



WILLIAM CHRISTY

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A name familiar with pioneers of Polk County was Christy. There were three brothers, Daniel, Archy and William, all carpenters. They were more largely identified with building the East Side than any other trio of men—in fact, it may be said they built it.

William was born during a cholera epidemic in Philadelphia, October Fifteenth, 1832, of Scotch-Irish parentage. He lived with his parents in pleasant surroundings, attending the schools of the city, his father being a prominent shoe merchant.

In 1842, his parents died, when he was ten years old, and he was forced to look out for himself. He went to work on a farm, but farming was not his forte, and two years later he returned to the city, learned the carpenter trade, serving two years' apprenticeship, at the expiration of which, in 1848, when sixteen years old, he decided to hoe his own row, which he did with good success until early in 1857, when, induced by glowing accounts of the great demand for carpenters, and the prospects of the "new Capital of the state," his brother, Daniel, had for two years been sending to him, in March, with his young wife, he came by rail to Mount Pleasant, thence by Stage Company "jerkey" to Fort Des Moines, taking a temporary abode with Dan., but soon after rented a small house at the corner of East Fifth and Locust.

There were but few houses on the east side of the river, and a big demand for more, some of the houses containing two or three families. He therefore quickly found employment at three dollars a day, a large price then, for the state was passing through the throes of a severe money panic. His first job was on a store on the west side of West Second Street. The first State House was being constructed, and for a time he worked there. So soon as he could, he purchased a lot on Walker Street, near Pennsylvania Avenue, and built a

small frame, two-room house for himself, wife and the wee tot the stork had brought them. It was not a very inviting place, as all that section was dense timber and brush. From Keokuk Street (now Grand Avenue) there was a road cut through just the width of a wagon, to town, and that was the only way to get there. In wet weather, it was nearly impassable. One evening, he and his wife went out to visit a friend, and going home she left both her overshoes in the mud.

Society in the very early days was very different from what it is now. Everybody knew everybody in town. Referring to it a few days ago, Christy said: "We were all good neighbors. One night I was called out by a neighbor whose wife was taken suddenly ill, to go for a doctor. When the doctor reached the woman, he found the case required the use of surgical instruments, which he did not have with him, and sent me to a drug store to get them. It was after midnight, and no one was in the store when I reached it, but I crawled in through a window and found them. The next day, I told the druggist what I had done, and he said it was all right. The pioneers were always ready to help one another. If I should attempt the doing of the same thing now, I would probably get my head shot off, or land in jail."

In 1859, his house was burned, but he rebuilt it and has resided there since.

Being a versatile genius, he sometimes worked side lines. He was acting as Constable on one occasion, and went in pursuit of a man who had assaulted an old man who lived alone in the brush, near what is now the corner of Des Moines and Twelfth streets. Learning that the fellow was at a house on the outskirts of town, he went after him, and on nearing the house, the fellow saw him and skedaddled through a back door, for the brush. Christy followed him to the bluffs on the bank of the river, where he lost him. Seeing foot tracks pointing inward at the mouth of one of the abandoned coal mines along the bluff, he followed them, and, after a long search, failed to locate him, yet was certain he was there. He built a bonfire of leaves and brush and smoked him out. There being no jail in Polk County, all prisoners having to be taken to Oskaloosa or Ottumwa, he was taken direct before Esquire R. W. Clark for trial. Doctor A. Y. Hull appeared as attorney

for the old man, and Will. Porter for the culprit. During the hearing, the two attorneys got mad, and sailed into each other, but were separated before blood was drawn, the Esquire threatening to take them both outside and thrash them if they didn't behave, and he was able to do it. I don't think Will. has forgotten it.

Christy continued to work at his trade until August, 1862, when, in response to the bugle call of his country, he enlisted in Company C, of which Congressman Hull was Captain, in the Twenty-third Infantry, to help put down the Rebellion. The regiment went into camp east of the Capitol, near where Mrs. Redhead now lives, and September Eighteenth, was mustered into service, the roster showing nine hundred and sixty men and officers. It marched to Keokuk, thence went by boat to Saint Louis. Its first service in the field was in Missouri, in hard marches and skirmishes for two months, when it was ordered to make a hard march to Iron Mountain, where it went into winter quarters, but soon after was ordered to break up a Confederate camp on Current River. While on that expedition, Colonel Dewey selected Christy to carry a special message to General Boyd, a hazardous undertaking, for the route was through dense forest, in an unknown country, infested with guerillas, but after a three days' journey, sleeping at night on the bare earth, he delivered the message. The General asked where the regiment was, and on being told it was in Arkansas, he replied, "Those d—d Iowa boys would follow the Secesh to the devil, if they were allowed to go."

