



SETH GRAHAM

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An old-timer in Des Moines, and one of its best-known citizens is Seth Graham, a genuine Buckeye, born in Wayne County, Ohio, April Thirteenth, 1831, of Scottish ancestors, who emigrated to America in 1793.

In 1838, his father moved to Pike County, Illinois, where, as a millwright, he resided until 1842, when he removed to Perry County, Illinois. In the meantime, Seth attended the district schools, assisted his father, and became familiar with the use of mechanical tools. In Perry County, he was employed in a wagon shop, carpenter shop, and did mill work for two years.

In 1849, when eighteen years of age, he struck out for himself, and paddled his own canoe. In 1850, he landed in Iowa, and went to burning lime in Cedar County for fifteen dollars per month. In the Fall of that year, he made a contract with N. L. Milburn, an extensive bridge builder, and built bridges on Cedar River, on the Des Moines, at Keosauqua, in 1851-1852; on the Skunk, at Rome, on the road from Fairfield to Mount Pleasant, in 1852-1853.

In the Fall of 1853, he began the building of the steamboat, *N. L. Milburn*, at Iowaville, on Des Moines River. The hull was completed and towed into an inlet for the Winter, and to protect it against floating ice in the Spring. The next morning it was found water-logged. Milburn charged Andrew Jackson Davis, he of the famous Colorado Will Case, a few years ago, who was running a saw mill on the opposite side of the river, and with whom he had, in common with many others, trouble in the courts, with sinking the hull. Early in the Spring, an attempt was made to raise it and get it back to the yard for completion, but a high wind got control of it and blew it across the river in Davis' bailiwick, where it landed in the underbrush. Milburn called Seth and told him to go and borrow John Jordan's revolver, quietly slip over to the boat, and guard it, for "the man who sunk it will try it again to-night."

Seth went and whispered his want to Jordan, who took the revolver from his desk and slipped it into Seth's overcoat pocket. Seth then crept stealthily on board the craft. It was a bad night; the wind was high and frigid; there was no escape from it except to crawl into one of the empty boilers, which he did, making himself as comfortable as possible, occasionally (sic) thrusting his head out of the "manhole" to see if the coast was clear. The dreary night passed, however, without disturbance. Crawling out of his post early in the morning, and stretching himself to take the kinks out of his anatomy, he examined his trusty revolver, the six chambers of which contained not a sign of a charge; neither had he one in his pockets.

The hull was moved to its yard again and hustled to completion, making its first trip May Sixteenth, to Keokuk, thence back to Eddyville. About twelve miles below Red Rock was a good coal mine, where the *Milburn* got its coal. The boat was kept busy, and on one of its trips, the *Badger State* was found lying fast on a rock just below Ottumwa, and heavily loaded with freight for Des Moines. The freight was transferred to the *Milburn*, and on the Nineteenth of June, pulled out for "Raccoon Forks." Among the passengers on the *Badger State* were Colonel J. M. Griffith, then running a general merchandise store, and Jesse Dicks, a stove and hardware merchant, both on Second Street, who had been to Saint Louis to buy goods. When within a few miles of the coal mine, the steamboat *J. B. Gordon* was discovered coming after them at full speed, apparently to cut the *Milburn* out at the coal mine. The pilot ran along slowly, until the *Gordon* got close on, when barrels of tar were rolled out, the heads knocked in, the wood plunged into the tar, and then under the boilers. The *Milburn* forged ahead and struck the coal dock with a thud that sent everybody sprawling on the deck, but she got the coal.

When it reached "Rattlesnake Bend," about eight miles down the river, the current being swift and tortuous, Dicks and Griffith preferred to walk across the narrow neck of the bend, which is shaped like a horseshoe, and they were put ashore, to be picked up at the other end of the bend, but they failed to make a connection, and the next seen of them was about two hours

after the boat tied up at the "Point." They hove into port on the south side of the 'Coon and hailed Seth to come over with a skiff—there were no bridges—and get them. Dicks, who was of very obese construction, short in the legs, was puffing like a porpoise; Griffith, tall and slim, a rapid walker, as everybody knows, having given him a hot pace.

