



MAJOR THOMAS CAVANAGH

MAJOR THOMAS CAVANAGH

EARLY settlers of Des Moines often recall with pleasure their remembrance of Thomas Cavanagh. On Christmas Day, in 1848, he walked across the Mississippi River at Clinton on the ice, and arrived here early in 1849; a man about thirty-five years old, of large physique, athletic, muscular build, who was for many years a model, valued citizen, known to everybody as the "Major." He was of that class of pioneers noted for their humility, stability, and progressiveness.

Born of prosperous parents, in Ireland, liberally educated, with aesthetic temperament, eminently social nature, refined taste, he, with his parents, had passed through the terrible Famine of 1847-8, which had invoked the world's charity for relief. When it had partially subsided, they determined to come to America, the Land of Promise. The "Major" came in advance, bearing letters to Judge Casady and R. L. Tidrick, then in law and real estate business. He was received in the kindly, open-hearted manner of the pioneers, whose gospel of living was to help one another. Would that there were more of that among the present generation. The Judge was impressed with his politeness, courteous mien, and scrupulous neatness of apparel, for in those days, old settlers did not give much attention to fine clothes, and fastidiousness in dress was a noticeable distinction.

The "Major" had some money, which he desired to invest in the most remunerative way. The Judge naturally suggested "corner lots," he having just purchased a couple at the corner of Fifth and Walnut streets, where Clapp's Block now stands. He recommended the southeast corner of the same block, at Mulberry Street, where the Youngerman Building now is. The "Major" purchased it for thirty dollars, and received the first and original deed from the County Supervisors, the county having received its title direct from Uncle Sam by donation. In 1891, when the corner-stone of the

Youngerman Building was laid, the "Major's" deed was, with other articles, deposited therein. He also made several other good investments in real estate.

His parents came soon after, went to an Irish settlement in Dallas County, and the "Major" joined them, where he laid out and established the town of Redfield, remaining there five years. It was while there he got the title of "Major," which he carried by common consent, and his own hearty assent, to the end of his days. In his little town was a couple of Southerners, jolly, jovial fellows, named Owens and Burns, who were his close chums. Under the rule that all Southerners are "Colonels," Owens was dubbed the "Colonel," Burns the "Judge" (a title that he afterward actually acquired), and Cavanagh the "Major," and the titles stuck.

At the September Term of the District Court, in 1854, the "Major" was admitted to the Bar of Polk County, and the next year returned to Des Moines and opened an office as a lawyer, real estate broker, and emigrant agent.

The bibulous Judge McFarland was then on the bench, and one day a divorce case was up for a hearing. The Judge had evidently been out the night before with agreeable friends. He came into court "half seas over," and, after getting into his seat and turning over his record, called the case, but before the lawyers had got fairly ready to proceed, he had lapsed into somnolence. The first witness was asked if he knew the parties to the suit. He replied, "Not very well, but they were always fighting and fuddling around."

The Judge aroused himself from his stupor, and mumbled: "Fud-dling around and a-r-o-u-n-d. Call the next case."

Such a spectacle was so abhorrent to the "Major," he seldom appeared before that court, and confined himself to his real estate business. He at once came into public esteem and favor, for he was of that temperament which drew people to him. His extreme suavity and courtesy gave him the distinction of being the most polite man who ever lived in the city. There was nearly the counter-part of him in J. D. Seeberger, the well-known hardware merchant. Old-timers would frequently smile when those two, meeting on the streets, would tip their hats and side-step to give the right-of-way, and the parting bow.

