



RICHARD T. WELLSLAGER

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An early settler of Des Moines who became actively and prominently identified with its business enterprises was Richard T. Wellslager.

Born in Washington County, Maryland, April Eighteenth, 1834, of German ancestry on the father's side, and Irish on that of the mother, when two years old, his parents removed to Richland County, Ohio, where his boyhood days were passed acquiring such an education as the common schools of that period afforded during the Winter months, and in Summer helping to fell the forest and open up a few more acres to cultivation in that then densely timbered country.

In 1852, when eighteen years old, he began teaching school during Winters for eighteen to twenty dollars per month, and board among the patrons. In Summer, he continued farm work.

In February, 1855, he concluded Iowa was a better country, and, by railroad, came *via* Chicago to Davenport, thence by stage to Oskaloosa, arriving February Thirteenth, after four days' bouncing over the frozen ground—the first day to Muscatine, the second to Iowa City, the third to Fairfield, the fourth to destination. He immediately secured a clerkship in the Postoffice, where he so thoroughly gained the good-will and favor of the people he served for two years as Deputy, that, regardless of politics, he was unanimously recommended for Postmaster, and in July, 1857, he received the appointment from President Buchanan. He served until April, 1861, when he resigned. While he was Postmaster, he edited and published the *Oskaloosa Times* one year.

Governor Kirkwood having, at the time of his resignation, called a special session of the Legislature to provide ways and means to put the state on a war footing, he, with a few friends, came to Des Moines to be in at the opening, and while he was making observations in the town one day, he was

greatly surprised with a notification that he had been elected Assistant Secretary of the Senate, a favor entirely unexpected. He accepted, and served to the close of the session, May Twenty-ninth.

Warren Hussey, having resigned as Cashier of B. F. Allen's Bank, the place was offered to Wellslager, and accepted. Being a bachelor, "heart whole and fancy free," with no "strings" attaching him to Oskaloosa, he decided to make Des Moines his future residence, and in October, 1862, he became a victim of the charms of Anna, eldest daughter of Harmon Beekman, a leading merchant and prominent citizen from 1857 to 1868, and he joined the ranks of home-builders.

In January, 1865, he resigned the cashiership and went to New York with "Deacon" S. V. White, to join the bulls and bears of Wall Street, but an experience of twelve months brought the conviction that it was not the place for him. March First, 1866, he returned and joined Wesley Redhead in the book and stationery business in Sherman Block, on Court Avenue.

In 1867, Redhead retired from active membership in the firm, to devote his time to developing his extensive coal properties, leaving Wellslager and his younger brother, Marion, whom old-timers will remember as a young man of most sterling qualities, to build up the business, which continued until 1877, when Marion found that to keep step with Richard was "the pace that kills," and he withdrew, went to Kansas, where he deceased in 1894, leaving a record of highly meritorious and exemplary character.

By the exercise of vigorous enterprise and energy, the business grew, so that in 1871, to secure better facilities, it was moved to a three-story brick, erected and equipped for the business at Four Hundred and Eleven Court Avenue, near the present Postoffice.

In 1876, the firm purchased forty-four feet at Four Hundred and Seven and Four Hundred and Nine Court Avenue, where was erected and equipped the largest and best book, stationery, and wall paper house west of Chicago. Wall paper trade was made a specialty, to handle which a large storage and shipping warehouse at Eleventh and Vine was required, and the firm was recognized as the third largest wall paper jobbers in the United States, their trade extending to Minnesota, South Dakota, Missouri, Nebraska, Kansas,

Colorado, and Wyoming, necessitating the employment of thirty to forty men on the road and in the house.

As an evidence of the impetus given the jobbing trade of the city at that comparatively early day, the business of the firm, in 1866, amounted to thirty thousand dollars. In 1882, seventeen years later, it was nearly half a million dollars, the result of unremitting hard work. The name of Redhead & Wellslager became familiar throughout Iowa and adjoining states, and Des Moines gained some prestige as a trade center.

