

BENJAMIN B. BRYANT

Among the earliest settlers in this region, antedating Barlow Granger and his clan of "pioneers," was Benjamin B. Bryant, small of stature, active, energetic, unique in many ways, social, genial, who became quite popular and held many places of public trust, the duties of which he performed with strict integrity.

He came here in 1842, with others, to make preparation for removing the Wapello Indian Agency to this locality. Subsequently, he joined the Trading Company as Chief Clerk and Trader with the Indians, being familiar with their language and acquainted with nearly everyone on the reservation, their villages or camps being about three miles down the river. He was rigidly honest, and had the most implicit faith of the Indians. He often related incidents of his transactions with them. He had more faith in the "honest Indian" than he did in white men. He gave them credit for whatever they purchased, and put it on record in a book in the form of a promissory note, payable at a certain price, after certain moons, the only almanac the Indians understood. They signed the notes in the same way Martin Tucker, an early tavern keeper on 'Coon Row did, with a big "X." Ben used to say the notes were paid, and he never lost a dollar. His old book is still in existence, and would be an interesting addition to "Charley" Aldrich's State Historical Collection.

His knowledge of the language induced me to inquire of him the Indian name of the river we call Des Moines. He said it was "Keosauk-sepo," from its mouth to its source, "Keosauk" meaning "dark, rolling water," and "sepo" meaning "river." They didn't accept the corrupted, misapplied misnomer we now have, a *sui generis*, the only distinctive quality of which is it has never been duplicated by any other community, a feature appreciated only by the postal clerks. It is unfortunate the Indian name was not perpetuated.

It may not be generally known that Des Moines came very near being given another name, officially. In 1833, Lewis Cass, then Secretary of War, in his annual report, recommended that dragoons be sent west of the Mississippi to protect emigrants from outrages committed by predatory bands of Indians. The President, in his message to Congress, approved the plan, and in accordance therewith, by order of the War Department, Colonel Kearney, with three companies of dragoons, in May, 1834, was ordered to move to the right bank of the Mississippi River, near the mouth of the Des Moines River, for Winter quarters. Through sickness of his troop and other causes, he did not get under way until September. On the Second, he wrote the Department he would leave the next day with four companies, and requested that a name be given the new post, and that it be declared a "double-ration" post.

The troops arrived on the Twenty-eighth. The Winter was very severe, and there was much suffering from uncomfortable quarters. In February, 1835, he repeated his request that a name be given the post, and stating that, merely for convenience, he had designated it "Camp Des Moines, Michigan Territory." On the back of this letter, Secretary Cass wrote, "Let the post be called Fort Des Moines, and let it be a double-ration post."

During the year 1834, emigrants came into the territory westward along the river, and in March, Kearney was ordered to go up to Raccoon Fork and reconnoiter for the selection of a military post. He arrived August Eighth, and after going over the field, reported unfavorable to the project that he saw nothing to make it necessary or advisable; the land was covered with timber and underbrush; no stone or other material for making chimneys; no springs, and the river unnavigable for boats to carry stores to it, etc., etc.

The War Department did not agree with Kearney's opinion, and Colonel Croghan, Inspector-General, was detailed to make a more careful examination and report upon the expediency of removing the garrison from Fort Armstrong, at Rock River, to a place up the Des Moines, which he did, and reported that so rapid was the emigration in that direction, before a suitable post and garrison could be established, the emigrants would be abundantly

able to take care of themselves, and it was needless [sic] to expend so much money, only to be abandoned in a couple of years.

The War Department did not accept his opinion, and decided that not only was it a duty to protect emigrants, but also those Indian tribes with whom treaties had been made, against whom emigrants, unscrupulous land sharks, and speculators were making encroachments, and marauding bands of other tribes continually making raids.

To this end, General Scott decided to send a detachment of dragoons to the reservation of the Sauks (Sacs) and Foxes, and in October, 1842, Captain James Allen came and selected "The Point made by the junction of Des Moines and Raccoon rivers." He reported that "during next Summer a good, comfortable establishment could be made for one company of dragoons for two thousand dollars."