The regiment was engaged in the battles of Port Gibson, Jackson, Champion's Hill, and Big Black River Bridge. At Port Gibson was its first battle engagement. After the battle at the bridge, it was detailed as guard to remove several thousand captured prisoners to Memphis. Returning, it was sent to Milliken's Bend, where, June Sixth, 1863, it had a desperate encounter with the Confederates, losing fifty out of two hundred men. It then joined the army investing Vicksburg, and was the first regiment to cross the river for attack on the rear. After the fall of Vicksburg, it was sent to reinforce Sherman at Jackson. At the close of the campaign, it returned to Vicksburg, and was sent to Texas, on the Brownsville Expedition. Then

returning to New Orleans, in the Spring of 1864, it was sent to reinforce the defeated army of General Banks in its retreat down Red River. Early in 1865, it returned to New Orleans, and joined the expedition around Mobile, and in the siege and assaults of that campaign, bore a notable part. At the storming of Spanish Fort, it met again the Twenty-third Alabama, which it had met at Port Gibson, when under fire for the first time. After two months' stay around Mobile, it was moved to Harrisburg, Texas, where, July Twenty-sixth, 1865, it was mustered out, came to Davenport, and August Eighth, disbanded.

On release from military service, Christy hastened home, only to begin life anew. His little child had died, his Government pay had barely supplied the needs of his family during his absence, he was poor in purse, but rich in courage, determination, and faith in the future. He built a small shop and entered the field as a building contractor. His competency, integrity, and business capacity soon brought him success. He made most of the plans for buildings, as architects were not so numerous as they now are. He built several hundred buildings on both sides of the river, mostly residences, for the town had not reached the steel-construction-sky-scraper stage. Prominent on the East Side was the bank building at Fifth and Locust, for I. N. Thomas; the Bolton Block, on Sixth; the store on Locust for R. C. Webb; the Goldstone stores, and the Odd Fellows' Hall. He did the interior work for Jule Parmlee's jewelry store, in the corner of the old Savery, where Joseph now is, the first room occupied on the ground floor. Lumber was scarce. There were no railroads. Store boxes was all the pine lumber he could get, and with that he did all the work. So well pleased was Jule, he not only paid for the job, but gave Christy a handsome present as a token of satisfaction. I think Joseph ran up against some of that work in remodeling the room to meet a more up-to-date fastidiousness. What a tale that hotel building could tell of transmogrifications it has passed through to keep pace with the progress of events and the public demand!

In 1873, under a change in the law, Polk County was divided into five Supervisor Districts, and Lee Township was made the second district. Christy was elected for that district, and reelected each term to 1897, when he got tired of it and quit, having served twenty-four consecutive years, an

unprecedented record, indicating not only his fitness for the place, but his popularity with his own townsmen. His business capacity and long experience in the management of county affairs, in fact, made him the burden-bearer of the Board work. It was a case where the minority ruled the majority.

In 1878, having acquired a competency, he retired from the building business.

In 1881, he was elected Overseer of the Poor of the city, and reelected every year to 1894. It was a thankless office, requiring the exercise of good judgment—a place where was constant struggle between deprivation, want, his heartfelt sympathy, and the limited funds placed at his disposal.

In 1878, he was elected a director of the Capital City Bank, and held the place five years.

In 1885, he was elected a member of the East Side School Board, and served nine years, aiding materially in advancing the schools to a higher and more gratifying position.

In 1890, he was elected Justice of the Peace, and is still on the bench, with a well-filled record that shows very few reversals of his decisions in the higher courts.

Politically, he is a Republican. He cast his first vote for President for Lincoln. He generally has a hand in all the political movements in Lee Township, and thoroughly understands the game, yet he is in no sense a place-seeker, his greatest difficulty being to avoid having places thrust upon him.

Socially, he is of kindly temperament, inclined to be demure, yet is companionable, and a good neighbor. He was formerly a member of the Order of Odd Fellows, but there being no lodges here when he came, he has dropped out. He is an active member of the Grand Army of the Republic.

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