



JAMES CALLANAN

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ONE of the most notable personages identified with the history of Des Moines for fifty years was James Callanan. Personally, he was known only by a few; yet he was an important factor in the body politic. His life was a dual one. In one, to the masses, he was a business man and financier, whose sole purpose was to acquire wealth; yet it was to secure means to gratify his other self, in the dispensation of practical philanthropy; to reach out for the want, privation, and misery which environ the poor and oppressed; to the abuses of dumb animals, imposed by the heartlessness of others. It was this side of his life that was little known, and yet it subordinated his other side. He did not carry his heart upon his sleeve. His right hand little knew what his left hand did. Ostentation had no place in a fiber of his being. He shrunk with extreme timidity from public notice. To the inquisitions of newspaper reporters he was, always in a kindly manner, a sealed book. He lived very largely within himself. He had no confidants.

In business transactions, he was methodical, exacting and specific. Every agreement must be fulfilled to the very letter, often with great sacrifice and difficulty to those with whom he was dealing. For that reason, he was very generally considered a sort of Shylock—too exacting of the “pound of flesh.” But it was not uncommon for him, when he found the case was worthy of his beneficence, to cancel the obligation, and destroy the contract, with the admonition to the recipient to say nothing about it. In that way, thousands of dollars were given to worthy persons struggling against the misfortunes of life.

Under the first Constitution of the state, the issue of banknotes, or “the creating of paper to circulate as money,” was prohibited. That left the door wide open for banks in other states, and Iowa became the dumping-place for their notes. In 1855-6, the rush for

land purchases developed a large number of banks, whose business was largely, if not wholly, that of buying land, or furnishing settlers with money to purchase land. Speculation was rampant, and much of the money in circulation was of doubtful character and genealogy.

In 1854, one Andrew J. Stevens was elected State Auditor. He served one year and resigned, when he went into the real estate business. Being a man of considerable publicity, he at once became prominent in land speculation, to facilitate which he needed a bank. He induced Callanan and S. R. Ingham, residents of New York, to join him, and the banking firm of A. J. Stevens & Company was started. Down in an obscure place in Tennessee, he bought the charter of the Agricultural Bank of Tennessee, loaded himself with its beautifully engraved notes, and immediately began to unload them on the community. It was "easy come, easy go." Having the prestige of being a local institution, he was enabled to loan it in large blocks, to land-buyers and speculators, taking their individual promissory notes therefor, with an agreement that he would redeem his banknote when presented at his bank. It was one of the wildest "wild-cat," kiting systems. In 1857, it went down in the financial crash, and thousands of his banknotes are still waiting their redemption.

Callanan and Ingham repudiated Stevens and his business methods, ousted him from the company, and turned their attention to real estate and legitimate banking, Ingham becoming the resident member of the firm. In 1863, the partnership was dissolved, and Callanan found it necessary to come to Des Moines and give personal supervision to his investments, made when on frequent visits here, in 1856-7.

During the hard times of 1856-7, and the War period, Eastern speculators and others, who had purchased land and town lots, found it often impossible to sell enough of their holdings to pay their taxes, which were allowed to lapse, became delinquent, and the land was sold for the taxes. Callanan invested extensively at these sales, with immense profit to himself, as there were very few redemptions of this property.

It was during the formative period of the town. Being a large property holder, he took great interest in public affairs. Of excellent business capacity, conservative and cautious, his counsel and aid was often sought—seldom, if ever, proffered—and so he was an important factor in the betterment of civic, business and social matters.

In 1865, he, with Frank Allen, Frank Palmer, and E. J. Ingersoll, organized the Hawkeye Insurance Company. He was a heavy stockholder, and one of the directors.

For several years it was simply a partnership. He had no faith in the "manifest destiny" sentiment which pertained among the people—that "all roads led to the Capital of the state; that all things must, perforce, come to it." He believed that communities, like individuals, to win success, must go after it. He disagreed with the policy which had spurned the proffer of the Chicago and Northwestern Railway to come to the city on very reasonable terms, and practically forced it to seek a route to Missouri River elsewhere.

For twenty years the people had anxiously waited the coming of railroads. The old Missouri and Mississippi Road had crept slowly westward to Marengo, where it stopped, and went into the Bankruptcy Court. The Des Moines Valley Road got as far as Pella and halted from sheer impecuniosity. With expectations blasted, hope crushed by repeated disappointments, Callanan, "Jeff" Polk, Ex-Governor Merrill, and a few others began an agitation to create public sentiment in favor of narrow-gauge roads radiating in various directions, and in February, 1866, a mass meeting of citizens was held in the Court House, at which the consensus of expressed opinion was that such roads would be not only helpful to the town, but beneficial to the territory traversed by them. In accordance therewith, the Iowa and Minnesota Railway Company was organized, to build a narrow-gauge road from Des Moines to the north and south line of the state. Work was begun on a portion of the line north of Polk City and in Warren County. With limited finances, the company struggled along for two years, when creditors began to harass it with court judgments to such extent it was obliged to suspend. The road was bisected, the north

half was transferred to the Des Moines and Minnesota Railroad Company, which practically meant Polk & Hubbell. The south half was transferred to the Des Moines, Indianola and Missouri Railway Company.