The "Major" became prominent in social affairs—not the fashions of society, but in that which pertains to the betterment of social life. He was an ardent friend of the Church and School, and a strong temperance advocate. In 1856, when Father Plathe was striving to build the first Catholic Church, at the corner of Sixth and Locust, the "Major" did valiant service, and when, in 1863, that grand, good man, Father Brazil, sought to build a larger and finer structure on the same spot, at a time when it was harder to raise one hundred dollars than it is now one thousand dollars, the "Major" canvassed the town with him for funds, and one day they ran up against Isaac Brandt, who is known to be a radical hater of whiskey. Isaac agreed to subscribe twenty-five dollars, provided—he tied a string to it, half hoping it would be refused—that Father Brazil should occasionally preach a good temperance sermon to his congregation. Both men quickly grasped his hands, and said the terms pleased them greatly. Some time after the new edifice was dedicated, Isaac thought he would go there one Sunday and hear the sermon. The usher gave him a seat well in front, and not far away sat the "Major." The house was packed. Whether or not Father Brazil knew of his presence, Isaac never learned, but the sermon was a most eloquent and scathing one against the evils and wrongs of intemperance, in which he made pointed allusion to the habits of a well-known man there present, now dead—he might as well have given his name—in which he said a man who will get drunk, spend his earnings for whiskey, and deprive his wife and children of the many things money would bring them, he would refuse to give absolution. The sermon had its intended effect. The man reformed and became a useful member of the church and the community. Isaac has never regretted the investment of that twenty-five dollars.

The principles of sobriety and right-living thus founded by Father Brazil and the "Major" permeated society generally, and have remained to this day. It is a fact that very few communicants of the Catholic Church are ever seen in the Police Court.

In 1862, during the exciting events of the Civil War period, when a Democrat was suspected of being a Rebel, a Copperhead, or a member of the Knights of the Golden Circle, the "Major" was

nominated for City Mayor. He was a Democrat, but not a politician. He knew very little of the chicanery of politics, and took no part in it, or the excitement of the times. Such was his popularity, he was elected. Scarcely had he taken the office, when, on the Twenty-eighth of June, occurred the murder of Michael King by A. D. Marsh, the City Marshal, a hot-headed Kentuckian, conspicuous for his immense watch chain, which hung down to his knees, and his truculent nature, which found vent a short time prior by shooting a German and arresting a negro without a warrant, with evident purpose to deliver him to his slave master. King was a man of athletic build, at times a little pugnacious. Some ill-feeling existed between him and Marsh over the impounding of some of his pigs by Marsh. The two met at the Sherman Building, corner of Third Street and Court Avenue, in which then were the city offices. On the way upstairs, they got into an altercation, when Marsh stabbed King, who struggled up to the Mayor's room, in the third story, where he died in a few moments. Marsh, seeing he was dying, quickly went to his home, and immediately fled the country. A Coroner's Jury was called, before whom the Mayor testified as follows:

"I was coming up the stairs toward my office, in company with King and Marsh. They were very unfriendly, and passed hard words as they came up. I was in advance of them, and when they were about turning the platform to get up the upper flight of stairs, as I supposed, I heard a noise which I supposed was King and Marsh at blows or quarreling. I turned around and saw Marsh putting a dirk in the scabbard. King came up the stairs, and when he had reached me at the top of the stairs, he said: 'I am stabbed.' I told him to sit down. He commenced falling, lay down, and grew worse very fast. He repeatedly said: 'Marsh has stabbed me.' I ordered a doctor, who was soon in attendance. I also acquiesced in the suggestion that Marsh be arrested."

The whole community was aroused, especially the Irish, and summary vengeance was threatened against Marsh. Search for him for several days was made, with great caution, as his desperate character was well known, but no trace of him could be found, and the event was passing into history, when, several years later, T. E.

