



FRANK M. MILLS

FRANK M. MILLS

ONE of the most active, energetic men who came here in the early days, and who impressed his individuality upon passing events, was Frank M. Mills. Small of stature, but a perfect bundle of restless energy and force, which permeated every political, social and business affair of the city and the state—in fact, several states—his sole idea seemed to be to make Des Moines the center of all territory west of the Mississippi, and in certain ways he succeeded very well. He was the head and moving spirit in what became the most extensive enterprise of its kind west of Chicago.

He came here in April, 1856, and opened a shoe store on Court Avenue, between Second and Third streets, in a small wooden building on the north side of the street, and diligently sought the welfare of the soles of the people of the little town; but it was not to his temperament. He was a practical printer. His brother, N. W. ("Web," as everybody called him), came in the Fall and started a small job printing office in the Gatling Building, down on Second Street below Market, near the newspaper and law offices. Frank—everybody calls him "Frank"—soon quit his sole-caring business, joined his brother, and they made a good team, for they were both hustlers and good mixers. It being the only strictly job printing office in town, the business kept pace with the rapid development of events. The first handbill printed—they didn't have presses nor type for poster printing—was for Woodward (Aleck.) and Hepburn (the redoubtable "Add"), dry goods merchants.

The little printing office, costing six hundred dollars, was a winner from the start, and so increased that in 1859 a three-story brick building was erected on Court Avenue, adjoining the old well-known Baker drug store at the southeast corner of Third, and Frank began to spread out. He added an old-fashioned Adams press for book printing, an "alligator" job press, which kept the

surgeons busy repairing fingers it chewed up, an Ericson hot air engine, which wheezed and rattled like a threshing machine, was whimsical and uncertain as a mule, would often, when work was pressing, give a despairing groan, like a lost soul, and stop. Then the "devil" had to go for one or two stout natives of Ireland to turn the wheels of the presses until the "caloric" got over the sulks. There were no electric motors, few steam engines, and wood for "caloric" fuel was cheaper than coal. The Adams press did good printing, but was slow, its speed being about five hundred impressions an hour. It was a very different outfit than its successors of to-day.

In 1858, Frank added another feature to his enterprise. He got into the good graces of the Legislature, and was elected State Binder. He managed to hold the place until 1867. In 1869, he was elected State Printer, and reelected in 1878 and 1880. So popular was he that it was a common saying that all he had to do was to ask for the office.

These appointments gave an immense impetus to his business. New machinery was purchased, and the establishment equipped to meet the demand. Blank book making, book printing, lithographing, map making, wood engraving, stereotyping, music printing, a book, stationery and music store were added, and a large corps of men were put on the road, who traversed every county in Iowa, and seven other states, and brought an immense amount of business to Des Moines, not only in their lines, but many side lines, for they were rustlers and popular. Of them I recall Cranston, Pelton, Norman, Blackmar, Dickenson, Ecker, Burns, C. T. Haskins, "Charley" Greene, and "Bob" Flynn, the last two notorious jokers and exaggerating yarn-spinners. They are all dead, I think. "Will" Lehman, still with us, who graduated from the music department, was cutting obituaries on headstones to be set in Woodland Cemetery when Frank was selling boots and shoes, but the cemetery didn't populate fast enough to secure him a good living, and he took charge of the music department.

In book making, Frank's genius inclined to law. The first book was *The Civil Code of Iowa*, written by Hon. John A. Kasson. This was followed by fifty-six volumes of Iowa Supreme Court

Reports, Kansas, Nebraska, and Arkansas Court Reports, and several extensive books on special subjects by eminent lawyers, *White's Geological Survey of Iowa*, in three costly volumes, the *Western Jurist*, a law magazine, seventeen years, and in 1866 the first City Directory, which contained four thousand five hundred and twelve names. He personally prepared an index Digest of ten volumes of the *American Turf Register*, which is the standard authority among horsemen to-day. He employed the best talent he could find to edit his publications, as in all the business departments. On his payroll at times, there was a Governor, an United States Senator, two Congressmen, a Foreign Minister, two United States Consuls, one United States Supreme Court Judge, three state Supreme Court Judges, and two First Assistant Postmaster-Generals.

The mechanical departments were occupied by one hundred and fifty to two hundred men and women, skilled in their several duties, among whom I recall Al. Swalm, Jut. Rhoads, Lafe Young, Philo Kenyon, George A. Miller, Lewis Bolton, the Bishard boys, Bernard Murphy, State Printer, the ubiquitous "Tac" Hussey, W. S. Welch, Ella McLoney, City Librarian, and Charles Sheldon, now the celebrated artist and illustrator for a leading London publication, "Ret" Clarkson, and Henry Sheppard, now publisher of the *Inland Printer*, the finest trade journal in the world. Every Saturday, Frank was confronted with a cash demand for about two thousand dollars to meet the payroll.

In 1861, when the call was made for the Tenth Iowa Infantry, during the Civil War, one Sunday "Hub" Hoxie, Wiley C. Burton, Judge John Mitchell, and Doctor Brownell brought Frank a commission as Adjutant, and earnestly solicited him, because of his energy and popularity, to raise the regiment, another having attempted to and failed, on condition that he would not be required to go with it to the field, owing to the demoralized condition of his business, his brother, "Web" having, as Major and Captain of the Capital Guards, gone into the Second Regiment, and taken with him nearly every eligible man of the establishment. Frank assented and at once went to the task. After riding over the country day and night for several weeks, he secured the men, swore them in, subsisted them, and went with them to the rendezvous at Iowa City.

