



DAVID NORRIS

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One of the most unique, well-known and popular pioneers of Polk County was David Norris, or "Uncle Davy," as everybody called him.

He was born in Frederick County, Maryland, August Third, 1801, of Scottish descent.

He once said: "I have been told that I weighed three and three-quarters pounds at birth. I don't know much about that, but I was there."

His youth was passed with his mother, for, when he was five years old, his father, who was a miller, was killed by an accident in a mill, and David had to hustle for himself, with very limited advantages for educational acquirements.

In 1814, when thirteen years old, he went to driving team. In July of that year, he went, with Frederick K. Biser and two teams loaded with flour, which was sold for thirteen dollars a barrel. After the flour was sold, and while he, Biser and the teams were taking their noonday meal, a United States officer came and notified them that he would have to take the teams for Government service. Biser objected vigorously, but he took the teams, saying they would be appraised and paid for. Biser and David then decided that they might as well go with the teams and they enlisted in the Government service, David easily passing muster, as he was of large proportions, weighed one hundred and sixty pounds, yet was simply an overgrown boy. The War of 1812 had not then closed.

Their teams were loaded with ammunition and sent to Fort McHenry, thence to Baltimore loaded again, and sent to Washington, without being allowed to stop for rest or meals, as the British were making an effort to capture and burn the city. Arriving at Capitol Hill they met President Madison fleeing the city, which was then burning. His carriage was loaded with office

records, and he was riding one of the horses. Going up a hill, his horses got stalled, and David was ordered to hitch his team on and help, which he did. They were quickly joined by about three hundred boys, who were pressed into service, and made an escort to Montgomery Court House. The President said his wife was across the river, hidden in a cornfield.

The teams were left with guards and the posse ordered to help. A bucket line was formed to the river, and water carried to an old-fashioned hand-brake fire engine, and the fire was finally extinguished. David remained there five days. Meanwhile, soldiers were sent to find Mrs. Madison, and escort her to the President. He was then ordered to go to Baltimore, get ammunition, and take it to Fort McHenry.

The British left Washington, sailed down Chesapeake Bay, threatened Baltimore several days, but finally went to Haberty Grass Landing, five miles above Baltimore, near Fort McHenry.

As they were crossing the Susquehanna River, September Thirteenth, Lords Cockerham and Ross were a sort distance in advance, and two boys who had climbed into a tree shot them both. Cockerham's body was put into a cask of whiskey and sent to England. A monument now stands where that tree stood.

David was in Government service twenty-nine days, and discharged, one day short of time necessary to entitle him to a pension. He always said he didn't think Uncle Sam gave him a square deal, but he was a little proud of the part he took in the scrimmage.

When General LaFayette was in this country, David saw him at Fredericksburg. There was an immense public reception given him. Carpets were laid in the streets for him to ride over, but he would not do so.

In 1820, David's mother removed to Dayton, Ohio, where he engaged in farming. He remained there until 1839, when he moved to Johnson County, Indiana, where he resided until 1845, when he came to Fort Des Moines, which contained only soldiers and officers of the garrison, while outside and not far away were the Indian villages of Keokuk and his various bands of Sauk and Foxes.

Norris at once procured a permit from Captain Allen to make a claim for some land. The land had not been surveyed, possession was in the Govern-

ment, and could not be purchased. There were three or four squatters widely scattered over the county, on claims granted by Captain Allen, on agreements to raise grain, forage and other supplies for the garrison. Norris went up north about five miles and selected one hundred and sixty acres, which is now a part of the County Poor Farm. John B. Saylor, who came here just before Norris, had staked out the claim, and Norris traded him a yoke of oxen for the claim. The sale conveyed no title to the land, as the entire county was in possession of the Government, and held as a part of the reservation of the Sauk and Fox Indians, who had the exclusive right to occupy it, Captain Allen and his soldiers being stationed here to protect them against squatters and their predatory enemy, the Sioux, until October Eleventh, 1845, when the Indian title ceased. But there was a tacit agreement among squatters and claim-holders that their claims should be rigidly observed. Early in 1846, a Claim Club was organized, rules and regulations prepared by "Old Bill" McHenry, adopted, and the squatters and claim-holders became a law unto themselves.