In 1870, the company controlling the north half adopted measures to secure tax aid from townships along the proposed line to Ames. Subsidies to the amount of one hundred and eighty thousand dollars were thus secured and tendered to the Chicago and Northwestern to build the road. For two years the Northwestern dallied with the proposition. "Manifest destiny" of the Capital, had no allurements for it. It had reached Missouri River. Polk & Hubbell got tired of the dallying, and the local company resolved to build the road. Callanan was induced to take hold of the project. A reorganization was made, and new officers were elected. During that year, the road was built to Ames. It was during the "Granger" or "Patrons of Husbandry" excitement, and to curry a little favor with the dominant fad, the first locomotive on the road was named "The Granger."

Soon after construction was begun, citizens of townships which had voted aid began to harass the company with court injunctions and the right-of-way was nearly plastered with them, thus involving the company in vexatious litigation and expenditures of money which seriously embarrassed its financial affairs.

The wrangles, turmoil and tribulation of the project satisfied Callanan with railroad building, and he withdrew from the business. That, I think, was the only public industrial enterprise he ever took any part in, and it was his intense interest in the improvement of the city that prompted him in that instance. In 1879, the road was transferred to the Chicago and Northwestern, and was changed to the standard gauge.

Callanan's excellent judgment, conservative temperament, and long experience was often sought by leading financial institutions of the city. He was for many years Treasurer of the Hawkeye Insurance Company, and at his decease President of the Capital City Bank, Vice-President of the Citizens National Bank, and a Director of the Valley National Bank.

In 1872, Callanan, with several other citizens, organized the Iowa Loan and Trust Company, with a capital of one hundred

thousand dollars, and erected the fine building it now occupies, on the spot where stood the original meeting-house of the First Methodist Church, and was once the starting point from which the Indians ran their races, to a point where the Water Works now are. The business of the company was to loan money on real estate security, and promote building enterprises. Callanan was a heavy stockholder and one of the Trustees. In that building, of the scores of finely equipped office suites, he selected one isolated room in the southwest corner, on the third floor, where, in accordance with his plain, simple taste, he handled business transactions amounting to millions, amid furniture and fixtures which will probably not add more than fifteen dollars to the value of his estate.

In 1878, it became quite apparent that something must be done to get the city out of the mud which at certain seasons of the year rendered the streets nearly impassable. Some of them had been graded; none paved. They were simply dirt roads. It was not uncommon to see wagons hub deep in mud or the wheels carrying fifty to a hundred pounds of sticky clay, or to see teams stuck fast. The humanitarian spirit of Callanan, his sympathy for dumb animals struggling up steep grades, often under the lash of brutal drivers, prompted him to suggest and advocate a system of paving and sewerage. S. A. Robertson, being then in the City Council, took the subject up, and succeeded, after most persistent efforts, in securing the adoption of the system which we have to-day.

In 1879, the subject of facilities for the higher education of girls than was afforded by the public schools, attracted public attention. For boys, colleges and seminaries were numerous, but for girls, they were few and far away. A company was formed of a few public-spirited citizens, who pledged liberal support to a school adapted to that end. That was Callanan's opportunity to work out one of his manifold public benefactions. Although he had no children to inspire him, he became enthusiastic on the subject, and assumed the burden of the whole project. He purchased the elegant residence of J. B. Stewart, on Pleasant Street, remodeled it, added more to it, fitted and equipped it in luxurious manner to accommodate two hundred and fifty pupils, at a cost of eighty thousand dollars. He had then laid the foundation for another benefaction.

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In his boyhood days, he attended a seminary in Cazenovia, New York. Among the teachers was Reverend C. R. Pomeroy and his wife, whom he regarded as his ideals for the management of his new enterprise. He brought them here, and installed them as the head of Callanan College, a name awarded to it by universal assent. The school flourished with success for several years, but such was the rapid advancement of educational facilities in the public schools and the establishment of other colleges, it finally closed. Subsequently, he leased one of the buildings, to be used as the Musical Department of Drake University. The other, in 1896, he gave the use of to an association of charitable women, for a Home for Aged Christian Women, and it was so occupied for several years, when another location was selected, and the scope of the institution was enlarged to embrace the aged and infirm of both sexes, which is now the Home for the Aged, located on University Avenue.

