

WILLIAM H. MEACHAM

THE title to land and the military control of affairs of Polk County expired on the booming of the cannon at The Fort, at midnight, October Twelfth, 1845.

Through the personal effort of William H. Meacham, a meeting was held two days after, on the Fourteenth, at the cabin of John Scott, when the first step was taken to establish local civil government for the county and town. About twenty persons were present, nearly all residents of The Fort—plain, common people, who believed that good government was founded in justice and equity. There was no local form of government in existence—military control had ceased. Meacham was elected Chairman. The object of the meeting was the organization of an Association to protect themselves against claim jumpers and speculators. A committee was appointed to prepare by-laws for the Association. It was a gathering of stalwart, earnest men, who had laid the foundation of homes, and did not want to be despoiled of them by speculators and land sharks constantly roaming the country, ready to seize upon every opportunity to take advantage of the ignorance or inadvertence of the settler to sequester whatever they could get hold of.

The following is a *verbatim* report of the committee, as it appears on the original record:

"The Committee Taking in Consideration the Rapped Emigration to this cuntry think It Proper to Form the Following Buy Laws, to Viz:

"Section One.—*Resolved*, That all Persons over the age of Sixteen Years Doeing for them Selves hav the right to make a claim them Selves or threw thare Agents.

"Sec. Two.—*Resolved*, that all Persons ma claim Three HHd and Twenty Acres in Too Separate Parcels and no moar.

"Sec. Three.—*Resolved*, that all Persons making a Claim Shall Mark It out By Blazing or Staking in sutch a mannar that the Lines ma bee Esaly Traist.

"Sec. Four.—*Resolved*, that all Persons making Claims on the Des Moines and Racoon Rivers, The Rivers Shall constitute one Line of said Claim.

"Sec. Five.—*Resolved*, that the First Person Marking out A claim after the Legal Time be the Lawful Oner.

"Sec. Six.—*Resolved*, that all Persons Marking thare Claims out as Designated in Section Third and Building a House within Sixtety days, at least Fourteen Feett Squair, Four round High, Shall hold Six Months from the time of Marking Said Claim.

"Sec. Seven.—*Resolved*, that all Unresidents after every Six months shall putt on Twenty Five Dollars worth of Work or caus to be don on said Claim or forfeit his Claim.

Sec. Eight.—*Resolved*, that any Person having difficultys in relation to thare claims, It shall be thare duty for each person to choos an arbatrator and tha too when choosen choos the third Persen to settle Sutch Diffaculties.

Sec. Nine.—*Resolved*, that thare be a committee of Eleven to call out the People to Settle Claim Diffaculties when tha cant be otherwise Settled.

Sec. Ten.—*Resolved*, that after these Resolutions be adopted and sined tha bee in full foarse."

The resolutions were adopted, twenty names were affixed thereto, and Meacham was elected Chairman of the Association.

Three years later, in April, 1848, at a meeting of the settlers in Polk County, Meacham was again elected Chairman, and a Claim Club organized, similar to the former Association, with an additional provision for a Vigilance Committee to enforce the regulations.

Meacham was for several years a Captain on sea-going vessels, and had many of the characteristics of that class of men. He was an ardent Methodist, and was familiarly called "Father Meacham" by the brethren. He lived in a log cabin on the East Side, near the river ford, which was near the present east end of Locust Street bridge. While he did not keep a tavern, he never refused the hospitality of his home to strangers, an accommodation of great benefit to persons coming in the night, too late to attempt to ford the river, as the course was crooked, the exit from the east being near Walnut

Street. He also had a farm on the East Side, adjoining that of "Aleck" Scott on the north, the Government Road dividing them.

In 1845, Meacham and nine others met in one of the log cabins and organized what is now the First Methodist Church. Services were held in the cabins of the society members. What they lacked in numbers, they made up in zeal and enthusiasm. Reverend Ezra Rathbun, a very talented man, who worked on week days, at whatever he could get to do, did the preaching for them.

