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Autobiography of Rev. William Hamilton

William Hamilton

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AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF REV. WILLIAM HAMILTON.

Every old settler in Nebraska will remember "Father Hamilton," early and so long a missionary among the western Indians. I solicited his biography for this report from his own pen. The following letter in response I feel would be marred if it were changed, even in the "dotting of a single 'i,' or the crossing of a 't.'" I therefore present it just as it came to me.

DECATUR, BURT COUNTY, NEBRASKA,
May 22nd, 1884.

Robt. W. Furnas, Esqr., Brownville, Neb.:

MY DEAR FRIEND—Your kind favour of March was duly received, and it was then my intention to comply with your request as

soon as I could. I had much on hand that needed attention, but a longer time has elapsed than I intended, ere I should make the attempt to reply.

Without further apology, I remark, I was born in Lycoming Co. (now Clinton), Pa., on the banks of the Susquehanna, West Branch, on the First of Aug., 1811. The house that my father built shortly before his marriage is still standing, and is the home of my youngest sister, now in her 78th year. I am the youngest of eleven children, all of whom, with one exception, lived till mature life, and five of whom are still living. My father was a farmer, and settled there before the revolutionary war, and was among the number of those who composed what was called "The Big Runaway." His father was killed by the Indians, while peaceably engaged on his farm; yet the Indians had no warmer friend than my father, one evidence of which was his anxiety, when I offered myself as a Foreign Missionary, that I should be sent to the Indians in our own country.

I worked on the farm till my eighteenth year, and part of the time till in my 21st year, studying and preparing for college with our Pastor, Rev. J. H. Grier, and, in part, privately. I went to college in Washington, Pa. (now "Washington and Jefferson College"), and entered the freshman, half advanced, and graduated in two and a half years, in the fall of 1834. Four of our class of twelve still live; one, the Hon. Wm. Russel, who has been in congress, who also received the first honours; the other two, with myself, are in the ministry. During my junior and senior year, I kept bachelor's hall, as more economical than boarding, though boarding could then be had for $1.50 a week, and in the club it cost a dollar a week. It cost me thirty-seven and a half cents a week, during the first winter, when alone—coal, 31¼; light, 6¼; washing, 25; but when my brother, J. J. Hamilton, now also in the ministry, came from the plow to get an education, our boarding cost us seventy-five cents a week. I gained one year, and he gained two and half, going with two classes from the start. By boarding ourselves we had more quietness and more time to study, and needed less exercise, our principal food being bread and butter and milk, with occasionally a taste of meat, or some little delicacy, such as apple-butter. My brother, though keeping up with two classes, had no equal in mathematics, while he was doubtless the equal of the others in the other branches. At the request of the class,

no honours were given. Four in my class participated in the honours, the second honour being divided between two. If I may be pardoned for referring to self, as illustrating how some things were done, I may say that I told the one who got the third honour how to parse all his words in Greek, and wrote his Greek speech for him, which he drew by lot, and could not write one sentence in Greek correctly. Then, as a little amusement, I wrote my last composition in Greek Sapphic verse, and exchanged with the other member for criticism—S. L. Russel—but he did not go into the room to criticise, but asked me to exchange on the portico, and the professor readily excused him when I told him of the manner of exchanging. This was near fifty years ago, and is mentioned simply as illustrating how some things were done.

As my father was unable to do more for me I at once engaged in teaching in Wheeling, Va., but as the bully of Wheeling undertook to cowhide me for whipping his boy—quite a youth—and was laid up himself under the doctor's care, and it produced quite an excitement (those were the days of slavery), I did not stay long though all the virtuous part of the town sustained me. I left and went to the seminary at Pittsburgh, or Allegheny. Do not suppose I carried any *deadly weapons,* this I have never felt it necessary to do even in the Indian country. At the seminary I boarded in a private family and taught three children three hours a day for my board and a room in the attic. Having a prospect of a school in Louisburg, Pa., I went home in January, 1835, and taught school in Bellefonte, Pa., for over two years, studying divinity privately while teaching, and was licensed to preach by the Presbytery of Northumberland in the spring of 1837, and returned to the seminary, resuming the studies with the class I had been with. During the summer I was accepted by the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions as their missionary, and was married to Miss Julia Ann N. McGiffin, daughter of Thomas McGiffin, Esq., of Washington, Pa.; went back to my parents, was ordained in October, 1837, by the same Presbytery of Northumberland, and started west on my journey by stage, taking near a week to reach Pittsburgh. This we left on the 30th of October, 1837, and reached Liberty Landing on Saturday, November 18th, having been on the way nearly a month (from Pittsburgh), and more than a month from my home in Pennsylvania, and traveling from St. Louis to a point where Glasgow now stands, by stage. We had 86 miles yet to go to

