



WESLEY REDHEAD

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AMONG the early hustlers and epoch-makers of Polk County and Des Moines, was Wesley Redhead, for forty years known by every man, woman and child in the community.

Born in Cumberland County, England, July Twenty-second, 1825, when but four years old he came over the sea with his parents to Montreal, Canada. His parents died in 1831, and he then went to live with an uncle in Cincinnati, where he was apprenticed to learn the printing business, and, being the youngest in the office, was the "printer's devil," and one of the first newsboys of that city.

After a time, his uncle, thinking his environments were bad, sent him to Fairfield, Vermont, where his eldest brother was engaged in cabinet making. Three weeks were required for the journey. After a month's trial at cabinet making, Wesley concluded he could do better. He left Fairfield between two days, without a "ticket of leave," and walked most of the way to Whitehall, New York, where he got a job as driver on the Erie Canal.

When the canal froze up, he went to a farm, where he worked two years, receiving therefor (sic) his board, clothes, and three months' schooling each year.

In 1842, he concluded farming was not for him, and went to Saratoga Springs, where, for two seasons, he served the visitors at Congress Springs as a "dipper" of the aqueous fluid, when another predatory fit seized him, and he shipped on a Mississippi River steamboat as cabin-boy. On the way up, at Muscatine, in September, 1844, he deserted the ship, and went to Iowa City, where a brother resided. There he secured employment in the office of the Iowa Capital Reporter, at three dollars a week, his stunt being the "devil's" work, and setting one column of type a day for the paper. Playing the "devil" for one year was enough for him, and, in 1845, he went to Anamosa, where he got employment to run a carding machine in a woolen factory, but soon after

his health became impaired, and he returned to Iowa City and apprenticed himself for three years to learn the tailoring trade. On the expiration of the term, he worked as a "jour." until 1851, when he came to Fort Des Moines and opened a tailor shop on Second Street, then the center of trade and fashion. Judge Casady, Barlow Granger, Hoyt Sherman, "Dan" Finch, and others of the old boys, say he made good clothes—better than we get nowadays.

In 1852, he was ready for another change, to suit his versatile genius, and he took a clerkship in the general merchandise store of J. M. Griffiths, on Second Street, at twenty dollars a month.

He was a good mixer, jolly, and, though a Democrat, in 1853 he was appointed postmaster by President Fillmore, to succeed Hoyt Sherman, who had resigned. He retained the office in the building erected by Sherman at Second and Vine streets, put in a small stock of books and stationery, and remained there until the Sherman Block was completed at Third Street and Court Avenue.

In 1855, he opened an agency of the Etna Fire Insurance Company, of Hartford, and issued the first policy of insurance on property in the town.

That was the year of the contest between the East and West Side for the location of the State House. Wesley was a West Sider, and subscribed one thousand dollars to the "war fund."

In 1856, at the May term of court, he was admitted to the bar as an attorney, not with the purpose of practicing the profession, but as an aid in business affairs. That was the last term of the unique McFarland on the bench. During the term, the second application for a divorce in Polk County was made, the only one at that term. I think the case was Mitchell vs. Mitchell. A Mrs. Dailey had married one Mitchell, who, not long after, joined the gold-seeking caravan for California, and forgot to come back. The plaintiff set forth in her petition her various grievances, especially that of desertion. Judge McKay, who had been the judge of the court one term, was the attorney for the grass widow. He presented her case in an able and convincing argument. The court at once took it under consideration, and happened to be in fair condition. McKay was standing near, waiting the decision. McFarland, looking up, said:

"Here, Judge, take your decree. Call her Mrs. Dailey here-after, and put her against the first chance she gets."

On another occasion, in Marshall County, a divorce case was up in which belligerency on one side was set forth in the petition. The Judge was "half seas over." The first witness called was asked if he knew the parties to the suit. He replied: "Oh, not much. They are always fighting and fuddling around."

The Judge aroused himself from his bibulous stupor and muttered: "Fud-ling-round and a-r-o-u-n-d; next case."

