



WILLIAM W. MOORE

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NO record of early days in Des Moines would be complete without mention of W. W. Moore, familiarly known to everybody in Polk County as "Billy." He came to the town when the Indians were here.

He was born "All Fools' Day"—but he is not a fool—in Madison, Indiana, 1832. Shortly after, his parents moved to Franklin, Johnson County, Indiana. When eleven years old, he began business life as a clerk in the dry goods trade, with Wooster & Woods, for four dollars per month. The following year he enlisted with Henry Fox for twenty-five dollars per month. The third year he engaged with I. B. Whipple & Company, for thirty-five dollars a month, where he remained until 1847, when he was attacked with Western Fever, and came to Iowa, landing at Keokuk with three dollars and thirty-five cents in his pocket, and no baggage. He took the trail on foot to Oskaloosa, which he reached in good condition, but without a cent—dead broke. His most pressing demand was that from an empty stomach. The first job available was table-waiting at the Kinsman Hotel, which he took and served two weeks for his board.

While serving the hostelry he heard so much about Fort Des Moines, at "Raccoon Forks," he concluded it must be a good place for a young man with business intent, and at four o'clock on the morning of May Sixth, he set his face hitherward, arriving at "Uncle Tommy" Mitchell's, at Apple Grove, in the eastern part of the county, at eight o'clock in the evening of the same day. There he had a good night's rest and the proverbial hearty welcome of "Uncle Tommy," whom "Billy" says was "the best and most popular man who ever lived in Polk County."

The next day, at two o'clock, he hove into town, and ran up against the Des Moines River, with no way to get across it to the West Side except by swimming, or on the ferry-boat, the toll tariff

on which was twenty-five cents. Searching his pockets, he found fifteen cents, all the money he had, the remainder of a tip he had received from a guest at the hotel in Oskaloosa. He sat down to commune with himself and the situation, but not long after, "Old Man" Fredericks, as he was called, who lived near Rising Sun, came along with a wagon, and "Billy" explained to him his predicament, whereupon he was told to, "Get right into the wagon; it shan't cost you a cent," which he did with the greatest alacrity.

Soon after he landed on the West Side, while wandering about he fell in with another young fellow, who subsequently became the well-known and popular physician, W. H. Ward, now in Arizona, who was likewise "strapped." To emphasize his companionship, "Billy" invested his fifteen cents in "Cuba Six" cigars, and they went down by the riverside, sat down on the grass to enjoy a smoke. It being their primitive experience, the emesis properties of the tobacco soon got in their work, and a rebellious stomach kept them busy until after ten o'clock in the evening. As "Billy" put it, "We was two of the sickest kids imaginable." But it did not cure them, for they became inveterate smokers.

"Billy's" next move was for bread and butter. B. F. Allen, or "Frank," as everybody called him, was running a dry goods store on Second Street, where all business was done, and wanted a clerk. He offered "Billy" twenty-five dollars, board and washing, per month, which was promptly accepted.

On Sunday morning, "Billy" arose early, the stores were nearly all open, especially the "groceries"—they had no Sundays in those days at "The Forks;" there were no churches, no preachers, and the day was usually passed in such amusements as could be improvised for the occasion. During the morning a man came in from the country who wanted some goods from the store—must have them. "Billy," ambitious to do things, took him in, sold him twenty dollars and fifteen cents' worth, put the money in his pocket, locked the store door, and joined the loungers around the "groceries." The amusement that day was a "hoss" race. The starting point was not far from the rear of the Iowa Loan and Trust Building, and the ending at the bluff near the Water Works. "Billy" joined the crowd to see the races. Monday morning he

was on hand at the store early, and, with considerable show of pride, counted out the proceeds of his Sunday morning sale to Allen, and was explaining to him how it happened, when a fellow came in, congratulated "Billy" on his good luck Sunday, and asked how much he won. "Two hundred dollars," responded "Billy," without a quiver. Allen, who was somewhat of a churchman, looked at "Billy" rather sharply for a moment, and then said, "Keep it, but don't do it again. Invest it in town lots."

