

## CALVIN THORNTON

The early events of Polk County were very frequently punctured with the doings of Calvin Thornton. Born January Seventh, 1830, in Vermillion County, Illinois, of Scotch-Irish ancestry on his father's side, and English on that of his mother, he passed his boyhood days on the farm of his father, and helped his mother with her weaving by doing the spooling and quilling. His education was a tussle between his animal propensity for sport and book learning. I asked him about it, and he replied, rather facetiously:

"The most schooling I got was learning to play what was called 'Townball,' 'Bullpen,' and other games. To be sure, we had a log schoolhouse, with puncheon floor, and slabs for seats. In the Summer, the teacher would lie down on one of the slabs, go to sleep, and either fall off accidentally, or with the assistance of some passing pupil, but in the Winter, there were boys as large as the teacher, and you bet they kept him awake."

Calvin, however, secured an education sufficient to fit him for successful business, and when seventeen years old, he concluded he could do better than living on a farm—that he would learn a trade. His father attempted to dissuade him, telling him that it was his intention to give each of his children a farm or set them up in business; that if he left his home, he would get no farm, and no start in business from him.

Despite the wishes of his father, he apprenticed himself for thirty months to learn the trade of cabinet-maker. At the end of the first year of his apprenticeship, in 1848, he got a ticket-of-leave to visit his father, who had removed to Polk County. His visit completed, he returned and served the remainder of his apprenticeship. In September, 1850, he returned to Fort Des Moines, in a prairie schooner, stopping at "Uncle Tommy" Mitchell's tavern to take a rest and be ready to wrestle with Skunk River bottoms. He forded Des Moines River between Grand Avenue and Walnut Street, and

landed on the West Side with a good suit of clothes and but a few dollars in his pocket. He at once began work at his trade, but soon after rented the small frame, shop and tools of John Reichnecker, which was on the west side of Fourth Street, where the Munger Hotel now is, and, with resolute spirit, took up the burden of life, often being reminded of the "no farm" decree of his father, which was faithfully kept, and which he later in life often said was a real benefit, for it forced him to rely upon his own resources.

One of his earliest customers was Elder J. A. Nash, whose first wife died of Consumption, and he had Calvin make the coffin—there were no burial caskets in those days. The Elder visited the shop several times, desirous that the coffin should be good and strong, as her father might decide to send the body East, and he wanted it safe for the journey. The incident ripened into a firm and lasting friendship between the two.

One day, when standing in the door of his shop, he saw some rabbits frisking about in the grubs where Brinsmaid's store is, and, taking his gun from the rack, shot one of them.

At another time, he, Hoyt Sherman and some other fellows went up on the bluff in the timber and dense underbrush where the Victoria Hotel is now, to hunt for wild plums. They got lost, and wandered about some time before they got their bearings and found their way out.

In January, 1851, having reached his majority, he decided to invest in farm land. Judge Casady entered forty acres for him with a military land warrant, which was paid for mostly in furniture. Every dollar he could spare from his business he invested in additions to his forty acres, until he had acquired two hundred and forty acres.

In April, 1851, he was elected Clerk of Delaware Township, and soon after Township Assessor, Director of the School District, and President of the School Board, and held one or more of those offices so long as he lived in the township. In 1854, he married, built a house, and went to farming.

In 1857, Douglas Township was carved out of Delaware Township, and Calvin was appointed by the County Court to organize the township for election, revenue and judicial purposes. He was elected the first Justice of

the Peace in the township, and held the place so long as he resided there. He was also a School Director. A few years later, his father-in-law died, leaving a farm which he entered in the Government Land Office in 1848, and which is now the State Fair Grounds. Calvin sold his farm, settled with the heirs of his father-in-law, took possession of the farm, and lived thereon until he sold it to the State Agricultural Society, in 1886.

In October, 1862, he was elected a member of the Board of County Supervisors, to represent Douglas Township, and re-elected in 1864. During the war period, the Board was an active and busy body, for the demands of families of the men who were in the army were numerous and imperative, requiring almost daily sessions. It was an intelligent, patriotic body, and the soldier boys from Polk County and their families were cared for with fidelity and liberality.

When the second Court House was built, bonds of the county were issued in 1859 to raise funds therefor. A large number of the bonds were sold to Clarke, Dodge & Company, New York. At the January meeting of the County Supervisors, they put themselves on record, to-wit:

WHEREAS, It is believed that a large share of the bonds known as Court House Bonds are owned by parties in rebellion against the Government; therefore,

*"Resolved.* That the Treasurer is hereby instructed not to pay interest on said bonds unless he is well satisfied that the owners are truly loyal."

