



JOHN L. SMITH

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A conspicuous and familiar personage around town in the early days of Fort Des Moines was John L. Smith. A native of Cazenovia, New York, when sixteen years old, he was forced by the circumstances of a widowed mother to look out for himself. Being of migratory temperament, he entered the service of the American Fur Company, owned by John Jacob Astor, of New York, as disbursing agent and trader, the headquarters of the company being in Chicago. He went to the Lake Superior Country, where he remained several years, trafficking with Chippewa and Winnebago Indians, during three years of which he did not see the face of a white man. It was hazardous business, as he had to travel through the wilderness on horseback, carrying large sums of gold and silver from one post to another. The Chippewas and Winnebagos often got at war with each other, and he was liable to get mixed up in it through suspicion of being more friendly to one side than the other, and so he did, for he was several times wounded in their combats.

Subsequently, he traversed the country westward from Chicago, trading with the Sauks and Foxes. He crossed Des Moines River when there was not a white settler in what is now Iowa.

Fur buying in those days was an extensive business. The furs were usually floated in canoes down rivers to the lake, and thence by vessels to Chicago. Sometimes wagons, several of them, were required. "When a river was reached, the wagon box was removed from the running part, and the furs floated across therein.

He became thoroughly conversant with Indian character, and learned to speak their language fluently; in fact, he became a "heap big che-mo-ka-man" (pale face) among them.

Tiring of the business in 1840, he went to Ohio, where he rejoined his mother, and engaged in manufacturing fanning mills until May, 1854, when he came to Fort Des Moines, purchased two lots near what is now the

northwest corner of Eighth and Walnut, "out in the country," and built a commodious one-story-and-a-half seven-room frame house, entirely of Black Walnut lumber, hauled on wagons from Davenport. When the house was completed, it was furnished with furniture purchased in Cincinnati, and shipped by steamboats, arriving here on the *Clara Hine*, which tied up at 'Coon Point. Some of the furniture was Rosewood, upholstered with fine haircloth, and is in use to-day in the home of two daughters on West Ninth Street.

The house completed and furnished, his family arrived in October, and became an integral part of the little community widely scattered over the plateau between the two rivers, and also proverbial for their hospitality and good cheer. Their latchstring was never "pulled in." For seven years, John A. Kasson made that house his home with the family, and, being a man of public affairs, it was the headquarters for politicians. Frequently, on Sunday, my wife and I used to go there from our boarding-place, where the Morgan House now is, straight through the weeds, across the Commons, for a social chat.

Like all settlers in those days, the family adapted themselves to circumstances. Although the father was a good provider, the larder sometimes got short, especially of fruit and meat. The greatest scarcity was fruit, Mrs. Smith often saying she could get nothing but wild crab apples for preserving, and wild plums for "plum butter." For meat, Hiram Y., their oldest boy, who was a wide-awake, hustling youngster, and who subsequently became prominent in county and state affairs, was equal to the occasion. He set traps along the bluff north of what is now High Street, and every morning, before breakfast, he would go to his traps and gather up an ample supply of quail or prairie chickens. His biggest catches were made on the spot where the Congregational Church now stands.

In 1869, Smith built a two-story frame house at Tenth and Walnut, and abandoned the old one.

This house boasted of the first plate-glass front door in Des Moines. The house sat well back from the street in those days, was a pretentious affair, and was one of the show places of Des Moines, but it was never so cherished

a place as the old home, with its treasured memories, in which the first formal invitational dinner of ham and eggs was served in the town. Mr. Smith, hearing of the first importation of several dozen eggs and a ham from Keokuk, cornered the market and shared the dinner with his friends, who lived "within a few doors." Hoyt Sherman was summoned from his home at Sixth and Walnut, where the Utica Building now is. The Robertson family was living at the site of the Chase & West Block, and Mrs. Mills (now Mrs. E. R. Clapp) from around the block on Eighth Street, and as many more as were in personal invitation distance. The first corn meal mush ever served in Des Moines was held as a highly prized dish for the same company, on another occasion. Mr. Smith received the first sack brought from Keokuk. Mush was all that was served, and the partakers never forgot that meal.

During the Summer, while he was building the old house, he purchased two lots on Walnut Street, where the Wabash ticket office now is, the price paid I have forgotten, but he traded them to John O'Connor for a pair of "onery" mules and a wagon, and "doubled his money," he used to say.

His first business venture was a general store on Second Street, near Vine, with H. R. Lovejoy's store on one side and J. M. Griffith's store on the other. Disliking indoor labor, he soon sold out, and was employed by the United States Land Office for some time in locating lands in the western and northwestern part of the state.

His next venture was the marble business, in which he gained an extensive reputation throughout Central Iowa by his genial, happy temperament, though engaged in a rather sombre enterprise.

He also had the contract for setting the poles of the Western Union Telegraph Company along the Rock Island Road, when their lines were built. In 1866, he was appointed Indian Agent for the Otoe and other Indian tribes in Gage County, Nebraska, to adjust some trouble between them and Uncle Sam. His long experience with Indians enabled him to secure unexpectedly friendly relations with them. He held the place until President Grant superseded the Quaker policy then in force in Indian affairs, which being interpreted, meant that a "good Indian was a dead Indian."

In 1870, he started a grocery store on Walnut Street, between Sixth and Seventh, but very soon got the migratory fever again—being subject to Asthma, he wanted more air—and he went on the road for the large printing house of Mills & Company, and made the circuit of the County Clerks throughout the country. On one of these trips, in May, 1874, his team became frightened, and, when crossing the railroad track about three miles west of Stuart, he was thrown out, receiving fatal injuries.

Socially, he was of cheerful, sunny temperament, companionable, possessed great strength of will, had the courage of his convictions, yet won and retained the friendship of others to a remarkable degree. His integrity was never questioned. Though of ponderous physique, he was always active and busy. In social affairs, his labor and influence were given to every moral and educational movement to promote the weal of the community. The home, the church, and the school were with him the only sure foundation of good government.

Religiously, he was a Baptist of the Saint John type. When the first church was organized, and the building of a meeting-house was started on Mulberry Street, where George Dimmitt now sells hardware, he gave many days of manual labor with Elder Nash and W. A. Galbraith, with hammer, saw, plane, axe, and trowel, helping the project along. His home was one of generous hospitality, and during church conventions of his faith it was a favorite resort for brethren.

He was an active and earnest member of the Old Settlers' Association.

Politically, he was a radical Abolitionist and Whig, and everybody knew it. He was not a politician, and took little or no part in politics, yet, through the good offices and friendship of Kasson, he was several times given a public trust, which he executed with strict fidelity and credit to himself.

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