

## Early Settler Aided in Organization and Growth of Humboldt

S. H. Taft

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## Early Settler Aided in Organization and Growth of Humboldt

BY S. H. TAFT\*

Iowa was just beginning its marvelous development when I came to the state from New York in September, 1862. Already it had just four short railroad lines extending west from the Mississippi; one to Cedar Falls, one to Marshalltown, one to Iowa City, and one to Bentonsport. I came to Iowa by invitation and spent a few days at the beautiful and delightful home of Gen. T. J. Townsend, of Dubuque, who was then surveyor general of the state. From him I gained much valuable information in regard to the natural resources of the various sections of the state.

On leaving Dubuque, I came into the upper Des Moines valley. I had left the East with the definite purpose of acquiring land on which, with a colony of friends, I could build up a town, organize a Christian Union church with the simple creed of love to God and man, and establish an undenominational college. While I am grateful for the measure of success which has been attained, I admit to a doubt whether the work would have been entered upon could I have known from the beginning of the physical exposures, mental anxieties, disappointments and financial losses (the latter chiefly from floods) and the college work which have attended it. The limitation of this article precludes me from saying anything regarding the

\*The Rev. S. H. Taft's original home in New York was at Pierce Point Manor in Jefferson county, a minister with high order of ability and much energy. His wife was M. A. Burnham at time of their marriage. Their son, William J. Taft became a leading lawyer of Humboldt and later lived at Fort Dodge, Iowa, born October 27, 1855, and moved with his parents from Pierce Point Manor to Martinsburg, Lewis county, New York in 1857, and thence to Iowa in 1862. William J. Taft was at one time mayor of Humboldt and also county attorney, later in partnership with A. E. Clarke, who was division attorney of the Minneapolis and St. Louis railroad. Within two years Mr. Taft was appointed general solicitor of the railroad which necessitated his removal to Minneapolis.

religious and educational work with which I have been associated.

With T. T. Rogers, I came west from Martinsburg, New York, traveling through Dubuque and Waterloo, Iowa, in the harvest time of 1862. Leaving Waterloo, we drove to Fort Dodge, looking for a desirable place to locate and establish a settlement. We took a trip up the Lizard creek, but not being favorably impressed, started for Dakota City expecting to find a town, but only found a few board shanties with stove pipes sticking through the roofs with not a single chimney in the whole town. We had a hearty laugh over Dakota City and started out the next morning prospecting, wanting to find a suitable place for building a saw and grist mill.

Driving up and down the river looking for suitable water power, we concluded to look for government land. John Craig went out with us, taking along surveyor instruments for establishing corners. We located a number of tracts for ourselves and friends. We marked these entries by laying four stones and then having four rails on top of the stones. We spent the week driving over the country and entering claims for ten sections of land; then went back to Fort Dodge and filed those claims. On examination it was found that the question of title to the land was in dispute, it being claimed by the Dubuque and Sioux City Railroad company, although that company had failed to build the railroad line which the bill granting it land rights had required; however, I contracted with Platt Smith, vice president of that company, for ten sections of land in consideration of which I was to pay the government price of \$1.25 per acre, put up a grist mill with no less than two run of buhrs; said improvements to cost not less than \$3,000 and the purchaser to sell a large portion of the land at such reasonable price as would induce early settlement.

#### COLONY FOR NEW TOWN

In the spring, Mr. Rogers and I returned east and

I brought back with me from central New York a colony of over a dozen families, which was largely added to in succeeding years. As the feeling between the Union men and the "copperheads" ran high in those days, much interest was felt regarding the political sentiment and character of the members of the colony, and a leading southern sympathizer of Fort Dodge reported that we were "a company of black abolitionists," which was true except as to color.

#### SOUGHT LEGISLATIVE RELIEF

During the winter, I had learned that the land for which I had contracted lay outside the limit of the grant to the railroad and Mr. Platte Smith suggested that it would fall to the Keokuk, Fort Des Moines and Minnesota Railroad company. I then went to Keokuk to look into that matter. I could not perfect my title. Under these embarrassing circumstances I resolved to seek relief through the state legislature.

