



GENERAL N. B. BAKER

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OF all men prominently connected with the history of the state and of Des Moines, none stand out more conspicuously than General Nathaniel B. Baker.

Born in Hillsborough, Merrimac County, New Hampshire, in 1818, he received a liberal education preparatory to entering Harvard University, from which he graduated in 1839, when twenty-one years old; studied law with Franklin Pierce, subsequently President of the United States; admitted to the Bar in 1842; appointed Clerk of the Court of Common Pleas in 1845; Clerk of the Superior Court of Merrimac County in 1846; elected Representative to the Legislature in 1851, and chosen Speaker of the House; prominently mentioned for presidential candidate by the Democratic Party in 1852; for three years associate editor of the *New Hampshire Patriot*, he became one of the most influential men in the state, and a leader of the Democratic Party. He was exceedingly popular with young men, and very helpful to them. In 1854, he was elected Governor, the last of his political faith in that state, and served one term. In 1856, he came to Iowa, and settled in Clinton, then a small town, but ambitious. The Legislature made a grant of land to the Iowa Central Air Line Railway Company, which had forfeited the grant by failure to comply with its terms. Clinton wanted a transfer of the grant to the Cedar Rapids and Missouri River Railway Company, organized to build a road from Clinton to the Missouri River, and which is now a part of the great Chicago and Northwestern system. To secure his influence, and the benefit of his legislative experience in behalf of that project, Baker was elected Representative to the Legislature in the Fall of 1859. No mistake was made in his selection, for he at once became a leader, and largely instrumental in shaping the legislation of that eventful session. "Honest John Edwards," as he was called, from Lucas County, was the Speaker. With little

or no experience, he got on very well, except when the members became turbulent and got in a wrangle, as they sometimes do, he would call "the gentleman from Clinton" to the chair, who would quickly quell the storm and get business going as smoothly as if never ruffled, for he know how to appeal to men, to gain their good-will and support.

"Charley" Aldrich, fresh from the prairies up in Hamilton County, was elected Chief Clerk. He didn't know as much about Legislatures as he does now. He had never seen one in session; hadn't the slightest idea of what he had to do, and, terribly fearful he wouldn't do it straight, it made him nervous and weak in the knees. Baker, who occupied a seat directly in front of the Clerk's desk, noticed the young man's trepidation, and the third day, after adjournment, went to the desk, gave "Charley" a whack on the back, saying: "See here, young man, I've got something to say to you. I sit right there," indicating his seat, "where I can see you from head to foot, and I notice that when you are reading or call the roll, your knees tremble. I want to say to you that it's all d__d nonsense, and I don't want to see any more of it. You needn't stand in fear of anybody in this House. You are going to make a good Clerk, and we all like you. Brace right up, my boy; you are all right, " then turning on his heel, walked away.

The bill for the transfer of the land grant came up early in the session. The railroad company was represented in the Third House by a man named Crocker, its President, and a prominent Eastern railway manager. He was assisted by one Bodfish, with several attaches. It was the first lobby ever before an Iowa Legislature. It was known as the "Owl Club." Crocker was of commanding presence, dignified in manner, with a color and cut of hair; large, round, gray eyes, with wise, solemn aspect, which gave him the perfect semblance of an owl—hence the name. He was the chief engineer of the Club. Bodfish, a large, portly, jovial individual, a good mixer, had charge of the dispensary department. Its head-quarters was at the old Demoin House, at First and Walnut. Baker had, perforce, charge of the bill in the House, and at once called in play all the tactics he had acquired from practice and experience. He was recruiting officer for the Club, and kept its rooms, which