"Billy's" first business venture was a drug store at the corner of Second and Market streets, and in the *Star*, he advertised "a choice lot of drugs, wines, brandies, candles, lard oil (kerosene and electric light was then unknown), brooms, fish and castor oil, by the steamboats *Caleb Cope* and *Tormentor*" He knew nothing of drugs, and he secured the services of Doctor Saunders to assist him. The doctor went through the drug stock, fixed the prices, and told "Billy" that in case he was absent, the price meant by the ounce; if a liquid was wanted, measure it in an ounce vial. One day a man wanted eight ounces of quicksilver. "Billy" hustled around, found an eight-ounce vial, filled it and delivered it, remarking that it was "danged heavy stuff."

When the doctor returned, he discovered the absence of the quicksilver, and asked what had become of it.

"Sold it," said "Billy," "eight-ounce bottle full for eight ounces."

"Thunder!" said the doctor. "Why, there was eight pounds of it."

On another occasion, a man wanted a pound of soda. According to instructions, that the marked price was by the ounce, he charged one dollar and fifty cents for the soda, which cost five cents, but he never manifested any compunctions of conscience respecting the profit.

He soon after concluded the drug business was not his forte. He went over to the corner of Second and Vine, opened a dry goods store, and hoisted the sign of "Hoosier Store." In those days the merchants did not have kodak-anti-Comstock pictures of feminine lingerie, alphabetical corsets, and cascaret tablets to illustrate their wares in the columns of the *Star* and *Gazette*; they used plain,

homespun English. For climaxes, they resorted to poetry. "Billy" mounted his Pegasus, which limped a little in spots:

"For Billy Moore is now on hand,
With goods new, rich and rare, sir;
And cords of goods at his command,
To make the people stare, sir.
He has Dry Goods of the latest style,
New Furs, Cloaks, Shawls and Laces,
Beaver hats, trimmed in style to please the ladies—
God bless their pretty faces.
Sound the trumpet, beat the drum,
From housetop and from steeple,
For Billy Moore is now on hand,
And bound to please the people."

One day, in 1848, a fellow came into the store, and bantered him to buy the lot on Fourth Street, where the Western Union Telegraph office is. He did not want it; it was too far away from business, but the fellow persisted, and "Billy," for a bluff, offered him a hand-me-down coat and pair of cowhide boots. He took the bluff, and gave a deed for the lot. It was the first property "Billy" bought in Des Moines. He sold it for fifteen hundred dollars.

In 1852, business having moved westward, he purchased the southeast corner of Walnut and Fourth streets, extending to the alley east and south, for six hundred dollars. Reserving the corner, he sold the remainder for about twenty thousand dollars, and on what was supposed to be an Indian mound, erected a two-story frame, fronting on Walnut street, and re-opened the "Hoosier Store," where he remained several years, the leading dry goods dealer in town. In the early Seventies he moved the store east, and on the corner erected "Moore's Hall," a three-story brick, the first exclusive amusement hall in the city. There Patti gave her first "farewell" concert, and there "Honest" Emma Abbott began her operatic career, when she was so small a dry goods box had to be provided for her to stand on to be seen. Later, it was remodeled and became "Moore's Opera House," and "Billy" turned his attention to public amusement. When other and more pretentious theaters came to compete for public patronage, the opera house was closed. For a few years a museum and vaudeville show was

conducted in it, known as "Wonderland." At present, "Billy" retains only an office room in the building, the remainder being rented. He is a member of the National Association of Bill Posters, which, with swapping yarns with old-time visitors, occupies his time.

His marriage was a notable event in those early days. It was solemnized in the home of L. D. Winchester, the first brick dwelling house in the town. It stood where the Valley National Bank now is, at Fourth Street and Court Avenue. Elder Nash was the officiating clergyman, as he and Father Bird were, by common consent, given the monopoly of that important function in those early days. The Elder also did the marrying for "Billy's" four daughters.

April Seventeenth, 1904.

Transcribed from:

PIONEERS OF POLK COUNTY, IOWA AND REMINISCENCES OF EARLY DAYS

by L. F. Andrews

Volume I

Des Moines, Baker-Trisler Company, 1908