

## My Years in Story County

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## MY YEARS IN STORY COUNTY

By A. M. HENDERSON<sup>1</sup>

When Iowa was just coming of age as a state, I arrived upon this earthly scene. My cradle was in a home on the farm purchased in 1856 in southern Hamilton county, Iowa, to which father moved in 1858, from Lisbon, Illinois. While railroad service was then established as far west as Iowa City, he and several neighbors, all with families, made the trek in horse and ox-drawn covered wagons.

In this home the Randall post office was established April 15, 1863—just two years prior to President Lincoln's assassination. Father served as the postmaster until the early eighties, when the narrow gauge railway was built through the west end of our farm where the present village of Randall was founded. This road was built by the Des Moines & Minnesota Railway Company, but was soon taken over by the Chicago & Northwestern system and converted into standard gauge in the early eighties. It was my privilege to see the first train pull into Story City January 1, 1878. Later on this line was extended to its terminal known as Calanan, three miles southeast of the present site of Jewell.

It was in this farm home serving as the Randall post office, I was born over eighty years ago, so I saw and felt as a child could see and feel, the conquest of the prairie and the privations and hardships that were inseparable parts of the pioneer life of that day. The "push button" was unknown. We did have the "tran lampe" which was the forerunner of the tallow candle. We lived in the day of the bootjack, the trundle bed, the straw tick, the bedcord, the "kubbe-rulle," the wooden shoe, the homemade soap, and even the mixmaster of the day—the "tvare" (potstick or stirrer).

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<sup>1</sup>Memoirs written by A. M. Henderson, 1950, and filed in the geneological section of the Iowa Department of History and Archives, Des Moines.—EDITOR.

## THE MECHANICAL PUMP

The first event of significance in my life was when the supersalesman for the chain pump drove into our yard. Prior to his call, the water from a twenty-foot well near our kitchen door was lifted by the hook-and-pail system. After his departure the feat was accomplished by merely turning a crank—my first experience with a laborsaving device—the old chain pump.

My schooling was started in 1873 in a one-room schoolhouse father built in 1860<sup>2</sup>. The school district was organized in 1858, the earlier terms of school having been held in private homes in the community. For many years it served an expansive Norwegian pioneer settlement. Here the boys and girls from these pioneer homes of a foreign tongue learned the fundamentals of English. Here, too, they acquired what was for many the only taste of literature they ever had. The anecdotes and fables of McGuffey's Readers played an important part in moulding into the community the American way of life. All of this created that atmosphere from which grew the great characters of the past into their rich fruitage.

This schoolhouse, primarily intended for book learning, soon became a community forum, the home for the spelling school, the debating society, the band rehearsals, and singing school, and it even housed the traveling medicine show of that day. Moreover, it served as a church edifice. The well-known itinerant preacher, Elling Sunve Eielson, officiated there a number of times. This is the Eielson who made several trips on foot to New York City to have translated and printed in English several textbooks he brought from Norway, including Luther's Catechism and Pontoppidan's "Truth Unto Godliness." His traveling paraphernalia for those journeys consisted of a coffee pot, compass, a rubber coat, and an ax.

## SCHOOL DAYS CUT SHORT

Because I was needed on the farm, my school days

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<sup>2</sup>*The Palimpsest*, September, 1931, p. 359.

came to a sudden halt when I had barely reached the mid-section of McGuffy's Fifth Reader, so the old schoolhouse which served as my baptismal font in my infancy was also my Alma Mater. For my postgraduate work, I turned to "The School of Experience."

The unpretentious, weather-beaten schoolhouse, older in years than the Emancipation Proclamation, intact, with bell and belfry and many of its original appurtenances, may be seen today at its original site where it now is maintained as the Sheldahl Memorial Hall. Among the many relics within may be seen a ballot box made from native walnut and used there in the elections of Abraham Lincoln. The first teacher, Capt. W. A. Wier of Civil war days, formerly fished whales in the Nova Scotia regions, and his harpoons are among the exhibits.

