



IRA COOK

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A VERY prominent man in Des Moines in the early days was Ira Cook. He came to Davenport in 1836, with his father, a small boy, worked fourteen and fifteen hours a day helping his father start a farm, and plant by hand what he declared was the first field of corn in Scott County.

He came to Des Moines in September, 1852, on foot, with ten men, his supplies and camp equipage drawn by two horses, *en route* to sub-divide, as United States Surveyor, a district of ten townships in what are now the counties of Carroll and Sac. Here he purchased his supplies and provisions for several months' stay in that uninhabited territory, the incidents of which he related one day, when in a reminiscent mood, which illustrates some of the trials and privations of pioneers.

"Down on Second Street, well toward the lower end," he said, "I found B. F. Allen, with a general stock of merchandise, of whom I purchased my supplies.

"Having more than my team could haul, I secured the services of Ed. Clapp to aid me in getting my 'traps,' including corn for my horses, up to my district. Ed. was not the millionaire that he now is, but he was the same whole-hearted, good fellow the citizens of Des Moines have known all these years.

"At the crossing of Walnut Creek, Ed. suggested that a farmer at that point was famous for the watermelons he raised, and of course we all wanted some. We could find no one about the premises, but Ed. said we must have the melons, and as he knew the way to the 'patch,' we soon had an increase to our wagon-load. Ed. said something about stopping on his way home and paying for the melons, but I think it is safe to say he returned by another road.

"Two miles beyond the town of Panora was a cabin of rough logs occupied by a squatter named Van Order, his wife and a half-grown son. There we left a barrel of pork and a barrel of flour to

lighten our load, to be returned for later, as there were no roads, and the country was rough. The third day out, we reached our destination, where we camped, unloaded Ed.'s wagon, and the next morning, bright and early, he started homeward.

"For the next four months, we worked early and late, in sunshine and storm. After New Year's, the cold became intense, hardened as we were, our provisions were low, and we decided to break camp. We were about two and a half days' travel from Van Order's cabin. An inventory showed we had just three days' rations. The first day, Friday, we made full one-third of the distance. The second day, following down the divide between the middle and south forks of 'Coon River, about nine o'clock, it began to snow, and soon the air was so full we could not see our course. We turned into the timber, and Saturday camped on Middle 'Coon. Sunday morning, two feet of snow covered woodland and prairie. I directed the cook to boil the remainder of our beans, and make all the flour into biscuits, which he did. I packed the whole in the camp chest, locked it, and put the key in my pocket.

"Monday, we dug our way out of the snow, crossed the river, and resumed our journey. The men were formed in two lines, and broke a path for the horses and wagon. Our progress was slow each day, as much time was consumed in going back and forth to the timber to camp. The morning of the seventh day, we decided to leave our wagon. The horses had nothing to eat but hazel-brush, and the men were getting weak. That night, we camped at the mouth of Willow Creek, Guthrie County, without tent or shelter. We made coffee and ate one biscuit each. During the night, the wind blew a gale, and it grew colder every moment, but we had a good fire to keep from freezing. At four o'clock in the morning, a pot of strong coffee, one small biscuit, five days old, and one small spoonful of boiled beans, the last of our food, was eaten, and very soon after, nine men in a string, to break the frozen snow crust and make a path for the horses (one man sick, and the cook, a cripple, riding), were on the march. About noon, from the ridge we were on, a settler's cabin several miles distant on the prairie was seen, to which we went, stopped over night, and the next day reached Van Order's. The barrel of pork and flour was quickly opened,

turned over to Mrs. Van Order, and for six days and nights she worked incessantly to fill up eleven hungry men. Van Order was a good hunter; deer, turkeys, prairie chickens, and other wild game hung from every ridge pole, to which we did ample justice, while our pork and flour was equally enjoyed by our hosts.

"So soon as our horses were recruited, the journey to civilization was resumed, which closed my Government surveying."

I asked Ed. a few days ago respecting the trip, and he said he made the return in two days, but as to the watermelons, his memory was foggy and treacherous.

In 1855, Ira came to Des Moines as the resident banker of the firm of Cook, Sargent & Cook, a banking firm of Davenport, which, like many others, wanted to get the forty per cent on short loans to be used in the various speculative schemes then going. Business having begun to move over to Walnut Street, a three-story brick was erected on the south side, next to the alley, later occupied for many years by Carter & Hussey, printers and book-sellers.

It was not much of a town; at least, that was the opinion of Judge A. B. Holcomb, of Connecticut, who, that year, was in this section with a little money to invest for himself and Eastern friends. After looking over Des Moines, he went on up the river, invested his money in several thousand acres of land, laid out and boomed the town of Boonesboro.

