

ALFRED D. JONES

One of the liveliest, best known and most versatile geniuses of pioneer days in Fort Des Moines was Alfred D. Jones. He hove into the little community of log cabins and scarce a dozen families of settlers the Thirteenth of February, 1846, and put up at "Father" Meacham's log tavern, near what is now the east end of Grand Avenue bridge. The infantry of The Fort had removed a portion of the Indians to Kansas, but the Dragoons were here, rounding up several bands of the red fellows, who had straggled away up the rivers. The settlers were preparing for civil government. An election had been ordered to elect officers to organize the county, April Sixth. The next day after Jones' arrival, there was a meeting on the west side of the river to select candidates for the county offices, and Jones joined in. He was a bright, active-appearing fellow, was elected Secretary of the meeting, and nominated for County Surveyor. The pioneers didn't stand much on technicalities. A man didn't have to wait long for an office or to vote. Jones pleased the "West Siders, and that was sufficient.

April First, the first United States mail bag reached The Fort by a special messenger. Jones had once been a postoffice clerk, and he was requested to open the bag. In it was found the commission of Doctor Thomas K. Brooks for Postmaster, and his bond, which was approved by Peter Newcomer and Jeremiah Church, who had come here in 1845.

The county had been divided into three voting precincts, Fort Des Moines, Camp Creek, and Allen's Mill. Jones' opponent was E. A. Woodward. The only real question at issue was the location of the County Seat. Brooklyn, a town which had been laid out about two miles east of The Fort, was a competitor for it. It was a vigorous scrap. Jones pitched in for The Fort, and on election day spent the whole day at the polls in Camp Creek precinct, which embraced

the whole eastern half of the county, working for the whole ticket, he said, but probably more especially for himself. The ballots were cast in "Uncle Tommy" Mitchell's hat, and anybody voted who wanted to, regardless of where he came from, or how long he had been in the county, one fellow being frank enough to say he had "just got in about thirty minutes ago." Jones being dressed in "store clothes" and white shirt, the countrymen looked at him askance, and he didn't get a vote in the precinct. The total vote of the county was:

Fort Des Moines	70
Camp Creek	42
Allen's Mill	<u>63</u>
Total	175

On the face of the returns, Woodward had the most votes, but Jones disputed the count, and, being good at figuring, and with the help of "Tom" Baker, won the place. The processes for deciding elections in the early days were somewhat peculiar, especially when "Tommy" Mitchell, Barlow Granger, Pete. Myers and Granville Holland took a hand in the game.

On June First, 1846, the first Board of County Commissioners ordered Jones to "proceed, as soon as practicable, to lay off a town at the site selected for the County Seat of Polk County." It was also further ordered that notice of the sale of town lots be published for three weeks in the *Burlington Hawk-Eye*, *Iowa City Reporter*, and *Democrat*, at Keosauqua. From present outlook, the advertising of such a sale in the one-horse town of Keosauqua would be deemed queer, but at that time Van Buren County was one of the most important counties in population, great men and wealth in the territory, and the *Democrat* had the largest circulation. According to instructions, June Fourth, Jones and Doctor Fagen began laying out the town. Jones had no surveyor's chain, and he used a long rope. The survey was hurriedly made, the site was covered with trees and hazel brush, there were showers, the long rope stretched and shrank. On July Eighth, he made return of his survey as follows:

"The bearings of Water, Second, Third, Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, and

Eighth streets, is north fifteen and one-half degrees west, and one chain in width, except Water Street, which extends to the River Des Moines. The bearings of Elm, Market, Vine, Cherry, Mulberry, Locust and Court Avenue is south seventy-four and one-half degrees west, and are all one chain in width, except Vine and Walnut, which are one chain and twenty-five links in width from Water Street to Fifth, and from Fifth to Eighth Street they are one chain in width; and Court Avenue is one chain and a half in width.

"The alleys all extend parallel and at right angles with the streets, as represented on the plat, and are twenty links in width, except Number Three (now Plum Street), which is fifty feet in width.

"The whole number of lots in said town is three hundred and twenty-four, and are one chain in width, and two chains in length, and lie as represented on the plat.

"The Public Square is four chains and a half in length and four and a quarter in width, and lies within the block numbered Nine, Fifteen, Twenty, Twenty-one, and Fourteen, and enclosed and designated as 'Public Square.'

"The Market space is four chains and twenty-five links in length, and one chain in width, and lies between blocks numbered Twenty-six and Twenty-seven, and designated within enclosed lines as 'Market Place.'

"The Public Ground lies between Raccoon River and Block Number Thirty-seven, and west of and adjoining Des Moines River, and designated as 'Public Ground.'

"The stone planted by the County Commissioners of Polk County, from which to make future surveys, is placed at the southeast corner of Lot Number Five, in Block Number Thirty-seven, at the corner of the Public Ground, and is marked this: O.

"The survey of the above town was made from the extreme southwest corner of said stone."

It is proper to say the area embraced in the survey extended from Des Moines River to West Eighth Street, and from 'Coon River north to Locust, and is known as the "Original Town" in all real estate transactions.

On the same day Jones filed his plat of survey, the County Commissioners donated all the "streets, alleys and public grounds in the town of Fort Des

Moines, as shown on the plat, to the public, with the proviso:

“That all the streets, alleys and public ground in said Town of Fort Des Moines which now have public buildings upon them shall not be considered highways until the expiration of one year, or until the Commissioners of such county shall declare them highways. The Public Square, as represented on said plat, is reserved for the purpose of erecting a Court House thereon, and such other public building as the County Commissioners may deem proper for the use of the County of Polk. The Market space, as represented on said plat, is reserved for the purpose of building a market house thereon, for the use of the general public, which shall be under the control and management of such officers as may have control, management and government of the Town of Fort Des Moines, the above platted town. The Public Ground is bounded and described as follows: North by Block Thirty-seven, west by a line parallel with the east side of Block Twenty-eight, extending to Raccoon River, and east by Des Moines River.”

