

Eminent Iowan Series

Lois Craig

ISSN 0003-4827

No known copyright restrictions.

Recommended Citation

Craig, Lois. "Eminent Iowan Series." *The Annals of Iowa* 31 (1953), 564-587.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.7294>

Hosted by Iowa Research Online



The Mitchell Log Cabin, 1847



The Home in Mitchellville

Annals of Iowa

ESTABLISHED 1863

VOL. XXXI, No. 8 DES MOINES, APRIL, 1953

THIRD SERIES

Eminent Iowan Series

• •
THOMAS MITCHELL

• •
A STURDY PIONEER OF CENTRAL IOWA

By LOIS CRAIG¹

On a farm fourteen miles east of Des Moines, in Beaver township, the traveller who likes out-of-the-way places may find one of the oldest landmarks remaining in Polk county. Two and a half miles south of Highway Six, near Apple Grove Orchards, stand two buildings which are over one hundred years old. They are the horse barn and stage stand which were a part of the second stage station and hotel kept by Thomas Mitchell. Apple Grove or Mitchell Tavern was widely known as a convenient stopping place on the way to and from Fort Des Moines during the 1840's and 1850's and was kept by the man who was Polk county's first permanent white settler outside Fort Des Moines, its first sheriff, and one of its organizers. The living monument to this early pioneer of central Iowa is the town which bears his name — Mitchellville — situated eighteen miles east of Des Moines.

BOYHOOD IN NEW HAMPSHIRE

A leader of outstanding characteristics, Thomas Mitchell was descended from Capt. John Mitchel, na-

¹ Miss Craig is a native of Mitchellville, and has an M.A. degree in history from the University of Wisconsin. She is now teaching in the schools of Colorado Springs, Colorado.

tive of England, who served as captain on a vessel sailing from Bristol to America. Captain Mitchel was lost at sea before his son William was born at Heniker, Merrimac county, New Hampshire, in 1768. William Mitchel, Thomas' father, married twice, leaving eleven children by his first wife. His second wife was of Scotch-Irish descent — Mrs. Dorothy Blake-Mitchell — to whom was born Thomas in March, 1816, Henry Blake, and Mary Ann.²

William Mitchel moved to Claremont, New Hampshire, in 1791, and lived on a farm one and a half miles from there. In 1832, an accident with a team of horses resulted in his death. He was a prominent citizen of Sullivan county; in politics a Whig, in religion an Episcopalian.³

For a young boy of sixteen years, with several brothers and sisters and no father to earn the living, there was only one thing for Thomas to do — start out for himself. Having been reared on a farm, it was natural for him to look to the farm for his support. He went to work as a farm hand for a neighbor at eleven dollars a month, at the same time receiving four months' more schooling. The second year of this kind of labor brought him an increase to fourteen dollars a month, enough to allow him to lay away some savings.

The mills and factories throughout New England were attracting rural youth, and in 1836 a paper mill in Claremont drew the boy there, where he earned four dollars a week and eight cents an hour for overtime, overtime meaning work after the first twelve hours. The next year he went across the Connecticut river to Springfield, Vermont, where he worked in a mill at the same rate of pay. Perhaps the effect of the panic of 1837 caused young Thomas to change his occupation, but at any rate, the following year he took to the road selling books and paper.

² Dorothy Blake changed the spelling of her husband's name to Mitchell.

³ Corbitt, Willis G., "Genealogy of the Mitchell Family" (Mr. Corbitt, of Mollala, Oregon, is a grandson of Henry Blake Mitchell, who was a brother of Thomas); *Des Moines Register*, July 20, 1894.

Typical New England institutions flourished in the environment that shaped the mind and character of young Thomas Mitchell. In Claremont there was a society for debating, declamations and other literary exercises. During the 1830's he might have been influenced by the Claremont Independent Temperance Association, and perhaps he participated in the Sacred Music Society, with its membership of sixty, or in the band which gave concerts. His young heart may have been thrilled with the visit to Claremont of General Lafayette in 1824.⁴

DECIDES TO LEAVE THE EAST

It was probably for a combination of reasons that he decided to leave New Hampshire. The panic of 1837 and the struggle to get along in the factories there no doubt gave him a desire to improve his lot financially. Then too, he might have turned away from his crowded native state to seek new adventures. Possibly he had heard of the Black Hawk Purchase in 1832, which made land available for settlers in the Territory of Iowa. No doubt he felt the spirit of unrest and change that was "in the air" all over America in the 1830's.

When Thomas Mitchell left his New Hampshire home on November 2, 1839, he took with him certain characteristics of the New England mind which were bound to make him succeed on the frontier. His Yankee mind was quick and sharp, singularly honest. He was industrious and possessed a hardy perseverance which was a requisite for one who was to help tame a wilderness. He was imbued with a passionate interest in self-culture, as nearly all New Englanders were, and he had a profound respect for formal education. The struggle he went through in New Hampshire as a young man schooled him for greater hardships which he endured out on the lonely frontier.