reach the place of our future labors. Forty-five miles of that was on horse back to the old agency nine miles below East Black Snake Hills, where St. Joseph now stands. This we reached on the 27th of December, and were detained at the agency on account of there being no way to cross the Missouri River till it should freeze. From the agency to St. Joseph I footed it, while my wife and a little Indian girl and white girl in Mr. Ballard's family rode a-horseback. The ice was only strong enough to cross on foot, and we waited till the trader bought a mule from an Indian, and hiring it and an Indian pony, my wife rode the mule and the two girls rode the pony, while I took it afoot. We had twenty-five miles to go to reach the Indians on Wolf creek, and night overtook us at Musquito creek, still seven or eight miles from our place of destination. As it was intended for us to get through, no provision was made for camping out, or for dinner, supper, or breakfast. It was very dark, and knowing nothing of the road we encamped on that stream, and I spent most of the night in cutting wood, having an axe in my saddlebags, in which I fixed a temporary handle. The next morning we started breakfastless, and reached Wolf creek about eleven o'clock. The water at the ford lacked only three or four inches of coming over the pony's back and the bank was very miry, and not till near four o'clock did we get over, all getting wet. Fortunately, though it was the 29th of December, it was for the time of year moderate, or we might have perished. Mr. Irvin and wife were there in a log shanty, and we were most kindly received by them and shared their hospitality till we could fix up the other end of the log house for our home. He had a small quantity of flour and we got some corn and beef from the trader at Iowa Point, six miles away, when it was issued to the Indians. I walked this six miles on one occasion and ground corn on a hand-mill as long as it was prudent to stay, and carried the meal home on my back. On another occasion I went to Fort Leavenworth, fifty-one miles, to take the borrowed mule home, expecting to cross there and go thirty miles further to reach St. Jo. that now is, over eighty miles, to get to a place only twenty-five miles from the mission, and return the same way, but when I got to the fort the cold of the preceding night rendered the river uncrossable on account of the ice. About sundown, when I was near twenty miles from the garrison, though I then knew nothing of the distance, there came up

suddenly what would now be called a blizzard, and it seemed as if I must perish if I had not had a buffalo robe on my saddle which a trader, who traveled with us from St. Louis, when we left him at Fayett, gave to Mrs. H., saying we might need it. The next day I started back, having obtained a sack of flour at the garrison through the kindness of Gen. Kearney, and got home on the third night near midnight, having had to break the ice to cross Wolf creek. It was February before we got our trunks, and then I had to make another trip, which took ten days. During this absence my wife and Mr. Irvin and wife had the pleasure of trying to live on the siftings of corn meal. But I need not go further into particulars, as this is a specimen of much of a similar nature. The Iowas then numbered about 800 souls, and the Missouri Sacs about 500. I do not suppose fifty of those then living are alive now. It was a common thing for them to continue their drunken sprees for days together, or till they had killed some of their own number, when they would swear off, as it was called, for a certain number of days, but before the expiration of the allotted time some would break over the rule, and then it was like one sheep going to water, a signal for all to follow. I spent over fifteen years of my missionary life among them, and Mr. Irvin, who had kept a diary, told me some time before I left that they had then in their drunken sprees murdered about sixty of their own number, while not one was killed by any other tribe, though they killed others in cold blood. At first they were very jealous of us, thinking we came to trade, and when told that was not our object they told us we might then go home as they could conceive of no higher object. They, however, became our warm friends, and generally came to us when in a difficulty. I was once waylaid, as the interpreter told me, by the head chief, a very bad man, when I had gone to mill and was returning after night. I however took a different road near his house without knowing why, and thus avoided him. We had also been under their consultation when they wished to commit murder, but they crossed the river and shot a white man in the bottom. No-Heart, when a little drunk, told Mr. Irvin that we should not die—a remark not understood at the time—but plain enough when we heard of the shooting across the river. All this happened before the purchase of this country in 1854. I had a pistol and bowie knife drawn on me by a white man who had been blacksmith, and was then farmer, who

was burnt in Texas for shooting the prosecuting attorney in court, confessing at the stake the murder of several whites and Indian James Dunham.

