



WILLIAM H. QUICK

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ONE of the best known men in Des Moines, and it may be said from Chicago to Sundown, is William H. Quick, or "Billy," as he is best known. Though not a pioneer of civilization, he was the pioneer of what has become an important part of the business life of the city and country—a great express business.

Born in Hamburg, Sussex County, New Jersey, July First, 1832, a descendant of sturdy Holland stock from the land of windmills, who settled in New Jersey on a land grant from Queen Anne, he is, as he said a few days ago, "a full-blooded Holland Dutch-man." His father was a miller, and in his youth, "Billy" was a general utility boy in the mill. Through some defect in the records of the land grant, his father was dispossessed of the property, and "Billy" was forced to paddle his own canoe. At the age of fifteen years, he took charge of a mill of five run of stones on Groeffel Hill, near Paterson, for old man Snyder, another Holland Dutch-man, and ran it nine years. Snyder used to say: "'Billy' makes the best flour of any man in the country."

In May, 1852, he became ambitious to be a railroad man, and enlisted as a brakeman on the New York and Erie Railroad, under Hugh Riddle's management.

In May, 1853, Riddle having become general manager of the Chicago and Rock Island, "Billy" transferred himself to that road as baggageman, and in May, 1855, was promoted to conductor.

In May, 1856, he was appointed as messenger for Parker's Express, on a line running from Iowa City to Dubuque.

In May, 1857, he was appointed agent at Iowa City of the United States Express Company, who had purchased all the rights and franchises of the Parkers. The old Mississippi and Missouri Railroad was slowly creeping westward, and, as extended, "Billy" was moved to Marengo, Brooklyn, Grinnell, and, in 1863, he was appointed superintendent of the company lines in Iowa, and the

small part of Nebraska in which it operated. Since then, his territory has been enlarged to embrace Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma, and Indian Territory, or the entire Rock Island Railroad system in those states.

His first office in Des Moines was in a small frame building on the west side of Third Street, next to the alley, between Court Avenue and Walnut Street, and opposite the Blodgett House, partly built by the soldiers, first known as the Marvin House. It was the headquarters of the Western Stage Company, who carried all stuff for the Express Company. A. T. Johnson, the pioneer omnibus line man, was the stage agent, and collected the express charges, "Billy" often paying him twenty-five thousand dollars a month.

When "Billy" took the office, there was only a weekly service. He immediately had it changed to a daily service. There were no delivery wagons in those days. Everybody had to go after their packages. Some merchants used hand carts.

Immediately on his appointment as superintendent, he selected his messengers from the old, trusty stage-drivers and stage messengers whom he knew well. The record of their service is worthy of mention. They remained with him as long as they lived. His employes (sic) may die, but they never resign. I recall a few of his old-time boys: George Butts, Aaron Stein, Winslow Billinger, John S. Magill, C. F. Chester, Fred. Kromer, E. M. Morseman—all dead except the latter—now President of the Pacific Express Company. "Billy" was proud of them, and often declared the company never lost a dollar by any act of one of them. A photograph group of six was presented to "Billy" Christmas Day, forty-two years ago, and he prizes it highly as a reminder of early days, and a testimonial of true, trusty friends.

The oldest messenger in the service was Kromer, or "Dutch Fred.," as he was best known. He began stage-driving when nineteen years old, drove with them westward to Des Moines, and on to Omaha. In 1861, he became a stage messenger from Des Moines to Omaha and Fort Kearney, Nebraska. When the railroad was completed, he was transferred thereto, and so continued to the end of his days, which came last year, at the age of seventy-six, having

served sixty years without the loss of a dollar of the vast sums of money entrusted to his care. He was the very soul of honor and integrity, and of upright character. So implicit was the trust in him, "Billy" once said: "If I wanted to send away a million dollars, and it was mine, I would give it to Fred., without a receipt, and think no more about it, for it would be delivered if he lived to get there." Reminiscently, he went on to say: "In the early days, people were honest. There was very little robbery. Money and valuables were placed in common iron boxes. There would be a change of stage drivers every ten miles, but we never thought of robbery. Now, we would not send such a box around the corner in Council Bluffs without extra protection. There has never been but one robbery in Iowa of our company, and that was about eight o'clock on the evening of July Twenty-first, 1873, when Jack Rafferty, one of the best and most popular locomotive engineers who ever pulled a throttle, was killed. The train was coming east from Council Bluffs, and between Anita and Adair, in a deep cut on a sharp curve and heavy grade, suddenly the engine gave a lurch and went into the ditch. The cab was crushed and Jack was probably thrown against the reverse lever, and his neck broken. The robbers, of whom there were seven, Cole and John Younger, the notorious bandits, and five of the Jesse James Gang, had removed the spikes and bolts from a rail, and, with ropes and straps, as the engine approached, pulled it aside. So quickly had Jack thrown the emergency brake, only the engine and express car left the rails. The passengers were severely shaken up, but not injured. Superintendent Royce, who was on the train, and "Billy" Smith, conductor, rushed out to ascertain the cause of the stop, when they were greeted with a fusillade of revolvers, and ordered to get back inside p. d. q., which, being interpreted, means, 'pretty d\_\_d quick.' Royce discreetly obeyed, but "Billy" pushed ahead toward the engine, when several bullets whizzed through his trousers, and he retired. A Chicago man also came out and implored the Gang not to shoot innocent women and children.

