



JAMES S. CLARKSON

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OLD-TIMERS of Polk County most assuredly have not forgotten James S. Clarkson, or "Ret," as everybody called him, who was so prominently identified with all the various activities of the county in the early days.

Born in Brookville, Franklin County, Indiana, May Seventeenth, 1842, he was literally raised in the printing office of his father, Coker F., who published the *Brookville American*. He began setting type in the office when he was so small, boxes had to be piled up for him to stand on and reach the type boxes, and there he acquired an education in one of the best practical schools in this or any other country.

When he was twelve years old, in 1854, his father disposed of his newspaper and engaged in railroad building until 1855, when he purchased a large tract of wild prairie land in Grundy County, Iowa, and with the assistance of "Ret" and his brother, Richard P., more familiarly known as "Dick," began making what became the famous "Melrose Farm." During the winter months, he added variety to his vocation by working in a saw mill.

In 1861, when the cannon's roar at Fort Sumter reverberated over the country, he tendered his services to Uncle Sam, but the army doctors rejected him for physical disability, caused by overwork in a saw mill the previous Winter. He enlisted again in 1862, in a cavalry company, and was again rejected because of a weak heart. He went back to the farm with the enthusiasm in which Cartoonist "Ding" would picture:

"The whining schoolboy, with his satchel  
And shining morning face, creeping like a snail,  
Unwillingly, to school."

Nevertheless, he stuck to the farm, and while his father was absent as State Senator from that county, served as sole manager of it, but it is safe to say his heart was not in it. He was not built

for a promoter of graniverous quadrupeds. His natural bent was toward journalism, and he became impressed with the idea that the *Eldora Ledger* would be a good thing to have. One day, he broached the subject to his father, who suddenly squelched his ambitious dream with the tart retort that if he had no higher aspiration than that, he had better stick to the farm until something better presented itself.

He stuck to the farm until the Spring of 1866, when the journalistic cravings of his nature brought him to Des Moines, May Eleventh, and he at once took a "case" as compositor in the *Register* office, in the Exchange Block, at Third and Walnut streets. Six weeks after, he was made assistant foreman of the composing-room, and three months later, promoted to foreman. Frank W. Palmer was the editor, assisted by the never-to-be-forgotten J. M. Dixon, a very peculiar man, and writer of oddities and pungent paragraphs.

While employed in the office as compositor, Clarkson indulged in sending news letters to several newspapers over the signature of "Ret." The office boys took it up, and it became universal. He always responded to it with geniality, in recognition of the good-fellowship which prompted it, and thousands of people did not know he had any other "front" name.

Dixon was a special correspondent of the *Chicago Tribune*, for which he was paid twenty dollars per month. His eyes became seriously affected, resulting in total blindness. "Ret" assumed the correspondence, and for nearly three years did the work, received the pay, and gave it to Dixon.

In the early Spring of 1866, began a contest for an election of Congressman from the then Fifth District. John A. Kasson was a candidate for renomination for a third term. The friends of General G. M. Dodge and a large contingent of the soldier element decided to put the General in the field, in recognition of his brilliant war record. The *Register*, Thomas F. Withrow, General Nat. Baker, and other leading Republicans, supported Dodge. It was one of the fiercest and most bitter struggles ever known in the party in the district or state. The General received the nomination, and was elected.

December First, 1866, Frank M. Mills and his brother, Jacob W., purchased the *Register* establishment, and on the Sixth took possession, signaling the event with a banquet to the editors and printers. Mr. Palmer was retained as editor-in-chief.

Several months later, a reorganization of the newspaper force became necessary. J. A. Carey, who had been assisting Palmer, was sent into the field for outside work, which made a vacancy at the city editor's desk. Frank, who was the active principle and moving spirit of Mills & Company, began casting about for someone to fill the vacancy. He had for some time been attracted by "Ret," who held a "case" in the composing-room. One day, J. C. Benedict, the chief bookkeeper, casually said to Frank that "Ret" was going away—that he had, or was about to book at the stage office for an overland ride to San Francisco. Frank sent for him to come to the business office. He promptly responded, and was offered Carey's place. He took it, and, said Frank to me, a few days ago: "I think I am entitled to credit for saving to the state of Iowa one of its greatest editors."

