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Burlington Backgrounds

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Burlington Backgrounds

From the days of the Indians, all who have had their homes in the rich midland lying between the Mississippi and Missouri rivers have valued it for its wealth of promises — promise of bountiful crops from a deep, rich soil; of homes for those willing to work; of freedom for untrammelled development of the spirit. This was indeed a place where men might reasonably expect to grow to their full stature. The Indians called the land "Iowa" which meant, in their tongue, "The Pleasant Land," or "This is the Place."

When my mother came to Iowa in the winter of 1860, there was no bridge at Burlington to span the majestic river which marks the eastern boundary of the State. Little Kate Darrow, a big-eyed, laughing, observant child, very proud of having been allowed to travel alone all the way from Chicago, used to tell me later how, the railroad having stopped at the river's edge, she had been driven across the Mississippi's frozen waters in a stylish "cutter" to her sister's home.

As her brother-in-law turned his mare's head toward the western shore, he called Kate's attention to the ragged silhouette of the town clearly defined against the sky. There in the middle of the picture, at the lowest topographic point, was what had been the center of Burlington's early life, the steamboat landing. The sleigh crossing the icebound stream now made for that same landing.

On this site had once stood the Indian village of "Shokokon," a word that meant "Flint Hills," for the stone outcropping there, flinty and hard, made superior arrowheads. But Kate saw no Indians. They had been gone some time now. In the 1830's Black Hawk and his Sauk warriors had resisted the efforts of the whites to dislodge them from their village at the mouth of the Rock River. Vanquished at Bad Axe by such men as Colonel Henry Dodge, the Sauk and Fox signed a treaty relinquishing approximately six million acres of rich land along the western bank of the Mississippi — a strip known as the Black Hawk Purchase. By June 1, 1833, the Indians had vacated this area and permanent white settlement began.

Among the settlers who had streamed in to stake out claims at what is now Burlington were certain notable personalities. Dr. William R. Ross came up from Quincy, Illinois, with a stock of

merchandise and set up the first store. Dr. Ross carried the first mails, made the first survey (with an old rickety compass and a rope in lieu of a surveyor's chain), built the first church, organized the first school, handled the first bank deposits, arranged for the first elections, and welcomed to his own cabin the first court. One of the most important things he did was to promote a Vigilance Association, thus giving notice to the lawless elements that they had better keep away from Burlington if they wanted to avoid trouble.

Another pioneer was James W. Grimes — a comely youth who "always smiled with his eyes." Although only nineteen years old, Grimes was a graduate of Dartmouth College and an attorney-at-law. Grimes was destined to become Iowa's third governor, and later represented the young State in the United States Senate.

In the fourth year of settlement, Charles Mason (a native of New York state and a graduate of West Point Academy) arrived in Burlington. A man of striking physical attractiveness and distinguished legal gifts, Mason was shortly appointed the first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the Territory of Iowa.

David Rorer, a peppery little Southern lawyer, had his fingers in many early Burlington enterprises. He it was who drew up the first charter and ordinances, laid out many streets, and named

some of them. It is even claimed Rorer suggested the nickname for Iowa. With Illinois on the east being called the "Sucker State" and Missouri to the south dubbed the "Puke State," men like Rorer were alert to find a more dignified designation. It is said that Rorer suggested "Hawkeye State" to James G. Edwards, who in turn recommended it in the first issue of his *Fort Madison Patriot*.

Like the Indians, the Burlington pioneers had hugged the shore of the Mississippi; but, after a quarter of a century, the settlement was a thriving town climbing from the bottom lands to higher ground. Business was still conducted at the river level but homes had been moved to the loftier, more healthful bluffs lying to the north and south of the steamboat landing and spreading westward onto the prairie land. Generally speaking, citizens were classified as residents of North Hill, South Hill, West Hill, and Prospect Hill.

Early in the history of the settlement, its name had been changed at the earnest solicitation of John B. Gray, a homesick son of Vermont, from "Flint Hills" to "Burlington." There were those who had wanted to christen it "Catfish Bend." I feel, personally, indebted to Mr. Gray; I can't imagine myself willing to come to earth trailing my "clouds of glory" to a place called "Catfish Bend."

Kate Darrow first saw the sprawling town of Burlington at the close of one of the most vibrant periods in its history. By 1836, three years after the Black Hawk Purchase, churches, schools, and courts had been set up. By 1850 cholera had twice stalked the Upper Mississippi Valley towns, claiming many victims. Meanwhile, in 1848 and 1849, events occurred on opposite sides of the world — in Central Europe and in California — which greatly influenced the future of Burlington.

The revolutions of 1848 brought to Iowa many Europeans hopeful of escaping Old World tyranny with its military conscription, oppressive taxation, and belittling class distinctions. Large numbers of Germans, for example, settled in Burlington where, as cobblers, blacksmiths, carpenters, and saddlers they contributed usefully to community development. By 1860 people of German stock were playing an important role in Burlington industry.

When gold was discovered in California, hordes of men stormed across Iowa to reach the golden coast. And then it was that the wealth of Iowa soil was revealed — at a time, too, when the McCormick reaper and other inventions greatly increased production. A rich prize was Iowa, richer far than California's shining sands, 56,000 square miles of black soil, practically every foot of which was tillable.

