



LEVI J. WELLS

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ALTHOUGH not a pioneer, according to a strict construction of the code, Levi J. Wells came early enough to be entitled an "Old Settler." He hove into Des Moines in 1856, with intent and purpose to do something, but there was little or nothing doing. The town was small, times were hard, and money was scarce, and what there was of it was of the "wild-cat" variety, and of doubtful paternity.

The first job he struck was hauling brick for "Jim" Savery, who was building what is now the Kirkwood House. He was a good carpenter and master workman. By industry and economy, he had accumulated about two thousand dollars, a part of which he invested in some of Alexander Scott's acres on the East Side, south of the Capitol. The remainder he planted in the historic A. J. Stevens' balloon bank, which went up in the air soon after, and with it all of Levi's hard-earned dollars. A little thing like that did not feaze him.

In 1860, Alexander Williams and John J., his son, well known to citizens of the present generation, purchased the old dilapidated flour mill and flood-beaten dam at First and Center streets, and with the practical help of Levi, rebuilt the mill and dam. It was exclusively a "toll" mill, the amount of toll being regulated by the compunctiousness (sic) of the miller, but I never heard of John being suspected of exorbitant toll. The old mill was a big benefaction to farmers and the community at large for more than thirty years, but it finally succumbed to the progress of events.

After the completion of the mill, Levi resumed business as builder and contractor during the war period, with the consequent disturbance to all business enterprises during those four years of tumult and strife.

In 1864, it became evident that Polk County was short its quota of enlisted men, and that a forced draft was the only means of

supplying the deficiency. When, later, it became a certainty, there was a sudden hegira of able-bodied men to a more congenial and healthful climate. The whole community was greatly stirred up. Heroic efforts were made by the city wards and townships to secure their quota of men called for, but some of the townships failed, and the unlucky man with money who got spotted paid a good price for a substitute. In the city, all the wards but the First furnished their quota, and when the dragnet was thown (sic) out, Levi was caught. He made no effort to "dodge," but promptly presented himself at headquarters for a physical and mental examination. The doctors thought he was a good catch, but on going over his anatomy, found the thumb and two fingers missing on his right hand, which had been fingering with a buzz saw. Though, much as Uncle Sam needed men, he would not take emasculated specimens, and Levi was dropped with thanks.

Immediately after the close of the war, business of all kinds began to thrive. There was a great demand for food products. The whole country had been denuded of them, and Levi decided to speculate a little on the shortage. He bought one hundred barrels of pickled pork, threw it on the wrong side of the market, pocketed a dead loss of eight hundred dollars, and decided to make no further effort to help Iowa farmers by building up the pork industry. That cured pork cured his speculative symptoms for all time.

In 1866, he leased the old "Grout House," so called, built of small cobblestones, coarse gravel, and cement, which stood for many years at the northeast corner of East Sixth and Walnut, and was a popular home for Legislators and state officers, ex-Governor Gue making it his abiding place for some time. But Levi was not built for a Boniface, the life was too sedentary, and after a year's experience, though profitable, he retired and began building houses in a small way on some of his East Side holdings.

In 1868, he purchased of George Sneer his livery stable, on the west half of the present Clapp Block, next to the alley on Walnut Street, and at once inaugurated a new era in that business in the city. He introduced hacks and 'busses, and kept pace with the rapid growth of the city. He was a lover of good horses, and usually drove some fine steppers, not record-breakers, but just fast

enough to worry and aggravate the other fellows when out for an airing. The increase of business necessitated the building of four-floor brick stables on Fourth street, soon to be followed with a large, four-story brick at Eighth and Mulberry. Though he is not with us, his familiar vehicular monogram, "W.," has been perpetuated by his son Jesse.

Prior to 1878, the streets of the city were simply dirt roads. There was no pavement, and at certain seasons the wet, heavy, sticky clay rendered the passage of light vehicles difficult, and of heavy loads nearly impossible. It was ruinous to fine carriages, and wearing on horseflesh. To get heavy-loaded wagons stalled on Walnut Street out of the mud with jacks and hoists was a frequent occurrence. Sometimes, Levi's hacks got stuck. I remember an instance in the late Fall, after a long rainfall. It was a dank, cloudy evening, and his hacks were carrying people to receptions. At the corner of Fourth Street, on turning west into Chestnut, the wheels went down over the hubs, the horses floundered and fell. All that could be done was to extricate the passengers, get the horses clear, and abandon the vehicles. There was also some doings over at the State House, and in struggling up the Locust Street grade, the horses got as far as Ninth Street, and quit from sheer exhaustion. They were also removed, and the hacks left. During the night, the mercury suddenly dropped, and the hacks were frozen fast in the earth, to be chopped out or left to the radiant rays of the Summer sun.

The City Council was again and again petitioned to devise some means for relief. They were lambasted, cajoled, and condemned by the people. One day, during a long period of mud and slush, and the streets simply sluggish rivers of ooze, Levi hove into Walnut Street with a large flat-bottom boat, drawn by four large, fine horses, which was hauled up and down the street, placarded: "For Passage, Apply to the City Council." There was a man in the bow to look out for breakers and snags, carrying a long, graduated pole, which he jabbed into the depths, and with stentorian voice declared his findings: "Three fathoms," "Four fathoms," "Two fathoms." The whole outfit, horses, vessel and men, were covered with mud. It was a masterly production of satire, and brought results, for

immediately began a system of paving and sewerage, culminating in what we have to-day.

When the German Savings Bank was organized, Levi became a stockholder and one of the Board of Directors. Subsequently, he was elected President.

During the Semi-Centennial Celebration of the city, in 1896, Levi went over on the East Side, at the grounds of the old abandoned brickyard, where he found the skeleton of the identical cart in which he hauled brick for the old Savery House. He toggled it up for service, found an ancient gray horse, embellished with spavins and string-halt (a high stepper), whose ribs and bones could be counted half a mile off; a dilapidated harness, generously repaired with rope, and padded with straw, to ease the equine protuberances, and, with these, he joined the procession, accompanied by his wife and children, all clad in garbs of years long gone by. The vigor with which he pushed on the tow lines, and used the gad to expedite his steed, expected every moment to tumble over and block the procession, was a notable one of the many good features of that event.

Socially, Levi was genial, affable, and kind-hearted. He was a good story-teller, and often united with "Laughing" Hatch in spinning yarns. When the two got together on a street corner, there was fun galore—the more so if Ed. Clapp "jined in." Hatch's laugh could be heard half a mile, and it would tickle a whole square. It was one of the best cures for the "blues" in the whole pharmacopoeia. Old-timers used to greatly enjoy their exuberant collisions. The trio were also horse fanciers, and drove some fine animals.

Politically, Levi was a Republican, and, as a large property-holder and good citizen, took an active part in politics, not as a place-seeker, but as a "sentinel on the watch tower," whereby he exerted a good influence for the betterment of civic affairs. He was, however, in 1891, inveigled to run for Alderman of his ward. Michael Drady had been holding the place year after year, and the Third Warders wanted a change. I. E. Tone, the spice and coffee dealer, was Levi's opponent. At the March election, Levi won out, but through some misinterpretation of a new-fangled statute, the

entire city election was set aside and another held in April, but Levi had no taste for the bear-garden business, refused to run again, and Tone was elected.

Levi was public-spirited, and enlisted vigorously and heartily in all public events and projects for social improvement of the community. He died February Fifteenth, 1902.

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