



GUY K. AYERS

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The only living resident of Des Moines who was here when the Dragoons and Infantry comprising the garrison of Fort Des Moines were here, and saw them drilling nearly every day, is Guy K. Ayres, a pioneer from circumstances over which he had no control.

Born in Ohio, when twelve years old his father emigrated to Iowa, in 1843, going down the Ohio River to Saint Louis, thence up the Mississippi to Keokuk, thence by wagon to Fairfield, where he stopped for a time, thence to Ottumwa, until the early Fall of 1845, when, loading his family and household goods into a wagon, hauled them with oxen to Fort Des Moines, landing on the east bank of Des Moines River, a desolate and uninviting place, for there were but two dwelling-places between the river and the buildings of the Indian Agency, about two miles down the river, one that of W. H. Meacham, which stood on the bank of the river, near Grand Avenue, and that of Alex. Scott, which stood near the east end of the present Court Avenue bridge. Meacham had made a claim of one hundred and twenty acres extending from about where Walnut Street is, east to Capitol Hill and north to near the line of Des Moines Street. Scott had a claim for all south of that as far east as the starch works. The whole of that section was covered with timber and underbrush. The land was low and wet, especially that of Meacham's, and contained not a building thereon.

Meacham, being a man of genuine hospitality, took Ayres' family into his cabin, where they remained until the first detachment of infantry left the garrison, when they moved into the fifth cabin from the east end of 'Coon Row in the soldiers' quarters. Ayres being a good tailor, readily found employment as a tailor, and, with J. M. Thrift, the garrison tailor, did the tailoring for The Fort. In that cabin they lived until the cavalry, or Dragoons, as they were officially called, left, in 1846. The Dragoons were required to

gather up several bands of Indians who had straggled away up the Des Moines and 'Coon rivers, evidently expecting to escape being transferred to Kansas, where the other Indians had been taken. In February, Colonel Grier issued orders to round them up and bring them into The Fort. One lot was found about thirty miles up the Des Moines, and another on Skunk River. There were about three hundred of them. They were corralled down on the bottoms along the 'Coon, and put under guard, no white persons being allowed to communicate with them. Guy says they were a dilapidated looking lot. On March Eighth, the Dragoons started with them for Fort Leavenworth, and on the Tenth, Colonel Grier, with the remainder of the infantry, left The Fort, and the military post came to an end. Ayres then moved into the cabin vacated by Captain Allen, corner of Second and Elm.

Guy was a youngster in those days, and took notice of things. He says he remembers the location of every building as distinctly as though it were but yesterday, and that the diagrams of The Fort which have been printed in "Charley" Aldrich's *Annals*, Will. Porter's "History of Polk County," and the newspapers, purporting to have been drawn by the War Department at Washington, are not correct as to the location of the buildings, and especially the flagstaff. He says:

"One of the most attractive features of the garrison was the horses of the Dragoons. Captain Allen rode a beautiful white, full-blooded Arabian. He was a very small man, but a splendid horseman. He was a strict disciplinarian. When he made an order, every man in the garrison knew that it meant just what it said. There was no talking back, yet he was kind and generous-hearted. The Dragoons all rode bay horses, so near alike it was nearly impossible to distinguish them. So perfectly were they trained that when turned loose on the Commons, as they were frequently, they went at once through the regular drill as perfectly as though under the saddle and bridle, and then they would scatter.

"Colonel Grier was usually in command of The Fort. He was a large, athletic man, weighed over two hundred pounds, of genial temperament, and quite social with the youngsters. He lived in the first cabin of the row along Des Moines River. Captain Allen lived in the fourth cabin. There were five cabins in the row.

"There were but very few people here when the soldiers left, but soon after they began to come in rapidly, faster than living places could be provided, as there were no saw mills in the county. The lumber for some of the first was brought from a mill in Marion County. I am quite certain the first log cabin put up by a settler was a little south of the corner of Third and Market streets. There were three large Sycamore trees near it. The photo of it has appeared in "Charley" Aldrich's *Annals*, other publications and newspapers as the house occupied by Colonel Grier, whereas he had left the country before it was built, and never saw it. The boarded addition was put on some time after its construction. It was standing as late as 1868. Opposite it, Thomas McMullen built a cabin, in 1847, of hewed logs, which was torn down about 1880.

"In 1849, there was an island in Des Moines River extending from near Court Avenue to a point just below the mouth of 'Coon River, and another large island about one-fourth of a mile lower down. Both were covered with a dense growth of large timber trees. On the upper island was a large Cottonwood, which, in 1851, was twisted and torn by the lightning strokes of that year, but it stood up until the islands themselves were washed away by the floods of the succeeding two years.

"The first brick business building in the town was erected by Doctor James Campbell, down at 'Coon Point, near the covered bridge, for an Eye and Ear Infirmary. It was three stories high. The first floor was used for dry and wet groceries, the wet groceries being dispensed from a bar, by the glass, at the rear end. The second floor was a billiard room and restaurant. The upper floor was a dancing hall. It was considered a very important improvement and extravagant investment of money. Some of the doings in that building would not be very proper reading for a family paper.

