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Brass Bands in Early Iowa

By CARLISLE ST. JOHN

The mention of a brass band formed in 1866 at Cedar Falls puts me in a reminiscent mood. I recall some other brass bands and events of the long ago in Iowa.

In Keosauqua, Van Buren county, where I lived as a boy, we tried to have about everything any one else had; among them was a brass band, which flourished in 1847. The Democrats of that place determined to have a barbecue as a help to getting possession of the state in a political way. This consisted of a roasted ox, a sheep and a hog, which were given into the hands of Sam Fasanacht, an expert in that art of cookery. A brass band from Burlington was hired for the occasion and Delazon Smith, then known as a "rip-roaring orator," as was his title about that date, made the speech.

The barbecue was held on the Purdom camp ground. Elijah Purdom was one of the first settlers in that part of Iowa. He was a devout Methodist, and his log house stood on the bank of the Des Moines river, and was a meeting place of the "circuit rider." I remember hearing Judge George G. Wright say that the first Divine service he attended after coming to Keosauqua was held at this hospitable home of Father Purdom. The singing was led by Chandler D. Yeager. The hymn was one of the oldest in use at that time, and in order to test the memory of the old-time Methodists the first verse is given here:

"Children of the Heavenly King,
As ye journey sweetly sing
Sing your Saviour's worthy praise,
Glorious in his works and ways."

Adjoining his home, bordering on the banks of the Des Moines river and located close to the village, was one of the most beautiful sugar maple groves to be found along the river. He had removed the undergrowth, and everything but the great sugar maples, and, at his own

expense, had made it a camp ground, where the Methodists annually early held their camp meetings. He had provided a very large and substantial tent, with a platform for the minister, seats, (just slabs with legs put in them) rough, but comfortable for the congregation; and a number of board tents for the laymen. This place was our meeting ground for our Fourth-of-July celebrations and other functions in the pleasant weather. It was here the Democrats were holding their barbecue. Delazon Smith was making his speech. Seated at the base of a large sugar maple tree, situated a little to the right and somewhat in the rear of Smith, his locks fanned by the gentle breezes, sat James B. Howell, one of the editors and publishers of the *Des Moines Valley Whig*, taking notes of the occasion.

The Democrats were very much enthused. The Burlington brass band seemed to have put mettle into them. So it was resolved, then and there, by the Democrats that they must have a brass band; and one was organized at once. The organization was as follows: George Swaim, cornet, leader; John D. Michler and F. F. Anderson, French horns; Jesse Barker, tenor trombone, and Sam Rhodes, drummer. The pieces were up-to-date tunes of those days. They rehearsed once a week in the court house and we heard it from time to time from "Come, come, away," "Hail Columbia," "Take Your Time, Miss Lucy," "Carry Me Back to Old Virginia," to "There Was an Old Nigger, and His Name was Uncle Ned," and similar melodies of the olden days. They seemed to supply a needed place, and we were frequently thrilled by the strains of the Keosauqua Democratic brass band as it made appearances on its musical mission of cheering local members of the Democratic party. Sam Fascanacht, a lover of music, usually provided the team and band-wagon for these occasions.

A NOTABLE EXCURSION

In the spring of 1849 there came a steamer, the Revenue cutter, up the Des Moines river. It came unher-

alded and it seemed to be on a prosperous tour. It did not appear to be carrying any freight and came steaming right up through the chute and past the dam and landed, to the great surprise of all. Everybody assembled on the bank to see the steamboat, myself with the rest of them. I was but a boy at that time and an apprentice at the tinner's trade and had left the shop in my working clothes, dirty face and all, to go and see the boat. I had gone on board and had gotten as far as the hurricane deck when I met my father, who told me they had prevailed on the captain to give them an excursion to Ottumwa and asked me if I didn't want to go along. Of course I did. Who ever knew a boy that didn't want to go someplace?