He inherited from his father his politics, for William Mitchel was a Whig and an ardent abolitionist. Yet

⁴Waite, Otis F. R., *History of Claremont, New Hampshire; Claremont National Eagle*, Spring, 1837, (in *Wisconsin University Historical Library*).

he exchanged his father's faith for another creed. We have no clue as to why he did not remain an Episcopalian as he was probably brought up and as most of his brothers and sisters remained. Whatever his childhood faith may have been, he became a Universalist and adhered to that belief for the rest of his life. The doctrine of Universalism was spreading in New England at the time Thomas was growing up, and there was a church of that denomination in Claremont.

No record of his trip to Iowa is available, but it is reasonable to suppose that as he came west he took the same route which his brother Henry did a year later. Henry travelled over the mountains by oxen and wagon to Troy, New York, from there to Buffalo over the Erie canal, then by canal to Portsmouth, on the Ohio river, and from there to Cairo, Illinois, and up the Mississippi river.⁵

MITCHELL COMES TO IOWA

A month after he left New Hampshire, Thomas Mitchell arrived in St. Louis. He spent the first winter in St. Charles county, Missouri, working as a farm hand. In March of 1840 he arrived in Iowa, a territory that was attracting settlers by the thousands every month, having been opened to permanent settlement only seven years. The rich soil, the streams and woods, which easily yielded game, and the rapidly rising communities no doubt held out promise and hope to a young man with strength, ambition and ability. The town of Fairfield, in Jefferson county, appealed to him, a town which was literally on the edge of civilization. He took up a claim near there, upon which his brother Henry later lived, and entered into the life of the frontier community. In 1841, the brothers built the first frame dwelling house west of Fairfield.⁶

Having made some progress financially, and deciding that Iowa was the place he was going to settle, he did what many pioneers did — return to New England for

* Corbitt, Willis G., "Genealogy Record of Henry B. Mitchell Family."

⁶ *The History of Jefferson County, Iowa*, p. 512 (1879).

a wife. In 1841, he married Miss Almira Swift in Thetford, Vermont.

Back in Fairfield in April, 1842, he was elected Commissioner of Jefferson County and held the office for two years. According to one writer, that same year he was sent to St. Louis from Fairfield to carry the first money received by the government from a land office in Iowa. He furnished his own team and was paid \$1.25 a day.⁷

When the government drew up the treaty with the Sac and Fox Indians at Agency City, Wapello county, on October 11, 1842, Thomas Mitchell was there to witness that momentous event.⁸ By this treaty the Indians were required to give up their homes in Iowa territory after three years from that date, and the government was to establish a Fort to protect them until they should go farther west.

FINALLY LOCATES IN POLK COUNTY

Opportunities farther west for Mr. Mitchell were dependent upon the results of the Treaty of 1842. In May, 1843, Capt. James Allen with 120 men arrived at the fork of the Raccoon and Des Moines rivers to set up the fort, in compliance with the treaty of the year before. Captain Allen, commander at Fort Des Moines, and Capt. John Beach, agent for the Sac and Fox Indians, gave Thomas Mitchell permission to build a stage station fifteen miles east of Des Moines on Camp creek in what is now Beaver township.⁹ For the right to settle in the area Mr. Mitchell was to build a bridge across the creek and keep the public at his place.¹⁰ The station also met the need for a post office between Fort Des Moines and Fairfield. Daniel Trullinger, an

⁷ Undated clipping from scrapbook owned by Mrs. U. B. Rogers of Des Moines. Mrs. Rogers is a daughter of Thomas' brother, Henry.

⁸ Frost, G. B., "The First White Settler in Polk County."

⁹ Original, unpublished, undated manuscript by Thomas Mitchell telling of the founding of Beaver township.

¹⁰ Nelson, Howard J., "The Economic Development of Des Moines," *Iowa Journal of History*, 48:195 (July, 1950); Thomas Mitchell Manuscript.

acquaintance of Mitchell's from New Hampshire, who had also pioneered in Fairfield, came to the fort in 1843 and recommended his friend Mitchell for the postmaster's job.

Accordingly, Thomas' partner-brother Henry, who had come to Fairfield in 1840, travelled the one hundred miles to Apple Grove by ox team in February, 1844, and started preparing a home for Thomas and his family. The winter was an unusual one — open and balmy, so warm that Henry was able to turn the cattle out to graze on the grass which grew so luxuriantly.

The house that Henry built was located fifteen miles east of Des Moines on Highway Six and one half mile south on the west side of the road east of Camp creek. It was a double log house, each cabin sixteen by eighteen feet, of hewed green logs with puncheon floors. The beds were built into the corners, thus requiring only one leg. The windows with sashes were probably the only luxury connected with it. To this crude home Thomas brought his wife and two children, a hired girl, and a hired man on April 14, 1844.