From the East, from the South, and from the states of the Old Northwest, settlers had rushed in, people who in racial stamina, patriotic ardor, and intellectual vigor were of unparalleled superiority. They had come by every means of transportation and over many routes. Those who came by waterways came down the Ohio or up the Mississippi to Saint Louis, whence they boarded an Upper Mississippi steamboat for Iowa. Grandmother Brown and her family came by way of the Ohio. Fewer came by way of the Great Lakes to Chicago, where they could continue by stage or covered wagon, and after 1855 by railroad. Many of those who came overland followed the newly-opened National Road westward.

Prior to 1855 the Mississippi dominated the lives of Burlingtonians. The Great River was the main highway to the Black Hawk Purchase; it had given them easy access to the East and South; and it served as the main artery for both exports and imports. After 1855 the iron horse threatened the supremacy of the Great River.

Among the eastern capitalists interested in extending railroads westward from Chicago was John Murray Forbes of Massachusetts. As a lad of seventeen, Forbes had gone to China and amassed a fortune in seven years as the confidential agent of a Chinese mandarin. Influenced somewhat by James W. Grimes (who made a trip

to Boston to talk with him), Forbes helped finance construction of a railroad which became the "Chicago, Burlington and Quincy."

In the meantime, Mr. Forbes had decided to back the Hannibal and St. Joseph across northern Missouri and the Burlington and Missouri River railroad which had been projected across southern Iowa. By the time Kate came to Iowa, the Burlington had been constructed to Ottumwa. She may have noticed, on that first morning (in 1860), the station of the old "B & M" railroad not far from the water front and she could have seen a youth named Charles Elliott Perkins working there — a man destined later to become president of "The Burlington Route."

In its early years, Burlington was known as a rough river town. Naturally, whatever lawlessness was abroad at first had traveled the river route, as later it took to riding the rails. In 1844 there had been riots down the river around the Mormon center at Nauvoo, Illinois. When a mob had stormed the jail at Carthage, shooting down the Mormon leaders confined there, several Iowa lawyers had taken alarm. They were not minded to let their state be run at loose ends.

Another regulating influence had been powerfully at work. Men of missionary spirit representing numerous religious sects had come into the Upper Mississippi Valley. The church for which

Dr. Ross dug the cellar and made the brick was a Methodist meeting house — later known as “Old Zion.” Then, in 1839, Father Samuel Charles Mazzuchelli of the Dominican Order, called together the few Catholics at Burlington and celebrated mass with them in the cabin of a poor settler. When he left, two years later, the Catholics had a brick church designed by Mazzuchelli.

Other denominations followed. In 1840, the Episcopalians had founded their “Christ Church.” From the halls of Andover Theological Seminary in Massachusetts came a crusading group of eleven young men in 1843 who were known as “The Iowa Band.” In tender years, I used to think “The Iowa Band” was some kind of a nice musical organization that had marched into Burlington in early days with our Dr. Salter “going on before.” William Salter, the youngest of the eleven, was a youth of personal beauty and refined charm, of distinguished gifts and rare devotion who became the pastor of the Congregational Church dedicated in 1846. In 1845 the Presbyterians had come, and, four years later, the Reverend G. J. Johnson, known throughout southeastern Iowa as “a veritable dynamo of mental and spiritual force” had set up a Baptist church. Yes, Burlington, with its aristocratic English name, had settled down into law-abiding ways and was now a prosperous, well-conducted town populated by

exceptionally fine people in 1860 when Kate Darrow first saw it.

In 1868, when my father arrived in the Hawkeye State, the Mississippi had been bridged at Burlington. Edward William Connor and his brother, Francis Fisher Connor, were two buoyant young Canadians who had left their home in Ontario to seek their fortunes among "the Yankees" in the States. Peering out of the car windows, as they crossed the river on the new bridge, they thought they liked the looks of Burlington.

In the interval between the arrival of Kate Darrow and the appearance of Ned Connor on the Iowa scene, development of the West paused while the nation settled the slavery question. When war was declared, "Old Zion" became headquarters for recruiting officers.

With the war over, railroad building was renewed by John Murray Forbes. Charles Elliott Perkins went back east to marry his cousin, Edith Forbes of Milton, Massachusetts, who was also Forbes' niece. By 1866, Perkins had become Forbes' right-hand man in the management of his railroad interests.

A shift in the relationship between the river and the railroad became noticeable now. River traffic fell off as the transportation of troops ceased and railroads extended their lines further, although the social prestige of the lumber barons

held long after the railroad station had supplanted the steamboat landing as a center of interest.

Keeping the C. B. & Q. in order was the job of Thomas Jefferson Potter, its general manager. Potter was an ex-soldier discharged from the Army in the spring of 1866 after four years as a volunteer cavalryman during which time his invaluable wife, Jane Wood Potter, niece of his commanding officer, had shared his experiences on the western plains. That Tom Potter was more benevolently inclined towards the masses than was Charles E. Perkins, president of the Burlington, who had begun his railroad work humbly enough as a \$30-a-month clerk, I have no reason to believe, but Mr. Perkins was regarded as an outsider from the East with various aristocratic labels on him. He was spoken of as "Mister" Perkins, whereas Mr. Potter was just plain "Tom."

The people of Burlington took pride in Tom's meteoric rise; they cited it often as an example of the great opportunities offered in America to aspiring youth. "Just think! Tom Potter was once a peanut boy on the railroad! And now he is its General Manager." Whether or not Tom Potter ever peddled peanuts on the Burlington, or any other railroad, such legends made a good story. And, meanwhile, across the plains and mountains a vast railway network was pushing westward.

HARRIET CONNOR BROWN