



LEONARD BROWN

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No record of the early history of Polk County and Des Moines would be complete without reference to Leonard Brown, whose sayings and doings have been interwoven in many ways into the warp and woof of the social fabric. He is of that class of early settlers who became such by force of circumstances, who were brought here in infancy by their parents, or were born here, grew up with the country, and are now identified with leading industries of the community.

In the Fall of 1853, Aaron Brown and family started on their pilgrimage by wagon from Indiana, to a better country. All went well until about midway of the twenty-mile prairie which spread out wild and bare between Newton and "Uncle Tommy" Mitchell's tavern—unoccupied, and deemed uninhabitable by natives of Indiana and Ohio, for want of timber for fence rails and fuel—the westward plodders reached a small creek which had a few hours before become swollen and carried away so much of the flooring of the bridge, a crossing could only be made on foot. The wagon was unloaded, taken apart, and everything carried across the stream by hand—sixteen-year-old Leonard doing his share—except the wagon box, which was floated, the horses swimming. The outfit was then re-assembled, and the journey resumed, ending at Des Moines in October. The only available place for a home was a double log cabin owned by Alexander Scott, which stood on his farm, about eighty rods southwest of Capitol Hill. Soon after, the family removed to a cabin which stood on a farm near where Lincoln School building now is, on Mulberry Street. A stake-and-rider fence surrounded the farm, with a driveway westward from Ninth Street about where Locust Street is now. Leonard's first job was with William Krause, as general utility helper. Elder J. A. Nash had started Des Moines Academy in one room of the Court House, which stood where the Union Depot now is, and Leonard's highest

ambition was to get an education. There was the opportunity, but not the means. Bread and butter was wanting. Money was scarce; he had none; but "where there is a will, there is a way." William De Ford, the first blacksmith in the town, had a shop on Second Street. A "blower and striker" is an important functionary in a blacksmith shop, so Leonard thought, and he engaged board and lodging with De Ford's family, for which he paid in "blowing and striking" until nine o'clock evenings, turning horseshoes. To pay for his tuition, he built the fires and swept the academy rooms through the Winter. In the Spring following, he was employed by Samuel Gray as Deputy County Recorder and Treasurer, and Books "E" and "F" in the Recorder's office contain the deeds and mortgages transcribed by him.

In those days, the majority of public sentiment was pro-slavery. An Abolitionist was considered fit only for contumely and contempt. One day, while Leonard was serving as Deputy, an election was held in one of the court-rooms, during which politics got at fever heat, one very noisy individual denouncing the Abolitionists in vigorous terms. "We hear a great deal about them," said he, "but when do we ever see one? No man dares to say he is one." Elder Nash happened to be there to cast his ballot, and hearing the bravado, turned quickly about, and, face to face, said to the fellow: "I am an Abolitionist," whereupon the fellow quickly subsided and got away.

In the Fall of 1854, Leonard taught the first school in Story County, west of Skunk River. It was in a typical pioneer schoolhouse, stick chimney, sod jambs, and a rude fireplace. It was a "subscription school," there being no free school system, and he "boarded around," his boarding-places being conspicuous for their magnificent distances. For his three months' service, he was paid forty-five dollars, the most money he had ever had at one time.

The next Spring, he returned to the Academy as a student, determined to fit himself for pedagogy as a life work. He was made a tutor, and Congressman Hull, Lon. Bush, George Lyon, boys then about twelve years old, can testify as to his ability to teach the "Geography Class."

In the Spring of 1855, Elder Nash closed his Academy and devoted his time to the pulpit, and improving his property on Ninth Street, near School,

then all a forest, Leonard remaining with the Elder, working half of each day, and giving the other half to study and recitation. In September of that year, he secured a position as tutor in the University at Burlington, for which he received board, room, and tuition.

Barring the forty-five dollars received in Story County, his emoluments thus far had been boarding and lodging. The next problem was wherewith to be clothed. He therefore, in the Winter of 1857, taught the district school of Flint Creek, six miles north of Burlington. It was a school of fifty pupils, of all grades, from ABC to Higher Mathematics and English Grammar, lively and wide-awake. It was there he had a practical demonstration of his psychological theory of school government. One day, a boy named Charley Adams came to the school, who had been ostracised and outlawed from the public schools of Burlington as a bully and bravado, by whipping out the teachers. He had not been long in his seat before the whole school was attracted and annoyed by his disorderly behavior, to which Leonard gave little attention. When school closed for the day, the boy was asked to remain after the dismissal a few moments. Recalling the incident a few days ago, Leonard said:

"After the scholars had gone, and I had finished some writing, I said to the boy: 'Your parents send you to school to learn, do they not?'