"In 1845, while the soldiers were here, food supplies for those outside of the garrison were sometimes short. Small quantities of flour could be bought of Benjamin Bryant, who was a Trader at the Trading Post, down the river about a mile and a half. The soldiers drew rations regularly and usually had some left over, which they would gamble away among themselves, and the fellow who won the pile would sell it to the settlers, which afforded the few families here then to get sugar, beans, and pickled pork."

Guy did not like tailoring; it was too confining, and he turned his attention to teaming, plowing, and whatever he could find to do. Early in 1846, his father made a claim for all the land on the flat from Eighth Street west to what was called Lyon Run, now Ingersoll Run, at Seventeenth Street, north to High Street, and south to 'Coon River, and fenced twenty acres west of Eighth Street, between Tenth and Twelfth streets, the original town having been platted to Eighth Street west. The rails for fencing were split from logs cut in the ravine between Eleventh and Twelfth on School. Guy hauled the rails and logs for the cabin.

Perry L. Crossman, the first Clerk of the county, pretended to hold a prior claim to the land, and when Ayres had his twenty acres fenced, Crossman took down an empty cabin which was down on the 'Coon bottoms, and put it up on Ayres' enclosure at Ninth and Market streets. The same night, Guy and his brother, David, another youngster, tore it down, their father being absent. The next morning, Crossman rebuilt it, and hired a man named Lacey to occupy it. The two boys saw him loading up his household goods to move in, when they, with their mother, hustled a lot of bedding, chairs, tables, etc., into a wagon and made a rush for the cabin, beating Lacey long enough to get installed and in possession. Lacey threatened to throw them out, but after a considerable bluster and threats which failed to scare the boys, he retired in good order. Soon after, the cabin was sold to Doctor P. B. Fagen.

In 1849, Ayres purchased seven hundred and twenty acres in Franklin Township, at what is known as Ayres' Grove, and began to cultivate a farm, but Guy concluded he wanted an education and remained in town. Hezekiah Fagen, who lived near what is now the corner of Thirty-first Street and University Avenue, asked him one day if he didn't want to go to school. If he did, he could come to his house, help the boys do the chores, and go to school. He accepted the offer. The only school available was a subscription school at Hickman Corners, one mile and a half north, through the timber and brush, kept in a rough log cabin. The seats were a long bench of split Linn timber placed along the wall, for the boys on one side and the girls on the other. It was heated by a large iron stove, the boys cutting the wood for

it. The teacher was an old man named Schneider. He taught Reading, Writing, Spelling, Arithmetic, and Gray's English Grammar. A spelling school was held once a week, and there were some mighty good spellers in the school.

His next step toward an education was a term in Elder Nash's school in the Court House. He boarded with John Hays, who kept the Cottage House, at the corner of Fourth Street and Court Avenue, opposite *The Register and Leader* building, and did chores for his board.

In 1855, Guy's father came into town, purchased two hundred and twenty-one acres on the river bottom, back to the bluffs, cleared the bluffs of timber, and erected a two-story frame dwelling where the Benedict Home now is, and one day he asked Guy how he would like to go into the milling business. It suited him, but four hundred dollars was all the money he had. His father said that was enough. They formed a partnership, purchased the saw mill of Griffith, Stanton & Hoover, which was on the east side of the river, at the foot of Des Moines Street, moved it to the west side of the river, rebuilt it at the foot of North Street, and began to cut up the heavy timber which skirted the river on both sides. Logging was good business in those days. I think Ed. Clapp has not forgotten some log hauling he did to that mill. Slabs were used for fuel for the engine. They did not then know that coal was underlying the whole of Polk County. In 1857, the mill was sold to a man who could not pay for it. It was dismantled, sold in parcels, and a new flouring mill built where the Edison electric light plant now is, at the foot of Chestnut Street. It was burned in 1861.

Guy then began buying or building mills on his own account, starting at Iowa Center, thence to Swede Point, Moingona, Sheldahl, Missouri, and other places, including Seattle and Tacoma. He did the machinery engineering for the glucose works which G. M. Hippee, J. J. Towne, "Charley" Weitz, Doctor Eaton, and others started, at Eighth and Vine, on the West Side. He also invested several hundred dollars in the enterprise. The factory turned out good glucose, and promised a good market for corn, but the exhalations from it became so obnoxious to the residents in that section, it was closed as a nuisance. A site was then purchased down where the starch

works were, a four-story brick 160 x 140 erected, and the business resumed on a larger scale, but in 1883 went out of business.

During the thirty years building mills, or buying them and swapping them for farms, he has acquired a competency sufficient to enable him to take a rest, on Seventh Street, opposite Crocker School, without worry as to the crops or the money market. His principal diversion is to swap yams with some old-timer downtown on a street corner.

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