



DR. FRANCIS C. GRIMMEL

DOCTOR FRANCIS C. GRIMMEL

ONE of the very early settlers here who made their impress upon the city, and for sixteen years was one of the foremost, energetic, respected citizens, was Doctor F. C. Grimmel.

In August, 1846, in Ohio, he gathered together his family, consisting of his wife, three sons and two daughters, and, with four wagons loaded with household goods and a small lot of drugs, drawn by ten horses, he set out for Fort Des Moines. He arrived here late at night, October Fifteenth, having to ford the river between Grand Avenue and Walnut Street, there being no bridges. There was not a place for them to unload, and they camped out, as they had every night during the journey.

The next morning, the only vacant or available place to be had was the large, oblong, log Guard House used by the soldiers, which stood near the present northeast corner of Third and Vine streets, and fronted on the Parade Ground, the north line of which was Vine Street, east line Fourth Street, west line Sixth Street, south, 'Coon River.

The house was divided into two compartments about fourteen feet square, with small iron-barred windows. The chinking between the logs had broken away, and, to make it endurable, the wagon covers were fastened to the walls. The Winter was severe. In contradistinction from the "old-fashioned" Winters talked of nowadays, that was a typical one. The mercury fell to thirty-six below zero, many cattle and hogs froze to death; the earth was frozen so hard, to dig a grave for the burial of a person, logs and wood had to be burned to thaw it so as to render it penetrable with a spade. Provisions were scarce, and there was much suffering throughout the country. The Doctor's family got out of meat. Doctor Brooks came over one day to make a friendly visit with the new comers, discovered the paucity of their larder, and, with his proverbial goodness, at evening brought a quarter of beef. There was no place

inside to put it. There were seven persons and a drug store in two small rooms. Ice boxes and refrigerators had not materialized; there was no cellar. It was hung on the outside wall, where it was cut from daily as wanted, an exposure that would hardly be wise in these days of higher civilization. But they didn't have locks on their doors on those days. The pioneers were all friends and neighbors; their doors and hearts were open always; they shared with each other whatever they had. A common interest and common sympathy bound them together. It was in the very nature of things that each person's protection was in the good-will of the community about him.

Reverting to those days, said one of the old-timers, who passed through trials and privations of which those of the middle age to-day can have no conception whatever:

"We were all on an equality. Caste would not have been tolerated. What one had, we all had. It was the happiest period of my life. But to-day, if you lean against a neighbor's shade tree, he'll charge you for it. If you are poor and sick, you may lie and suffer unnoticed, uncared for, and probably go to the Poor House, and the man who reported you will charge the county for doing it."

The first Winter was passed in the Guard House. The first move in the Spring was to get out of it. The Doctor purchased the Government warehouse, which was on the East Side, a story-and-a-half structure of two-inch walnut plank; tore it down, removed it to near where the Sisters of Mercy now reside on Sixth Avenue, rebuilt it, and lived in it during the Summer while he was building a permanent residence. One portion of it was used for a stock of drugs and his office until 1852, when he built a frame store at the corner of Sixth and Grand avenues, which he occupied several years, when the lot was sold to the Catholics and the store removed to Mulberry Street. In it Rev. Ezra Rathbun lived and died.

In the Spring of 1847, the Doctor made a claim of eighty acres lying between what is now Grand Avenue and School, Fourth and Ninth streets.

So soon as the Doctor had made his claim, he selected the site for a residence "away out on the hill," as they said at the post office, down near "The Point," when anybody inquired for the Doctor professionally.

The timbers for sills, joist and rafters were cut and hewn on the claim between Park and School streets. The weatherboards were sawed at Parmalee's mill, near the mouth of Middle River, in Warren County. The shingles and lath were made by hand. The frame was the regular down-east mill style, with mortise, tenon, braces and pinned jointures. When put together, the carpenters declared it could be rolled all over town. The top plate was sycamore, the corner posts oak. One night, after the frame was put up, lightning struck one upper corner, passed down the oak post, slivering it and the tenon, without injuring the tenon mortise in the sycamore plate.