I was transferred from the Iowa and Sac mission on Wolf river, to the Otoe and Omaha mission at Bellevue, Neb., in 1853, reaching Bellevue on the 6th of June, that year. During that summer Col. Manypenny visited them with a view to getting their consent to sell a portion of their lands. They had a long council and hardly seemed to know what was best for them to do, but they were all very particular to tell him that they were chiefs and that their fathers were chiefs. Their agent, Major Gatewood, was ordered to bring a delegation to Washington with a view to making a treaty. He at once proceeded to call councils and made treaties with the Otoes and Omahas, which I believe was noticed when he reached Washington. He was a man who felt the dignity of his office, and sometimes was ready to be advised, as was illustrated by his giving his report to the printer at St. Mary's to print him some copies for government to save the trouble of writing them. The printing was done, and as the type was set, it was much easier to make that report a part of his next issue, than to distribute it and set up new matter; so the public got the report of the agent before the agent reached Washington, who started to carry his own report to headquarters, being, I presume, called there on business.

Col. Peter A. Sarpy had much to do with making these Gatewood treaties, but to his credit be it said, that when they had made choice of their present reserve, he earnestly opposed the agents trying to get them to to go the Blue with the Otoes. With all his faults he had a kind heart, and was a warm friend to the Indians, as is evidenced by his helping them when in need, and leaving to his faithful wife a legacy of two hundred dollars a year, while those who have inherited his wealth have for years tried to keep her out of her just dues. In fact, it has only been obtained for some years by employing a lawyer to collect it. This has been the case only since the death both of John B. Sarpy and his son.

After the treaty was made and the Indians supposed they had a home of their own choice at Blackbird Hills, they were kept in doubt for some time while efforts were made to get them to go elsewhere, and it was only when the facts were laid before the Hon. Walter Lowrie, Sec. of the Pres. Board of Missions, and he went to Washing-

ton and laid the whole matter first before the Commissioner of I. Aff., then before the Sec. of the Interior, then before the Sec. of War, and finally before President Pierce, that with a resolute stamp on the floor, he said, "I say they shall go there."

I could relate many things in connection with the treatment of the Indians that ought to make us, as a nation, blush, but it would require a book to tell all I have witnessed of fraud practiced upon them, and by many persons things that I have personally known to be true would now hardly be believed. Much has been written on the Indian problem, but there is only one way of solving the problem that has troubled so many wise heads; that is, to give them the Gospel, and if possible, in their own language, and civilization will follow or go along with equal pace. The policy of teaching them English is well enough, but the idea of driving their own language out of their minds may do to talk about, but will not be done in many generations. Even the few who seem to understand our language as well as we do ourselves (only a few) prefer speaking in their own. Their mode of thought is so different from the English, and I might say, from all modern European languages, that it is a great barrier to their acquiring our language perfectly. It must be a work of time, and while they are instructed in the English, the great truths of the Gospel must be heard in their "own language wherein they were born." With this instruction in religion and the education of the young, strict justice on the part of our government should be done to them. They have rights that seem to have been little respected.

Although I seemed to offend an agent forty-six years ago by saying the whites would have this country before long, and I could not believe what he so confidently asserted again and again, that they could not, for it was set apart *forever for the Indians*, yet time has shown that what he could not then believe has almost literally come to pass. When the treaty was ratified, it was not long till great numbers were seeking a home in what was thought, not a century ago, to be a desert country, and only fit for the huntings grounds of the Indians. When I came west in 1837 most of Iowa was unsettled and owned by Indians, and the buffalo roamed over it, there being a few settlements on the Mississippi. I have seen all west of the Missouri settled up, and I might say, as far south as Arkansas. When asked in an early day how far my diocese extended, I replied, I supposed

north to the forty-ninth degree of latitude, and west to the summit of the Rocky mountains, as at that time I knew of no other Presbyterian minister within these bounds. Rev. Dunbar had been among the Pawnees, but had left. The population of the United States did not at that time exceed fifteen millions of souls. Now what do we see? Churches and schools all over this then Indian country and a population of fifty-five millions.

