



COLONEL J. N. DEWEY

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THIRTY years ago, a very dignified and prominent individual in Des Moines was Colonel J. N. Dewey. How he acquired the military title, I never learned. He was not a Kentuckian, nor was he ever in the military service, except by implication.

By profession, he was a civil engineer, and in the early 'Fifties, did railroad engineering in Massachusetts and New York. When Hugh Riddle was at the head of the New York and Erie Road, the Colonel surveyed, laid out, and assisted largely in building that road, and when Riddle came to Chicago and became President and head of the Chicago and Rock Island Road, so great was his confidence in the Colonel, he was a frequent and influential adviser with the leading men of that road, and represented them in the Directory Board of the Burlington, Cedar Rapids and Northern Division.

In 1855, he came to Des Moines, then only a small village, and began business in surveying, engineering, and real estate. An adept in his profession, and possessing excellent business qualifications, his services were valuable in promoting the growth and business interests of the town, and in 1856 he was elected Engineer by the Town Council of Fort Des Moines, and reelected in 1857 City Engineer by the first Council of the City of Des Moines, and was prominently identified with the laying out of streets and alleys and fixing the holdings of lot owners. His services in the City Council, when business qualifications were much needed, were of great value to the city.

In 1860, he was elected City Treasurer, and held that office one term.

In 1860, the Legislature convened in special session to devise measures for a War and Defense Fund, and to enable the state to comply with the demands of the United States for soldiers in "suppressing the Rebellion," as the statute reads. (All through the war period, the Legislature used the terms "rebellion" and "rebel.")

An appropriation of several hundred thousand dollars was made to pay the expenses therefor. The Colonel and S. R. Ingham were elected Commissioners by the Legislature to disburse that fund. It was an onerous and difficult task. It embraced the auditing of "all accounts and disbursements having reference to the military organization, arming and subsistence of the same, and all expenditures regarding the purchase of arms, uniforms, and accoutrements, army supplies and subsistence for any of the companies of the state called into the service of the General Government."

No claim could be paid unless proved and allowed by the Commissioners. For this service, they were allowed three dollars per day and actual mileage. The war period was a field day for "grafters" and speculators in army supplies, and there were many always alert to "make money" by it, but, while not penurious nor captious, the Colonel and Ingham would pay no "padded" or constructive claims against the state or United States. They could not be swerved one iota from exact justice and right. There must be a tangible equivalent for every dollar expended. A single glance at the frigid facial expression of those two men would send a shiver down the spinal column of the most persuasive and versatile jobber in Government contracts, and visions of "graft" vanished into nothingness.

The Legislature also provided in the original Act for protection against "wild-cat" money, by requiring paymasters and all other disbursing officers to make their payments in coin of the United States, or be removed from office and barred from holding any office in the state for five years.

The burden of the labor of the Commission was assumed by the Colonel, who devoted his entire time thereto. There was very little building in the town during the period. All business enterprises were greatly depressed.

In 1862, the Colonel was appointed by President Lincoln as Assessor of Internal Revenue for the Third District, he being the first one appointed. Soon after, he was appointed by Secretary of War Stanton as Commissary of Subsistence, but the duties of his office as Auditor of the Iowa War Fund were so exacting he was obliged to resign both appointments.

In 1864, the Des Moines Gas Company was organized. During the first year, its work was largely experimental, in an effort to make gas from superheated steam. Brilliant gas could be and was made, but no substance could be found of which to make the crucibles that would withstand the intense heat necessary for "cooking" or heating the steam. The project was abandoned, the usual process adopted, and gas was first supplied for private use, Tuesday evening, July Eleventh, 1865.

In 1866, the Colonel was selected, by Act of the Legislature, a special agent of the state to settle and adjust with the United States all claims of the state for expenses incurred during the war in raising and equipping troops, expenses in protecting her frontier from guerrilla raids, and also expenses incurred in protecting her frontier after the Spirit Lake Massacre by Inkapadutah and his band, in 1857; also to settle all claims of the state of the five per cent of the sale of public lands. His compensation was fixed at five dollars per day, and so thoroughly complete and exact was kept the account for raising and equipping Iowa regiments under the Act of 1860, with its multiplicity and complications, every claim which had passed through his hands was allowed and paid.

All these papers, records, and statements relating to his war commission, carefully preserved, are stored in the barn at his late residence.