I went to Des Moines, a stranger to everybody in the city, except Judge C. C. Cole, whom I met in Keokuk when there to contract for the land. He introduced me to leading members of the legislature and I laid my case before them. I shall never cease to be grateful for the deep and intelligent interest they all took in my enterprise. In a few days a resolution had passed both houses and received the executive sanction, which authorized the governor to convey the land directly to me on my paying the purchase money into the state treasury.

It thus turned out that what at first seemed a serious difficulty proved a blessing in disguise, as my visit to the state capital gave me the acquaintance and helpful cooperation of many of the legislators and other leading men of the state. Among these I call to mind Governor Stone, B. F. Gue, L. S. Coffin, Dr. McGown, Senator Harlan, Judge Wright, Judge Hubbard, Judge Charles, John Scott, Governor Larrabee, Governor Merrill, Governor Carpenter, Charles Aldrich, H. G. Parker, J. B. Power, Judge Oliver, Judge Adams,

Professor Abernathy, and others. It is to these men and their compatriots that Iowa is indebted for the leading place it has so quickly attained among the states of the Union.

On reaching our destination in May, 1863, I moved into a building erected years before by a pre-emptor who had fled from fear of Indians and abandoned his claim. The building stood on land embraced in my purchase. It was twelve feet long by sixteen feet wide, one story high, built of boards made of native lumber nailed onto ribs and battened. In this I lived with a family of six (besides boarding much hired help) from May to Christmas day, 1864.

#### RIGORS OF AN IOWA WINTER

The winter of 1863-4 will ever be remembered as the cold winter. We would in the morning sweep up and carry out the snow which had sifted in during the night, and kept a sheep skin under our bed to put out and stand upon while dressing. In November, 1864, by reason of over-work and exposure from watching the sick, as there were many cases of typhoid fever at this time, Mrs. Taft was prostrated with the disease in a very severe form, being delirious from the first and continuing unconscious for over two weeks. It was often so cold in the house that water standing in a cup by the bedside would freeze. I frequently watched by her with my overcoat on with a warm stone in my lap for my hands and another at my feet. I kept hot bricks in the bed and on the pillow near her head.

The children (we had three then) would come to the beside in the morning, push aside the curtain, look at their mother and go away with sad faces as she failed to greet them. The youngest, a boy three years old, was the first one to be made glad by Mrs. Taft's return to consciousness. During the night previous to the incident of which I speak, Mrs. Taft had slept more restfully than at any time before, so I had hoped and even expected to see an improvement

in her condition. I was making preparation for breakfast when the little fellow came from his bed, climbed up in a chair and got behind the curtain, seeing which I hastened to the bed lest he should disturb her sleep, when he turned his face all aglow with delight, exclaiming, "Pa, 'ma look good at me." The fever had broken and reason had returned.

On three separate occasions since that time, Mrs. Taft has been brought near to death's door by the hardships and over-taxation attendant upon our pioneer work.

#### TOWN NOW HUMBOLDT PLATTED

I laid out the town of Springvale now Humboldt, in the spring of 1864. The name Springvale was given to it by Mrs. Taft on account of the natural springs in the locality. Two or three small buildings which had been put up on the prairie by preemptors and abandoned, were at first moved in upon the town plat for residences. But the first new building erected was raised in November, 1864, on the day Lincoln was elected president the second time. In the winter of 1864-65 a number of families lived in cellars covered over with boards.

The foundation of the mill and a portion of the dam was put in during the summer and autumn of 1864. G. W. Mitchell of Fort Dodge and A. D. Bicknell put up the walls of the mill. The piers and dam were completed during the winter of 1864-5, but before the head gates were put in place, a February freshet undermined the southwest corner of the wall. In spite of the difficulties, work on the mill had progressed and the saw mill was in operation in the summer of 1864. At first when coming west, we ground our wheat and coffee with large coffee mills which we had brought with us. When the dam was built and the water was under control, I attached the saw mill power to an iron corn cracker, with which thousands of bushels of wheat and corn were ground, the settlers coming from great distances for their grinding.