In the early settlement of Neb. there was much excitement and some bloodshed, but the greatest excitement was about the location of the capital, as on that depended the future wealth of many, as they supposed. Had Governor Burt lived, it was his intention to examine the country, and then place the capital where it would be most beneficial to the territory, not to the individual or himself, though he was a poor man and in debt. I suppose I was better acquainted with him than any others, except those who came with him to the territory. He was remarkable for his kindness of heart and his sterling integrity, as those who came with him testified and as I could bear witness to, as far as I knew him. His kindness led him to listen to the proffered advice of those who came to consult about their own interest, when he should have enjoyed perfect quietness. His state of health required this, and I was anxious to secure it for him, but the people would not let him rest. I might almost say he was worried to death. I feared the consequences from the first, but caution was of no avail to those who hoped to get rich by his deciding according to their wishes. The end came, and it does not seem a harsh judgment to say, that to some it did not seem to be regretted. After his death, and before his remains had left the Mission, plans were made, and arrangements made to carry out those plans, to place the capital at Bellevue. These plans were talked over in the room where the corpse was lying, while I was opening the zinc coffin to fill it with alcohol and soldering it up again. The talk was intended to be blind, but I understood it well enough. It was between the acting Gov. Cumming, and a man called Judge Green, who had before asked me the price of the mission reserve, four quarter sections. The plan was to purchase it of the Board of F. Missions and then locate the capital there. Three or perhaps four were interested in this plan, the acting Gov., the aforesaid judge, and a Mr. Gilmore. Judge Green was to ostensibly accompany the corpse to S. C., but to go to New York when the di-

verging point was reached and make the purchase. Judge Green had told me that he would give $25,000 in gold for it, saying he did not wish me to think he was rich, but he could command the money in gold. I had asked fifty thousand for the reserve. He went to N. Y. and agreed with the Hon. Walter Lowrie to give the fifty thousand, but asked sixty days to consider. He was to telegraph at the end of that time. He did not telegraph as agreed, and Mr. Gilmore, who was then living in Omaha, told me it was at *his advice* that he did not telegraph, saying it was the *pressure*, the *pressure* meaning they could not borrow the money. The next move was to get bids, not from Bellevue alone, but from the different towns that wanted the capital. The Bellevue Land Claim Association promised liberally, but none had as yet titles to what they promised, only claims. Judge Ferguson then came to me and said everything was now arranged to secure the capital at Bellevue, except one thing. The L. C. A. had promised liberally, but acting Gov. Cumming asked one hundred acres of the mission reserve, and he assured me that if that was given, the capital would be placed at Bellevue. I replied without hesitation, not one foot to the man, but was willing to recommend the giving of it to the county or territory. This, I suppose, decided the matter. Some years after, when conversing with Judge Briggs about the amount Omaha was taxed for the capitol and R. R., I said, all of Bellevue could have been purchased for a trifle of what they had paid out to secure these things for Omaha, and then they would have been independent. He admitted the fact, and added, "we are not done yet." I have never regretted my refusal, though some of the citizens blamed me, but our Board never blamed me.