occupied nearly the whole ground floor of the old rookery, well supplied with members. A novel scene was the Club in procession, marching over to the State House every morning. It was never asserted that much money was being used, but generous promises of land were made, if the bill passed, and an abundant supply of thirst assuagers of several varieties were constantly on tap at the south end of the hostelry, while Bodfish had a quiet place to which were invited the Governor, Judges of the Supreme Court, and Legislators, for liquid refreshments. Governor Lowe, who was a man of most sanctimonious mien, indulged in no levity, of rigid temperance habits, declined the proffer, until Bodfish, "on the honor of a gentleman" and temperance man, assured him the whiskey they had brought to Iowa had all been run down a "yarn string" from the fifth story of a warehouse to the cellar, thus removing all its satanic elements and objectionable features; that it was harmless, and known to the elect as "string whiskey." The next day, the Governor told Judge Wright all about the innocent "string whiskey"—he ought to have known better—Bodfish had set up for him, and that evening, at a banquet given by the Club, the Judge, in his most inimitable, jocular way, related the Governor's discovery of harmless "string whiskey," which brought down the house and actually provoked a broad smile from the victim. It was a rather curt sally, but the old pioneers understood one another thoroughly, and the Judge thought it was too good to keep bottled up.

The land grant was transferred, and thus was secured the completion of the road, one of the greatest public improvements ever made in the state.

Another incident of the session, illustrating the trait of Baker to grasp situations and meet emergencies, was an election on the part of the House of a state officer, after a spirited and somewhat acrimonious contest. "Charley" made up the journal of the proceedings and deposited it in a cupboard behind his desk, to be reported the next morning, but before the hour of meeting, discovered that the entire record respecting the election was missing. He was all broken up, and what to do did not know, but, recalling Baker's brace-up friendliness, laid the whole matter quietly before

him. Asked if he still had the original minutes of the proceedings, he replied he had. "Well," said Baker, "leave it with me, and I will fix it up all right." When the House opened the next morning and "Charley" began to read his journal, Baker arose and stated that a portion of the journal had been lost or stolen, that the Clerk still had the original minutes from which the journal was made, and moved that he be instructed to make the proper restitution, which was adopted. "Charley" restored the journal, and it was approved by the House, thus averting an investigation and a big scandal. Who committed the larceny was never known, but "Charley" was always sure he could put his finger on the man. In 1861, when the war clouds began to gather, the Southern states were seceding from the Union and raising the red flag of Rebellion, Governor Kirkwood called a special session of the Legislature, in May, to provide ways and means to support the President in his effort to suppress the insurrection. Iowa had no drilled military organization, and no money. There was also a large portion of the Democratic Party bitterly opposed to Lincoln's war measures, and loyal people were intensely alarmed respecting their action. Baker immediately went to the Governor and informed him he would do all in his power to induce his Democratic friends to support him, and aid in putting the state in condition to meet the demands of the President. He was made chairman of the Committee on Military Affairs in the House, secured the necessary provision for arming and equipping soldiers, for the support of their families, and the issue of war bonds for eight hundred thousand dollars, to provide a war and defense fund. At the close of the session, he was appointed Adjutant General, and soon after removed to Des Moines. In July of the same year, the State Convention of the Union Party nominated him for Governor, but he declined, declaring he would support Kirkwood in putting down the Rebellion.

As the war progressed, he was made Inspector General, Quartermaster, Paymaster, and Commissary General. The labor devolving upon him in organizing and equipping the fifty-seven regiments and four batteries which Iowa sent to the field was enormous, especially with the first regiments, for there were no telegraphs, no

railroads, and to get them into rendezvous camps, stage coaches, livery hacks, and private conveyances had to be provided.

In addition to that labor, he kept a record and watchful care of the soldiers, wanted to know their condition at all times, and their casualties. After heavy battles, he would ask the department at Washington for details. At first, he was informed that the time of the department was "too precious to be devoted to sending casualties to the Adjutant General of Iowa, for the benefit of civilians," but the Adjutant General of Iowa knew his rights and could not be bluffed. Sometimes he needed army supplies, and an attempt would be made at Washington to unroll red tape on him—he despised red tape—and they would get a vigorous rounding up. He was past-master in the use of what General Fitzhugh Lee called "energetic idioms"—his swear words, on occasions, were indeed robustous, and typical samples thereof would be hurled at head-quarters, regardless of rank or station.

His office was a model of system and efficiency. Of the immense sums which passed through his hands, not a penny miscarried. He made a brief record of every Iowa soldier (eighty thousand), comprised in eight thick volumes, of wonderful accuracy, and of priceless value, as has often been verified, even the Pension Department at Washington depending upon it largely for facts.