April Third, 1865, the Board was in session when the report came of the surrender of Lee's army, whereupon it was immediately

*"Resolved.* That the Clerk of the Board is hereby authorized to illuminate the Court House at the county's expense this night, in honor of the capture of Richmond by the armies of the Republic of the United States.

*"Resolved,* That the Clerk be and is hereby authorized to have thirty-six guns fired this evening in honor of the recent victories of the Union army near Richmond."

Captain Harry Griffith, Clerk of the Board, who had served two years as Commander of the First Iowa Battery in the field, on hearing the resolution read, leaped to his feet, called Pete. Myers to take his place, and, before the Board had adjourned, he had a twelve-pounder belching fire, smoke and noise down at 'Coon Point. His thirty-six guns were supplemented with one hundred more ordered by the state. The whole town was wild with exuberant cheering.

In 1869, the county was infested with horse thieves and perpetrators of other robberies among the settlers. The Vigilance Committee of Allen and Four Mile townships determined to put an end to it, within their jurisdiction at least. Suspicion fastened upon "Jack" Hiner as one of the gang, and he was brought before Esquire Prentice, an old settler, a few miles east of the Capitol. Hiram Y. Smith, a young lawyer, who subsequently became Prosecuting Attorney for the county, and Congressman, appeared as Hiner's attorney. There was a large gathering of farmers present, and considerable excitement. After a long hearing, which lasted until night, the court decided there was not sufficient evidence to hold the defendant, and he was discharged. He was immediately taken in charge by a number of men. Smith's horse was brought up; he was told that his services were no longer required there; that further attempt to save his client would be futile, and the best thing he could do would be to get back to Des Moines and stay there. The advice was given with emphasis, which received prompt attention. That was the last known of "Jack" Hiner. What became of him has since been a mystery. Knowing that Calvin was familiar with all that was going on in those days, I asked him not long ago if he knew what became of him, to which he replied:

"The last I heard of 'Jack' Hiner, he got into a deep hole in Des Moines River, between Mrs. Henderson's and Rees Wilkins' place. Of course, I was not there, but some of 'the boys' told me a committee was appointed to take him to jail, but when they got along in that timber on the river bank, he got away from them, and made the highest jump they ever saw a man make—fully as high as their heads—and into the river. You certainly know that is a dangerous place to get into on a very dark night. A person is likely to find a

watery grave, and no one would feel in duty bound to risk their life at such a time in trying to save him. 'Tis sad, 'tis pity, 'tis true. But it was a weak committee, composed of such men as 'Tom' Mattocks, Jarvis Hougham, J. C. Taylor, and some others I might mention not yet dead."

If Calvin's explanation is correct, that committee must have changed their plans, for on the night Hiner disappeared, "Jim" Miller says the sixty feet of rope in the well on his farm, not far from where the committee took charge of Hiner, was taken by a group of men who would not let him get near enough to identify them.

Politically, Calvin is a radical Republican. He was a charter member of the party, in 1853. So popular was he in the party, he was selected as a delegate to nearly every Republican county convention during his residence in the county, and so much faith had the people in his business capacity, honesty and integrity, he was elected Justice of the Peace, Director, President and Secretary of a school district, Township Supervisor or Assessor continuously in the several townships of Delaware, Douglas, Lee and Grant, which, by the changes of geographical lines, his farm fell into, from the time he was twenty-one years old until he left the county, in 1886. Some of the time he was Director, President and Secretary of the same school district, until the Legislature prohibited the office of President and Secretary being held by the same person. He was a charter member of the Tippecanoe Club. He was a man of affairs in the early days. Socially, he was affable and companionable. He was a firm and active helper of the church and school. Reared as a Quaker, he abjured all fraternal organizations, except the Grangers.

When the Des Moines Plow Company was organized, he became a stockholder, and later President, until it was changed to a barbed wire company. In 1875, the company made a contract to manufacture and supply the State Grange (Patrons of Husbandry) at reduced price, barbed wire, in opposition to the Washburn, Moen trust. Immediately, a big fight was on in the courts. Calvin was an active participant in the scrimmage from start to finish. There were thirty-one subordinate granges in the county, and Calvin

was a charter member and Master of Grant Township Grange. He showed the courage of his conviction by affixing his signature to the fifty-thousand-dollar bond which carried the contest to the United States Supreme Court and victory. Then he was satisfied.

When the Iowa National Bank was organized, he invested four thousand dollars in its capital stock.\*

January Fourteenth, 1907.

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\*He died in Pasadena, California, September Third, 1908.

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