For surveying and platting, Jones was paid eighty-nine dollars and fifty cents. His flagbearers, stake drivers, axe-men and teamsters were paid fifty-five dollars, a total of one hundred and forty-five dollars, which, in those days, for three days' work, was considered enormous—scandalous—as some of the rural settlers put it.

There is another monument stone, or ought to be, which I saw set by Professor Harkness, of the United States Observatory, and several other Government officials from Washington, who came to Des Moines in August, 1869, to observe the total eclipse of the sun. They set the stone, a cut cube, near the southeast corner of the Court House yard, from which they fixed the exact location of the center of the Court House dome at longitude sixteen degrees, forty-three minutes, fifty-two seconds west; latitude forty-one degrees, thirty-five minutes, forty-five seconds north; elevation of the stone above the sea level, eight hundred and forty-nine feet; difference in time at Washington, one hour, six minutes, six seconds.

The stretching and shrinking of the rope used in the survey caused crookedness and shortages—in fact, the plat did not cover the one hundred and forty-three and one-third acres donated by Congress for the site. It was

also found that it lapped over on preemption claims held by settlers. A re-survey was made and the discrepancies finally adjusted satisfactorily to all concerned.

Immediately after his arrival, Jones began reading law with "Tom" Baker, who was the Representative from Polk County in the Legislature, and after his admission to the Bar, became a partner of "Tom's" in business. So soon as the town lots were ordered sold, speculation was rife among real estate men, but the uncertainty of the location of the State Capital made it risky. Jones concocted a scheme to help out, which he confided to a few close friends. He wrote a long letter to himself, dropped it in the Postoffice. When the next mail day arrived—the mail came but twice a week—a large crowd was present. He received the letter, went off in a corner to read it, which done, the crowd wanted to know what it was about (so long, it must be important). He replied that it was quite certain the Capital would come to Fort Des Moines, and that there would be money in town lots. A day or two after, "Tom" McMullin and a few of his friends saw Jones and Wall. Clapp, a brother of our Ed., leisurely looking over the town lots, plat in hand, which was construed as certain that Jones had received a tip from "Tom" Baker. They immediately bought all the town lots they could pay for, and more, too; but Jones bought none, which was to them a suspicious circumstance, and when the trick was made known, they anathematized Jones with the most energetic idioms known to men not very circumspect with their vocabulary, but they held on, and made a pile of money, and also made Jones the butt of their jibes at his joke, by which he tricked himself out of a good thing.

In March, Jones was appointed Deputy County Clerk, and July Twenty-fourth, his record showed he had issued four marriage licenses, one of them to a fellow who said he had no money, but would pay for it in splitting rails, which the county did not need. He was, however, donated the license.

July Eighteenth, Jones took the first census of the town, and returned as his count of the population, one hundred and twenty-seven, consisting of twenty-three families and thirty-one houses, all of them log garrison buildings. He also returned thirteen young men and eleven women as proper

subjects for matrimony. They all subsequently married, except Jemima Scott, an old maid, who proved invulnerable to Hymen's charms.

He was paid a dollar and a half out of the county treasury for taking the census.

In August, he was nominated by the Whigs for Constable, and by the Democrats for Justice of the Peace, was elected to both and got his certificate. He was also Deputy County Clerk. As Justice of the Peace, he went into the marrying business. On one occasion, he was present at a wedding when another justice officiated, who did not know his business, and got balked. Jones helped him out, and then, to further instruct him, called one couple after another of those present and put them through the marriage stunt until they all could go through the ceremony without prompting. It was a hilarious crowd.

In September, 1846, he was appointed by Judge Williams, of the Territorial Court, County Clerk, to succeed Crossman, and held the office until the next election, in April following.

After his retirement, he presented a bill of nineteen dollars and forty-five cents, for eighty-eight bushels of coal he had furnished the Clerk's office during the Winter period. It was not allowed. Why, the records do not state, nor where the coal was obtained, but coal was then dug out of the bluff at Hall's mill, at the foot of Center Street, and the soldiers got what they claimed was better and harder coal down the river, at the southeast corner of Barlow Granger's farm. That is the earliest record of coal dealing in the county.

Jones did not remain here very long, but while he was here he was a hustling booster of everything going on to promote the town, politically or otherwise. In 1849, the site for the County Seat of Madison County having been located by a commission, of whom Isaac Cooper, of Fort Des Moines, was one, Jones went down there to help organize a town and give it a boost. At one of the preliminary meetings, on a very cold day, a name for the town was considered, and "Summerset" was suggested, when Jones retorted: "Better call it Winterset," and so it was named.

Politically, he was a Whig, and very popular. He was such an all-pervading spirit in the early days that he could get any office he wanted or would take.

He failed but once. He ran for County Clerk in Madison County, against Colonel Houck. It was a close contest, and one of his friends in the north part of the county thought a little whiskey would help out. He went to town and bought a big jug of the "Oh, be joyful," but filled himself so full of it, he didn't get home until after the polls were closed. The vote was a tie, and Jones lost. Afterward he and Houck drew lots, and Houck won.

He laid out the town of Adel, then called Penoch, and organized Dallas County.

He surveyed the first railroad across the state, the Air Line, or "Rain's Horn," as it was called, but never built.

In 1854, he laid out the town of Omaha, was the first Mayor of the city, was elected Judge of the County Court, was several times a member of the Legislature, and once Speaker of the House. He became a very wealthy man.

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by L. F. Andrews

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