While I was reared in a comfortable Christian home with devoted parents and wholesome environments, my teenage years seemed long and uneventful. True, we lived and labored under primitive conditions. When father had acquired a spring seat for our lumber wagon, reserved for himself and mother enroute to church or town, our neighbor pals called us "highbrows," albeit we, the offspring got along very well with a board across the wagon box, back of the spring seat.

We had the packpeddler—the Marshall Field of the open road—as well as the itinerant clock fixer, not to forget the mender of kitchen utensils and tinware with his miniature charcoal-burning sheet-iron stove for heating his soldering irons.

Our reading matter was limited. Father was a subscriber to the leading Norwegian weekly paper, the *Skandinaven*, but we craved English. I thought the colorful seed catalogue of W. Atlee Burpee & Co. well worth my perusal.

In 1888 when the hand-rake reaper had become obsolete in our community, I cut the grain crop for our neighbor, Christian Knutson Aabe, with the first self-rake



reaper that reached our neighborhood. May it here be added parenthetically, that the great grandson of the neighbor whose grain I cut is today the pastor of the University Church of Hope in Minneapolis, the Rev. Joseph L. Knutson.

#### SWEETS VIA SUGAR CANE

The so-called "molasses mill" maintained at the Christian Aabe farm is unforgettable. It was to this processing plant we carted our annual crops of sugar cane where the juice was extracted from the long stalks by horse power. Thereupon it was poured into large vats and boiled for about twelve hours, and presto, there was the unadulterated homemade sorghum, today an almost forgotten luxury.

My parents were charter members of the St. Petri Lutheran congregation of Story City. In the late fifties, the sainted Rev. P. A. Rasmussen came from Lisbon, Illinois, to help organize the congregation. From then on he made two visits a year to this parish until he was able to secure the late Rev. Nils Amlund as the first resident pastor.

The construction of a church was soon under way, with much of the material used from native timber. This church, built ninety years ago, today serves approximately the same number of members (600). In the intervening years it has been remodeled and largely modernized. However, the pulpit and altar frame in use there now were built by the Reverend Amlund. It was my pleasure to serve as a choir member in this congregation thirty-four consecutive years.

It must be added that Story City has three other thriving churches, with memberships aggregating over thirteen hundred.

#### THRILL OF FIRST CIRCUS

This saga would be incomplete should I fail to share with the reader the thrill I had as a pocketbook customer

at the Ringlind Brothers ticket wagon at Story City on their maiden trip through southern Minnesota, and Iowa in horse-drawn vehicles. The five brothers were born at McGregor, Iowa, where their father was a harness maker.

The mythical "Twenty-Mule Team" of borax fame had not reached the radio channels, but we did have the twenty-ox team in the flesh, with the bright brass ferrules on the tips of their long horns not only ornamental, but a safety gadget too. This herd of oxen and huge wooden plow served as drainage equipment, for opening the so-called "bull ditches" for draining the ponds of the prairie or field.

The stately figure we called the Ox Master, with his black mustache and goatees and wide-brimmed hat, with his "gees," and his "haws" in his resonant voice followed by a professional crack of the whip, with Iowa prairies as a background, would rival Hollywood's best production of frontier life.

We had no footprints of the Indian, nor hoofmarks of the buffalo to point to within my memory. I do, however, remember frequent Indian invasions, but of a friendly nature. Every spring and fall, representatives of the Sac and Fox tribe from the Tama Indian reservation pitched their tents on the banks of the Skunk river across the road from our home. Their sole objective seemed to be fishing, trapping and hunting. The Indian name for skunk is "seganku" so to them they were camping on the banks of the Seganku.