In the Spring of 1854, the *Milburn* went up Missouri River on a three months' cruise. Then she loaded with freight from Saint Louis to New Orleans, where she was chartered for the cotton trade—and when crossing the Gulf of Mexico, foundered and sunk.

In the Spring of 1855, Seth came to Des Moines, and went to work in the steam saw mill of Stanton, Griffith & Hoover.

The first Sunday after his arrival, a big commotion broke out in the Irish Settlement, down on the 'Coon bottoms. It was rumored they had all been poisoned. They had suddenly become as "crazy as bedbugs," not violent, but hilarious and noisy. All the physicians in town were called out, and the whole town rushed down there. The victims were singing and dancing, and making more fun than a circus. Asked what the trouble was, they said they had been eating "greens," made from Jimson Weed. The doctors doped them according to their best diagnosis, the symptoms indicating *spirituous frumenti*, though they vigorously denied that they had "touched a drap av the craythur, for isn't it locked up wid the prohib'try law, an' Dochter Cole has the key? Indade, it was the weeds."

In a few hours, the excitement subsided entirely.

I recall another case of "greens" which occurred in 1853, on the Fourth of July. A big celebration was had. "Old Bill" McHenry was Master of Ceremonies, and "Dan" Finch did the orating on the steps of the old first Court House. It was a gala day and everybody was happy as lords. A few weeks ago, "Dan," referring to those "good old days," said of some of the doings of that day, that William Marvin, who kept the Marvin House, on Third Street, and was also Clerk of the Courts, sent down to Burlington for some choice ingredients to make a drink called "julep," composed of sugar, water, and the stuff he got at Burlington, which was mixed, and some "greens" added. Marvin "set up" the concoction to his numerous friends, and its effect

was most decidedly exhilarating, for Captain West bought one of the finest residences in town right opposite the Marvin House, paid eight hundred cash for it, and the next morning had forgotten all about it, and declared that somebody had robbed him. Hoyt Sherman and R. L. Tidrick, two very dignified and circumspect gentlemen, escorted one of the young ladies home in a buggy, and Byron Rice, the County Judge, a very temperate and economical man, became very much disturbed and disconsolate because he could not find some poor, worthy family to whom he could give a farm. There was something very peculiar about it. Most everybody who drank the stuff felt the same way. I was always inclined to think it was the "greens."

In the Fall of 1854, Seth and W. F. Ayers purchased the steam saw mill at the foot of Des Moines Street, on the east bank of the river, owned by Stanton, Griffith & Hoover. They denuded forty acres of heavy timber on Ed. Clapp's land in North Des Moines, and cleared the section where Mercy Hospital now is. In fact, the whole country north of School Street was heavily timbered. The coal for making steam was burrowed out of the bluff where Saint Mary's Church is, and floated across the river in scows.

In 1857, Seth and Ayers built a three-story steam flour mill where the Edison light plant is. The machinery was shipped from Mount Vernon, Ohio, by rail to Iowa City, thence hauled by teams to Des Moines, with the usual delay in getting across Skunk Bottoms. The price paid for wheat was seventy-five cents to one dollar per bushel. A defect in the apparatus for "smutting" prevented making a good grade of flour, and the project was not a success, and in 1859, the partnership in both mills was dissolved. In 1863, the flour mill was destroyed by fire.

In 1859, Seth went to Boonesboro, where he superintended a flour mill one year; then he went to Perry County, Illinois, where he worked in a lumber yard until 1862, when he returned to Des Moines, and went to Elkhart and ran a saw mill for Joe Hutton one year, when he went to work in the foundry and machine shops of H. N. Heminway, on the East Side, to learn the trade, where he remained until 1868, and became a master mechanic. While he was there, he made for me a very fine machinist's "peen" hammer,

which was stolen by one of the Beve Graves gang of thugs, robbers and murderers, which terrorized the town in 1874-1875.