Their wheat had to be hauled by wagon over the prairie from the Mitchell farm near Fairfield. At first they took it to Bonaparte to be ground, later to the mill four miles north of Oskaloosa. Three lonely months passed before Mrs. Mitchell saw another white woman, except the hired girl. Mrs. Captain Beach stopped at the inn on her way to see her mother, Mrs. General Street, at the Agency in Wapello county.¹¹ Three encampments of Sac and Fox Indians were nearby, for this was still their country.

Twelve and a half cents a meal (side pork, corn bread and milk) and twenty-five cents for a night's lodging were the usual rates charged to the travellers who stopped at Mitchell's Inn. Their guests were many, for theirs was a strategic location. "It was necessary to have a feeding place between the Indian boundary line and the fort, the line being near where

¹¹ Thomas Mitchell Manuscript.

Monroe now is. All of the supplies for the Indians and troops had to be hauled by wagons from Keokuk to the fort. Therefore there was considerable travel."¹² The wagon roads to the fort brought business to the tavern, and in 1845 the legislature made provision for the building of a road connecting Iowa City with the garrison.¹³ By 1850 the stage coach was making trips to Fort Des Moines.¹⁴

A FRIEND OF THE INDIANS

The Mitchell brothers (Henry stayed at Apple Grove for almost three years before returning to settle at Fairfield) maintained friendly relations with the Indians, sitting with them around the campfire at celebrations and special occasions. Both temperate men in the Puritan tradition, their consciences permitted them only to pretend that they were partaking of the whiskey bottle and peace pipe as they were passed around.¹⁵

Thomas knew Black Hawk, Appanoose and Powesheik personally.¹⁶ One writer claimed that he also was able to converse freely with the red men in their own language, that they came to him for advice in times of trouble, and even that it was through his influence and friendly relations with them that the state was saved from massacres.¹⁷ Although there is not sufficient proof for these assertions as yet, there can be no doubt that his relations with them were of a fraternal nature, not only during the period before their exodus to Kansas, but also after their return, and that this state of affairs was conducive to a successful and rapid settlement of this section of the frontier.

Mr. Mitchell entertained his eastern relatives and friends by taking them to see the Indians. One such

¹² Thomas Mitchell Manuscript.

¹³ Nelson, "The Economic Development of Des Moines," 198.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 201.

¹⁵ Corbitt, "Genealogy Record of the H. B. Mitchell Family."

¹⁶ "Early Iowa Men and Stories," undated clipping from Rogers Scrapbook.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

occasion was described by Mary Ann Mitchell, who visited her brother Thomas in the summer of 1850:

1850 July 13 went with Thomas & Almira & Mr. Carey to see the Indians camped on Skunk River on their way back to their home beyond the Missouri two squaws and one Indian came to ask Thomas to go to their tent Thomas bought a pipe for John, paid fifty cents for it saw Poweshick the chief of the Sacks and Fox Indians I should judge him to be about fifty years of age good looking has coat and dress like white people when in company with the whites he had nothing but a blanket on when in the tent. Some Winnebago in company, ec . . .

Another entry reads as follows:

went to see the Indian war dance in Ft. Des Moines about seventy warriors rode into town and around and then formed a circle and danced about an hour it was a novel scene.¹⁸

PUBLIC ENTERTAINED AT THE INN

Government men, army officers, immigrants and travellers of all sorts came to the Mitchell Inn and enjoyed the warm and sincere hospitality of its proprietor. No needy person was ever turned away. The story was related of a young man who stopped at the Inn over night and was preparing to leave the next morning without his breakfast, excusing himself by saying he did not feel well, while in reality he did not have enough money with him to pay for his meal. Thomas insisted on feeding him anyway. The young man was W. W. Moore, who later became a prominent business man in Des Moines.

Even religious refugees found a cordial reception at the inn. A band of 300 Mormons stopped for a rest of several days in July, 1845, camping in front of his tavern. They were travelling to Council Bluffs from Nauvoo, Illinois, and the genial host "sent them on their way rejoicing."¹⁹

The westward bound traveller, reading the *Harris*

¹⁸ Original diary of Mary Ann Mitchell, in possession of Mrs. U. B. Rogers. Mr. Carey, from Claremont, New Hampshire, later settled in Polk County and worked for Thomas Mitchell.

¹⁹ Andrews, L. F., *Pioneers of Polk County, Iowa*, II, 11; *Iowa State Register* (Daily), November 11, 1871.

Over Land Guide of January, 1852, possibly saw the advertisement of the tavern:

Tom Mitchell (!!!) Dispenses comfort to the weary (!) feeds the hungry (!) and cheers the gloomy (!!!) at his old, well-known stand, 13 miles east of Ft. Des Moines. Don't pass me by.