It was late in the Fall, help being scarce, before the house was ready for plastering, but there was no lime nor plasterer. Cloth was fastened to the walls and ceiling, and another Winter passed in discomfort. In June following, the Doctor's daughter, Augusta, and P. M. Casady (now known as the "Judge") were married therein. It was a notable, jolly affair. The groom was popular, a lawyer, and candidate for State Senator. The groomsman was Doctor Fagen, who, for two years, had been a roommate and chum of the groom, and who was the Whig candidate for Senator against the groom. For the fun of it, a vote for Senator was taken by the whole crowd, and the Doctor beat the groom by a large majority, every blessed one of the girls voting against him—they didn't like the breaking up of their social circles by marriages—but their vote was soon after verified by the marriage of the Doctor to the bridesmaid, Melissa Hoxie.

The second Fall, the house was completed, a plasterer having come to the town, and it became famous afterward for weddings and social gatherings. It was a cherished place for young people. In it, in 1855, was held the meeting for organizing the first Lutheran Church, the Doctor and his good wife being earnest, active Lutherans. It was the first complete timber frame house built in the town.

In Summer time, the pet family horse, who grazed in the large field about the house, could be seen with head and neck thrust in an open window to receive the benefactions so proverbial within. The house was destroyed by fire in 1889, the lot then sold, the hill cut away, and the Catholic Church built thereon.

Simultaneously with the making of the claim by the Doctor, Edwin and Edward Hall, twin brothers, who built the dam at the foot of Center Street, made a claim westward from the river along Center Street. In 1854, when the claims were made additions to the city, in locating the streets it was discovered the claims over-lapped. To avoid expensive litigation, for land was cheap, the claims being covered with timber and tangled underbrush, and prospective purchasers scarce, a compromise was made, which explains the jog the length of one lot in Fourth Street at Center.

In 1855, at a meeting of the State Lutheran Convention here, it was decided to establish a college of the Church. Through the earnest effort and influence of the Doctor and his estimable wife, Des Moines was selected for its location. A corporation was formed, a site purchased on Pleasant Street, where Younker's residence now is; the Doctor gave ten thousand dollars to the project; he was elected one of the trustees; a building was commenced, the corner-stone laid May Twenty-sixth, 1856, when hard times came on, material difficult to obtain, the project was abandoned, and the property sold to the Baptist denomination.

In the State House location fiasco, 1855, the Doctor was an enthusiastic West Sider, subscribing ten thousand dollars to the "war fund." He offered ten acres of his claim, and Richard Holcomb, who had a claim adjoining that of Grimmel's on the west, and lived in a log cabin on the hillside, near where Irving School is, offered ten acres also, or more, if wanted, for a building site, and ten thousand dollars to the "war fund."

In 1855, Grimmel retired from active business, and for recreation, the following year, built a large two-story brick residence, corner of Park Street and Sixth Avenue, where he lived until his death, in 1862. In 1865, the property was sold to General J. M. Tuttle, and the Doctor's widow returned to the old house.

After General Tuttle's death, the brick house was torn away, the lot excavated, and the Victoria Hotel built thereon.

Politically, the Doctor was a radical Democrat. He was skillful and successful in his profession, zealous in the promotion of religious, educational and civic affairs, liberal in all matters of charity, his controlling effort being to help the city.

Contemporary with the Doctor was Doctor Pierce B. Fagen, an excellent physician, a graduate of several medical schools. He arrived here in June, 1846, the second doctor in town, Doctor Brooks having preceded him. With him came Judge Casady. The night before, they stopped at the cabin of "Uncle Tommy" Mitchell, well known to everybody in Polk County for fifty years—in fact, the godfather of the county—who lived near where Mitchellville now is.

A young boy of Mitchell's was bitten by a rattlesnake the day Doctor Fagen arrived there. It was a godsend for the boy. There was no drug store at hand, not a neighbor's cabin within several miles. The only possible antidote for the poison to be had was tobacco and whiskey, usually kept in a settler's cabin, though "Uncle Tommy" was a good cold-water man. The boy was loaded with tobacco and whiskey, and recovered, which helped the Doctor more than all the "puffs" in Barlow Granger's *Star*. He opened an office with Mr. Casady and at once got into public favor.

