



FRANCIS GENESER

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A well known old-timer, eligible to a place in a history of Polk County or reminiscences thereof, is Francis Geneser. Born on the Rhine, in Bavaria, Germany, he passed the years of his minority with his father, who was a stone mason and cutter, the two trades being combined in that country. He attended the common school, which corresponded with the district schools of the United States, from the age of six until he was thirteen.

A revolution having broken out in several of the provinces in 1848, and having arrived at his majority and liable to six years' Government military service, his only means of escaping it was in leaving the country. In November, 1849, with two comrades, he set sail from Havre for New York, where they landed twenty-nine days later. They looked the town over, and thought it too large a place for them, and they went to Albany, where the two comrades had friends. There he got a job on a farm at four dollars per month and board. He worked four months, and in the Spring following went to work at his trade in the country surrounding Albany at one dollar a day and board, which he thought was good wages. A day's work was from sunrise to sundown—there were no labor unions in those days.

In May, 1856, his brother, Joseph, having preceded him, he came to Des Moines, by rail from Albany to Iowa City, where he hired a team to bring himself, wife, and three children, Mary, Joe and John, to Des Moines. Houses were scarce; the only available one was a small log cabin near Aulman's Brewery, on Elm Street, between Second and Third, in which he lived until he built a small frame house on Sherman Street, between River (now Crocker) and Mill (now School).

His first job was on the old Grout House, at Sixth and Walnut, East Side. He also worked one hundred and twenty-three days on the Hierb Brewery, in 1857, at Seventh and Center.

In 1858, he took his first job as a contractor, and built the foundation walls of a drug store for G. M. Hippee, at the southeast corner of Second and Court Avenue, the first brick store building on the avenue. The stone was quarried out of the bluff along Des Moines River, on Barlow Granger's land, and was a good quality of sandstone. It was hauled in with teams.

His fidelity, fair dealing, energy and honesty soon secured for him all he could do. Among the buildings he erected was the Good Block, at Fifth and Walnut, where the Casady bank is; the Charles Hewitt wholesale grocery building, at Third and Walnut; the Judge Byron Rice building, next west of the Equitable Building, at Sixth and Locust; St. Ambrose Church, at Sixth and High, and numerous smaller business blocks and residences. He built the abutments and piers of Court Avenue bridge more than twenty years ago, and they have withstood the pounding of floods and ice gorges without protection of ice-breakers.

In his building business, he found brick very scarce. He secured land and began making by hand what was known as sand brick, and for twenty-three years it was a large part of his business. Over three million, eight hundred thousand of his hard-burned brick were put in the new Capitol, and of their quality it is only necessary to say they passed the lynx-eyed scrutiny of "Bob" Finkbine, who was a holy terror to contractors for material furnished that structure. They were what is called "nigger heads," and hard as flint rock. Vitrified brick was then an unknown quantity.

He, with Conrad Youngerman, built the porticos and steps of the old Court House, which was torn down to give place to the present one. The stone was quarried at Elk Rapids, on Des Moines River, in Boone County, about thirty miles north. They would go up there and quarry a lot of stone, haul it down here with teams, and then cut and put it in place. It was a job which tried their very souls to the breaking-point, and required three months' labor.

He employed a large number of men and teams, and for more than thirty years was an important factor in the industries of the town. In 1890, he retired from the contracting business.

For comparison of the wages paid bricklayers in the early days and that at present, when building the Good Block, he paid two dollars and a half per

day, a day's work being from seven to six o'clock—ten hours.

In 1893, he organized the German Savings Bank, was a heavy stockholder, one of the Directors, and its President until 1897, when financial reverses to some of its patrons, overdrafts, and his personal securities given to aid in developing infant industries in the town, necessitated the closure of the bank, with a total loss of seventy-two thousand, four hundred dollars, and which he had to make good to the bank, thus sweeping away the emoluments of his many years of toil.

As a business man, he was noted for his integrity, honesty and fidelity. A contract made with him required no bonds or collaterals.

Socially, he is plain, quiet, unostentatious, benevolent, has an unbounded faith in humanity, is a good neighbor and an exemplary citizen. Is not a member of any clubs or societies.

Politically, he is a Democrat, but takes no part in the game of politics. Religiously (sic), he is a member of Saint Mary's Catholic Church.

July Fourteenth, 1907.