In 1847, the Government survey of the land was made, and the lines run for townships and sections. It was found that in many cases the lines staked by squatters did not correspond with the Government lines. All such cases were submitted to the Claim Club, an amicable adjustment made to conform to the survey, and the land speculator or "claim-jumper" who attempted to interfere was made to understand that his immediate safety was outside the county lines. October Thirtieth, 1848, Norris entered his claim at the United States Land Office, at Iowa City, and got his title. He at once, on buying his claim in 1845, began to cultivate and improve the land. His nearest squatter neighbor was "Uncle Tommy" Mitchell, whom Captain Allen had permitted, on agreeing to raise corn for the garrison, to stake a claim on Camp Creek, in what is now Beaver Township. The Indians were his frequent visitors, and he became very chummy with Chemeuse, or "Johnny Green," as he was known to the pioneers, a Pottawattamie chief, who, with several hundred of his tribe, roamed over the county, hunting and fishing. The location of his claim was a beautiful one, bordering on the timber, and from which is a fine

view of the Capitol and prominent buildings of the city. It is also a healthful location, respecting which, said "Uncle Davy," several years after he had left it: "Yes, people live up there, and animals, too. One of my neighbors there, in 1847, during the Summer, went back to Indiana to visit their old home and be absent about four weeks. They stored the carriage and some other articles in the garret. When ready to start, the family dog was missing—couldn't be found. On their return, during the first night, there was a big rumpus upstairs. On making an investigation, they were greeted most vociferously by the missing dog. He had eaten up the leather top of the carriage, was lank and lean, but he lived."

During the Summer of 1847, Norris opened a butcher shop in a part of B. F. Allen's warehouse, at Second and Vine streets, and in the Fall of 1848, built a shop at the corner of Second and Vine streets. The shop was open Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays. One "beef critter" was sufficient for a whole week, and families had to go to the shop to get their supplies.

In the Fall of 1848, the supply of flour in the town became exhausted, and "Uncle Davy" went with an ox team to Bonaparte, in Van Buren County, and got a full load. On his return, he found that not only was everybody out of flour, but out of money. He loaned out the entire load, the Hoxie House taking a large portion of it. Of the remainder, very little was ever paid for.

In 1855, he sold his farm and moved into Des Moines, and built a double brick, two-story house at the corner of East Eighth and Keokuk streets, now East Grand Avenue.

In 1856, he was appointed by Judge Gray, Bailiff of Polk County District Court, and served through the terms of Judges Gray, Nourse, and Maxwell. It was during Maxwell's term, December Fifteenth, 1874, that Charles Howard was taken from the jail by a Vigilance Committee, and hanged to a lamp-post for the murder of John Johnson.

"Uncle Davy" was also appointed Sheriff of the State Supreme Court, in 1857, and served when Stockton, Baldwin, Wright, Lowe, Dillon, and Cole were on the Bench, nearly twenty years.

He was appointed Crier of the United States District Court for life by Judge Lowe, and served twenty-one years, when he resigned, in 1888. His memory

was remarkable, and his fund of stories of incidents and happenings in the several courts, embracing all phases of human existence, was ever a treat, spiced with his quaint humor, to a group of listeners. He always looked at the bright side of things. He would never admit that he was growing old, even after he had passed the ninetieth post. He was always jolly, weighed over two hundred and fifty pounds, and was *persona grata* with the judges of the State Supreme Court, especially Baldwin, who weighed over three hundred pounds.

One day, Baldwin lost twenty dollars, and "Uncle Davy" found it. He handed it to Judge Wright, saying, with a twinkle in his eye, that he had found it under very incriminating circumstances. Those who knew Wright will appreciate the humor, irony, and sport of the jibes given Baldwin, as to where and how he lost his money. Baldwin always declared that "Uncle Davy" had lied a little to Wright.

Not long after, sitting around their long table in a social way, Baldwin said to "Uncle Davy":

"Where were you born?"

"In Maryland," was the reply.

"I never saw but one honest man born in Maryland," retorted the Judge.

"Did you ever see anyone born in Maryland but me?" queried Norris.

"No-o-o," responded the Judge, with a chuckle."

In the very early days, the rivers abounded with fish, and furnished a generous food supply to the community. When Hall's dam was built, at the foot of Center Street, it was a favorite spot for anglers. One day, "Uncle Davy" and Wiley Burton went there for some sport. Wiley had a dip net, and immediately on dropping it into the water, withdrew it, landing a whopping big pike. Lowering it again, it stuck. Getting a good brace on himself, declaring he had got the biggest fish in the river, he landed a small boy, about four years old. They rolled, punched and pounded him for a long time, when he recovered himself, sprang to his feet, and away he went, saying, "I'll go and tell my mamma all about it." How he came there, or who he was,

they never found out, but the conclusion was that he fell into the water above the dam, and was sucked down through the chute in the dam into the net.