And not many did. The tide of immigration in the 1840's and 1850's brought hundreds and thousands of people by way of Fort Des Moines to Council Bluffs, the starting point on the Oregon Trail. The "Forty-Niners" were advised to go through Fort Des Moines, and the *Iowa Star* for September 28, 1849, carried a reprinted article from an eastern paper entitled "Best Route to the Pacific." During that exciting year Mr. Mitchell fed 7,000 teams at his tavern.²⁰

At least one foreign traveller stopped at Mitchell's Inn. An Englishman came upon the proprietor one day while he was shingling the roof. The guest called out, "What are you doing here?" The answer he received may have been given only half seriously, but it can be said that Thomas Mitchell did these things during his life time: "I'm feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the widows and fatherless, and keeping myself unspotted from the world." The Englishman stayed long enough to learn that he was a dispenser of true hospitality, and when he returned home he mailed Mr. Mitchell a copy of a London newspaper with an article mentioning his visit to the Mitchell Tavern.²¹

PUBLIC LIFE DURING 1840's AND 1850's

A man of unusual energy and ambition, Thomas Mitchell not only found time to be a genial host, but he also worked to build up the country beyond the limits of his own plot of ground, a fact which made him well known in central Iowa. He took a significant part in the formation of the county and the state and was also a booster for Des Moines. When Iowa's

²⁰ *Iowa State Register* (Daily), July 17, 1894.

²¹ Conversation with Harry Mitchell, son of Thomas.

territorial delegate, A. C. Dodge, visited the area that became Polk county, in 1845, in order to secure the opinions of the settlers regarding statehood, he held an interesting conversation with Mr. Mitchell. The general explained that the western boundary line would likely be drawn a few miles west of the fort, since what lay beyond was a part of the Great American Desert. It is not known whether Mitchell's opinion carried any weight or not, but he expressed the view that Iowa's western boundary should extend to the Missouri river.²²

BECAME POLK COUNTY'S FIRST SHERIFF

The territorial legislature passed an act in January, 1846 which provided for the organization of Jasper and Polk counties, and for the election of officers on the first Monday in April of that year. For the voting in April the clerk of the district court established three precincts, one of which was called the Camp creek precinct at the Thomas Mitchell house. One result of the 175 votes cast in the county was to make Mr. Mitchell the sheriff until the regular election in August. At that time he was again elected and held the office until 1848.

His work as sheriff consisted partly in apprehending fugitives from the law, rounding up horse thieves, and summoning jurors for district court. One time a mob was going to hang a horse thief, but Sheriff Mitchell prevented it.²³

Not only did he protect his fellowmen from out and out criminals, but he also worked to safeguard them from shrewd swindlers. In the spring of 1848, a public meeting of citizens at the fort was held to adopt measures for protection against land speculators. As a member of the Claim club which was established at that time, Thomas Mitchell was a strong advocate of the rights of settlers.

²² *Des Moines Daily Iowa Capital*, July 16, 1894; *Des Moines Plain Talk*, July 21, 1894; *Iowa State Register*, July 17, 1894.

²³ Conversation with Harry Mitchell; Andrews, *Pioneers of Polk County*, I, 8.

Nearly every county has a story about the dispute over where the county seat was to be located. Although not as violent as many, Polk county had its difficulties, and Thomas Mitchell, along with Dr. P. B. Fagan and some other men, worked for the location at the Fort. On a cold day in February, 1846, the men started for Iowa City to work as lobbyists and confer with the commissioners of location. The first night out from the fort they were compelled to stop at a cabin four miles east of Newton. The accommodations they received were perhaps not as good as those the tavern operator was in the habit of extending. They had to sleep in trundle beds and were "refreshed" in the morning with corn bread and sour bacon.²⁴

SOCIAL LIFE AT THE INN

With a variety of visitors at the tavern, the Mitchell family did not experience the monotony that was common to most households on the frontier. In the spring of 1846, three men who were destined to become distinguished citizens of Des Moines entered Polk county and dined at the tavern — Dr. P. B. Fagan, P. M. Casady, and W. D. Frazee. It was an exciting day, for a marriage ceremony took place in Mitchell's log cabin, uniting Benjamin Bryant and Elvira Birge. Some writers have called this the first marriage in Polk county. The occasion might have been more dignified if the squire who performed the ceremony had not forgotten some of his lines. In a loud voice a lawyer who was present threw him the missing words from across the room and the couple was made man and wife. On the same day, when Thomas' young son Orrin was bitten by a rattlesnake, Dr. Fagan was there to prescribe two old-fashioned remedies — whiskey and tobacco.²⁵

Before the people in eastern Polk county were bound together by a town, with its various institutions, the Mitchell Tavern was the center of community life. In

²⁴ Frost, "First White Settler in Polk County," 4.