The General had great affection for the soldiers, and they for him. No soldier, his family, or widow, ever appealed to him in vain. He would, and often did, make great sacrifices for them, even to his last dollar and clothes. It was marvelous the number he could call by name. They were all his "boys," and they most reverently called him "Pap."

Nothing incensed him so intensely as to be told that some of "his boys" were being ill treated while in the rendezvous camp, before being mustered into the United States service. He took vigorous measure to stop it, and the perpetrators got a rounding up with the most forceful expletives in his masterful vocabulary. Shoulder straps interposed no hindrance in such cases.

When the Forty-seventh Regiment—the one hundred day men—were sent to rendezvous at Davenport, they were put on guard duty. They knew nothing of military duties, and the officers of

the camp looked at them askance, and gave them no instruction. One night a camp shoulder-strapper found a young man of the Forty-seventh asleep at his post. He was called up, given a piece of timber, ordered to place it across his shoulders and walk the beat until further orders. While he was doing it, Baker came along, and, seeing him, asked what he was carrying that log for. On being told, he went to headquarters, and in very expressive language informed them that they hadn't one d__d bit of authority over the Forty-seventh Regiment, and to let it alone.

An instance, illustrating his watchfulness of them, was a railroad collision in Indiana, by which several of them were killed and wounded. He at once issued public notice to their friends not to make any settlement with the railway companies; that he would secure the proper reparation for what he deemed palpable, criminal negligence, and he did so.

The incidents illustrating the varied characteristics of this big-hearted, patriotic, public-spirited man during his servitude would fill a big book.

During the Winter of 1862, the army had met with numerous reverses, and the people had become disheartened. The Legislature was in session, and one day a resolution was before the House to take a recess over Washington's Birthday. Amendments, farcical and ridiculous, had been piled on it, and the House was in a turmoil and wrangle, when a telegraph message was brought to the Speaker, announcing the capture of Fort Donelson. Instantly, there was a shout, all business was suspended, and everything loose went up in the air, amid which General Baker mounted a desk, and, with his leonine voice, moved that "the Prohibitory law be suspended for twenty-four hours. All in favor thereof, say 'Aye.' The Ayes have it." What transpired during the remainder of the day can be imagined, for before sundown several members had been completely overcome by their enthusiasm. The General and Governor gave a banquet that night at the Demoin House, in honor of the capture, and during the latter's speech at the table, respecting the action of the South—he had no children—said: "I will do all can to avenge the wrong, and I will teach my children—if I ever have any—" when the Senator from Dallas County sprang up,

and, giving the table a vigorous whack with his fist, declared: "Governor, you shall have, and I now move that the Seventh Commandment be suspended for your benefit." It was unanimously adopted.

In 1864, learning that deserters from Price's army were crossing into Southern Iowa, for robbery and murder, Baker issued orders to the State Militia to "Be alert, and if those desperadoes enter the state to rob, steal, and murder, and are caught in the act, they are to be treated as outlaws (sic), and shot on the spot, or hung to the nearest tree."

In September, 1867, came the invasion of grasshoppers, an event of historic importance, and one of the most serious of the trials and hardships of the early settlers in the new counties. To one who did not see them, the ravages of the voracious insects would be deemed incredible. They came from the west, appearing first in Webster County. They spread over the ground, fences, buildings, and trees, ate the grain in the fields, grass, even the bark of young fruit trees, currants and gooseberries. During their stay, they deposited their eggs just below the surface of the earth, which hatched the following Spring, and the devastation was repeated, until their wings had grown, when they flew away in masses, darkening the sun. Thus they kept on for several years, invading the counties of Webster, Woodbury, Ida, Sac, Calhoun, Cherokee, Carroll, Greene, Dallas, Page, Adams, Ringgold, Madison, Adair, Boone, Warren, and Polk. In Jefferson and Boone, the Chicago and Northwestern had lots of trouble, so thick were the hoppers they stopped trains on the grades. They reached Des Moines in their hopping stage, with a vigorous appetite, moved straight forward like an army of soldiers, the main body following Bird's Run, resting at night, cutting a wide swath in vegetation, leaving only bare stalks, and badly disfigured trees and shrubs. They went southeast across the rivers, their passage through the city requiring several days.