He was a wide-awake Whig, and in 1848, when Casady was a candidate for State Senator, he was the Whig candidate and took the stump against him. They roomed, ate and slept together, "boarding 'round," first at the tavern of Martin (X) Tucker—Martin wrote the "X" and somebody else the rest—then the Martin House, and so on. They were firm chums. Casady won out, though the Doctor received a large vote in Polk County. His friends charged the Democrats with working the sympathy racket, by telling the people that it was more important to the health of the community that the Doctor be kept at home during the Winter. A lawyer could be easily spared, not so a good doctor. But when the county-seat location contest came on in the Legislature, during the Winter, the Doctor and "Uncle Tommy" Mitchell started one very cold morning in February, on horseback, to go to Iowa City to lobby for The Fort. They reached Bennett's cabin, four miles east of Newton, the first night, nearly frozen, and hungry as bears. Corn bread, sour bacon, a com-shuck bed short at both ends, was the best the cabin afforded. It required pluck and public spirit, but they went on, and helped materially in securing favorable legislation.

The first deed executed in the county by an individual was by Fagen. It was for forty acres lying within the plat set apart by the County Commissioners as the Original Town, and was part of a claim made by the Doctor. The deed was to convey title to the Commissioners. The price paid was three hundred and five dollars, or about seven dollars and a half per acre. It is now in the heart of the city, as the original town lay between Des Moines River and Eighth Street west, 'Coon River and Locust Street north. A big town it was, prospectively.

In November, 1849, the Doctor and Melissa Hoxie, the bridesmaid at the Casady wedding, were married in the Hoxie house. It was a notable event. Guests came from all over the county; "Uncle Tommy" Mitchell from Apple Grove, Doctor Brooks from Indian Agency, Charley Van from Vantown, the latter coming with an ox team.

While the wedding ceremony was on, a terrific storm came, compelling the guests to remain through the night—some for several days. The house was packed. It was an unique affair, replete with all the jollity Charley Van could concoct to "kill time."

As transportation facilities at that time were sadly wanting, Colonel Hooker's stage coaches not having reached this point, and steamboats being barred by the two half-completed dams of the River "Obstruction" Company at Bonaparte, there was no bridal tour.

The Hoxie house was a prominent landmark for many years. It was built in 1848, of hewn logs, clap-boarded, a lean-to, and outside brick chimney. It stood on the Hoxie claim, fenced in by rails, near the present southwest corner of Twelfth and Walnut streets, but askew to the street, and, with the Grimmel house on "the hill," a small one near the corner of Vine and Third streets, where Cownie's Glove Factory is, were the only buildings visible in that territory. It subsequently was sold to Samuel Keene, and became the headquarters for social functions, Mrs. Keene being a great favorite with the young people, memories of which were recalled by Hoyt Sherman, "Dan" Finch, Judge Casady, "Ed" Clapp, and other old-timers for years after. In 1879, deserted, dilapidated, unsightly, and awry with the street, it was torn down.

The rails composing the stake-and-ridered fence around the claim were cut and placed by good "Uncle Jimmy" Jordan, the grand old-timer, father of the wife of Doctor Hanawalt.

When "Missouri Bill" headed this way with his bushwhackers, during the Civil War, to loot the Capital, the banks of the city removed their money and valuables to "Uncle Jimmy's" farm, near present Valley Junction, and cached them for safety. But "Bill" ran up against some "blue-coats" and didn't get here, much to the regret of Captain Harry Griffith, who was prepared to give him a salutation from several six-pounders.

In 1850, Fagen was the Whig candidate for County Supervisor for Des Moines Township, but as it was against the divine rights of the Democrats, he was defeated, though he beat the Democratic vote in the township. Soon after the election, he had an acute attack of California gold fever, which "carried him off," and the town and county lost a helpful, active, earnest supporter of all that was good.

July Twelfth, 1904.

Transcribed from:

**PIONEERS OF POLK COUNTY, IOWA AND REMINISCENCES OF EARLY
DAYS**

by L. F. Andrews

Volume I

Des Moines, Baker-Trisler Company, 1908