#### HOG-TO-MARKET SYSTEM

A description of our hog marketing system in the seventies may be a bit unique. When a few hogs were ready for market, a hog-killing day was designated and the neighbors alerted for help. A sixty-gallon water-filled copper caldron with fire underneath served as the hot-water system for scalding. This was a winter job and the carcasses when dressed were cut in halves

and left hanging out in the open until the morning following, when they would be frozen hard. Then they were carted to Nevada, temporary terminal of the Chicago & Northwestern railway, and from there sent by rail to Chicago. After the railroad reached our community with shipping facilities at both Story City and Randall, the larger herds were often, because of limited horsepower and rolling stock, driven to market on their own power. Such movements were usually followed by a team of horses hitched to a lumber wagon, so that if a critter in transit showed undue fatigue, it was promptly lifted into the wagon, destined to meet its pals, good as new, at the railroad stockyards.

#### THE FIRST STREET CARS

We had neither the thrills nor the tragedies of the automobile, but only fifty miles away (Des Moines) we had the horse-drawn streetcar, which would be a thrill for anyone from eight to eighty today. On arriving at State street in Chicago, on a horse-drawn car we heard the clarion call "change cars." Thereupon we boarded a car operated by underground cables.

Radio was a foreign term to us, but we did find at the state fairs a bequest from Alexander Graham Bell, a gadget known as the graphophone. What boy in his teens or younger could help "plunking" down his nickel for the rental of a pair of small tubes similar to those used in a physician's stethoscope? With the business ends of those tubes inserted in the ears, melodious strains of Stephen Collins Foster's compositions came seemingly from nowhere.

In the course of events there developed a marked musical ability among our teenagers. This resulted in the organization of the Riverside band<sup>3</sup>. With the aid of our elders as signers of our note we managed to borrow enough money to purchase a complete set of new instruments from Lyon & Healy of Chicago. Such good

<sup>3</sup>*The Palimpsest*, May, 1932, p. 202.

progress was made that the year following our organization we received a bid from the Iowa State Fair board to serve as the official band for one day at the coming fair. According to the press reports, we came out in flying colors.

The next year we participated in a band tournament at Storm Lake, Iowa, in which sixteen bands were registered. We came out second to none. Upon disbanding, our director and instructor went to Chicago, Illinois, where he served as flute soloist in the famous Thomas orchestra. He also served as director of the Auditorium Opera House orchestra. One of our cornet players joined the Soldiers' Home band at Leavenworth, Kansas, as solo cornetist. Another cornet player entered Luther college at Decorah, Iowa, where he became cornet soloist in the college band under the leadership of the renowned band master, Carlo A. Sperati.

#### TAKES A WIFE

But true to the maxim of old: Time and tide for no man bide. Subservient to the March of Time, I found myself confronting a new era in life, with added responsibilities: the life of maturity. On January 1, 1891, I married Julia T. Hegland of Roland, Iowa. Three children were born to our wedlock: two boys and one girl. Floyd, the oldest, died at the age of nine. Mildred lives in Northfield, Minnesota, while Luther remains at Story City.

We started our married life on a farm I had purchased from father in 1890. Incidentally, this is the farm on which the now well-appointed and widely-known Riverside Bible Camp is located. Here I had my first business or official experience. I succeeded father as justice of the peace in Scott township. We set up housekeeping with a complete set of furnishing for a five-room house at a total cost of eighty-five dollars. The spring following, the house burned to the ground with nearly all of our eighty-five dollars worth of household goods, togeth-

er with all wearing apparel save that in use. Upon our retirement from the farm, hogs brought four dollars per hundred pounds, and corn sold at thirty-three cents a bushel.

### ENTERS BUSINESS LIFE

In the midnineties an opportunity came to acquire an interest in a well-established hardware and implement business in my home town, so my aspirations to become a businessman were attained.

The original trading post in the day of the stagecoach was located half a mile east of the present business section of Story City, at first known as Fairview, where several stores were located on the ground now occupied by our public school buildings. When the railroad was built through this community in the late seventies, a new townsite was platted near the right-of-way, which was followed by an exodus from the Fairview location, already known as Story City.