So disastrous in some of the new northwest counties had been the scourge to settlers, they were reduced to absolute want and poverty. Many of them abandoned their desolated farms, or sold them for a mere song, and left the state. Appeals were made for

help. The Legislature appropriated fifty thousand dollars, to be expended for the purchase of seed for the farmers, but there was need of clothing and other supplies. General Baker at once started measures for relief. Some of his "boys" were sufferers, but his big heart was no respecter of persons, and by his energetic, organizing capacity and vigorous appeals to the people—they were simply demands without apologies—and with the generous cooperation of the railroads and express companies, he soon had supplies in their homes. He went hither and thither, day and night, for months, often forgetting to eat or sleep. While on one of his errands of helpfulness among the settlers, in the Winter of 1874, he exposed himself a whole day in a storm of sleet and snow, took a severe cold, terminating in a pulmonary affection, which baffled all medical skill, and his giant-like form wasted slowly away, until September Thirteenth, 1876, when he passed to eternal rest as gently as a babe to sleep, poor in purse, but rich in the affections of the people.

In September, 1870, a reunion of Iowa soldiers was held in Des Moines, when thirty thousand of them were camped on the ground where the Capitol stands, and eastward thereof. It was the largest reunion of soldiers ever held in any state. To feed them was a monster undertaking. Murphy's big packing-house was given for cooking by steam. It required twelve beeves and sixty-four barrels of coffee for one meal. During the encampment of five days, one hundred and seven fat cattle, four hundred and ninety-eight barrels of coffee, and tons of other supplies were consumed. General Tecumseh Sherman was present, and wherever he appeared was greeted with a whoop that made the welkin ring. "Pap" Baker was happy, and so were his "boys." I recall going to the Police Court, one morning, in the Sherman Block, at Third and Court Avenue, to report proceedings. More than a score of the "boys" had been "pinched" during the night for over-indulgence in "Oh-be-joyful." Mayor Hatch was just ready to open court when Baker came in, and, looking around the room, inquired, "Sam," "Bill," "Joe," and so on, "What are you doing here?" to which they replied they were under arrest. "Arrest, h__!" retorted the General, "Get out of here." The Mayor interrupted him with notice that they were there for trial. "To h__l with your trial. These

are my boys. I'll take care of them. Fall in, boys," and he marched them out of the court-room, leaving the court and police dumbfounded at his effrontery. There were no more arrests of his "boys."

He was a member, for many years, of the State Press Association. His newspaper experience prompted him often to discuss public affairs in the state papers, whose columns were always open to him, and many a powerful, stirring article appeared in the editorial columns of the *Daily Register* from his pen, unknown outside the office. He was a hail-fellow with reporters, and ever ready to give them aid.

He was a member of Capital Lodge, Number One Hundred and Ten, of the Masonic Order, and when the Masonic Mutual Benefit Association of Iowa was incorporated, in 1857, he was its first Vice-President.

As a citizen, his whole aim and purpose was to do good, to help the whole community. Brusque of manner he was, and blunt of speech, but a tenderer heart never beat in human frame. His generosity was ruinous to him. His interest in and helpfulness to young men was proverbial. His love of children was supreme. Those who were poor and needy were special objects of his commiseration and activities. It was not uncommon for him to pick up on the street a poorly clad and shivering boy during Winter cold and storm, lead him into a store, fit him with a warm, new suit of clothes, and go his way, the boy never knowing who had done it.

The granite column which marks his resting-place in Woodland Cemetery was erected with funds contributed in small sums by thousands of "his boys," a special privilege they requested, as a testimonial of their high regard for him. A special Act of Congress directed the War Department to place the four brass cannon which surround it.

No good portrait representing him in the prime of life is in existence. The one presented herewith was copied from a portrait now in the Aldrich collection in the State Historical Building.

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