The completion of the mill and the making of bolted flour in February, 1865, was celebrated with a public supper, to which several hundred persons came to eat biscuit made of flour manufactured in Humboldt county. Toasts were drunk in cold water and coffee, speeches were made and cheers given in honor of the occasion. Loads of grain came to the mill drawn by two and three yokes of oxen, much force being required to cross the sloughs which were then not bridged. Grain was brought from over a hundred miles from the north and west.

#### SWAM STREAMS IN FLOOD TIME

Before the rivers and other streams were bridged, I used to swim them in flood time when necessary, sometimes on horseback and sometimes with my team. I call to mind one occasion when driving with Hon. J. D. Springer across the prairies to Sac City to attend a political convention, we came to a stream which was so flooded that we could not ascertain where the banks were cut down for the ford. In order to surmount the difficulty Mr. Springer made me the custodian of his hat and clothes and swam out in search of the crossing place, on finding which he signaled me to come, which I did, after putting the clothes and my satchel on the seat and putting my feet in position to readily move to the right or left in balancing the carriage, and then made the crossing safely, when Mr. Springer joined me and we proceeded on our way.

There was an attempt made to unite Dakota City and Humboldt, which was a rational thing to do, but one of the proprietors of Dakota City refused. Then followed a period of rivalry and bickering between the two prospective towns, and while the people were spending their energy on this disturbing question, the spring freshets came on in 1867 and an ice gorge took out the dam, suspending operations for six months. The same day the price of flour advanced from \$6.00 to \$10.00 per hundred.

The year 1867 was called the starvation year among the settlers, as there was not enough bread in this part of the state to feed the people and there was little with which to buy it. It was with great difficulty that provisions were obtained to feed the large force employed in cutting a new mill race and putting in a new dam a half mile further up the river, which was done at a cost of some \$18,000. This was a great undertaking considering the time, the tools with which they had to work, the scarcity of labor, the limestone rock through which they must cut and the long distance.

I can never forget the scene attending the arrival of the last load of flour before the mill commenced grinding again. I had sent the load up from Fort Dodge, driving up myself a little later, and came into town just as the load was approaching my house. Between forty and fifty hands were at work on the race, who, sighting the load, dropped shovels, picks, and wheel barrows and ran toward it, while those having teams on wagons drove rapidly toward the house. Some were expressing their joy by shouting and some by weeping. I reached the wagon just in time to obtain control of two fifty pound sacks, saying to those who would have taken them, "I must obtain this much of the load, since I have the largest family and am almost out of bread."

The event of reopening the mill was made the occasion of a celebration equal in interest to the first one.

#### ATTRACTIVENESS OF THE AREA

In beauty of location, Humboldt is not excelled by that of any other town in the state. It is laid out with parks and broad streets and avenues, chiefly named after the leading reformer civilians and generals then living. The town has water works of the more valuable character. It has become an important business and educational center. Its businessmen, in energy and financial standing, are of high order. It has one of the most perfectly equipped flouring mills in the



state. The town has five churches, all working harmoniously together. Its public school edifice is the pride of its citizens, while the three beautiful college buildings crowning the bluff at the head of Garrett Smith avenue would be an honor and ornament to any town.

In 1868, I was the presidential elector for the great Sixth district, which embraced one-third of the state, in canvassing which I travelled from State Center on the east to the Missouri river on the west, and from the Northwestern railroad on the south to the north line of the state. Except along the line of the Northwestern road, I traveled with my own team, often driving many hours without seeing a residence or meeting a human being. On passing over this beautiful and fertile section of the state now, it is difficult to believe that it was a wild uncultivated region so short a time ago.

The progress in material development and political prestige which Iowa has made in fifty years is unsurpassed by any other state.

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### End of Summer

A harsher wind, a gentler sun,  
Bring to mind that summer's done.

A softer haze on ocean's rim,  
Shortening days and twilights dim—

All these portend to one at play,  
Now is the end of holiday.

The hours that creep 'twixt marsh and dune,  
Half lulled to sleep by the waves' tune,

Soon run their course with the ebb tide,  
And I perforce leave the sweet seaside.

Another year at summer's end  
May find me here where the myrtles bend.

All winter long I'll hear as now  
A mockingbird's song on a live-oak bough.

—Thomas H. English in the Emory University Quarterly

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