The Judge was an athlete of prodigious strength, which he never used except as occasion required, but he enjoyed seeing others indulge in athletic sport. He was holding court one hot day in a schoolhouse in Newton. The windows and doors were all open, and "Dan" Finch was addressing the jury, when a man in the crowd outside, in a loud voice, boasted that he could throw any man in Jasper County, at a side-hold. The Judge tapped on his desk, and said he would take a recess for a few minutes. Going outside, he asked for the man who had made the boast. A large man named Sparks replied that he was the man. The Judge ordered a ring made, and requested "Dan, " who had some reputation as a wrestler, to try him, which he did, and put him three times squarely on his back, whereat the fellow got mad, and, getting on his feet, seized a big club and hurled it at "Dan, " barely missing his head. The Judge grabbed the fellow with one hand by the throat, and shook him up lively, remarking that if he touched "Dan" he would wipe the ground with him, adding: " 'Dan' does the wrestling on this circuit, but I do the fighting." That ended the scene, and the court resumed its session.

In 1857, Redhead removed the Post Office to Sherman Block, which had just been completed, and put in a large stock of books and stationery; made a specialty of school books, and controlled the trade of the city for many years.

In the early Sixties, he began to widen the scope of his business. Coal and cattle presented strong inducements to him. The presence of coal in and around the town was well known. Doctor Brooks and W. A. Scott burrowed into the bluff southeast of the Capitol, and got coal for the garrison black-smiths in 1843-4. Later on,

factories and mills were supplied with it. In 1856, a factory where the German Church stands, at West Second and Center streets, burrowed direct from the engine-room and got coal to heat its boilers. It was also dug up from the bed of the Des Moines River near Rattlesnake Bend. The veins were thin, and the quality not good.

In 1864, Redhead organized a company and began mining coal in a systematic way, with varied success.

In 1865, he, with William T. Vincent, an old Welsh coal miner, B. F. Allen, M. Starr, William Phillips, Hoyt Sherman, John Teesdale, James W. Davis, L. W. Dennis, Frank Butler, and E. Sandford, organized the Des Moines Coal Company, and coal mining was begun in a more extensive manner. The digging was done on the old Peet farm, on the bottoms in the north part of the city, along Des Moines River, under the foremanship of John Gibson, a Derbyshire, England, miner. The coal was in "pockets," so-called, near the surface, which were soon cleaned out, requiring frequent removals and changes of location. They burrowed all over the farm until the supply was exhausted, so as to render further digging unprofitable.

In 1867, when the Equitable Life Insurance Company was organized, Redhead was elected Vice-President. He was one of the organizers of the People's Savings Bank, and one of its Directors.

In 1866, Redhead was elected to represent the county in the Lower House of the Twenty-first General Assembly. He was made a member of the standing committees on Banks and Banking, Schools, Agriculture, Police Regulations, Fish and Game, Board of Public Charities, and Library, of the latter being its chairman.

He started in early and energetically to regulate things, and was the author of numerous bills, the most notable of which was one prohibiting the issuance of a marriage license by the Clerk of the District Court, unless the parties gave him satisfactory assurance that they would be able to support themselves and their progeny. S. M. Weaver, the member from Hardin, now one of the judges of the Supreme Court, with the irony of fate, but facetiously, moved its reference to the Committee on Retrenchment and Reform. There it went, and Wesley, during the remainder

of the session, was left to ruminate on tricks of legislation. It never came back to the House.

At the same election, he was elected a member of the Board of County Supervisors, to represent Des Moines Township. At the January meeting, following, of the Board, it was found that the township had acquired a population of four thousand, and was entitled to another supervisor, and Redhead was elected.

In 1867, he retired from active participation in the business of the firm of Redhead & Wellslager, to devote his time to the development of his coal projects. He owned a large tract of land south of 'Coon River, near the south end of Seventh Street bridge. Persistent in the belief that stratified coal existed in this locality, he determined to test it on his own land, though Gibson and other old miners thought it doubtful. Machinery was purchased, and early in 1873, a prospecting drill was started, with a day and night crew.