The first public improvement in the new townsite that comes to my mind is a street lighting system installed by our firm, Henderson & Henderson. It was nothing more than some large ornamental kerosene lanterns placed atop nicely-milled cedar posts set along the wooden sidewalks. Thus it came to pass that the proverbial lamplighter was with us in the flesh—my friend of old, the late Christian Juhl, was Story City's first. A proud lad was I to live in a town with street lights. Today Story City (population 1497, 1940 census) operates its municipal diesel-powered electric light and power plant with an annual output of 2,875,800 k.w. hours.

### BECOMES A "NASBY"

Business was going on as usual when in the late nineties I was sought as traveling salesman for the Cascaden Manufacturing Company of Waterloo.

After serving in that capacity for five years, our congressman, the late Hon. J. A. T. Hull, desired a change



in our postmastership. He told me frankly the position was mine for the asking. With a growing family at home, I thought the change desirable, and so I asked for it. During my incumbency I had the pleasure of serving two terms as president of the Iowa Postmasters' League. Besides the opportunity afforded to meet the many "Nasbys" of Iowa, it paved the way for attending the national conventions, generally held in the south and east, with New York or Washington, or both, on the itineraries. The postmastership with the resumption of a normal home life, carried with it a better opportunity to participate in community affairs.

We supported an active commercial club in which the members of the city council participated. Thus they were always well informed on the public attitude on any pending projects, which helped them materially in their official deliberations. In the course of time the name of the club was changed to the Greater Community Congress. A new set of by-laws provided for the creation of twenty standing committees, and that every member should serve on one of these committees. This proved a desirable stimulant and our membership increased markedly. It was my privilege to serve as secretary for a term of years which was followed by a like number of years as president.

Street paving and sanitary sewers were in the offing and the Community Congress lent its moral support to these and other much-needed improvements. In due course we were lifted from our miry one-hundred-foot wide streets by a splendid brick pavement. Our wooden walks were replaced with cement, with curb and gutters attached, and last, but not least, a substantial sanitary sewer system constructed.

#### SUNSET HOME BUILT

At this juncture one of our leading businessmen fathered the thought of promoting the building of an old people's home and sanitarium. The construction was



soon under way, financed by public subscription in which the surrounding farm community shared liberally, and we soon had a going institution. Shortly thereafter it was transferred to the United Lutheran church with the understanding they were at liberty to discontinue the hospital and sanitarium. This anticipation has become a reality. Now building funds through public subscription have made it possible to erect a new and separate hospital, work on which has been started. The old peoples home has in the meantime become known as the Sunset Home. A commodious addition has recently been built and this institution is now caring for approximately sixty aged residents.

Because of the financial upheavals of the early thirties, a substantial structure on our business street, known as the Grand Hotel and Auditorium, failed financially. Through the joint efforts of the city council and the Community Congress, this structure was taken over and converted into a community building, which proved definitely successful. This structure today has a spacious assembly hall on the second floor large enough to seat three hundred people at banquet tables, with ample modern kitchen facilities and equipment. On the first floor are well-appointed office quarters for the city officials with a suitable council chamber and committee room; also a modern library and reading rooms, and last but not least, stalls for two modern fire engines, one for the country and one for the city. It should be noted that the Greater Community Congress has kept up a continuous organization for forty-two years — perhaps a national record for a town of this size, where usually the commercial club, or whatever it is called, has to be reorganized every three or four years.

#### BECOMING A BANKER

Just as the Democrats fixed their covetous eyes on the postmastership at the end of my second term, a bid came to me to take over the cashiership of the First National

Bank. This was accepted, of course. At the time of my installation, the total resources of the bank were approximately \$300,000. It was my pleasure to see this grow to the million dollar mark. During my incumbency I served as city treasurer. I was also one of the organizers of the First National Farm Loan association and served as its first president.