In 1869, Palmer retired from the *Register*, to run for Congress. Dodge, satisfied with the glory and emoluments of one term in an office he did not like, and did not want, declined a renomination, and "Ret" was given the editorial chair on probation. Fearing he might be too young for so heavy work, and with vivid remembrance of the events of 1867, Frank made arrangements for articles from General Nat. Baker, an old editorial wheel-horse; Louis Ruttkay, a fine scholar and polished writer; Tom Withrow, the nester of the Iowa Bar, and General Solicitor of the Chicago and Rock Island Railroad, and John S. Runnells, one of the most polished political persuaders that ever mounted a stump, but it was soon discovered that the young man who would push a pencil from Monday morning to Saturday night without stopping was equal to the occasion. Al. Swalm, a second Dixon, was called down from the composing-room and installed in the city editor's chair, and the general verdict was that the two made a team that was hard to get ahead of. Later, Al. was sent to Grand Junction and Jefferson to run newspapers for Mills & Company, and "Lafe" Young, who had been an apprentice in the job department, and was running a job press, was given

Al.'s place at the city editor's desk, which he held until he went to Atlantic and started the *Telegraph*.

In 1869, the printing business of Mills & Company had increased to such magnitude the newspaper became an incubus, and they were inclined to dispose of it. That was "Ret's" opportunity, and he suggested the purchase of it. to his father, as "worthy of higher aspirations. " The suggestion was accepted, the purchase made for thirty thousand dollars, cash, and December Fourth, 1870, the property was transferred to the father and sons, "Ret" and Dick, under the firm name of the Clarkson Company. "Ret" became the editor, Dick the business manager.

"Ret" was an editor by birth, "a chip off the old block." He possesses a virile, versatile, matured mind, well stored with gems gathered from the choicest and best authors.

Old-timers recall with pleasure the force, directness and diction of his political editorials; the elegance, descriptive beauties and masterful word-building of his more sentimental productions, sparkling with all the charms of the purling, babbling brook adown the mountain side. The impress of his individuality, as clear as the shadow from a photographer's camera, was stamped in every line. He had a peculiar genius for constructing obituary notices. It used to be said there were those who were willing to die if "Ret" would write their obituary. He is the author of two works of fiction, but not under his own name, which had a large sale.

There was one style of his writing—his chirography—the public never saw. It was simply execrable, and it was vouchsafed only to the compositors who put it in type to enjoy the beauty of it. The swear-words declaimed in their efforts to decipher it were terrific. It was unique—nothing like it, except, perhaps, that of John H. Gear, Governor Larrabee, Judge George G. Wright, and Horace Greeley, none of whom could decipher their own after it got "cold." There was fun with the "regulars" when a tramp hove into the office for a chance to "sub." He would be given a "case," Jones, the foreman, with a twinkle of his eye, would slip a "take" of "Ret's" copy on the hook; the fellow would grab it, go to his place, study over it, turn it around several times, and break out: "See here, boss, what the h\_\_l is this yer givin' me. Looks like an

inscription on an Egyptian obelisk," and hand it back to the foreman. Harry Porter was the only compositor who could read it readily, and the boys were willing he should have all the "phat" there was in it.

He wrote very rapidly with a pencil, on soft paper, and several years before he left the *Register*, his wrist muscles collapsed under the strain of his strenuous pushing, and he had to employ a stenographer, and later a typewriting machine, when those came into use.

I recall an instance, when "Ret" and Dick took a trip to the Pacific Coast, and the only time, I think, Dick went outside the city limits while he was connected with the *Register*. Just before leaving the office, "Ret" sent upstairs a full column editorial for the next morning's issue. Harry Porter was off duty, and after a serious consultation among the boys, O. H. P. Grove volunteered to tackle it. He awaited the return of the proof with dismal expectations, and great was his surprise to find a crisp, new One Dollar bill pinned to it, complimentary to his expertness as a guesser. As a reminder of the event, a page of the manuscript of the editorial was pasted up in the composing-room, where it remained several years.

In 1871, when the Des Moines National Bank was organized, he was a stockholder, was elected one of the Board of Directors, and subsequently Vice-President.

He had abiding faith in the city of his adoption, every foot of which was underlaid with coal, surrounded by an immense wealth of raw product, in the center of the finest body of land the sun shines upon—it only needed greater facilities for communication with the outside world to secure growth and prosperity. He decided that what was necessary was railroads. The town had but one, the Rock Island. The Chicago and Northwestern had built its road forty miles north of it to the Missouri River, the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy fifty miles south of it to the same point, and the town was fenced in. The so-called Granger Law was in force, the four big trunk lines were vigorously fighting it, and declared that not another mile of railroad should be built in Iowa. Des Moines was at a standstill, and lethargic. The big, old Savery House was closed and empty; small boys could be seen casting stones through

its windows. "Ret" decided that something must be done, and one night, in 1878, I think it was, he sent the office boy in haste to his residence for his valise, and went to Chicago, where he spent several days in strenuous effort to induce the railroad magnates to release their embargo, at least against Des Moines. That he was successful was evidenced by the fact that immediately on his return, he organized the Des Moines and Knoxville Railway Company, went personally into the field, secured the right-of-way from Knoxville to Des Moines, raised the funds to build the road, and when the road-bed was completed, the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy laid the iron on it, and January Tenth, 1880, the first passenger train came into the city over it. "Ret" was President of the company from start to finish.