²⁵ Frost, "The First White Settler in Polk County," 4.

the midst of pressing, pioneer duties, they took time out for rollicking good times, parties which attracted not only young people from the immediate vicinity, but also from Des Moines. The following account by W. W. Moore vividly describes one phase of the social life of the inn:

In the early days, when a snow storm came, we young folks — Hoyt Sherman, Mr. Tidrick, Mr. Casady and a lot more of us — would hustle out, get a wood-sled — sleighs were not in fashion — and, picking up a fiddler, would start in early evening for Uncle Tommy Mitchell's. We never sent any notice, but, getting there at seven o'clock or so, would soon have possession of the house. Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell could join the rest of us in a good old-fashioned dance and at midnight would serve us a supper that it makes by mouth water now to think of.²⁶

Postoffice, voting place, hotel for travellers, and social center — the Mitchell Tavern at Apple Grove served as all these. It also was somewhat of a religious and educational center for the settlers of the surrounding area. Travelling preachers gave sermons there on occasion. Ezra Rathbun, a licensed Methodist preacher, was one of them.²⁷ Sanford Haines and a Mr. Pardoe were two others. Until churches were built the pioneers who were interested in religion often held services in their homes, so that, of course, Mr. Mitchell's home was not the only place where they could hear preaching.

SCHOOL FACILITIES PROVIDED

The settlers of Beaver township and Apple Grove district did not wait for ideal conditions before starting a school. Mr. Mitchell, having received his schooling in New England, where much importance was attached to popular education, took the initiative in the

²⁶ *The Saturday Review*, July 21, 1894.

²⁷ Ezra Rathbun preached the first sermon in Fort Des Moines, the occasion being the funeral of Lt. Grier's baby. Ezra's father, Abner, was founder of the Methodist Episcopal church in Des Moines (F. T. Van Liew, "Famous Names Among Early Residents of 'Raccoon Row'", *Des Moines Tribune*, June 15, 1946). The Rathbuns, father and son, are buried in the Canfield cemetery eight miles southwest of Mitchellville, just north of Highway 163.

enterprise. He was in conversation with a neighbor, William Sweeney, who seemed not to know what steps to take. Sweeney asked, "Where can you get your scholars, where can you get a room, and above all, where can you get a teacher?"

The native New Englander replied, "You have two scholars [two children], I have two. I can give a room over the bar room in the hotel, as it is only used as a bed room at night, and I can furnish a teacher for eight dollars per month, by the name of Miss Lucia Carey, and she can pay for her board by helping my wife evenings and mornings in the hotel."

The idea was carried out, using an elementary spelling book and the simple materials at hand. For two years the school was kept, with an uncertified teacher and without the aid of a county superintendent, for that office had not yet been created. So far as is known, this was the beginning of schools in Beaver township.²⁸

SECOND TAVERN

The original cabins and farm, which the Mitchells took up in 1844, were sold in 1846 to Mr. George Barlow, whereupon the tavern owner moved a mile and a half south and a half mile east, among the wild apple groves near Camp creek. Here he built a larger stage station and hotel, this time a frame building with a long dining room, a large horse barn and a building through which the coaches drove, a place of protection where the passengers alighted. This latter is still standing, a weather-beaten, unpainted building. Made out of walnut, it has wide double doors on opposite sides and windows set high above the entrance and exit. The farm is owned now by Prof. Charles Kinney of Des Moines.

It was to this second tavern that Thomas' brother Henry brought his bride in 1847 for a three weeks' honeymoon before taking her to their home west of

²⁸ Williams, J. D., "Historical Sketch of the Williams Family," 7. Mr. Williams was a pupil in that first school.

Fairfield. In his travelling back and forth between his brother's tavern or the fort and Fairfield, Henry Mitchell had often stopped at an inn at Tool's Point (now Monroe). Here he had made the acquaintance of young Maria Tool who became his wife. After the wedding the couple started off for the Mitchell Inn at Apple Grove in a covered wagon drawn by horses, which according to the standard of the day was a more stylish way of travelling than by an ox-drawn vehicle.²⁹

MITCHELL'S FIRST TOWN

The prospect of the coming of the railroad changed Mr. Mitchell's location in 1857. The Mississippi and Missouri Railroad (later Rock Island) was surveyed by Grenville M. Dodge and Peter A. Dey in 1852 and 1853. It was thought and hoped that the road would reach Des Moines by January 1, 1857. With that expectation bonds were voted, and there was an increase in the influx of settlers.³⁰ Mr. Mitchell spent much time in the western part of Jasper and the eastern part of Polk county urging people to vote the aid and in securing the right-of-way for the company. He donated the right to the railroad where it crossed his land for one mile. He also helped to secure the right-of-way for the Des Moines Valley Railroad.

Mr. Tracy, an official of the M. & M., suggested that Section Two in Beaver township would be a good place for a station and promised to make one there when the road came through. Accordingly, Mr. Mitchell and two men from Wayne county, Indiana, laid out a town of eighty acres, railroad grounds and all, in the first part of 1857. The railroad did not come, but the town grew in spite of it. The Crisis of 1857 and the Civil war kept the people waiting ten long years for "the cars."