Writing to his Eastern friends the result of his observations, he said of Des Moines, under date of July Twenty-fifth, 1855:

"The new Capital, which is to be, is a low, dirty, stinking hole. I think the Capitol buildings will be some two or three miles out. The matter is before the Legislature again, since an injunction has stopped the Commissioners from locating."

Some allowance must be made for prejudice of the Judge, as his town, "the geographical center of the state," as he claimed, was one of many at that time making desperate effort to get the Capital removed from Des Moines.

In 1858, the bank having been practically wrecked by the panic of the previous year, closed its doors; but Ira had come to stay, and after winding up the bank business, in 1860, went into real estate and insurance.

In 1856, when the State House location fight came on, Ira enlisted with the West Siders, and subscribed five thousand dollars to the "war fund."

In 1861, his numerous friends elected him Mayor of the city, but he was not built that way—he did not like the office, and resigned.

In 1862, he received an appointment in the Postoffice Department at Washington, which he held two years.

In 1864, he was appointed Deputy United States Revenue Collector, a place he held for some time.

In 1866, he was elected Alderman for the Third Ward, was reelected in 1867, and by the Council elected President *pro tem*. During his incumbency, the city made rapid growth, and entered upon a new era, for in 1868, the first railroad train entered the city, and business at once received a new impetus.

In 1868, he was elected one of the Trustees of Des Moines Township, an office then requiring the exercise of good sense, judgment and financiering, for the city was encroaching so rapidly upon the domain of the township that it was difficult to know where it was at, or to devise ways and means to maintain its corporate existence, for every addition to the town cut the revenues of the township. This process went on, until a few years later the township officers were abolished and an Alderman-at-Large in the City Council was provided to represent the interests of the township.

In 1875, Ira became a stockholder in the Iowa Loan and Trust Company, which, since 1873, has been one of the most important financial institutions in the state. In 1880, he was elected one of the three Trustees of the company for the bond-holders, for two million, three hundred and fifty-four thousand, five hundred and eighty dollars of debentures of the company, a fiduciary trust of great responsibility.

In 1879, he decided to take a hand in the industrial industries of the town, and help the farmer by providing a market for his surplus corn. With G. M. Hippee and three others, the Des Moines Syrup Refining Company was organized, to make syrup, sugar, and glucose from corn.

Politically, Ira was a Republican. He was not a politician or place-seeker, yet he was frequently called to serve the people, who had faith in his fitness for places of public trust.

Socially, he was a good mixer, and in the very early days, a popular component of social functions. In those days, the only amusements were such as could be improvised, dancing parties, receptions, picnics, sleigh-rides, etc. Traveling troupes had not then struck the trail, though I recall an instance in 1857, related by one who was there, of a troupe which hove into town one day with a show called "The Forty Thieves." The only available place to exhibit the larcenous aggregation was in the dining-room of the Collins House, which was Martin (X) Tucker's old tavern remodeled, and stood where the old Burlington Passenger Depot now is, and what is now the "Whitechapel" District, then being the fashionable part of the town. S. A. Robertson, "Laughing" (Hy.) Hatch, and the eccentric Judge McFarland, a jolly trio in those days, decided to take in the show. Arriving at the place, the room was packed like sardines, there was no room for the performers, and not a person would vacate a foot of space. After a long wait, the Judge roared out, with his fog-horn voice: "Bring on your forty thieves. If you haven't got forty thieves, bring what you have got." Being impossible, the show was abandoned, and "The Forty Thieves" neglected to give "rain checks" or return the entrance money.

As the years passed, Ira identified himself prominently with all civic affairs beneficial to the community. He was the originator of the law for the adoption of children, one of the most beneficent measures on the statute books. In 1857, a girl about three years old was given to his wife, by the child's father, under a written agreement that she should be reared as the child of Mrs. Cook. Nearly a year after, having become strongly attached to her, Ira got uneasy, as the claim to the child rested solely on the will of the father, there being no law on the subject but that respecting apprenticeship. He laid his case before John A. Kasson, a member of the Legislature, then in session, and suggested the provision of proper legislation respecting the adoption of children. Mr. Kasson heartily acquiesced, immediately prepared a bill, which was at once

passed, and went into effect a few days after. So soon as signed by the Governor, Ira sent an instrument of adoption to the father, who returned it duly executed, to which Ira and his wife affixed their signatures. It was then recorded, and stands as the first recorded in the state under that law.

As in this instance, so in many other ways, Ira was a benefactor to social life and the community as a body.

He died in 1902.

November Twelfth, 1905.

**Transcribed from:**

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

**by L. F. Andrews**

**Volume I**

**Des Moines, Baker-Trisler Company, 1908**