line of migration up the valley of the Des Moines River. The boy saw the prairie schooners, the ox teams, the hurrying throngs day after day, their eager faces turned to the West. As a child of nine, he watched William W. Chapman, Iowa's first Territorial Delegate in Congress and later one of the founders of *The Oregonian*, start from Oskaloosa for Oregon with an ox team. He saw the late arrivals moving off to their new claims, rude cabins springing up everywhere from which curled the blue smoke that marked a new fireside. In spring and autumn nights shone the glare of distant prairie fires, and off to the west were "the plains", with stories of Indians and buffalo to stir the imagination of frontier youth.

But a boy of fourteen, if he is "poor", must find work and if nothing better, then in a lath mill raking out the sawdust, wheeling it away, and

chopping up the slabs. The pay was meager, the boy delicate, but one must live. In the summer of '53 there was work in the saw and grist mill of Roop and Son, and in winter, school in the old courthouse, taught by G. W. Drake. The next summer, work at five dollars per month in the store of Dawson & Waggoner, and in winter, school and, most important of all, a new boy friend, Marshall Byers, destined to fame as Major S. H. M. Byers, a distinguished poet and soldier in the Civil War. The friendship thus begun, flourishing now for seventy-eight years, is still intimate, precious, keenly alive. It is still "Jim" and "Marsh", as in the old days.

In '55 there was work in the store of Cooper & Kinsman mornings and evenings and more schooling. One morning, Jim was sweeping the sidewalk in front of the store when along came a boy looking for a yard of muslin on which to paint. Jim sold him the muslin and then and there was added to the pals Jim and Marsh a third, by name John, later Iowa's noted statesman — John F. Lacey. These three, Jim, Marsh, and John, from that day were inseparable as chums and in ties of loving friendship.

Jim's younger brother, William, was included in the group of boyhood friends, though his connection was not as intimate as the relations of the

triumvirate. A man of great learning and culture, trained in the medical profession, he lived most of his life in Colorado. His son, born on an anniversary of John F. Lacey's birthday, was named William Lacey Edmundson in honor of the life-long attachment of the Edmundsons and Laceys. He, too, is a doctor, and served as a major in the United States army during the World War.

In 1856 Jim Edmundson found work in the office of the County Treasurer, and in the store of Lee & Howard. During the following year there was a trip afoot to Newton to visit Uncle David Edmundson, who offered to keep the boy and send him to school. The man of ninety-four remembers with keen gratitude the debt to Uncle David for the training of those two years, to April '59. In '58 he clerked in the drug store of Chambers & Brown at Newton for thirteen dollars per month. One day a youth came in wishing to buy a blacking brush. Edmundson sold him the brush and there began an intimate friendship with Frank T. Campbell, later Lieutenant Governor. The boys slept together in the old courthouse in Newton. But health gave way with the indoor work and two or three months were spent driving about in search of its restoration.

In 1859 the youth went back to Oskaloosa and began the study of the law in the office of Seevers,

Williams & Seevers. Byers did the same in the office of William Loughridge. The two pals roomed together in the old courthouse, where Mr. Edmundson admits many more hours were devoted to music and the poets than to the law. Byers had a guitar and Edmundson a flute. Thus did eternal youth invoke the muses in '59 and '60!

The winter of 1860 brought the session of the Eighth General Assembly and Jim got a place as page in the House at the unheard-of pay of two dollars a day. Charles Aldrich was Chief Clerk and Ed R. Clapp Sergeant-at-arms. The session was held in Des Moines in the Old Brick State House on Court Avenue — warmed by a stove and lit by candles. As the dignity of the House forbade lighting a candle twice, the partly burned candles were the much-prized perquisite of the janitor! Edmundson stopped at the Grout House, a hotel situated on Court Avenue where the International Harvester Building now stands. The rates were four dollars a week for room and board.

Among the members in that Assembly whom Edmundson remembers vividly were N. B. Baker, Henry Clay Caldwell, Rush Clark, Samuel Merrill, and Jonathan C. Hall. It was the custom at the end of the session to present each member with a set of *Iowa Reports*, of which there were then only a few volumes. On this occasion J. C. Hall

arose and moved that a set be given to "J. D. Edmundson, first messenger of this house", the "best employee we've had this winter" — and it was done. Mr. Edmundson's volumes of Blackstone, the *Iowa Reports*, and the volume of *Morris Reports* given to his father in the First General Assembly, marked by many marginal notes, have been given to the State Library.

In 1860 came admission to the bar. During the following winter, James taught school at Rose Hill. Early in the next summer, he made a trip of from four to five hundred miles on horseback across the prairies of southwestern Iowa in search of health and a location in which to begin his law practice. His story of that trip is rich in dramatic interest — the great sweep of the prairies, the wild flowers, the swaying blue-stem, the long distances without a house, the violent storms encountered, the wild game, and the white eggs of the prairie chickens spotting the hillsides where the prairie fires had run. On west as far as Glenwood, he rode, then north, stopping often of nights at some settler's cabin, once where Anita now stands, and on, unmindful of roads until, on the twelfth day, Des Moines was reached.

The trip was momentous, for in June, 1861, with his whole fortune of \$115.15 in his pocket, mainly his savings as page, he went by stage to Glen-

wood and joined William Hale, an old schoolmate, in the law. Hale was later Governor of Wyoming. But clients were scarce and at the end of the first year he had but fifty-six dollars left and had spent two hundred and fifty. He knew to a penny all he had received and spent, and through a busy life rich in benefactions he has yet kept careful accounts, always strictly down to date. That winter, to recoup his fortune, he earned four hundred dollars keeping books in the store of Staude & Anderson, going back thereafter to the work of Hale & Edmundson.

One day while at Glenwood he was surprised, even alarmed, to receive by mail a large official envelope. He thought it must be meant for some other man. Not so. It contained a commission for him as Deputy Provost Marshal. He knew of no such office or why the commission was sent to him. But there it was, his appointment to the office, with a list of deserters whom he was to arrest. It was too good to be true. The salary was a hundred dollars per month! When he had recovered from his astonishment he busily set to work. Later he was made also Assistant Assessor and Deputy Collector of Internal Revenue. Everybody and everything were taxed. There was plenty to do. But he does not know to this day who suggested his appointment.

Through these years of young manhood, though in delicate health, he was not afraid of work, was methodical, careful in expenditure, scrupulously honest, inordinately shy, rich in human sympathy, jealous of a good name, determined to avoid debt, passionately fond of good books, a zealous champion of correct English, and always looking for wider opportunities. And he was responding to the stimulus of a thrilling era. The young State was a hive of industry — people scattering over the broad prairies, starting towns, building houses, breaking the sod, or moving across the Missouri, bound for the far reaches of the great Northwest. The horizon beckoning with the lure of the unknown, States to be built and officered, mines to be worked, millions of acres of mighty forests to be exploited, locomotives shrieking through lonely canyons, everything yet to be done — a free people with the blood of all the world in their veins, their tents struck, and on their way. Thus in 1866 the lot of James Depew Edmundson, aged twenty-eight, was cast in surroundings rich in possibility, full of challenge to the best that was in him. Amidst a thousand temptations, he had chosen a clean, fair path, certain to lead to a career of splendid service to his fellow men.

JAMES B. WEAVER