



DR. DAVID D. SKINNER

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A pioneer of Iowa, and very early settler of Polk County, was David D. Skinner, or "Uncle Dave," as he was familiarly called. He was born in Hamilton County, Ohio, in 1824, and when nine years old, came with his parents, in 1833, by flatboat down the Ohio, and up the Mississippi, to Montrose, near the mouth of Des Moines River, where his parents settled. What is now Iowa then had no legal existence, for when the State of Missouri was carved out of the Louisiana Purchase, Uncle Sam seems to have forgotten what is now Iowa and Minnesota, along the Mississippi, and the Dakotas, and from 1821 to 1834, there was no government, no courts, and no laws, except such as the settlers who had come into the territory made among themselves. An incident illustrating the fact was that of the murder of one George O'Keef, by Patrick O'Connor, at the Mines of Spain, a lead mine operated near where Dubuque now is. The murder was without provocation, and the friends of the victim sought to have the murderer tried. The nearest court was at Galena, in Illinois, but that court declared it had no jurisdiction west of the Mississippi. The settlers decided to have a trial. A jury was formed, who, after hearing the evidence, rendered a verdict of murder in the first degree, and fixed the penalty at death. He was sentenced to be hanged.

O'Connor's friends then applied to the Governor of Missouri for a pardon, to which he replied that he had no authority to act in the matter at all. Application was then made to President Jackson, who decided that, as the laws of the United States had not been extended over the territory west of the Mississippi, he could not interfere. He suggested, however, that the settlers were the proper persons to exercise the pardoning power. But the settlers were not so inclined, and O'Connor was duly hanged. The incident was so glaring that Congress sat up and took notice, and divided what is now Iowa into two counties, the north half was named Dubuque, the south

half Demoine—not Des Moines, as it is now written—and attached it to Michigan Territory for judicial purposes.

That was the state of affairs when the lad, David, came to Iowa. In 1824, under a treaty made with the Indians, the United States acquired possession of land in the northern part of what was then Missouri, which was reserved for the use of the half-breeds of the Sauk and Fox Indians. The north line of the tract was near what is now the north line of Lee County, and was known as the Half-breed Tract. The Indians had the right to occupy it only. But settlers began to come in, and in 1835, Congress gave the Indians the right to sell claims as a class, but not as individuals. That opened the door for speculators to rush in, and buy claims with a quart of whiskey, a pony or a blanket, and trouble began. There was no survey nor boundary lines, and, as a consequence, there was frequent clashing on both sides, and sales of claims to which there was not a shadow of title. The Indians still occupied the territory and the actual settlers were, of course, anxious to keep on good terms with them. Young Black Hawk, son of the famous old chief, had his tribal headquarters not far from Montrose, and was a frequent visitor at the Skinner cabin, and quite friendly with the family. As a matter of policy, the settlers made it a point to get the good-will of the Indians, though they were satisfied that, through the influence of whiskey and irresponsible sharpers and land speculators, the Indians sometimes imposed upon them. Frequently, they would get restless and threaten to drive the whites out of the country, would gather around the settlement and act ugly, terrorizing the women and children especially, but some friendly Indian would always give warning to the settlers that they might be prepared, so being forewarned, they were forearmed, and but few collisions occurred.

All about the vicinity of the Skinner cabin were positive indications that at a period long passed, a large Indian village had been located there, though overgrown with grass and shrubs. The old men of the Sauk and Foxes had a tradition agreeing with the narrative of the discovery of the River Moingona (Des Moines) by Marquette. The site of the deserted village corresponded

with the statement of Marquette that it was three leagues from the Mississippi; that there was a beaten path leading to it; that six hundred Indians returned with him from the village to his canoes on the Mississippi. The children of the settlement were fond of hunting for relics on the site of the deserted village, which extended over a large area, and was strewn with them. Often those of value were gathered. Young Dave one day found an Indian tomahawk which had evidently been in use a long time before it was dropped where found. It was treasured by the family, and is now in possession of a daughter, the wife of W. B. Keffer, or "By." as all old-timers called him, when, as a kid, he used to hunt and stab bullfrogs in that old slough where the Cownie glove factory is, played hookey with the Sherman boys, and sampled strawberries found in back yards of residences of aristocrats scattered around the "Commons,"

"Uncle Dave" used to say that the first settlers around that old village site were satisfied it was the identical spot visited by Marquette in 1673. It was about eight miles from Montrose, west on the prairie. There was evidence of a well-traveled road or trail, at some former time leading from the mouth of the Des Moines westward, and on beyond (sic). Arrowheads and flinty fragments were found over a large area. It is the only one in that vicinity which agrees with Marquette's narrative.

