

JOHN D. MCGLOTHLIN

AMONG the very early settlers prominently associated with the public affairs of Polk County and The Fort during their formative governmental period, was John D. McGlothlin, a typical pioneer, whose experiences, like others of his class in those days, contrasted with their environments twenty years later, seem altogether mythical.

He came, with his family, in June, 1846, from Indiana, in the proverbial "prairie schooner," and purchased a claim held by G. B. Clark, on Keokuk Prairie, originally a part of Des Moines Township, but now in Allen Township. He paid four hundred dollars for the claim. It was an attractive spot, the favorite camping-ground and headquarters of the famous Indian chief, whose name it bears, for many years, and up to the time of his removal from the territory, in 1845, to Kansas, where he died in 1848. It is pertinent here to say the name of the old chief has been anglicized to modern idioms. When he was before the Government Commission to identify the half-breeds in the allotment to them of the Half-Breed Tract, he wrote his name on the record many times, and always "Ke-O-Kuk." The terminal, "Kuk," was evidently a tribal or family name, as the names of several chiefs on the record have the same terminal.

McGlothlin's claim was on the west side of Des Moines River, and extended westward to North River, sloping gradually back from the two rivers.

Clark was a bachelor, and lived with a family in a cabin made of poles, a puncheon floor of hewed slabs in one corner for the bed to stand on, the remainder being the natural soil; no door, no chimney, the smoke escaping between the logs. Instead of a door, the opening made for a chimney was used. That was the greeting presented to McGlothlin for a home. He at once built a chimney of stones and clay from the rivers, and made other changes, so that

it might be more comfortable. During the Summer, the family suffered severely from fever and ague, which was epidemic all over the Des Moines Valley. It was of the vigorous, shaking variety—often fatal.

In October, he built a new log cabin. It had one room. As there was no lumber in the country, a part of the room was floored with slabs split from logs. There was no window nor door, the chimney opening being used until the chimney and fireplace was built, when a door was made in one end.

He brought with him corn and flour enough to supply the family for four months, but in October they became exhausted. The nearest mill was at Oskaloosa, sixty miles away. Hitching four horses to the "prairie schooner," which he filled with "grists" for himself and neighbors in the vicinity, he went to Oskaloosa, and arriving there found the mill surrounded by farmers, waiting, with "grists" enough to keep the mill busy for several days. He went on to Fairfield, where he found no better prospect, and went on to Bonaparte, where he had better luck. He then started homeward. The roads were in a horrible condition. Several times the team was mired, the grain unloaded, and the wagon hauled out of the mud. On the way, he picked up a lot of sheep and hogs, and arrived at his cabin twenty-one days after leaving it, to the great delight of his family, who had become worried over his long absence, and, beside much suffering from sickness, were deprived of proper sustenance for want of flour.

In the sketch of William A. Meacham, mention is made of the hurried escape from the Vigilance Committee in Camp Township of the Reeves Gang of horse thieves and general marauders. On their way to Missouri, they camped one night near McGlothlin's. During the night, one of their wagons was burned by fire from their camp. The generous-hearted settlers in the neighborhood, not knowing the character of the outfit, made up a purse to compensate the loss, and they hurried on out of the state.

In 1848, the settlers began to consider ways and means for some form of civil government, there being none in existence. Accordingly, in August, 1848, was organized the Old Settlers' Claim Club. McGlothlin was elected first Vice-President of the Club.

In the same year and the same month, he was elected one of three County Commissioners, reelected in 1849 and 1850, serving until August, 1851, when the office was abolished and the duties thereof conferred upon a County Judge. The Commissioners had full control of all county affairs, could levy taxes, organize townships, locate public roads, build bridges and public buildings, and from their decisions there was no appeal. County affairs were then in an embryo condition. Much depended on the intelligence and good judgment of the Commissioners. McGlothlin was an active, progressive member of the Board, and possessed excellent business qualifications. Of genial temperament, he at once came into close relation with all the people. He spent much time at The Fort, and took great interest in its affairs, so much so that he was considered a resident.

The pages of the record of the doings of the Board give abundant evidence of their public spirit. It was a period of progress. The county and town were rapidly growing, and civic affairs must keep pace therewith.

The first important business was the building of a Court House. An agreement was made with John Saylor that he should, "during the year 1848, erect and set up and inclose, and during the year 1849, shall completely finish, in a good, substantial, workmanlike manner, according to the best of his art and skill, a Court House, for the sum of two thousand and fifty dollars." In January, 1850, Saylor threw up his job. He was allowed two hundred and twenty-five dollars for what he had done, and the Commissioners continued the work until completed. Its total cost was two thousand and fifteen dollars. It was where the Union Depot now is. It was sold, with the jail, in 1863, to the Trustees of the Central Church of Christ, for eight hundred dollars. In 1865, it was tom down, to give place to a larger structure, which was occupied until 1875, when the encroachment of railroads along Vine Street necessitated a new location, and the old frame building was used as the Wabash Depot for several years.