Though Bellevue is, I think, the most beautiful town site on the Missouri river that I have seen, and I have seen many, it is a very small place yet, though for years Omaha seemed to fear it; they have now grown beyond the fear of it, and, I think, are now taking a lively interest in the Synodical College located there. That, if successful, will be of far more advantage than the capital. It has lost none of its beauty or natural advantages, and if Omaha goes on according to expectations, it may soon be a part of Omaha. One wiser than mere man has ordered all things well. But I need not dwell on what is recorded elsewhere. This fall will complete fifty years since I graduated, and a great change has taken place in our country since

then. When a boy the mail was carried on horseback between Williamsport, twenty miles east, and Bellefonte, thirty miles west; now there is a railroad on each side of the river, and also a canal on one side. It was a winter's job to tramp out the grain with horses, taking a week to thresh and clean from 80 to 100 bushels of wheat. The first thresher in that country was built by one of the best farmers, and by hard work they could thresh 90 bushels in a day, and clean it the next day. Harvests were cut by the old-fashioned cradle, and mowing done with the scythe; often the old-fashioned Dutch scythe, which was sharpened by hammering instead of on a grindstone. Perhaps I should except the machinery of the whisky bottle, without which it was thought the harvest could not be cut. The first harvest of my father's cut without whisky, my brother and I told him if he would not have any whisky we would cut the harvest. We did it, and the bottle was never necessary after that. I need not speak of how these things are now done. Our school books were Webster's Spelling Book, the New Testament next, and at times the Old Testament, then Scotch Lessons, and afterwards Murray's English Reader. I think as good scholars were then made as they make now with all the change of books. We could not buy ruled paper, but ruled our paper with a hammered lead pencil. I never attended Sabbath school except as a teacher, as there were none in that part of the country. But if I may return to the early history of the Indians, near fifty years ago, the contrast is almost as great. I then saw a man riding a horseback, and his wife walking and carrying a load, and the little girls also carrying something, and boys, if there were any, carrying a bow and arrows. Before I left the Iowas, I saw the wife on the horse, and the man walking. The same may be said of the Omahas. Now it is quite common to see the man and his wife riding together in a wagon. Then, the women packed their wood, often three miles, on their backs —that was in summer; now it is hauled in wagons, the men generally doing the work when able. Then, when not on the hunt, they were, when sober, either playing ball or cards, or some other games; now they are engaged in farming. True, they keep up their dances, i. e. the heathen part, but generally take the Sabbath for them, as they pretend they work on other days, but they also work on the Sabbath. The members of the church attend meeting, and often others; and I have often gone from Decatur to the Mission through storm, when most

of the whites thought it too stormy to attend church, and found a house full of attentive listeners. The Omahas are on their farms, and a large portion of the potatoes and corn brought in to Decatur comes from the Reserve. They raise a good deal of wheat, many of them breaking each year about five acres of fresh prairie to add to their farms. The prairie breaking that I have seen I think is far ahead of what the whites do. One Indian told me that a white man offered him a half dollar an acre more than he was willing to give a white man, because he did it so much better. Some of them have built houses, purchasing the pine lumber and hiring Indian carpenters to do the work. And I must say that the houses put up by the Indians are better and more substantial than those put up for them by Agent Painter. The Omahas are also increasing in numbers, and are a sober people.. I have seen but one drunken Omaha in over fifteen years, and he could talk English. Although a large part of them keep up their old superstitious habits, they always listen to me when I visit them at their homes, and seem often to be interested. Occasionally, some one may make some objections, but a few kind words overcome their objections, and they listen to the truth. Last Sabbath I stopped at White Horse's, and found the door shut and no answer to my knocking. I passed on a couple of hundred yards, and was talking to some Winnebagos, who were stopping there, when his wife came and inquired what I wanted, and when I told her I was teaching the Indians, she said her husband wanted me to go back and teach them. They were in another part of the house. There are over sixty members in the church now, besides a number have died and some in triumph of faith. It is over thirty years since I left the Iowas, and they have greatly diminished, as have the Otoes and Sacs. Whisky has been their ruin. The Pawnees, too, have greatly diminished, less than one-third what they were fifty years ago, perhaps not a fourth or even a fifth of their number. So have the Poncas. According to their history, when they first came to the Niobrara they encamped in three circles instead of one, on account of one circle requiring so much space—numbering not less than three thousand souls. The Omahas encamped in two circles. The Poncas were hunters while the Omahas cultivated some patches. The tradition is that the Omahas, Poncas, Iowas, and Otoes came from the south-east, from below St. Louis, and crossed the Mississippi near that; while