At the depth of seventy feet, three inferior veins of coal had been pierced, with a flint rock stubbornly resisting further progress of the drill. John advised abandonment of the whole business, but Wesley declared he would "go to China, or find coal." He asked John how much drill rod was left, and being told there was twenty feet, he ordered the work to proceed, saying if twenty feet of rod was not enough, he would add one hundred more. The work went on, the drill advancing but three inches per day, for four weeks, when the rock was penetrated, and the drill plunged through a strata of fine coal. It was late in the evening, and Wesley, elated with the discovery, went to Allen's house, routed him out of bed to make it known. Allen was so well pleased, he invested thirty-five thousand dollars in the company. A shaft was immediately put in, and, at the depth of one hundred and twenty-five feet, ninety feet below the bed of 'Coon River, a coal measure four feet and six inches thick was reached on the Second of June, and on the Third, a load of coal was delivered at Wesley's office, and thus was inaugurated one of the most valuable industries of the state.

John is still digging coal under about half of Polk County.

Wesley gradually purchased all shares of the company held by others, and, in 1874, became the sole owner.

In 1876, he sent samples of his "Black Diamonds," as he called them, to the Centennial Exposition at Philadelphia, which were

given high commendation in the award of merits, and greatly surprised the Eastern coal miners.

In May, 1880, James P. Clark, who had been his confidential clerk, joined him, and the name of the company was changed to Pioneer Coal Company.

Redhead was always a busy man, with a restless energy to do things, to develop some good industrial or social project. He did more than was expected, promoted business enterprises, and developed one of the greatest and most valuable natural resources of the city and county.

In 1865, when the old State Bank of Iowa was reorganized under the National Banking Law, he became a stockholder and director. In 1876, its charter was surrendered.

He was always interested in agricultural affairs, and owned a good farm. When the Patrons of Husbandry and Granger craze became epidemic in the Western States, in September, 1870, he was instrumental in organizing, and was a charter member of Capital Grange, Number Five.

In 1872, he was one of the organizers of the Des Moines Scale Company, and was elected its treasurer. Its business was the manufacture of scales, windmills, and butter-workers, and so continued to 1874, when the establishment was leased to William Dickerson.

In 1873, the State Printing Company was organized, to print auxiliary newspaper sheets, or what was known as "patent insides," for country newspapers. Redhead was one of the directors, and was elected Vice-President of the company.

In 1879, when a wide-spread effort was made to permanently locate the State Fair, in which several towns in the state were like-wise interested, Redhead was actively instrumental in securing it for Des Moines, and in furnishing some of the land on which it is located.

In 1885, he organized the Pioneer Hay Company, with a capital of sixty thousand dollars, its business being to purchase prairie land, bale prairie hay, and the breeding of fine cattle. Out of it has come the noted Redhead herd of Hereford cattle, known all over the country, and now owned by his son George.

For several years Redhead was an active member of the Public School Board.

He was a man of strict integrity, honesty and fidelity to every trust imposed upon him.

Socially, he was affable, fond of society, a good mixer, and immensely popular. In the early days, there were no predatory barnstormers, amusement halls, nor concert troupes, and the people had to rely on their own resources for amusements. In Summer, picnics, parties, and out-of-door dances under trees; in Winter, sleigh-rides and dancing in the dining-rooms of the taverns, were frequent and enjoyable. The pleasant home of Mr. Redhead was a favorite meeting-place for young people, with whom he and his lovable wife were chummy friends. He was a charter member of Emanuel Consistory, A. A. S. R., Number Two.

Politically, Redhead was a Democrat, until 1865, when he became a Republican; but he was not a politician—had no time to waste in the game. The Sixth Ward, however, pressed him into service in 1870 and 1871, as its Alderman, and he proved an efficient member.

Religiously, he was a Methodist, and a substantial pillar of that church. August Seventh, 1904.

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