My shoes were bad and clothes rough, but I stuck right by that boat and in the evening, just as the sun was going down, we left the wharf and went steaming up the river to the strains of "Hail Columbia." I suppose the band thought they had to earn their money and kept it up pretty well until late in the night, and the next morning about sunrise we landed at Ottumwa. It was Sabbath morning and the Ottumwans were as much surprised at the arrival of a steamboat as we Keosauquans had been the day before, and they insisted with the captain until he consented to give them an excursion to Eddyville.

Although we paid only \$1 each for our excursion, the captain carried us along to Eddyville without extra charge. The provisions ran low, but we had plenty of brass band. We returned to Ottumwa Sabbath evening and lay there that night and went on down to Keosauqua the next morning, arriving there about 11 o'clock. The Revenue cutter made quite a number of trips after that, carrying freight. It was dubbed "The Rope Cutter." This was because at that time the ferries over the river were conveyed on ropes. When it became necessary for a boat to pass over, the ropes were let down in the water and it sometimes happened, as the boat was passing over, the rope would be caught up by the paddle wheel

and carried over the top, and as it came down, a man was stationed there with a hatchet and hacked it. This boat seemed to have more than her share of mishaps of that kind and was dubbed "The Rope Cutter."

A "RALLY" IN THE 40'S

Along in the early forties there was a law firm established in Keosauqua under the name of Howell & Cole (James B. Howell and James Cole). They occupied a little brick office on the southwest corner of Second and Dodge streets. In addition to their law practice they published a weekly newspaper called the *Des Moines Valley Whig*. In the rear of their office they built a frame building extending along Dodge street. This was their composing and press room. They published this paper for several years. In 1849 they moved to Keokuk and merged the *Des Moines Valley Whig* with the *Keokuk Register* and for a number of years it was published under the name of the *Des Moines Valley Whig and Keokuk Register*. But it evolved and I don't remember when it became the *Gate City*.

In 1848, during the Lewis Cass and Zachary Taylor presidential campaign the Whigs held a rally at the little town of Birmingham, located on the prairie about twelve miles north of Keosauqua and about eight miles south of Fairfield. It seems to me now there couldn't have been to exceed a dozen houses in the place, situated out in the raw prairie. I had just set in as an apprentice to learn the tinner's trade. My boss was an enthusiastic Whig and attended all of the rallies and took me along to swell the crowd.

There was quite a delegation from our place and with a profusion of flags and banners made quite an imposing appearance. It was a beautiful day and there was a large turn out, as the various delegations arrived from different localities with their flags and banners and fife and drum corps they looked "terrible as an army with banners." They were formed in a grand procession and paraded to a grove a little distance west of the town. The delegation from Fairfield was headed by the

Fairfield brass band and this delegation headed the procession. The Fairfield brass band was the most attractive feature of the occasion. There was one member of the band who was a very large man and played the great big bass horn. I have seen some very large men on exhibition as giants, but none of them ever appeared to me larger than this one. I remember the rest of the members called him Cale.

NOTABLE PARTICIPANTS

Doc Walker, whose home was between Business corner and Libertyville, was marshal of the day. He was a tall, slender man, a fine equestrian, wore a three cornered hat, was finely mounted and you could see by the very way he rode he was proud of his procession. Fitz Henry Warren made the speech for the occasion. He also was a tall man and a very graceful speaker. He had a good deal to say about the Clayton-Bulwer treaty and all that, but I was a boy of 14 and that didn't interest me half as much as the large man with the big bass horn—that was the "elephant" of the occasion for me.

Some years after that, a man by the name of Caleb Baldwin of Fairfield was elected judge of the district court in the district of which our county was one. When he came to hold court, who should he be but the large man who played the big bass horn in the Fairfield brass band at the Whig rally at Birmingham in 1848. He seemed to be very popular and a favorite with all. After his term of judgeship expired, I saw him no more. He was elected supreme judge and was seen no more on brass band wagons. His son, John N. Baldwin, has been well known by the later generations as an eloquent orator, a distinguished politician and an attorney for the Union Pacific railroad.

A Cure for Voter Apathy

To obtain more regular voting in general elections defaultants could be penalized by making them ineligible to vote at the next general election, thereafter restoring their rights until they again fail to exercise their privileges.

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