At the pinnacle of its fame the little town of Mitchelltown, which lay a mile and a half northwest of the

²⁹ Corbitt, "Genealogy Record of Henry B. Mitchell Family."

³⁰ Thomas Mitchell Manuscript.

present town, reached a population of 200 in 1861.³¹ Nothing remains to mark the site now. The clump of beautiful old maple trees, which was a landmark for so long, was cut down a few years ago, leaving only an unrevealing field of corn.

Mr. Mitchell was rightly called the chief proprietor of the little village. He and R. B. Ellis put up a steam saw mill at Trullinger Grove nearby, so that lumber would be available to those who wanted to build houses. He built for himself a twenty-one room house just outside the town and a large hotel inside the town which was always operated by someone else. He urged settlers to come there to live. At least three families were from his home town of Claremont, New Hampshire. A tannery, shoe shop, store, hotel, blacksmith shop, and school gave the place "quite the appearance of a town," according to the village's number one booster.³² He built the school house himself, hired the teacher, and also furnished the fuel and other necessaries for several years. The building was considered quite "nobby" by the people in those days, for it had a steeple and bell on top.³³

In many frontier settlements the school house served as a church edifice and public gathering place as well as for educational purposes. It was so in old Mitchelltown. Preachers of the Universalist, Christian and Methodist denominations held services there from time to time. It was the scene of political debates and speeches during the Civil war, and temperance lecturers gave orations there. The community also supported a Good Templar lodge and a brass band.

The outside world was brought to the village by means of the stage coach and newspapers from Des Moines and other cities. In 1861, the route of the

³¹ *Mitchellville News*, September 27, 1878. (The town's official post office name was Mitchellville, but it is still referred to as Mitchelltown to distinguish it from the present town.)

³² Thomas Mitchell Manuscript.

³³ Blyler, Frank F., *Reminiscences in Mitchellville Index*, January 22, 1892.

stage coach was changed from Apple Grove, five miles south, to go through Mitchell's town, a breakfast stop on the run from Des Moines to Iowa City.³⁴

MITCHELL'S SECOND TOWN

It is impossible to give the exact reason or reasons why the surveyed line of the railroad was changed. In August, 1867, the long-awaited "cars" of the Rock Island came on rails laid down where the present route lies, leaving Mitchelltown out in the cold. Not to be outdone, however, Thomas Mitchell and his townspeople probably thanked God and took courage; that is, thanked God for the railroad and with courage started building a bigger and better town.

In June, 1867, Mr. Mitchell and a Des Moines surveyor laid out the present Mitchellville on a 160-acre plot which he owned. In the mind of the founder it was to be an ideal town. Allowance was made for wide streets — 100 feet wide north and south, eighty feet wide east and west. Whether by accident or by intention, the cultural pattern was in many respects similar to that of the town he left behind him in New Hampshire. Its well-built houses would have enterprising, industrious, sober-minded, cultured people in them. It would have churches and prosperous businesses and a school. It would *not* have a saloon, for he refused to sell lots to anyone wishing to engage in the liquor business.

Mr. Mitchell was largely responsible for the organization and building of the Universalist church in Mitchellville. The date above the door of the simple, white-spired, New England style church is 1868. He was an active worker not only in the local church but also in the state organization, serving in various offices.

MITCHELL SEMINARY

During the years 1871-1872, there was an expectant, prosperous outlook in the community, with new businesses and dwellings being erected and many new set-

³⁴ *Iowa State Register* (weekly), September 4, 1861; *Mitchellville News*, September 27, 1878.

tlers arriving to make Mitchellville their home. The chief reason for the increased activity was the project initiated by Thomas Mitchell, described in the following newspaper account:

"An educational institution called Mitchell Seminary will go into operation next year at Mitchellville, Iowa, under the management of the Universalists. The building, which is now in process of erection, is of brick and stone, and is four stories high, and 120 feet long. The Hon. Thomas Mitchell has endowed the seminary with \$20,000 worth of land. — *New York Tribune*."

Many of our old citizens remember the founder of this institution. Hon. Thomas Mitchell is a native of Claremont, living here until about the year 1840, when he removed to Iowa.³⁵

On the Fourth of July, 1872, the cornerstone was laid for the large, three-story building that was to house Mitchell Seminary. This school was a further, concrete expression of the founder's desire to have an ideal town, and it helped to meet the need of a high school. It was controlled by a board of trustees who were appointed by the Iowa Universalist convention and was not a college, but an academy which sought to prepare young people for work on the college level. In 1878-1879, a faculty of nine teachers offered an imposing list of subjects: English, German, French, Latin, Greek, art, music, a business course, telegraphy and takigraphy.³⁶ The local station agent gave the course in telegraphy, and Dr. Haldeman, of Mitchellville, who had received medical training in Heidelberg, Germany, gave lectures on physiology. The music department was considered quite strong and was headed by Prof. J. H. Goodrich of New York. Besides forty-eight students who were taking the regular three-year course, there were thirty-four "irregulars" who were evidently

³⁵ Claremont, New Hampshire, *National Eagle*, Nov. 11, 1871, Wisconsin University Historical Library.

