



ISAAC COOPER

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ONE of the earliest and best known settlers of Polk County, and identified with the formative period of the city, was Isaac Cooper, a nephew of J. Fennimore Cooper, the novelist. He came here in September, 1845, made a land claim in what was then Delaware Township, but now a part of Clay Township, and waited around The Fort until the expiration of the Indian title, October Eleventh. On getting possession of the claim, he built a cabin, and dug a well, the first in Polk County—with two skillets borrowed of the Indians. It was about twenty feet deep, and furnished an abundance of pure water.

The materials for home making were scarce. The early pioneers generally came with few household goods. Tables, bedsteads, chairs, stools, etc., had to be improvised from old boxes, poles, or whatever could be obtained. There were no saw mills, no boards. He had one chair, with which the family did very well, he used to say, except on Sunday. From a Black Walnut tree, he made the frame of a chair, and seated it with hickory bark, a more serviceable chair than most of those in the market now. I think it is yet in existence, as a family treasure, with Mrs. Fred Hubbell, his daughter.

As Winter came on, the children's shoes were out. Leather and cobblers were scarce. From the tops of a pair of his boots, and the skirt of a saddle abandoned by the dragoons, he made a pair of shoes for his boy—more serviceable, he said, than any he ever bought at the stores, and were probably the first made in the county.

Scarcity of cobblers and shoes was not uncommon in those early days, even down to the early Fifties, and often there was no money to buy with, as Leonard Brown once learned. He was a young fellow, with considerable pretensions, a school teacher, a high society chap, and popular with "the girls." On one occasion, a social event was up, which Leonard desired to attend. There were

no invitation cards, no superfluous ceremonies in those days. The community was like a large family, everybody knew everybody. Whenever the time arrived for one of those functions, a fellow would "pick up" his girl, as it were, and go. On this occasion, Leonard invited a very nice, comely young maiden to go with him. She flatly declined. That was a stunner for Leonard. It broke him all up; hurt his pride. It was an insinuation against his good name, for which, as Shakespeare says, "no firm reason could be rendered." It worried him, and he sought the aid of a good matronly friend to ascertain the cause of it. On making inquiry of the young woman, the reply was:

"Why, I didn't go with him because I was barefoot. I had no shoes."

The young maiden is with us yet, and has probably forgotten the incident, but she is able to purchase several pairs of shoes.

Mr. Cooper at once became a leader in public affairs, and when the township was organized, was elected one of the Trustees, and Justice of the Peace. Having been a contractor and builder "Down East," he naturally moved in that direction. Lumber was greatly needed. He met the demand by building a saw mill on Four Mile Creek. It required faith, fortitude and pluck to attempt to harness that little thread-like stream to such a mill. It was of rude construction, but was of great value to the community.

He improved his farm, became active in township affairs, and pushed things in various directions. He brought the first threshing machine and reaper and mower into the county.

In 1853, he moved to The Fort and became a permanent resident, locating on a tract where the Water Works office and Ball Park now are, on Grand Avenue and Fifth Street. Soon after, he was appointed Chief Clerk in the office of the Register of the United States Land Office, a post of great responsibility, the daily receipts often amounting to twenty-five thousand dollars in gold. Uncle Sam would not accept checks, nor "red-dog," "wild-cat" currency.

In 1857, he was elected a member of the Town Council from the Third Ward. The same year, the County Judge, Napier, began to agitate a project for a new Court House, and kept at it for a

whole year. He wanted one worth not less than fifty thousand dollars. The farmers and taxpayers thought that was an enormous lot of money to put into one building—there was no good reason for it; it was preposterous; it was setting up a bad precedent to put so much money into the hands of one man. It was discussed over farm fences and in stores, but the Judge, who was a law unto himself, decided to go ahead, and in June, 1855, made a contract with Cooper to erect it for sixty-three thousand dollars, according to plans made by D. H. Young. It was to be an elaborate affair, 66 x 102, fifty feet high, surmounted by a dome and town clock—the clock never got beyond the dial stage—the porticos and roof peaks to be ornamented with life-size Basswood goddesses representing several kinds of mythology.

In those days, money did not grow on bushes, and the rural people queried as to where the Judge would get the money.

Cooper had only got fairly started when he wanted money, and in May, 1859, the Judge ordered an election to vote on a proposition to issue bonds to the amount of thirty thousand dollars. The proposition was adopted by one thousand and seventeen to seven hundred and ninety votes. The bonds were issued and sold for 23,768.61. Cooper took three at ninety per cent, and eleven at eighty per cent.

The bonds issued, the next problem was the interest and principal. How were they to be paid? Public sentiment got hot. The Judge was lambasted on all sides. Contention, bitterness and strife were rampant. While none questioned the integrity and honesty of the Judge, his judgment was severely criticised. He was investigated, and every few days called up to explain things, and so intense became the agitation that at the election, October, 1859, he lost his job, and was succeeded by John H. McClelland, an estimable, conservative business man, who went on with the work, but soon found himself short of funds. With the clamor of county officers, and courts parceled out in discommodious quarters in the Exchange Block, on Walnut Street, and the Sherman Block, on Court Avenue, and impatient lawyers on one side and a disgruntled populace on the other, the Judge was in sore straits. To issue more bonds was not to be considered at all. The Judge was at his wits' end, but he must have more money.

When Uncle Sam made his survey of the state, there was found fourteen thousand five hundred acres in Polk County which were deemed unsuitable for cultivation, and they were transferred to the state as "swamp lands," much of which has since been transformed into valuable farms. The Judge, in his extremity, hit upon these "swamp lands." There was money in them, but to get it required legislative action. The General Assembly was "seen," and an Act authorizing the Judge to sell the swamp lands and use so much of the proceeds as was necessary to complete the Court House, provided the electors of the county approved the same, was passed. The Judge thereupon ordered an election, at which the proposition was unanimously approved.

The next General Assembly, in 1861-2, passed an Act placing all court houses under control of the County Boards of Supervisors. The first move of the Polk County Board was to get possession and boss the job. They attempted to oust Cooper, but he had a good contract, and those who know him, know he doesn't scare easily; he was of such temperament that he could be led where he could not be driven, but he was so continually harassed and embarrassed that he surrendered his contract, and the Supervisors finished the main structure so it could be occupied in 1863. Then came the dome, and the whole was not completed until 1865—in fact, was never completed, for, so soon as the dome was finished, Jupiter Pluvius disclosed holes in the roof, and from then on there was constant repairing, alteration and reconstruction until its final destruction. The cost of it was near one hundred thousand dollars. It was, at best, an architectural monstrosity, and, with the jail in the cellar, always a nuisance and abomination. I have no doubt, the demise of several judges, county officers and lawyers could be traced to the unhealthfulness of that old rookery, with its walls completely saturated with the poison of sewer air, one of the most insidious foes of human life.

After retiring from the Court House, Cooper turned to real estate investments and settlement with the County Supervisors, until 1875, when, with impaired health, he went to California, where he made his temporary home.

Politically, he was a Democrat, but had little to do with politics. He was a plain man, of few words, of most positive temperament,

never vacillating, his "yea" and "nay" were final; never identified himself with the strifes between the East and West Side, and, in the early days, was helpful in many ways in developing the county and town. *

September Fourth, 1904.

*Died August Thirteenth, 1902, aged eighty-nine.

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by L. F. Andrews

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