Gradually, the Indians gave way to the encroachment of civilization, and the country developed rapidly. David learned the trade of blacksmith, and, after reaching his majority, went to Davenport, where, with a brother, he engaged in making plows until 1855, when, learning that Fort Des Moines was to become the Capital of the State, and, protectively, a better place for business, he came, with his family, and formed a partnership with John H. Given, who was making plows on Vine Street, between Second and Third.

He took up his residence in a log cabin near the shop, but soon after moved to Third, between Vine and Court Avenue.

In 1857, he withdrew from Given and joined John R. Rollins in the grocery business, on Second, until 1861, when his brother came to Des Moines, and, with him, he resumed the making of plows, first at the corner of First and

Market, but a few years later larger shops were built at Second and Sycamore (now Grand Avenue,) where a large business was done. For more than thirty years, the Skinner plow was famous all over the country. It was deemed superior to Eastern plows because it would "scour" in the black drift soil of the prairie, and not break at the mold board. Its superiority was in an invention of Skinner's, whereby the front of the old mold board was chilled or hardened on the front side, and made softer on the back side, so that it would "scour" or polish on the front side, and the back, being softer or flexible, would not break across the center, as in Eastern plows. Skinner's plows are now to be found in use on farms in Polk County.

Unfortunately for him, he neglected to get a patent for his discovery, and protect himself against piracy. His plows became so successful, it worried the big factories at Moline and Rock Island, and they sent secret agents here to see how it was done. They visited the shops daily for several weeks, on various pretenses, until they gained the whole secret, which was swiped by the Eastern makers, and it made them millionaires. The Skinners were doing business on capital borrowed at ten per cent, and when the hard times came, reverses followed, the shops were closed, and Skinner retired from the plow business.

Among the pioneers of Des Moines were some having the religious faith known as Campbellite, or Church of Christ. Meetings were held in their cabins, and Reverend P. T. Russell occasionally preached to them when making the tour of the county. In the summer of 1858, they organized a church society, consisting of "Uncle David," Charles Nichols, J. L. Scott, Samuel Bell, Samuel Van Cleve, Thomas Hendryx, B. F. Jones, and their wives, fifteen persons. B. F. Snook was elected pastor. Their first meeting-place was in a two-story brick building erected by Alex. Scott near Des Moines River bank, between the present Rock Island and Keokuk railroads. The lower floor was used for pork packing. The entrance to the upper floor was by an outside stairway. Soon after, the little band met in a room in the uncompleted Savery (Kirkwood) House, but were soon crowded out, and went over to the Griffith Block, on East Locust, now the Columbia Hotel. In 1863, the society was reorganized as the Central Christian Church. The old

Court House was purchased, where the Union Depot now is, and James B. Gaston became pastor. The church has kept pace, by frequent removals, with the growth and prosperity of the city, until it now occupies the magnificent structure at Ninth and Pleasant, and has a membership running into the thousands.

"Uncle David" and his helpmate were zealous, active members of the church from its inception. His cabin was the favorite stopping-place for the brethren in the early days, and they were always given a hearty welcome, for he was a genial, warm-hearted man.

In 1862, he purchased three acres where the West High School building is now, at Fifteenth and Center, built a large, two-story frame house, surrounded it with blooming plants, shrubbery, and grapes, making it an ideal home. It was always open. The latch-string was never drawn in. The table was always spread. It was a home of generous hospitality and good-fellowship. It was a favorite resort for children, of whom "Uncle David" was very fond—and he had twelve of his own. His greatest pleasure was in being surrounded by youngsters, and aiding them in their sports and happiness. His big heart took them all in, and he was their friend indeed. That old home was a delightful place for old and young.

After retiring from the plow business, he turned his attention to helping suffering humanity by what is known as magnetic healing, and for several years had a very successful practice.

In 1887, I think, he removed to San Jose, California, where he continued his practice until 1890, when he was suddenly stricken down by an affection of the heart.

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