In 1868, he was elected Alderman for the Third Ward, and reelected in 1869. The ward then comprised all the territory between Locust and Center streets west of Des Moines river.

In 1870, the Legislature passed an Act providing for the erection of the new Capitol. An appropriation of one hundred and fifty thousand dollars was made to begin the work, and a Board of Commissioners was elected to carry out the provisions of the Act. The Colonel was one of the Commissioners, each of whom had to give a bond to the state in the sum of fifty thousand dollars, that he would honestly perform his duties. Work was commenced at once, and on a cold, rainy day, November Twenty-third, 1871, the cornerstone was laid with elaborate and appropriate ceremonies, and the foundation finished for the erection of the superstructure.

In 1875, the Capital City Gas Light Company was organized, and a charter obtained from the City Council. The Colonel was

elected President of the company, and on the evening of September Twenty-third, 1876, the city was first lighted by that company, and has continued its service to the present day.

In 1878, the city had grown so as to encroach largely on the territory of Des Moines and Lee townships, little being left of them. The Legislature was appealed to for relief, and an Act was passed providing that where a city of the first class embraced parts of two or more townships, an Alderman-at-Large should be elected to represent such township. Under this Act, the Colonel was elected Alderman-at-Large to represent Des Moines Township.

While associated with Ingham in various official undertakings, the Colonel was so well pleased with him, a business partnership was formed, and when the old Savery House (Kirkwood) was sold under a mortgage, it was purchased by Ingham and the Colonel, stripped of all its contents, the rotunda and business offices removed from the second floor to the ground floor, and the whole interior remodeled. The name was changed to "Kirkwood," in honor of the old War Governor. The Colonel retained his interest in it until 1889, when he sold it back to Ingham.

In 1880, when the City Water Works passed from Polk & Hubbell to a joint stock company, the Colonel was made President of the company.

The Colonel was, to the masses, serene, taciturn, and frigid. Few knew him intimately, but those who did, socially and in business, found him gracious and companionable. He had a warm side to those who got next it. He was a fast friend. He was kind and charitable to the poor, to whom he made liberal contributions. He also gave generously to churches and other worthy objects, and always with the request that the source should be unknown to the beneficiaries. He disliked newspaper publicity of his doings, and the reporter who attempted to "pump" him very quickly discovered his aversion to it.

He took great interest in civic affairs, and his oft-repeated election to public office evidences the public faith in his honesty and integrity.

Politically, the Colonel was a Republican. He took an active advisory part in politics, but never sought public office, yet for

nearly twenty years he was a public servant, and during the war period did the state notable, conscientious service. He was intensely patriotic, and strongly desired to enlist in the army, but his age precluded it. When the news came of the assassination of President Lincoln, the city was intensely excited. Hurried preparations were made for public expression of its sadness and sorrow. The Mayor requested that all public offices, office buildings, and private residences be appropriately draped. A mass meeting was held in the Court House Square, on Sunday, attended by an immense crowd of people. Eloquent addresses were made by Frank W. Palmer, John A. Kasson, J. A. Williamson, and others, the meeting closing with a benediction by the venerable pioneer and beloved first rector of the Episcopal Church, the Reverend Doctor Peet. The pastors of all the churches, at their morning service, except one, gave heartfelt expression of sympathy for the Nation's great loss. Some devoted the entire service to the event. At the Episcopal Church, the rector, John E. Ryan, conducted the regular service. At the close of his sermon, he asked the attention of the audience for a moment, and said that, as a Christian minister and patriot, he would not do his duty if he omitted to mention the distressing event of Saturday, but he had many times declared his pulpit should never be profaned to the preaching of politics. He would not, on the one hand, carp at the measures of the administration, nor on the other eulogize the virtues of the late Executive. There was instant expression of indignation at the mockery of the incident, and the audience dispersed in discomfiture. The next day, when vestrymen the Colonel, Hoyt Sherman, "Dan" Finch, and others met to make preparations to drape the church, which was a small frame standing on Seventh Street between Walnut and Locust, where the Younker store now is, they were informed the rector had refused to permit the church to be opened for such purpose. The doors were forced, and the interior elaborately draped. The rector soon after left the city.

During the later years of his life, the Colonel retired from active business, having become quite wealthy. He died in September, 1880."

September Third, 1905.

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