³⁶ Takigraphy, n., same as tachygraphy, n., (pronounced ta-kig-ra-fl), the art or practice of quick writing; stenography; ancient shorthand. — Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary, unabridged, 1950.

grade school pupils, and also there was a list of special music students.³⁷

The financial strain, the greater share of which fell on Mr. Mitchell, was too much to allow the seminary more than a short existence. Early in 1880, the institution was sold to the state for use as the Girls' Reformatory. The loss of \$12,000 and the failure of the venture no doubt were a bitter disappointment to the founder, but he maintained a genuine interest in the State Training School which took its place. Furthermore, he served on the board of trustees of the Iowa Industrial School from 1880 until his death in 1894, and for eight years of that time he was president of the Board. The significance of the seminary was the strong cultural influence which it and its faculty exerted on the life of the little town across the tracks, and the fact that it filled the need of a high school in eastern Polk county until Mitchellville should have one of its own.

POLITICAL ACTIVITY

In politics, as well as in religion and education, Thomas Mitchell possessed strong convictions and, with one exception, hewed to a certain line. He was at first a Whig and then later a Republican. He stood firm in the cause of freedom for the negro, and his home was a depot on the "underground railroad." His party alignment, though, did not prevent him from subscribing to a Democratic newspaper or from defending the liberties of those whose political beliefs differed from his. During the Civil war he prevented an angry mob from hanging a fellow-townsmen who was a Democrat; he looked upon all men as his brothers.

In the early days of the county the Democrats were in power, and the Whigs made strenuous efforts to win some of the elections. One of the most famous of these was the nip-and-tuck fight of 1848. Tom Mitchell and a friend persuaded sixteen Democrats to drive some hogs to market at Ottumwa the day before

³⁷ "Catalogue of Mitchell Seminary, 1878-1879."

election so that they would be unable to vote. On the other hand, the two Whigs returned home on their fast horses, arriving in time to cast their votes.

In the fall of 1857, Mitchell was elected on the Republican ticket to represent Polk and Jasper counties in the lower house of the legislature, which sat for the first time in the new capitol at Des Moines. He served on a committee to examine credentials of persons claiming seats in the house, on committees for claims, for public buildings, and for the improvement of the Des Moines river.

When his own convictions and party platform were at odds, he forsook the Republican ranks. This was in 1873, when he ran for state senator for the Anti-Monopoly party, and won over his Republican opponent. The editor of the *Iowa State Register* regretted to see Tom Mitchell's name on any other than a straight Republican ticket, for he confessed that when it came to character, capacity, and personal and public worth, not one word could be urged against him.⁸⁸

Protesting "the encroachments of the rings and monopolies on the rights of the people," the Anti-Monops were fortunate in securing a man to run for them who was as widely known and respected as Thomas Mitchell. However, his "waywardness" was only temporary; the political backslider returned to the Republican fold after the period of agrarian discontent was ended.

In his position as senator at Des Moines he served on the standing committees on normal schools, public buildings, congressional districts, compensation of public officers and reform school. In 1876 he introduced an amendment to a bill which made possible the straightening of Skunk river, an improvement which brought under cultivation several thousand acres, previously useless due to annual floods. He also introduced a bill in 1876, to appropriate \$350,000 for the further erection of the state capitol.

⁸⁸ *Iowa State Register* (weekly), July 18, 1873.

His life as a public servant not only took him into the realm of state affairs, but also those of the county, for while he was representative, in 1859, he was elected to the county board of supervisors and served six years. Here he served on a committee to equalize tax lists and introduced the following resolution, which passed: "That the sum of \$1,000 be set aside to give to needy families of soldiers, to be distributed by a committee." This concern which he had for people bereft of loved ones by the Civil war reflected a strong humanitarian spirit.

INTERESTED IN RAILROADS AND AGRICULTURE

Many causes and interests received the support of this civic-minded man. He not only worked hard to promote the Rock Island and Des Moines Valley Railroads, but he promoted one from the north. In 1866, he subscribed \$300 for the stock of the Iowa Minnesota Railroad Company and gave a check on the spot. A Des Moines paper lauded him for appreciating the value of a railroad to the farming interests.

A farmer by occupation, he was intensely interested in agriculture. He actively encouraged the employment of improved farming methods by participating in fairs. As early as 1852, he showed Durham cattle at a fair held in Des Moines and was one of the three directors of it. In December, 1853, the first State Agricultural Society was organized in Fairfield with a board of managers composed of five members from each of the thirteen counties. Mr. Mitchell was on the board from Polk county. Later he was active in the Polk county Agricultural Society and served as Vice-President of the Model Farm and Agricultural College provided for by act of the General Assembly of 1858. His agricultural interests were not confined to the promotion of good farming in general, but he was a practical man who knew about animals. Looked upon by fellow-farmers as a sort of unlicensed "horse doctor," he was called upon to treat sick animals.