At the termination of the treaty with the Indians, the Government withheld a tract four miles square around The Fort, and in January, 1846, Congress ceded to Polk County one hundred and sixty acres of the four miles square, for a County Seat, an act which has not a duplicate in the records of Congress.

Perry L. Crossman, Clerk of the District Court, was ordered to divide the county into voting precincts, and make the necessary arrangements for an election, April Sixth, 1846, to elect county officers, for organizing the county, to hold office until the regular election in August. At the April election, Meacham was elected as a member of the Board of County Commissioners, and by that board, its Chairman. He was also one of the Judges of Election for Des Moines Precinct.

During the year 1846 occurred the notable contest for location of the County Seat, in which Brooklyn, Lafayette, Polk City, and other ambitious settlements were contestants, which has already been set forth in these reminiscences.

In June, 1846, Meacham and Saylor, as County Commissioners, met to adopt measures to survey the one hundred and sixty acres, and for the sale of town lots. It was ordered that A. D. Jones, County Surveyor, proceed at once to survey and lay out the town, and that sale of the town lots at auction be held July Fifteenth, the lots to be sold for payment at six, twelve and eighteen months.

Jones at once made the survey. As he had no chain, he used a rope, which must have got wet and shrunk, for when he had finished the plat, he found that there was considerable shortage. On the Eighth of July, he certified to the Commissioners that he had made the survey, and filed a plat of the town. It is known in all legal

conveyances as the "Original Town." It was bounded on the south by Elm, east by Des Moines River, north by Locust Street, and west by Eighth Street.

At the public sale of lots, on the Fifteenth of July, the first payments received were sufficient to furnish quite a fund for public use. But one lot was sold for spot cash, twenty-seven dollars and a half, it being one of the lots now occupied by Green's foundry, on Second Street. The lots at the northeast corner of Third Street and Court Avenue, where the Sherman Block is, sold for thirty-five dollars; northeast corner of Third and Walnut streets, eighteen dollars; southeast corner of Fifth Street and Court Avenue, opposite the Postoffice (sic), fifty-two dollars, purchased for investment, there being no business demand west of Third Street; southwest corner of Second Street and Court Avenue, thirty dollars; northeast corner Second and Market streets, one hundred and six dollars.

The entire Block Thirty-seven, at The Point, near 'Coon bridge, was once sold for eight hundred and sixty-three dollars, and lot Six, next to the southeast corner of the block, soon after sold for one hundred and seventy-five dollars. The same year, the corner of Eighth and Locusts streets sold for twenty-five dollars, these being the extreme points of lot buying.

The corner occupied by *The Register and Leader* was sold for thirty-seven dollars, the lot adjoining east for thirty-five dollars, and in 1866, it was sold for eight thousand four hundred and fifty dollars.

In 1847, the lots where the new Postoffice is to stand were sold for sixty-five dollars. They were sold last year, as the Postoffice (sic) site, for fifty thousand dollars, spot cash.

In July, 1850, lot Five, in block Fourteen, sold for thirty dollars. It and lot Five adjoining were valued for assessment at one hundred and twenty-two dollars. On these lots is the Youngerman Block, corner of Fifth and Mulberry streets. I have been told Youngerman paid for them twenty thousand dollars. I was offered them in 1866 for two thousand dollars.

At the election in October, 1847, the boundaries as described on the plat were adopted, and in April of that year, the newly-elected County Commissioners authorized Mr. McKay, the County Agent,

to sell all the "houses, rails, and all other property belonging to the county, at auction," and the sale was made, but it was soon discovered that the County Commissioners had been selling lots and property to which they had no title. Robert A. Kinzie held a claim granted by Captain Allen, Commander of The Fort, commencing at the mouth of 'Coon River, thence up Des Moines River half a mile to an oak tree, thence west half a mile to an oak tree, thence south to an elm tree, thence southeast to 'Coon River, containing about one-half section of land, with all the building and improvements thereon.