While Seth was employed in the Heminway shops, a draft was ordered by the Government to fill up some regiments that were deficient. When the war broke out, there was a strong pro-slavery element in the town and county; many of the pioneers having come from slave-holding states, their sympathies were naturally with their former states. In fact, slaves were owned and held in Polk County in 1845. There was strong opposition to the draft, and Hub. Hoxie, who was the United States Marshal, arrested three men in Story County for resisting it, brought them to Des Moines, and placed them under guard in the third story of the Exchange Building, at Third and Walnut streets. There was in town a large number of members of the Knights of the Golden Circle, who were Rebel sympathizers, opposed to the war, and especially all attempts to coerce men into the army, declaring that, as the Republicans brought on the war, they should fight it out. It was reported to Hoxie that the conclave had planned to seize a lot of guns and ammunition stored in the State House, release the three prisoners, and destroy the *Register* office, which was on the second floor of the Savery (Kirkwood) House. He immediately selected one hundred trusty, able-bodied men, of whom Seth was one, to guard an attack. They were armed and equipped for duty, with instructions to take no chances; if they shot, to shoot to kill. The Rebel sympathizers were noisy and demonstrative as to their intent and purpose. The Democratic State Convention was in session down on the old Fair Grounds, at the foot of Seventh Street, near 'Coon River, and there was a big crowd in town. One of the speakers in the convention, a prominent man in the party, reverted to the rumors which were rife, and, recognizing in the audience some of the suspected secret conclave, he, in vigorous terms, advised against any interference with the movements of the Government, for "the man who attempts it might as well make preparation in advance for his funeral, for," he said, "there are more than one hundred Union Leaguers in town, prepared for whatever may happen." As an approach to the State House, Exchange Building and *Register* office at night was greeted with a look down the barrel of a well-loaded gun, with a man behind it, the raid was not attempted.

Referring to that event a few days ago, Seth said: "When the war broke out, the northern Democrats were an uncertain quantity. Did you know John A. Logan? He was a pretty good Union man, wasn't he?"

I replied that I had seen him many times, "but what of him?"

"Well, I knew him along in the Forties, when I was a schoolboy, and \_\_\_\_\_." Then, twirling a cigar between his lips, relapsed into a reminiscent mood for several moments, as if scanning the picture before his vision, then went on: "He was a rising young lawyer, following the courts around the circuit on horseback, stopping at the various county seats, as was then the custom. When court met at Pinckneyville, the lawyers all stopped at the same tavern, as there was but one, and it was the pride of us boys who could get in the good graces of the hostler to ride their horses to the creek to water, thereby saving the hostler a whole lot of hard pumping, and some of the horses were more or less accustomed to the race track, and would not let anything pass them. It was fun to ride up behind some fellow and make his horse run away with him, but our great delight was to stand around open-mouthed and drink in the yarns told on the porch after supper.

"Logan was dark-complexioned, black-haired, and black-eyed. He was a good talker, spoke with a decided Southern accent, and was an ideal hero for us boys. I think his most impressive yarns were of duelling and horse racing. He lived in the adjoining county of Franklin.

"I left Perry County in 1849, and on my return, in 1860, he was the Representative in Congress from that district, and I did not see him again until June, 1861. Things were hot in that country then. Business was dead; work was played out. The President had called for seventy-five thousand one-hundred-day men, and Company A of the Eighteenth Regiment was being recruited with a rush; meetings every day for recruits and drill. Our Representative's proclivities being pretty well known, he was freely cussed or discussed, depending on the point of view. He started out to make a tour of the southern counties before returning to Washington for the called session of Congress. The day he spoke in Pinckneyville, he did not come on

the drill ground, and most of us went down to the lake for a swim before going to hear him. While there, John Kirkwood, the drill master—afterward First Lieutenant, and killed at Fort Donelson—proposed that we fill our pockets with stones and ‘rock’ him out of the Court House if he advocated Secession or gave any treasonable utterances. The proposal met a hearty response. There were about forty of us. We loaded up and went to the Court House, scattered ourselves around the back seats, with Kirkwood up near the front, where we could all see him when he fired the first shot, but we did not get the opportunity. The nearest the speaker come to it was when he said: ‘Raise your volunteers and put them in the field, but put them in the harvest field. If Illinois is invaded, I’ll fight. I’m going back to Washington City in about two weeks, and if Washington City is invaded, I’ll fight, but I’ll not go out of my state to fight.’