the Quapaw, tradition is, that they were also with them, but separated there, they going south or below (their way of expressing south), while the others went up or north—up signifying north, as the streams flowed from that direction. They traveled on till they reached the Vermillion. There they made a village, and after a time kept on north on the other side of the Missouri river, till they went some distance up that stream, and then crossed it and came down on this side, the Otoes and Iowas going before. When they reached the Ne-o-brara (the correct way of spelling it), the Poncas staid there, and the others came on down, and the others eventually went still further down, while the Omahas stayed at Omaha creek, and, at times, on the Elkhorn or at the Blackbird Hills, and eventually at Bellevue. They think it must have been as much as 300 years ago. When they first came to this country there were some other Indians roaming over it, but not Sioux. They did not hear of the Sioux for a long time. There were some battles among them; and the Omahas raised some vegetables, as corn and beans, and the Poncas traded meat for corn, etc., with the Omahas.

There is no doubt that the Osages, Kansas or Kaws, Quapaws, Omahas, Poncas, Otoes, Iowas, Winnebagoes, and the different bands of Sioux were formerly one people, and to these might be added the Mandans and Hedatse, and perhaps others, as their language shows, the Osage being the most guttural and the others as named less so, yet they need an interpreter to talk together, except the Iowas and Otoes, and Omahas and Poncas, and Osages and Kaws. The Chippewas, Pottawattomies, Kickapoos, Sauks (Sacs) and Foxes, Weas, Peorias, Peankeshaws, Kaskaskias, and, I think, Shawnees, show a common origin. No resemblance between the languages of this latter class and the former. The Pawnee is again different; but a mountain tribe, I think the Crees, show a resemblance; and a tribe far in the north, above the Yellowstone, in language resemble the Sacs. The Missourians were slaves to the Osages, but ran off and came to the Otoes, and became mingled with them, and have nearly lost their own language, only a few old people speaking it; but while they speak the Otoe, it is with a peculiar manner, showing it is not their native tongue, speaking very slowly, as if they were not yet familiar with it to speak it as the Otoes. The Pawnees seem to have come originally from the south-west, near Mexico.

The Indians do not worship idols as many heathen, that is carved idols or images, but are idolaters in the true sense of the word, but the idol is more in the mind and they apply the name of God to many things or ideas—different gods for different things. Wakanda in Omaha, Ponca, etc. Wakanta in Iowa, Otoe, and so forth. Waka-tangka in Sioux, which really is the great or war god, Tangka, Sioux, tangga, Omaha, tanra, Iowa, signifying great. Waka is snake in Iowa and Otoe, and uda is good in Omaha, perhaps good snake, as pe is good in Iowa, and peskunya is bad, or not good, while uda is good in Omaha, but pe-azhe in Omaha is not good, showing the pe retained in the negative. Great Spirit is introduced, I have no doubt by the whites, as the only idea of spirit is the spirit of a person. Moleto or moneto is the name of God in the Sac and kindred languages, and a Sac interpreter told me it meant big snake. Is there in this something handed down from the fall? I have discovered I think traces of the creation and flood among the Iowas. It is quite a long story. The Chippeways invented a system of writing and taught some Kickapoos, and a few Sacs learned it from them, but it must have been formed from the English, as the letters resemble the English considerably though the sounds are different, using sixteen letters, four of which are vowels. The Sac language is as musical as the Greek. The Winnebagoes use a term for God signfying the maker of the earth, but also the same nearly as the Iowas. There is a tradition that a part of the Iowas left the tribe and went off to hunt sinews and never returned, and lost their language, and that the lost ones are the Winnebagoes. But perhaps I have given you enough, or too much. If in any thing I have not been full enough, if you will ask questions I will try to answer them. I have printed down just such things as came into my mind, and as you will see not in very regular order, but you may get some ideas from this hasty sketch that will suit you. I do not write a plain hand unless I write slowly, and in the caligraph I sometimes get in a hurry. I often think of you and remember your kindness. Remember me kindly to your family.

Yours truly,

WM. HAMILTON.

I wrote without referring to the circular, and since looking at it, find there are some things I can answer, as sources of streams, but may

not be able for a week or so. Though poor and often without a cent I would be ashamed to ask pay of you for contributing what I can.

Yours truly,

May 26th, 1884. WM. HAMILTON,