Had there been more firms in those days like that, and Mills & Company, to bend their energies in building up a jobbing trade, "manifest destiny," the pride and boast of the town in the early Sixties, would now be an accomplished fact. There would be no necessity for a "Committee of Three Hundred" to boost it out of the Slough of Despond.

In 1883, after seventeen years of strenuous effort to crowd twenty-six hours' labor into twenty-four, Wellslager found there was a limit to nerve strain and human endurance. His physician advised him to cut loose, relax, and take a rest in a climate more favorable to an indicated pulmonary diathesis, which he did, going to Florida and California during the Winter months.

The business was removed to Six Hundred and Seven and Six Hundred and Nine Locust Street, and continued under the name of Redhead, Norton, Lathrop & Company until after the decease of Mr. Redhead, in 1891, and was closed in 1894 or 1895.

In September, 1887, Mr. Wellslager having fully recuperated his physical condition, accepted the cashiership of the Des Moines National Bank, succeeding the following January to the presidency—with the deposits one hundred and sixty thousand dollars. By his sagacious management, in 1892, the bank reported to the Comptroller of the Currency, its deposits were one million dollars, the first statement of the kind made up to that time by any bank in Des Moines, showing deposits of one million dollars.

In May, 1891, Mr. Wellslager sought and was instrumental in securing an order from the Comptroller of the Currency, making Des Moines a Reserve City for national banking associations, an acquisition of immense advantage to the city and its business activities. Under the national bank statutes, every

national bank is required to keep at all times a certain per cent of reserve, and three-fifths of such reserve may consist of balances due from banks in reserve cities. All national banks in Iowa had to keep their reserve balances in banks in Chicago, Omaha, Saint Paul, and Eastern money centers. By this change, they could keep such balances on deposit with the banks in Des Moines. It was also of great benefit to the national banks of the city, and added many thousand dollars to their deposits. It also gave Des Moines special advantages in times of money stringency, for it is then miscellaneous bank balances are closely drawn and centered in cities where they can be counted as reserve.

The year 1893 was a panicky one for banks and bankers, and after safely piloting his bank through the breakers, Wellslager determined to avoid for all time a repetition of his experiences of the year, and on January Eighteenth, 1894, he resigned the presidency.

During his active business career, he helped to organize several financial institutions, among which were the Des Moines National Bank, Polk County Savings Bank, Security Loan and Trust Company, German Savings Bank, Central State Bank, Cooperative Bank of Iowa, Polk County Loan and Building Association, and with the management he was prominently identified. For many years, he was a large stockholder in and until recently a Director in the State Insurance Company. During recent years, he has been less strenuous and aggressive—is more inclined to let others stand the brunt of things; but he is not on the retired list. He is closely identified with the Central State Bank, where he has private quarters, devoting his time at his ease, mainly with his personal affairs.

As a business man, integrity, strict exactness, method and reliability are noted features of all his business transactions. His word always is as good as his bond.

He is of nervous, sanguine temperament, positive, slow to yield convictions once fixed—in fact, his phrenological bump of firmness is pretty fully developed. He is quiet, unassuming, inclined to taciturnity, shuns notoriety, has no ambition to be “in the public eye;” yet, withal, he is affable, genial, and agreeable in contact and manner. He is not a member of any clubs or fraternal organizations.

A marked characteristic of him during his mercantile business career, was his strict regularity. His home was two doors from my residence, and as "rapid transit" means to his store he had a favorite pacer, and so regular and precise was his going and coming, the neighbors and residents along the way used to say they could set their clocks by it, and so it was at the store, where he was the first to arrive and the last to leave.

Politically, he was a War Democrat, but since he came to Des Moines has not sought nor held any political office, yet has taken an interest in political affairs, and, in a quiet, but not less effective way, has exerted a potent influence in behalf of the dominant principles of the Republican party and good civic government.

Religiously, he is not a member of any denominational church, but is broad and catholic in his views.

The stork has brought to his home but one child, a daughter, the wife of J. D. Whisenand, of the Central State Bank, a prominent and active citizen.

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