Brown, the lawyer and capitalist well known in the early days, returned from a business trip to Texas, where he said he saw Marsh and had a little experience with him. He was informed while there that Marsh had formed a conspiracy to rob him, knowing that he was accustomed to carry large sums of money. He did not propose to give him the opportunity. He had him arrested on a charge of murder, and he was put in jail. Sheriff McCalla and Jonathan Stutsman were sent after him, and in due time returned, but without Marsh, to explain which they said that when passing up the river from the gulf of New Orleans, Marsh, who had declared he would not be taken to Des Moines alive, watching the opportunity, suddenly leaped overboard; his ankles and hands being heavily manacled, he at once went down in the rapid current and was seen no more. Articles in their possession taken from him gave credence to their statements. But some time later, James F. Kemp, a boot and shoe merchant, was in New Orleans, where he said he met Marsh, who said he was in the cattle trade in Texas. No further attempt to get him was made, and it became the general opinion that his escape from the Sheriff was a myth—that he was given opportunity to get away and stay away, thus saving the county considerable expense.

That was the second murder in Des Moines, the first being that of a woman, also named King.

The "Major" was an efficient official, performing the duties of Mayor and Police Magistrate upon a higher plane than is usually given the place. He closed his term with so much credit, he was nominated for a second term. The city was in a most turbulent condition. The war spirit was high. A draft for the army had been ordered. United States Marshals were here, hunting Knights of the Golden Circle, which the *Register* declared was a "secret organization, a Jesuitical sneak, plotting in the dark against the liberties of the people." Every Democrat was an alleged sympathizer with Jefferson Davis, but the most scathing attribute that could be applied to the "Major" was to call him the "acquiescent" candidate, referring back to his testimony in the King murder hearing.

The campaign was an exciting one, and so was the election, the "Major" using his best effort to allay the tumult. When the time

for counting the votes came, there was a big crowd present. Several acrimonious disputes arose, in one of which, Hy. Hatch, an active politician and well-known character, told the "Major," who was present counseling a fair and honest count, to "Go to h__l, " to which the "Major" quietly replied, "I cannot do that," clearly illustrative of his character.

The result of the count was: Leas, four hundred and sixty-four; Cavanaugh, four hundred and forty-eight, the defeat of the "Major" by sixteen votes.

To show the intense feeling prevailing, the *Register* the next morning announced in big type: "Great Union Victory!" "Copperheads Floored!" "Old Acquiescence Subsides!" "Copperheads Carry One Ward!" "We wonder if Kavanaugh [witness the spelling] 'acquiesces' in the decision?"

The "Major" was satisfied with politics. That was the only public office he held. He thereafter devoted his energies to the social side of life, in the broadest, humanitarian sense. He was a diligent helper of churches and schools. Though an ardent member of the Catholic Church, his catholicism and liberality of sentiment embraced all things which tended to promote good society. It was not uncommon to see him, a large, robust man, going about visiting schools and other public functions with S. F. Hanna, a very diminutive person, of frail physique, about four feet high, a good Presbyterian, for they were great chums, both bachelors, and popular. It was amusing, as it was singular.

In 1862, when the Savery House (now Kirkwood) was opened, the "Major" was one of the first guests, and there made his home until his marriage, in 1872.

He was one of the founders of the City Public Library, and one of its firmest supporters.

He had a fine library of law and literature. Occupying a part of his office was a pseudo-lawyer, who one night left town, taking with him the "Major's" library. Some time after, he returned the "Major's" much cherished family Bible, for which manifestation of conscience, the "Major" expressed complete satisfaction.

He retired from business in 1890, and died April Twenty-fifth, 1891, leaving a wife and three children.

Those who knew him will bear witness that he was ripened, cultured, benevolent, public-spirited, and the best type of manhood. For womanhood and motherhood, he had the most profound regard. It is no marvel, then, that with so many estimable qualities, he had the esteem and confidence of all good people. He held many important fiduciary trusts, as administrator of estates. As a benefactor to Des Moines, and especially to its domestic and social life, it can be truly said of him, as it was of the renowned French statesman, Thier, at his death, "He has lived."

April Twenty-third, 1905.

Transcribed from:
PIONEERS OF POLK COUNTY, IOWA AND REMINISCENCES OF EARLY DAYS
by L. F. Andrews
Volume I
Des Moines, Baker-Trisler Company, 1908