Having provided for a Court House, the Commissioners were, as are the Supervisors of to-day, confronted with the necessity of a jail. Accordingly, in February, 1849, a contract was made with

James Guerant and George Shell to build a log jail for seven hundred and fifty dollars, on the lot adjoining the Court House. It was to be constructed of "hewn timbers one foot square, with double walls, with a space between the walls of six inches, to be filled with strong and substantial stone, closely pounded so as to fill the space, the cracks between the timbers to be filled with mortar." It was to be two stories high. It was to this jail the noted and bibulous Judge McFarland one day threatened to send "Dan" Finch, the well-known old-time lawyer. The Judge had made a ruling in a case "Dan" was trying, to which "Dan" objected, on the ground that the court had made a mistake. "Daniel," retorted the Judge, pointing with his index finger, "do you see that jail over there? Well, sit down, or I'll send you there in five minutes." "Dan" subsided.

In November, 1849, Guerant, one of the jail contractors, threw up his job. He was allowed three hundred dollars for work and material furnished, and the Commissioners completed the jail at a total cost of one thousand, one hundred and seventy-five dollars and five cents.

In 1850, it became quite apparent that the Capital would be removed from Iowa City. With his accustomed public spirit and business qualifications, and with an eye to the future, McGlothlin suggested, and it was ordered that, "in case the Capital of Iowa shall be removed to Fort Des Moines within four months from the date hereof [November Twenty-second, 1850], an appropriation of eight thousand dollars be and is hereby made for the purpose of erecting a Court House of sufficient capacity that the same may be used by the State of Iowa as a State House so long as the state shall desire to occupy the same."

During the year, the Commissioners discovered an unusual increase in court expenses. Therefore, in October, they ordered that, "no fees shall be allowed to any person serving as witness before the Grand Jury," a measure as commendable at the present time as then. The service was put upon the ground of a duty owed to the public.

In April, 1849, the Board granted a license, for twenty-five dollars, to Edward and Edwin Hall, twin brothers, to build a dam

across Des Moines River at the foot of Center Street, and to maintain the same for fifty years. The license expired in 1899, but the dam is there yet, an important factor in public utilities.

The first Warranty Deed executed in the county was signed August 14, 1848, by Mr. McGlothlin, as County Commissioner. It was for Lot Eight, Block Thirty, in the Original Town, the lot next to the alley on the southwest corner of Vine and Second, where Green's foundry is. It was sold, at the sale of town lots, in July, 1846, for two hundred and seventeen dollars and a half, to William McIlvain, of Wapello County. He plunked down the money, and, being a stranger, and the only purchaser present with "spot cash," he was suspected of being a land-grabber and speculator, and was given very emphatically to understand that the traveling in rural districts was good. He bought no more lots, and submissively waited two years for his deed.

The first Warranty Deed in the county from an individual was by Doctor P. B. Fagen, and dated the same day as the foregoing. The first Board of Commissioners, in their haste to expedite public affairs, and largely through the influence of A. D. Jones, general superintendent of civic affairs at The Fort, who surveyed and platted the town, took in land that belonged to Fagen and sold it at the town lot sale in 1846. In order to give a good title to the purchasers, McGlothlin and his Board purchased of Fagen his interest, paying him three hundred and five dollars. It was that portion now occupied by the railroad stations and big warehouses below Court Avenue.

While, as Commissioner, McGlothlin was pushing forward public improvements, he improved his farm, until the eight hundred acres, with its large and commodious buildings, orchards, splendid herds of horses, cattle, hogs, and sheep, became a rural paradise. Watermelons were one of his fads. Old-timers at The Fort used to make frequent visits there in the season to feast on them. Judge Casady says the first melon he ate in Polk County was there, and of the best quality and size he ever saw. When he was ready to leave, he was "held up" until, his wagon was packed with melons.

Religiously, McGlothlin was a Baptist, and an active supporter of churches and schools. He was emphatically a home-builder, and his home exemplified his ideas of what such should be.

Politically, he was a Democrat, of the Jeffersonian variety, but not a politician nor an office-seeker. During the Greenback craze, he identified himself with that element, and was an active, influential member of the Patrons of Husbandry.

In many ways, he was an important factor in the foundation, growth and prosperity of the county and town. He died in 1878.

May Twenty-first, 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