In 1865, Frank concluded there was room for further enlargement of the business. The lot on Fourth Street, where the Western Union Telegraph office and Munger's Hotel are, was purchased, Father Bird's church torn down, and a three-story brick erected. His elder brother, J. W., joined him, and in December, 1866, the *Daily Register* was purchased, and consolidated with the other business. The daily was a small six-column folio sheet. It was soon enlarged—in fact, was enlarged four times under Frank's management. Frank Palmer continued as editor two years, and was succeeded by J. W. and a score of special writers. An early move of the management was to put new, young blood into the paper. Among the "type-stickers" were "Ret" Clarkson, Al. Swalm, and Lafe Young. They were assigned to the reportorial department, where they quickly impressed their individuality so distinctly it needed no confirming signature. "Ret's" forte was panegyrics and politics, in both of which he developed remarkable brilliancy. He soon became editor-in-chief, and one of the most important factors in Iowa politics, and, with John S. Runnells and Judge N. M. Hubbard, became what was known as the Republican Regency.

During Frank's management, he instituted (sic) a series of descriptive sketches of the counties of this state, especially in the Northwest, then uninhabited, written by Judge A. R. Fulton. The sketches were printed in the Register, accompanied with a map showing every unoccupied forty acres in each county, and set forth the inducement to home-seekers. The result was the immediate settlement of the whole region by an intelligent, sturdy people.

After four years' newspaper experience, the Register was sold to C. F. Clarkson and his two sons, Richard P. and James S. ("Ret.").

In 1872, the Iowa Exposition Company was organized, and a three-story brick building 132 x 132, erected on Walnut street west of Eighth, to be used as a permanent exposition of the goods and wares of merchants and manufacturers of the state, and also of curios and the State Horticultural Society. A large, fine organ was put in, and several exhibitions were given, but public interest waned; it was ahead of time; too far out, and for several months was closed. That was Frank's opportunity. He bought the building, remodeled it, removed from Fourth Street, and occupied it

until 1886, when he closed his business. The building was sold and transformed into what is now the Iliad Hotel.

A notable feature of the big establishment was its educational facilities. Embracing as it did a multiplicity of branches, book, job, music, lithographing, blank books and newspapers—at one time, four newspapers—it was a veritable printers' college. Good printers were scarce, and the best way to get them was to make them, hence there were always several apprentices, and they began with the rudiments of the business—Frank was exacting on rudiments—and worked their way through the several departments. Sometimes they demurred to so much time spent on rudiments, but he would tell them the more time spent on rudiments, the better craftsmen they would make. The result was there graduated from the college many who became foremen or superintendents in establishments all over the country, newspaper publishers, or went into business themselves. When the first typesetting machine was inaugurated in Chicago, Frank was requested to send a person competent to run it, and he sent Miss Ella McLoney, now City Librarian, who was an expert book compositor and good proofreader. She went and made good, as she always does.

Sometimes the apprentices chafed at their slow progress, and thought they were worth promotion and more pay than they were getting, and would come to me as Superintendent for a raise. I recall an instance when Lafe Young one day very gently informed Frank that a boy of his caliber, superior ability, and large experience—less than a year—was worth more than three dollars and a half a week—it was too small pay entirely. Frank solaced him by telling him that too much money was bad for a boy; that to succeed in business, he must learn the business, practice economy; that then was the time to acquire habits of economy. He graduated from the establishment as the city editor of the *Daily Register* and is now the publisher of the *Des Moines Daily Capital*, with a circulation of over forty-six thousand.

At one time Frank had a notion to revolutionize the horse industry of the state. He bought a big farm, not far out, on which he proposed to breed Percheron horses from the finest specimens that could be found in France. After he had got his project well

Vol. I—(13).

advanced, he invited an old, experienced live-stock man to go out there and make observations. After going over the premises and eating a good, square meal, he asked his visitor what he thought of it.

"It's all very nice, Frank," he replied, "but you have made a mistake. You'll find that farmers are a good deal more interested in cattle and hogs than one-ton horses. They haven't got to that yet."

Among his live-stock was a herd of Polled Angus cattle, of very fine blood. There was one heifer he was proud of, which produced more champion-herd individuals than any other in the state. In 1902, three of her progeny were sold for ten thousand dollars. But live-stock prices took a big slump, and he had so many irons in the fire, he sold the farm. But his venture, so far as he went, was a success.

In 1873, he was elected Alderman from the Second Ward, on purely local issues. He didn't want it, but had to yield to public demand.

During the forty years of his business activity here, he assisted very materially in building the town in many ways. His books show that he paid as wages to employes while in business over two million five hundred thousand dollars. He is now running a daily paper in Springfield, Illinois, and building an electric street railway in Salt Lake City, Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and an interurban electric road at Benton Harbor, Michigan, but still claims Des Moines as his home city, to which he will some time return and abide.

December Fourth, 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