To get another outlet in another direction, in July, 1879, he organized the Des Moines, Marshalltown, Marion and Milwaukee Railway Company, secured the right-of-way, and survey of the route, negotiated with the Chicago, Milwaukee and Saint Paul to iron and operate it, but the project failed.

"Ret" then turned his attention to the Wabash, a connection with which would not only give Des Moines a third communication with Chicago, but with Saint Louis and the South. He and John S. Runnells went to New York and made an agreement with Jay Gould similar to that made with the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy, whereby the Wabash was to be extended to Des Moines. The Des Moines and Saint Louis Railroad Company was organized, and when the roadbed was ready for the iron, Mr. Gould was called to execute his part of the compact. In that compact was a provision that two narrow-gauge feeders should be built northward and westward from Des Moines. Accordingly, early in 1880, "Ret" organized the Adel and Western Railroad Company, the name of which was, in September, changed to Des Moines and Northwestern Railroad Company. This was followed with the organization of the Saint Louis, Des Moines and Northern. Polk & Hubbell became interested in the narrow-gauge roads, and one was built through Dallas and Guthrie counties to Fonda, and the other to Boone.

In January, 1886, "Ret" negotiated the incorporation of the Des Moines Union Railroad Company, composed of the Des Moines

and Saint Louis, Des Moines and Northwestern, Saint Louis, Des Moines and Northern, and Wabash, Saint Louis and Pacific Railroad Companies, and he was elected President of the corporation.

To secure these four roads to Des Moines, "Ret" spent nearly half his time for two years, and much money from his own pocket. Nor was that all. It was not uncommon for him to turn the paper over to "the boys," and post off to New York and Philadelphia, to assist in starting some new industry in Des Moines.

He is a radical Republican, an active politician, and understands the game in all its phases. The influence of the *Register* attained national fame, and in 1868, I think, he was made Chairman of the State Central Committee, and served several years. In 1867, when only twenty-five years old, he was offered, by President Grant, the mission to Switzerland, but declined it. In 1871, he was appointed Postmaster for Des Moines, served six years, and resigned on account of his inability to agree with the Southern policy inaugurated by President Hayes, and his unwillingness to oppose a President he was serving under officially. In 1881, President Garfield offered him a foreign mission, but he declined it. In 1889, he was appointed, by President Harrison, First Assistant Postmaster General, and served one year, when he was offered a mission to China or Russia, but declined them.

He was a delegate to each Republican National Convention from 1876 to 1896; a member of the Republican National Committee from 1880 to 1896; Chairman of the Committee from 1890 to 1892, and President of the Republican League of the United States from 1891 to 1893.

During the entire war period, to him a Secessionist was a Rebel, and so long as he was editor of the *Register*, it was so printed in its columns. He recognized no such substitute as "Confederate."

He is of nervous, lymphatic temperament, genial and companionable, but not loquacious; is decidedly positive in character; possesses an indomitable will which even the most adverse circumstances cannot break; is a close, tenacious friend, and a hard hater. An enemy he can forgive, but forget, never. Is inclined to be aggressive, and woe to the person or thing that becomes the target of his trenchant pen when dipped in gall. He was an earnest



promoter of the growth and prosperity of the town of his adoption, and from the viewpoint of the present-day "booster" dispensation, he was a booster when it was needed. He gave to the industrial, educational, and church interests the powerful influence of his newspaper. For several years he was an active member of the West Side School Board.

In 1879, a beginning was made to establish (sic) a school for the higher education of girls, and the preparation of boys for college, to which endeavor the columns of the *Daily Register* gave enthusiastic support. It culminated the following year in the incorporation of Callanan College, so named in honor of James Callanan, who donated the grounds and building, as a boarding school of the highest excellence for young women, and "Ret" was elected one of the Board of Trustees.

He was a charter member of Capital City Lodge Number Twenty-nine, Knights of Pythias, organized March Twenty-sixth, 1876.

In 1891, he sold his interest in the *Register* to his brother, Dick, went to New York and organized the New York and New Jersey Bridge Company, to build a bridge over the Hudson River at Fifty-ninth Street, to cost sixty-five million dollars, and was made President of the company.

In 1902, President Roosevelt appointed him Surveyor of Customs for the port of New York, which place he now holds. Some day, he will return to Des Moines, which he claims is his home.

May First, 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**