



NICHOLAS McDONNELL

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An old-timer is N. S. McDonnell, or "Nick," as he was best known thirty years ago. Born May Eighth, 1842, on the "Auld Sod," in Tipperary, Ireland, of true Celtic ancestry, he passed his youth on his father's small farm, abutting the River Shannon, where he marshaled the ducks to water, looked after the pigs, burglarized the hens' nests for the kitchen supply, and did such other stunts as fall to a growing lad on a farm. He attended the National schools, which correspond to the public schools in this country, until he was fourteen years old.

At Cape May, New Jersey, resided an uncle, who wrote such glowing accounts of the country on this side of the "big pond," and told such tales of the chances for a young man to make dollars, "Nick" decided to try it. Rolling his belongings into a bundle, he put them into a bag, and in May, 1857, set sail alone for America, with no mishap *en route*, except a slight interference with his appetite from *Nausea Marina*, as the doctor would call it, before he got his "sea legs," and a slight attack of nostalgia, as the distance widened between him and father, mother, and the good old Emerald Isle, but he was a disappointed boy on arriving at Cape May, to learn that his uncle had left the country—gone West.

Without money, in a strange land, he had to hunt a job. He learned that Jay Gould had purchased a large tract of timber land in Luzerne County, Pennsylvania, and was going to build a big tannery and town there. "Nick" took the trail, and on arriving there his first job was peeling the bark from the trees as they were cut down, and cording it up, at two dollars per week. His next job was attending the tan vats—that is, changing the liquids from one vat to another, according to the time required, a process demanding promptness, precision, and fidelity.

Meanwhile, he kept his eyes open, and when Gould began to lay out and

plat his town of Gouldsborough, he was placed in the surveying party. His next job was with the builders of the notable big tannery.

He remained at Gouldsborough until 1859, when he had an attack of Western Fever, came to Illinois, looked about a bit, but did not like the country. He turned his face southward and landed in Memphis, Tennessee, where he made an engagement to learn the trade of machinist and boilermaker. He remained there until the Civil War broke out, in 1861, and not being in sympathy with the Southern side of the contest, made tracks northward. He came up the Mississippi to Clinton, thence by railroad to Cedar Rapids, thence across the country to Iowa City, thence by railroad to Marengo, then the terminus of the Rock Island Road. From there he walked to Des Moines, getting the first view of the town one fine April day, from the top of Capitol Hill, which he declares was the most, beautiful landscape he ever saw. He surveyed it in all directions and decided to come in and stay. The town was small; there were but few houses, scattered over the bottoms on the East Side; all trade and business was done on the West Side, on Second Street, and Court Avenue below Third Street.

Not finding sufficient employment at his trade, he went to work on a farm in Walnut Township, in the harvest fields, at sixty-five cents per day. For a short time, he worked in Heminway's foundry, on the East Side, the first foundry in the town.

Charley Van was building and booming a rival to Des Moines—facetiously called "Vantown," on the south side of the 'Coon. He had built a big mill, several small houses, staked out a promising city, and he offered "Nick" a good factory site, if he would locate there; but it was declined, with thanks.

Soon after, he found a small frame, abandoned building on Des Moines River bank, near " 'Coon Point," and, gathering a few tools and other appliances together, he put up his shingle for business. In the Spring of 1862, the floods came, and one morning, when going to his shop, he saw it sailing down the river toward the Gulf of Mexico.

Discouraged, but not undaunted, he bought a small part of a lot belonging to the estate of Alex. Scott, at the corner of East First and Court Avenue,

started again, and inaugurated steam boiler making in Des Moines, and he is on the same corner now. There was not much demand for steam boilers then. The first one he made went into the Heminway foundry; the next into the *Daily Register* office, and he has made every boiler used in that establishment during all its mutations and migrations, to the present time. As business increased, extensions and additions were made to the works, until they now occupy an entire block.

In 1866, James Meara, his old shopmate in Memphis, joined him as partner, the two, and an occasional helper, doing all the work. In 1879, Meara having died, "Nick" purchased his interest, and in 1888, organized the Des Moines Manufacturing and Supply Company, with himself as President and his son, John E., Secretary and Treasurer.

During all these years, "Nick" devoted his spare moments to the study of mechanics, and the most advanced literature on that subject. In 1864, he took a course in Muffley's Iowa Business College, then in the Turner Building, next east of *The Register and Leader* Building, and the first business college in the city. On the third floor of that building was the first exclusive amusement hall opened in town.

The works are now making all kinds of engines, boilers, mill, clay, and mining machinery. A specialty is machinery complete, of original designs, for gypsum plaster mills, which are successfully competing with Eastern manufactories. Five mills have been put in at Fort Dodge; others at Syracuse, New York; Fort Clinton, Ohio; Manitoba, and in California. The machinery for a mill is massive, and embraces the mining, drying, crushing, grinding, calcining, and mixing of gypsum rock for stucco work, a calcining pan alone weighing one thousand, nine hundred pounds, and a good mill has four pans.

More than fifty mechanics are employed, and from the first week in 1864, every employee, on Saturday night, has received his week's wages. If the cash box was short, as it sometimes was, "Nick" hustled out and borrowed enough to "pay off," rather than break his inexorable rule, believing that a well-paid and satisfied employee is the best helper.

Beginning with nothing but brain, brawn and determination, by industry, intelligently directed, sterling integrity, and square-dealing, he has won success, and added to the mechanical industries of the city until the output of his works is now more than two hundred thousand dollars per year.

Politically, he is a Republican. He cast his first ballot for the election of "Old Abe" to his second term, but he has not time nor inclination to indulge in politics.

Socially, he is of genial disposition, companionable, esteemed by everybody, and carries a big, warm heart, pulsating with kindness and charity. He is not a member of any secret organization, preferring to keep aloof from all "entangling alliances."

Religiously, he is a Catholic, and active in the church and educational work of that denomination.

He has good health, is always on deck for business, yet his forty-nine years of strenuous labor prompts him to let John E. do the hustling.

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