"The reply, punctuated by a revolver shot, was: 'Get back inside. We ain't no common highwaymen. We only rob the rich to give to the poor.' In the meantime, two of the most stalwart of

the seven entered the express ear, where John R. Burgess, another veteran messenger, still on deck, with over forty years of service to his credit, was guarding his treasure box. With three big revolvers leveled at his head, he was ordered to hand out his key. Thinks went through his head in haste, but he concluded his life was worth more than the contents of the safe, and he very politely presented the key, when the master of ceremonies directed him to open the safe, and do it quick, which John very slowly and reluctantly did. The money was quickly extracted. Several mail sacks were cut open, but no letters taken. Picking up several valuable registered mail boxes, they asked if they contained money. 'You can't prove it by me,' said John, and they were thrown down when they left the ear. Overlooking a large amount of gold bullion, they mounted their horses and went away, the whole event not occupying over fifteen minutes. The money was what had been taken at stations between Council Bluffs and Adair, and amounted to only eighteen hundred dollars.

The robbers stopped for dinner the next day at a farmhouse a few miles distant, and thereby were fully identified. "Billy" and Dan Bringolf, then Sheriff, went down to Missouri to round them up, but soon discovered they were being "shadowed," though carefully concealing their identity, for immediately on their arrival, "Billy" was visited by General Joe Shelby, who informed him he knew what he was there for; that the James boys were under his command, and couldn't be taken away. Everywhere they met a like rebuff, the chase was abandoned, and the robbers never caught.

Another old-timer who, for the last thirty years as money messenger has been known to every bank, store and business house in the city is Doty—his "front" name don't count—I doubt whether he knows it himself—it's just Doty. For many years, he drove a wagon and a beautiful, intelligent bay horse named Jack, a great pet, with an ever-present taste for sugar and candy, which was so pampered by women and children, Doty said they "played the deuce" with him. On going to a house to deliver a package, some child or woman up the street would appear holding up a hand, and away Jack would go to get what he knew was coming. It was not uncommon for him to be a block away, or around a corner, munching sugar with some young damsel, when Doty had finished his

delivery, but express horses, like Methodist preachers, have to go where they are sent, and when Jack was sent to Omaha, it broke Doty all up, but he is still on duty, though his work has been greatly lightened.

Another veteran was E. L. Smith, who was appointed agent at Eddyville, in 1857; in May, 1865, checked in as agent at Des Moines, and until his decease, about a year ago, every day found him at his desk. He was very quiet, courteous, methodical, highly esteemed by all employes (sic) and everybody who knew him.

The fidelity of these men to the trusts imposed with them, and the length of continuous service, is indeed remarkable, and a constant pleasure to "Billy" Quick.

Politically, "Billy" was an old-line Democrat, until McKinley first ran for President, when he concluded there was no difference between the Democrats and Republicans; that the Saint Louis Republican platform was identically the Tilden platform, except as to the tariff, which he indorsed, and he flopped, voted for McKinley, joined the Republican Party, and has been there since. He is not a politician, and takes but little active part in politics, but there are lots of United States Express boys who, when an important election approaches, want to know how he will vote.

Socially, he is genial, affable, and popular; is strongly attached to his employes (sic), and they to him. A generation or more ago, he was one of "the boys." He is a member of the Royal Arch Chapter of the Masonic fraternity, and in 1860, when a delegate to the Grand Chapter of the Royal Arch Masons of the United States, he, with several other Iowa delegates, were initiated in the mysteries and miseries of the Sons of Malta. Subsequently, he joined the R. E. C. A., a cabalistic organization concocted about thirty years ago by Hy. Smith and Ed. Whitcomb. "Ret" Clarkson prepared the ritual. A lodge-room was secured between Second and Third streets on Court Avenue, and there the mysteries of the organization were carried out. Every month or two, promptly at half past ten o'clock, a long file of men could be seen coming down the stairs of the old building. Snake-like, they formed a procession of over a block in length. Each man wore a mask and a long white robe, and carried in one hand a spear and in the other a hickory stick,

into which a hole had been bored and a candle set. Behind, came D. Miller, the Scribe, who was armed with a pen about four feet long and a bundle of records large enough to start the biggest bonfire ever built in Des Moines. Following him, came other men similarly garbed, carrying kerosene oil and the properties of the lodge. Around the streets they would march until the entire populace would be aroused to witness the strange ceremony. Sometimes, on gala occasions, a brass band would be added.

When Fourth and Walnut streets was reached, the men would form a big circle, in the center of which a big pot and tripod was erected. The fire would be lighted, and then, singing some strange song, the masqueraders would march around, dropping bits of paper into the fire. What these papers contained was a subject of much speculation. Some even declared that they were the unpaid wash bills of the members.

After the ceremony, the crowd would march into the old Savery Hotel (now the Kirkwood), and there sit down to the banquet prepared. The same bill of fare was always presented—a bowl of soup, which had to be eaten with a fork.

On the night of the last day of the year, was brought to the big circle the records for the year, and every paper representing a business transaction, bills, receipts, etc., and, as the fellows circled around, a leaf from the record and a bill, or other paper, would be cast into the flames, until all were burned, and the work of the year obliterated.

This was the public view of the organization. No one knew of many quiet visits to the homes of the poor and suffering, where loads of coal were left and empty larders were filled, where suffering was relieved and medical attendance secured for the sick. For years this charitable work was kept up and maintained quietly and unobtrusively. Many in Des Moines to-day can tell of the visit of quiet men, who, low-voiced and sympathetic, learned of the struggles of poor and incapacitated people.

The hold which this old organization got on the members, and the friendships which were formed there, has been lasting to the extreme. Scattered about over the country, the old former members remember the old home guard well. There are still in the city

such men as "Billy" Quick, "Charley" Leonard, W. L. White, Harry West, John Chase, Harry Shepherd, Will. Lehman, George McCain, Con. Miller, Fred, Macartney, George Lyon, A. D. Willis, "Friday" Eason, and many others, whose membership has continued through these many years.

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**by L. F. Andrews**

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