“He was not ‘rocked’ out, and we unloaded around the corner. He went on his tour, and we got reports that at most of the places where he spoke, parties of men were made up to go hunting or fishing, and by some unaccountable accident they all met down on Ohio River, and, as there was about enough to form a company, they concluded to go over and offer their services to the Southern Confederacy.

“In after years, it was thrown up to him in Congress, and I never knew of his coming out flatfooted and denying it. He always referred to his record in Congress as disproving it.

“However, on his return from that trip, the Eighteenth Regiment had gone into camp at Anna, and he wanted to go in and see some of the boys, but, unfortunately, he found some of those same Perry County boys on guard, and they positively refused to admit him or take his name to the commanding officer.

“After the regiment had been mustered into service, we organized a company of Home Guards, similar to the plan later adopted by the Union League. Our headquarters were usually in the field, our drill ground the same.

“About that time, Hawkins S. Osborn, our Representative in the Legislature, attempted to raise a company of mounted horse guards He had said at Salem: ‘We can take all south of Mason and Dixon’s Line, and go with the Confederacy.’ We furnished him enough recruits to hold him level, and



before the Summer was over, they disbanded.

"I have forgotten the precise time we got the report that Logan, Breckenridge, and another Representative had sent a messenger to Richmond to see Jeff. Davis and ascertain upon what conditions he would be willing to compromise, and had been answered, that if they gave him blank paper and allowed him to write his own conditions, he would have nothing to do with the Federal Government.

"At the close of that session of Congress, a number of Representatives agreed to go home, raise a regiment, and go into the field. When Logan arrived, he found the Thirty-first Regiment nearly full, and, with his disposition to 'get there,' it suited him better to be elected Colonel of that regiment than to raise another. Company A, again the company from Perry, voted almost solid against him, but he was elected. Immediately, in Company A, a ring was formed to kill him if he made a move to betray them to the enemy. I think there were ten in the ring, but I only knew one of them positively. I asked one, the first home on a furlough, how they were getting along with John A., and his reply was: 'We are not worrying about John A. now; he is going to give us all the fight we want.' "

At the close of his five years' service with Heminway, in 1868, Seth had the choice of the superintendency of the foundry and iron works or a partnership with Lester Cate in the transfer business. He chose the latter, and is in it to-day, his son, Fred., having succeeded Cate, who deceased in 1893. During his service, he has distributed an average of one family a day of new-comers to homes in the city, and set them on the way to help Des Moines do things. The first ten years, he paid the railroads one and one-quarter million dollars for freight charges.

Politically, he is a dyed-in-the-wool Republican, but takes no part in politics, as politics goes. During the War Period, he was an active member of the Union League.

Socially, he is genial, good-natured, unobtrusive, reticent, and enjoys companionship, but gives little attention to social functions. In business affairs, he is noted for sterling integrity, as evidenced by the fact that he has served more years as treasurer and officer of Masonic bodies than any

person in the United States. He was initiated in Pioneer Lodge in 1856, and received the degree of Master in 1857. His record stands thus:

Raised in Pioneer Lodge, January First, 1857; elected Treasurer, 1869.

Exalted in Corinthian Chapter, 1858; elected Treasurer, 1880.

Knighthed in Temple Commandery, 1871; elected Treasurer, 1872.

Elected Treasurer of Masonic Temple Association at its organization, 1883.

Elected Treasurer of Masonic Library Association at its organization, 1886.

Elected Treasurer of Alpha Council at its organization, 1897.

There is never a doubt as to the funds of those bodies while Seth holds the key to the box, and it can be truly said he is an exemplar of the tenets of the Masonic order in civic and social life.

Religiously, he is an Episcopalian. In the early days, he was active in church work, holding the office of Vestryman for some time.

He is still in business, vigorous and healthy; lets Fred, do the heavy work; takes three square meals a day; carries a cigar in his lips every day from morning to night, half the time unlighted; enjoys life and the esteem of his fellow citizens.

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