Another interest which claimed his attention was

the Polk County Old Settlers Association, formed in 1868. Mr. Mitchell was honored by being chosen its first president and served thereafter for many years. The old timers met for picnics and other social times, and his contributions to such gatherings were always welcome.

The temperance cause found in him a real warrior of the Carrie Nation type. He fought with determination to keep his town clear of what he considered a dreadful blight — the saloon. One time someone established one near his farm. It was reported that the wind blew it down and that Thomas Mitchell was in the wind. More than that. He *was* the wind!⁸⁹

Another reform which Thomas Mitchell considered worthy of his attention was the Women's Rights movement, which was gaining a following over the country during the second half of the nineteenth century. Its influence was felt even in the small town. Some women in Mitchellville had a Political Equality club, and Mr. Mitchell's name was included in the list of citizens who supported their cause.

A KIND, GENEROUS AND JUST MAN

The intense moral earnestness of the man did not make him a sour, long-faced individual. He loved a good joke and a funny story. He was especially fond of telling Irish stories, frequently quoting Will Carleton, author of Irish folk-tales. Those who knew him only slightly remember his jovial, cheerful good nature. The story was published of how he and a gentleman friend of his plotted a practical joke on their wives who had never met each other. Each man informed his wife that the wife of the other was very hard of hearing. When they were introduced and started screaming at each other their husbands withdrew to the next room to laugh and enjoy their prank. When he was a county supervisor the board had a supper one night at the "Des Moines House." The

⁸⁹ Conversation with Harry Mitchell.

newspaper reported that Mitchell "made the table roar with his lively sallies of humor."

The impression he gave to a visitor from Chicago, who reported a Universalist Convention, is interesting: "His whole-hearted qualities have made everybody his friend, and in off-hand Western phrase he is known as 'Tom' Mitchell. But he is not as might be inferred from this cognomen, rough, coarse, or uncouth, but one of nature's noblemen, and a natural gentleman."⁴⁰

Notable characteristics of "Uncle Tommy" were his generosity and kindness. His philosophy was to take every man to be honest until he should be proved dishonest. It may be truly said that he was generous to a fault, for there were those who took advantage of his good nature. When the teachers at his seminary were not receiving all their salaries, he made up to them the balance out of his own pocket and no one paid him back.⁴¹

A man came to him one time who had twelve hungry children and two starved old horses. "Uncle Tom" took them in for the night, wintered them on one of his farms, then later let them move on to another farm which he owned, asking a third of the crop for rent. The rent was never paid.⁴²

Although he was firm in his own religious beliefs, he was tolerant of other faiths to the extent that he even contributed to other churches in Mitchellville. He could ask a blessing with Presbyterians, Baptists and Methodists around his table. Methodists, whose theology was opposite from his own, were invited to preach in his tavern, for he probably realized that religion was a great civilizer for a frontier country. Mr. Rathbun, one of the first preachers in the county, was a Portugee and of a dark complexion. One day while the minister was eating at the Mitchell Tavern, some

⁴⁰ Article from *Chicago New Covenant*, reprinted in *Iowa State Register* (weekly), July 26, 1872.

⁴¹ Conversation with Mrs. Mabel Martin, of El Reno, Oklahoma. Mrs. Martin is a niece of Mr. Mitchell.

⁴² Conversation with Harry Mitchell.

intolerant guests appeared who asked the host if they had to eat with "that nigger." With righteous indignation, the host defended the preacher and told the offenders that they should not, indeed, eat with him. They found their fare some place else that day.⁴³

In the circle of his family Mr. Mitchell was kind and yet firm. Perhaps his children wished he had extended more of his generosity toward them, for he was a strict disciplinarian, often applying the whip to his sons for some misdeed.

Two boys and two girls were born to Mr. Mitchell by his first wife. The sons both died in youth, the older, Orrin, a victim of the Civil war. He and his second wife, Ann C. Mattern, also had four children. Two of them are still living — Harry, in Booker, Texas, and John, in Grand Prairie, Texas.

Death came to this noble pioneer on July 15, 1894. At his funeral the little church in Mitchellville was too small to hold the people who had come to mourn the loss of their "Uncle Tom." Many people from neighboring towns came to lay their respected friend away, and a special train brought old settlers from Des Moines.

With a limited education and humble background, this strong New Englander was founder of two towns, two schools, a church and a seminary, promoter of railroads, office holder and legislator. He brought a high type of culture to a wilderness country. Indeed, his life story presents a significant segment in the history of central Iowa.

⁴³ Blyler, *Reminiscences in Mitchellville Index*, spring, 1892.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.