Doctor P. B. Fagen also held a claim for a quarter section, which also lay within the platted town. It was, therefore, necessary for the county to secure title to these claims, which was done by Kinzie giving a quit-claim deed in consideration of the sum of five hundred dollars, and Fagen likewise for three hundred dollars, which evidences the sense of exact justice which prompted the founders of the town, for they could have made much more money by holding on a few years.

At the second term of the District Court, in September, 1846, Meacham was one of the Grand Jury. There was a large docket of cases before it, but no indictments were found, and the defendants were all dismissed.

In 1847, I think, Meacham was elected Justice of the Peace. The magistrates in those days were not presumed to be versed in ethics of law, and, moreover, the income was not very attractive. They were usually selected for their good judgment and common-sense, and the office was accepted more as a matter of public spirit, and some honor, than otherwise. The records of their proceedings were often humorous. An instance is a case to establish the ownership of a certain steer. The Esquire's record says:

"I turned to the plaintiff's wife and asked if the steer in question had any white on its tail, and she answered, 'No,' whereupon the steer in question was produced, and, being examined, it was found there were white hairs in the end of its tail. Judgment was therefore rendered for defendant and two dollars and twenty-five cents costs, and the steer delivered to defendant."

Meacham held the office for several years, became a terror to horse thieves and claim jumpers, and was noted for his zeal and

courage in running them down and driving them out of the country. He finally became a monomaniac on the subject. In the excitement of some occasions, his old "sea-dog" habits got the better of him, and he would swear vigorously, which he subsequently would reproachfully confess. There were a lot of general marauders in Camp Township, known as the Ridgeway Gang, suspected of horse stealing, and even worse crimes. One of them, named Kesner, had a bad reputation and was handy with a gun. Meacham went after him once. Fully arming himself for an emergency, he went to the fellow's house, quickly opened the door, and went in. Kesner saw him, knew what was coming, and reached for his gun, when Meacham leveled his gun on him, commanded him to throw up his hands, or he would be a dead man quick, emphasizing it with a volley of vigorous swear words, and Kesner surrendered without resistance.

On another occasion, a most brutal murder had been committed near the Poweshiek County line. The whole country was aroused. The Ridgeway Gang was suspected of being parties to it. Meacham, with an armed posse, arrested Ridgeway and a son-in-law and brought them to the Sheriff's office, but, there not being sufficient evidence to hold them, they were released. Ridgeway then had Meacham arrested for false imprisonment, but public sentiment was so strong against the gang that he was released. Ridgeway's testimony in the case, however, was so crooked that he was arrested for perjury and brought before Will Porter, then a Justice of the Peace, and bound over to the Grand Jury. It was decided to accept no one on the appearance bond but some of the suspected Gang, and when the time came for further hearing, the whole Gang and their families had left the country. In the meantime, however, one of the Gang had been captured by a Vigilance Committee and left hanging to a tree in Poweshiek County.

In 1847, lumber was scarce. There was no saw mill nearer than Parmelee's mill, ten miles down the river. Meacham put in operation a circular saw, near the east side of the river, between Locust and Walnut streets, with which he turned out about two thousand feet of lumber a day, in fair weather, for it stood in open air, and was propelled by six horses. The logs were cut from the dense

timber just north of Locust Street. It was the first mill started in the town, and was a valuable enterprise.

"Father Meacham" was a good man, active and helpful in promoting the welfare of the community. He had a good wife, and this is how he got her. He was driving along the road one day, down near Iowaville, and met a very comely appearing woman walking on the roadside. He halted and accosted her:

"Are you a married woman?"

"No, sir," was the reply.

"Then you are the woman I have been looking for. Will you marry me?"

After a moment's consideration, she said, "Yes."

It must have been so, for he often related it, and she never denied it.

In 1859, I think, his physical system broke down and he went to his rest.

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by L. F. Andrews

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