His report was accepted, but it failed to get through the circumlocution office at Washington until February, 1843, when an order was made establishing the post, and directing Captain Allen to fix the site. He reported May Tenth that he had located the post, named it Fort Raccoon, and requested that it be made a double-ration post. The War Department didn't like the name declared it was shocking, too "wild and woolly West." Adjutant-General Jones suggested "Fort Iowa." Soon after, however, Captain Allen received notice from General Scott that "Raccoon" would not be a proper name, and until further direction by the War Department, he would call it "Fort Des Moines." To this Captain Allen forcibly objected, because of the liability to be confused with the late post on the Mississippi (it having been abandoned), and the old post in Wisconsin, causing great delay and inconvenience in business transactions—which, in fact, had already been experienced. He therefore asked that some other name be given. He also renewed his request for a double-ration post, to all of which General Scott was willing to accede, but the War and Treasury Department had got at loggerheads as to the rights of a post to double rations, asked for by Colonel Kearney. Captain Allen's request was pigeonholed pending a decision of that question, but before it was decided—if it ever was—public use and common consent to a fortuity of

corroborative circumstances, had so fixed the name that a change was unnecessary.

On the convening of the first session of the District Court, in 1846, "Ben" was appointed Bailiff of the court.

The early records of the county were kept in very unintelligible form, on loose sheets of paper, and otherwise, which have been lost, so that not until Judge Rice and Hoyt Sherman came into office as County Clerk, in 1852, were the records kept in complete and permanent form.

August Sixth, 1849, he was elected County Treasurer, and he must have been quite sure of his election, for a presumed record shows that his official bond was filed July Fourteenth. As he was a good Democrat, and as Barlow Granger, Judge Casady and R. L. Tidrick ran the machine in those days, and no Whig had even a hope of public office, the particularity of records was of little account. "Ben" served the term and was reelected.

In 1853, he was elected a member of the Town Council, and reelected in 1854-55-56-57, and was a very active and influential member at that formative period, when good judgment was an important factor in public affairs.

He served several terms as Justice of the Peace, and was quite popular as an arbiter among litigants. A story was told that once, when he was a candidate for office, the Whigs, who had gained enough strength to take some active part in politics, started a report that "Ben" was not the man for the place that he was completely under control of Crocker (subsequently the General), and so was his court. "Ben" denied it most emphatically. "Give me an opportunity," said he, "and I will show you." It was not long before a case was brought before him in which Crocker was one of the lawyers. During the hearing, Crocker made several objections to his opponent's method of procedure, and "Ben" in every one decided against Crocker—with an eye to the Whigs and that office until finally, after a knockout, Crocker retorted: "I cannot understand the action of the court in this case. I believe the court has been tampered with."

"I fine you ten dollars for contempt of court," replied "Ben."

"All right," said Crocker, as he drew a paper from his pocket, "I'll indorse it on the back of this promissory note of yours."

There was a couple of well-known fellows in town I will call B and C, who by some means were very frequently summoned as jurymen in "Ben's" court. They didn't like to be hauled into court every few days from their business, and they put their heads together to get rid of it. The next time they were called, B, who is still in business at the old stand, went to the defendant's attorney in the case and very confidentially said to him that he did not think he was a proper person for the jury, as he had some knowledge of it, and beside, was strongly prejudiced against some of the parties to the suit. He suggested that C would be a good jurymen.

C, who has since passed beyond the reach of mundane courts, went to the plaintiff's lawyer and told the same tale, and suggested the selection of B.

When the case came up for hearing, both were preemptorily challenged for cause, and dismissed. They played the trick until they got rid of jury serving in "Ben's" court.

After the close of his several terms as Justice of the Peace, he was appointed Deputy Sheriff, and held that place, I think, until his decease, in 1866.

He amassed considerable wealth, and began the erection of a fine brick residence at the corner of Fifth and Vine streets, now a part of the Rock Island Station. The spot was low, wet, little else than a slough in fact, in early Spring the boys used to shoot wild ducks a block east of it. His project was accepted as one of his eccentricities. A cellar being impossible, he built a basement story above ground, and got the first story up, when the panic of 1857 came, which strewed this country with wrecks of fortunes, and he was obliged to stop. He put on a nondescript roof, and made it his home, where for many years it was, with its high skeleton basement of open doors and windows, a conspicuous reminder to the whole town of hard times, of one who deserved a better fate, and who was a prominent personage in the earliest days of the town.

December Eleventh, 1904.

Transcribed from:

PIONEERS OF POLK COUNTY, IOWA AND REMINISCENCES OF EARLY DAYS

by L. F. Andrews

Volume I

Des Moines, Baker-Trisler Company, 1908