One hot day, in August, "Uncle Davy" was sitting on the handrails of the rear platform of one of Doctor Turner's old horse cars, when the car stopped in front of the old Savery House, and a pretty young woman got aboard. Just as she was entering the car door, the mules gave a quick start, which threw the woman backward into "Uncle Davy's" lap. He threw his arms around her, to prevent her going overboard, and, on righting herself, she thanked him politely and profusely. When she left the car, she again proffered him thanks; whereupon, said he, "Well, aren't you going to invite me to dinner?"

One day, there was a lot of young fellows down rear the river, and they got to boasting and bantering one another as to what they could do in an athletic way. Among them was John Elliott, over six feet tall, and slim as a telegraph pole. After listening to them a while, "Uncle Davy," who was short in the legs and pudgy, said to Elliott, "I'll run you a footrace to the Court House for a dollar." The challenge was so absurdly ridiculous, the crowd spurred it on, for the fun of it. Elliott accepted, and off they went. After running a few rods, "Uncle Davy," with Elliott far in the lead, going like a quarter horse, stopped and went back. Elliott went over the course, went back, and claimed the wager. "Oh, no," said "Uncle Davy," "I won. I agreed to run a footrace to the Court House, but I didn't say I would get there first." The laugh was on Elliott, and that was all "Uncle Davy" wanted to make out of it.

That was only one of the many ways the very early settlers sought amusement. There were no outside sources, and they had to improvise for themselves with concerts, dances, footraces, ball games, etc., as the spirit moved them, but they usually found abundant means for enjoyment, and as a community they declare they were happier and enjoyed life better than people do now.

In 1856, during the memorable contest between the East and West Sides over the location of the State House, "Uncle Davy" was a valiant West Sider, and subscribed five hundred dollars to the War and Defense Fund. Later,

when the East Side made a strenuous effort to prevent the building of the second Court House on the West Side, he stood with Judge Napier and the West Side.

He was a charter member of the Old Settlers' Association. February Twenty-sixth, 1868, thirty-two of the earliest and most influential settlers of the county met in the rooms of the City Council, and adopted the following resolution:

"Resolved, That we, the settlers of Polk County previous to January First, 1856, and now present, do form a brotherhood of the early settlers of Polk County, Iowa, and in furtherance of this project, now adopt the following constitution:

"ARTICLE I.—This brotherhood shall be called "The Association of the Early Settlers of Polk County."

This was followed by the usual regulations for the government of the association. The following are the names of those who signed and the date of their arrival: Thomas Mitchell (elected President), 1844; David Norris, Isaac Cooper, F. Nagle, Reverend Ezra Rathbun, Thomas McMullin, H. H. Saylor, 1845; P. M. Casady, Hoyt Sherman, John Hays, R. W. Sypher, J. C. Jordan, William Deford, Peter Myers, 1846; R. L. Tidrick, 1847; Reverend Thompson Bird, W. W. Williamson, Thomas Boyd, 1848; Madison Young, 1849; J. M. Griffith, 1850; Reverend J. A. Nash, Doctor William Baker, W. A. Galbraith, 1851; Harry H. Griffith, 1852; S. F. Spofford, C. S. Spofford, J. B. Bausman, R. R. Peters, G. W. Cleveland, 1855; J. S. Clark, 1856.

September Twenty-third, 1880, three hundred of the old settlers gave "Uncle Davy" and his helpmate a generous and hearty house warming, on the fiftieth anniversary of their wedding-day. The oldest man present was Richard Stanton, aged eighty-four, robust and sprightly as a youth of twenty-four. The oldest woman was "Mother" Githen, aged eighty-one. An elaborate banquet was spread, and the event was the most memorable one in the history of the association. It was the first golden wedding of any member of the association.

"Uncle Davy" was always a Democrat. In the early Sixties, his many friends urged him to become a candidate for Justice of the Peace for Des Moines Township, against Absalom Morris, a Democrat, who had been proprietor of the old Marvin House, and a very popular man. "Uncle Davy"



did not want the office, but he did want to beat Absalom, and he won. He, however, refused to qualify. Morris took it and served until his death, proving to be a capable and meritorious official.

Socially, "Uncle Davy" was unique in many ways. He was plain of speech, of genial, happy temperament, an inveterate joker, a friend with everybody, public-spirited, a highly esteemed neighbor and citizen.

He deceased in 1897, at the age of ninety-six.

January Thirteenth, 1907.

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