" 'I have no parents.'

" 'Well,' said I, 'I am sorry for you. I was left in nearly your condition when I was eleven years old, by the death of my mother, and I have gone from pillar to post ever since; have done entirely for myself; was a bad boy at school until a good teacher gave me a better notion, and I determined to get a good education, if possible. Now, I am trying to work my way through college, and to that end, am teaching this school. I have studied Phrenology some, and am sure I know just what kind of a boy you are.'

" 'What kind of a boy am I?' he asked.

" 'You are a very smart boy. You will make your mark in the world, and a good one, too, if you try. There are few boys in the school your equal in intelligence, I think, and I want you to come to school, and also to come

to my room at the Ripley Tavern, where I have a trunk full of good books, which you are welcome to read.'

"He was excused and went home. From his grandparents, I learned that on reaching home, he said to the old people: 'I am going to school to that man; I like him.' He became one of the best and most industrious pupils in the school, and took an active part in the exhibition at the close of the term. On my return to the University, he soon followed, with his books, to get an education. Soon after, my support funds ran out, I was obliged to return to Des Moines, and lost all trace of the young man."

In the Fall and Winter of 1856, Leonard was a teacher in Ives Mark's College at Palestine, Story County; in 1860, he opened a Select School at Avon, Polk County; in the Spring of 1861, he became a teacher in Elder Nash's Forest Home Seminary, on Ninth Street.

After the battle of Wilson's Creek, in August, 1861, William H. Coodrell, who was a student at the Seminary, and had enlisted in the First Iowa Infantry (a three months' regiment), came home with his arm in a sling from a wound received in the battle, and one day, during a recess of the school, gathered together about a dozen students, marched them single file to Hierb's Brewery, at the corner of Center and Seventh streets, where they loaded up with beer. On returning to the schoolroom, Leonard started to call them down for their action, but they were not inclined to hear him. He requested them to be seated, and when they got sober he would talk with them, whereupon Dave Winter quickly arose, and, bringing his fist down on his desk with a whack, said: "Mr. Brown, I am just as sober as any man in this saloon." His blunder caused a vigorous titter among the girls, and the next day every one of the crowd enlisted in the Fifteenth Infantry, and subsequently it was admitted they enlisted because they did not dare to go back and face the girls.

In May, 1864, Leonard enlisted in the Forty-seventh Infantry, for one hundred days. On his return from service, he resumed his school, which had been removed to Seventh Street, between Center and Crocker, and in October, 1865, he was elected County Superintendent of Schools, and served one term. In 1870, he opened a school in Polk City, and in 1875, was

elected a professor in Humboldt College, but soon after resigned and entered the lecture field. For twenty years, he canvassed the state as an advocate of social and political reform.

After the close of the Civil War, he published a book of six hundred pages, in memory of the soldiers of Polk County, who had died in the service, and other works of prose and verse—twelve in all. For the last ten years, he has been preparing what he deems his crowning work: "Our Own Columbia That Is to Be!"—social, moral, religious, and economic, and also a collection of his verses, entitled, "On the Banks of the Des Moines."

Among his pupils were Simon Casady, Amos Brandt, "Charley" Rogg, Fred. Getchell, "Dan" Bringolf, Philo Kenyon, George A. Miller, Bruce Jones, Homer and Leander Bolton, the De Ford boys, Mrs. Lona Ingham Robinson, Mrs. Ella Clapp White (wife of the shoe dealer), Mrs. Newton Harris, Mrs. Minerva Jones Hallet (wife of the dentist), and scores of other well-known and prominent citizens of to-day, and they all declare he was a good teacher.

He says his long experience as teacher fully affirms his belief in the adage that you can lead a horse to the trough, but you cannot make him drink; that there are no bad boys—at least, he has never met one. Give a boy the right ideal, and he will become a good and useful man—a rule with no exceptions.

In the very early days, Leonard was actively identified with Father Bird and Elder Nash in establishing schools, and advocating the educational facilities of the community, and the impress of his earnest zeal and labor can be seen at the present day.

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