In 1881, Callanan, with James C. Savery, formed the American Emigrant Company. They purchased so-called swamp lands—land which had been thrown out by the Government Surveyors when surveying the public lands as of doubtful utility for farm purposes, and considered valueless. These lands were purchased all over the state and sold to emigrants and actual settlers at low prices, thus, while bringing wealth to the company, it added largely to the population and industrial wealth of the state, for the lands proved to be valuable for farm purposes. Polk County's second Court House was partly built and her Poor Farm was purchased with proceeds from the sale of swamp lands, which now command a high price as well-cultivated farms.

In 1900, the Methodist people of the state began a movement for the establishment of a hospital. The Methodist Hospital Association was formed, and Callanan was appealed to for aid in the enterprise. He heartily approved the movement and offered the two college buildings and ground on Pleasant Street, which had cost him eighty thousand dollars, at a valuation of sixty thousand dollars, for thirty thousand dollars. The proffer was accepted, and the property was deeded to the Association. The remodeling of the building was at once commenced. Callanan had great confidence in the lay members of the Hospital Association, as he had

also deep interest in the institution, and two years ago gave the Association thirty thousand dollars cash, conditioned that he be paid semi-annually six hundred dollars during his lifetime. The Annuities were paid promptly—three of them—when he passed away. He was solicited to permit the hospital to bear his name, but he refused.

One of the directors of the Association, who was an intimate friend of his, and who probably knew the humanitarian side of his life as well as any other person, said to me:

“I held him in higher regard than any layman I ever knew, as being, in a high and good sense, the greatest and best man Iowa has produced. While there have been in public life men who have succeeded in public careers, men of greater minds, none had the great brain and kindly heart which he possessed, and so I regarded him as the peer of them all.”

The hospital is now practically completed, a magnificent fire-proof structure, equipped with the best and most approved appliances, and has a capacity to care for three thousand persons annually, regardless of nationality, religion or color—a notable public improvement, and a credit to the public-spirited members of the Association who planned and secured it.

While Callanan was public-spirited and always interested in civic affairs, it is to the humanitarian side of his life the city is most indebted. I have stated that he invested extensively in tax titles by purchasing land sold for delinquent taxes. In numerous instances, where he found on examination—it was never in his heart to do wrong to any person—that the delinquency was caused by some misfortune, that the owner of the property was honest, temperate and industrious, possibly a widow struggling against poverty with a family of small children, to give them his deed to the property and throw in the taxes, with the request to say nothing about it.

I recall an instance of a promising young man, whose physical system had become seriously impaired. He applied to Callanan for assistance to procure medical aid. He was loaned money, for which he gave his promissory note. He was sent to a hospital in Chicago, his expenses paid, and on his return his note was surrendered to him.

The poor people, regardless of race or color, and dumb animals, and the amelioration of their condition, were constant objects of his thought and studied effort. When the storms of Winter came, "What will become of them?" worried him, and in many untold ways he brought relief to poverty-stricken houses, and rescue to dumb animals. Said L. M. Mann to me a few days ago: "I went one morning to his office, and he seemed greatly depressed, and not in good spirits. He said to me: 'I was greatly troubled all last night; could not sleep, for all through the day yesterday, through the Humane Society, there was poured into my ears tales of suffering and want of poor people, dumb animals poorly fed, unshod horses falling when forced to draw heavy loads over the slippery streets, or being cruelly beaten by their drivers.' "

So it was, naturally, that when the Des Moines Humane Society was organized, he was made its President, and so continued to his death. It was the special object of his support and care. No limit was put upon its benefactions, except that of reason and good judgment. Whatever was required or necessary must be provided, and the means thereto were furnished while he lived, and in his last will and testament he gave the Society twenty thousand dollars, conditioned that Mrs. Elizabeth D. Jones be retained as Secretary during her life, and that she be paid an annual salary of eight hundred dollars out of the bequest. A further sum of fifty thousand dollars was given for general charitable purposes. He was prouder of being President of the Humane Society than of the places held in banks or financial institutions, or of all his stocks and bonds, for through it he could help the helpless.

He was especially fond of children. The number of friendless boys and girls who have received his generous help will never be known.

He was not a churchman, but to churches of all denominations he was a liberal giver.

He was a friend of the colored race, and embraced every opportunity to improve its condition, through churches and schools. From 1866 to 1870, H. S. De Forrest, D. D., was pastor of Plymouth Congregational Church, in Des Moines. During his pastorate, he and Callanan became firm friends. After the close of his pastorate, De Forrest went to Talladega, Alabama, where, in 1879, he

was elected President of a flourishing industrial school for the negro race. Callanan and Ex-Governor Samuel Merrill purchased a fine, large mansion and presented it to the College for a home for De Forrest, who occupied it until 1896, when he was accidentally killed. Callanan's great interest in the college prompted his munificent bequest of one hundred thousand dollars in his will.

To Des Moines Benedict Home for Unfortunate Girls he gave ten thousand dollars; to the Salvation Army, twenty thousand dollars; to Des Moines College, five thousand dollars; to the Iowa Humane Society, fifty thousand dollars.

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**by L. F. Andrews**

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