Here again came an official recognition. At the annual convention of the Iowa Bankers Association held at Davenport in 1922, I was elected president which carried with it no small amount of work and duties, besides arranging for and presiding over the annual state convention at the close of the year. During my incumbency we had over eighteen hundred banks in Iowa, whereas today the records show less than seven hundred.

I shall be derelict in my duty should I fail to note here that as a generous honorarium for official services the year past, I was given an all-expense-paid trip to the American Bankers annual convention held at New York city that year. And more gratuitous recognitions were in the offing. At the following state convention I was elected to a three-year term on the Council of Administration of the American Bankers association. The three meetings I attended were held at Hot Springs, Arkansas, Pinehurst, North Carolina, and Augusta, Georgia.

#### TRAGEDY VIA DEFLATION

But here again tragedy was in the offing. In 1932, the institution where I served for twenty years was sucked into the maelstrom of financial tragedies of the era. One must be a part of such a calamity to realize its full meaning.

I had a family to support, so I was pursued by the whip-lash of necessity. I decided to experiment with a "cash and carry" system among the merchants in the smaller towns in Iowa. I secured a stock of staple kitchen utensils, pocket knives, razor blades, et cetera,—anything

I thought could be handled from a business coupe. The venture was discouraging at first, but I was out in the open and my mind occupied. I established a 2650-mile route of all season roads that I made every sixty days. Ere long I called myself a success.

However, in the death of my wife in 1936, I suffered another major upset. She was and is missed. She was a true devotee to her family, her church, and her community.

In the resumption of my routes following this visitation, I found anew the duties to be strenuous, but also realized that I had by now established a worthwhile business. The manager of the Chicago branch office of the American Safety Razor Corporation told me several times that I was his best customer between Chicago and Denver, and I almost believed him. In 1942 and 1943, I sold and delivered from my Chevy coupe, over two tons of Star razor blades each year with an active demand for other types of blades, and other merchandise.

#### COMES THEN THE WAR

But at a time when business was perhaps at its best it seemed that all handicaps not anchored, converged on my "Portable Emporium."

War restrictions not only on tires, tubes and gas, but merchandise as well, prepared me for admission to the ranks of the unemployed. On top of it all I had to seek refuge at the Mecca for the infirm at Rochester, Minnesota, for two minor surgicals. During my convalescence that followed, I realized full well that if all the other handicaps were lifted, I would not be equal to the strenuous road work I had carried in the recent past. Following a season of prayerful deliberations, the solution came in the one word: retirement.

So after residing in the community of my birth for seventy-six years, I found it advisable to move to Northfield, Minnesota, to make my future home with my

daughter, who has for many years served as food director for the St. Olaf college cafeterias. This new venture has proven very satisfactory. While I am little else than a shut-in, I enjoy creature comforts in a full measure. I have learned from experience that "a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions," and for this I am appreciative. Grateful, too, for the rich life I have lived, rich in experience and historical significance. And thankful for being part and parcel of a generation that has seen more change and growth than has any other generation in the annals of time.

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### THE FATHERS CREATED A REPUBLIC

Gov. Leslie M. Shaw: In very recent years we have been using the word "democracy" when we have meant "republic." This flippant and unscientific manner of speaking tends to lax thinking, and is fraught with danger. The Fathers created a republic and not a democracy. Before you dismiss the thought, examine your dictionaries again and settle once and forever that a republic is a government where the sovereignty resides in the citizens, and is exercised through representatives chosen by the citizens; while a democracy is a government where the sovereignty also resides in the citizens but is exercised directly, without the intervention of representatives.

The distinction, briefly and concisely stated, is this: One is direct government, the other representative government. Under a democratic form of government, the people rule, while in a republic they choose their rulers. In democracies, the people legislate; in republics, they choose legislators. In democracies, the people administer the laws; in republics they select executives. In democracies, judicial questions are decided by popular vote; in republics, judges are selected, and they only, interpret and construe laws and render judgments and decrees. Every true American is satisfied with representative government, and that is what the term republic means.

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