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Early Fremont

E. H. Barnard

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flicted with severe rheumatism and resigned my office as pastor of this church. I suggested that some younger man might be more useful. October 1, Rev. James B. Chase became our pastor. He continued so for two years. In January, 1872, Roswell Foster became our pastor. He continued so for three years and some months. During his pastorate we enlarged our church building, by adding twenty-two feet to the north end. In January, 1876, Rev. George Porter became our pastor, and continued so for a year and a half. Our present pastor, Rev. A. T. Swing, commenced labor with us February 1, 1878.

EARLY FREMONT.*

BY HON. E. H. BARNARD.

When in the early autumn of 1856, from the bluffs near Elkhorn City, my eye first beheld this portion of the great Platte valley, I thought I had never seen so goodly a landscape. For many miles the windings of the Elkhorn and Platte rivers were outlined by a fringe of timber, bounding the valley on either side, while the meanderings of the now classic Rawhide were as distinctly traceable by an occasional tree and clump of bushes. The sight filled me with rapture and made the blood fairly bound in my veins. In all my life I had never seen its like and I never expect to again. Here was this grand, and beautiful, and fertile country, spread out like a map at my feet. And what made it more fascinating was the fact that it was *unoccupied* except by Indians and wild beasts. What wonder that those who saw this valley then should be seized with a strong desire, as was Moses of old, to go in and possess the land.

Well, we went in, a few of us, and just here the *poetry* of this narrative ends. Instead of the flesh pots of Egypt, made ready and awaiting us, we found hardships and privations on every hand. Nobody had been in advance to build us houses and dig us wells, to lay out roads and build bridges, school houses, and churches; nor men to plant groves for us. We had all these things to do for ourselves. The man who has a good house to live in while he builds a better one, does a good thing, but he who builds a shelter while he is himself

*Read at the farewell service held in the Old Church, June 21, 1884, first printed in the *Fremont Tribune*; reprinted by permission.

unsheltered does quite a different thing, and just *that* the first settler always has to do in a new country. Everything had to be done in the way of building before we were ready to begin to live, and all the while we were preyed upon most persistently by flies and gnats in the daytime and fleas and mosquitoes by night. Insect life was animated and held high carnival, and I can assure you there is quite a difference between the music of the festive mosquito just outside the screen, and the same voice, and bill, too, on the rim of one's ear, as some of you may know. Well, we didn't have screens then, nor any place to hang them either, which was worse. And further, besides all these impediments and pull-backs, we had the Indians to pacify. All this, however, was to have been expected, and as long as money held out to buy provisions with we were content. The first human habitation, so far as is known, was built upon the very spot where a part of this church now stands. I say human habitation because it sheltered men; but you may regard it as an inhuman place to live in when I tell you that it was built of logs, about 12x16 feet, and covered with hay. It was occupied first as a boarding house and afterward as a hotel, furnishing lodging to as many as fifteen or sixteen persons on one occasion over night. Such was the first cabin. In due time it gave place to this church edifice, and now that we are to remove this old building from this site, how fitting that a monumental church should be erected in its place, thus marking for generations to come the precise spot where that first cabin stood.

I had intended to relate some experiences with the Indians, who were more or less troublesome all of that autumn, but I forbear as that would prolong my narrative too far for this warm morning.

The winter which followed was one of great severity, and a large proportion of the stock which had been brought into the settlement in the fall, having nothing to eat but hay, mostly cut in October after it had been struck by the frost, perished.

I well remember that of the eight oxen brought here by Mr. Heaton, or perhaps I might better say, that brought him and his effects here, three survived. And here I want to relate a little incident. One of the most respected citizens, then as now, built a sled, an ox-sled, rather large as it was intended to haul house logs on, and as the weather was bad he was delayed in his work so that the vehicle was not completed until perhaps midwinter. When all was ready he

hitched his oxen to it, but by that time the snow was so deep and the oxen had become so poor and weak and the sled was so heavy that they were unable to stir it out of its place. How handy it would have been if he could have had a span of those fat, powerful Percheron horses, of which Fremont now boasts, to put in their places. But then we didn't have Percheron horses.

During the winter provision had to be brought from Omaha through snowdrifts that were well-nigh impassable. It used to take a week to make the round trip, and sometimes longer. On one occasion, towards spring, when there was a crust on the snow strong enough to bear the weight of a man in most places, a couple of sacks of flour were brought over from Fontenelle on a hand sled to piece out until our regular supplies could be got from Omaha. The winter was tedious, both in its monotony and its weather. But in the spring all was bustle and stir in the settlement; every man felt well and was full of courage and hope. Considerable prairie was broken up in time for planting corn, of which there was, very providentially, a good sod crop raised and harvested. The corn was of the variety familiarly known as squaw corn, because it was cultivated by squaws before we came. It was similar to Yankee or Canada corn, except that the kernel was softer. It was of all colors, and when ground or beaten into meal was the most perfect specimen of variegated colors imaginable.

This corn, while it was good for food, could not, at that time, be sold for cash, nor even traded for other provisions, for the simple reason that there was not any cash or provisions in the country demanding it. It had a value, however. It was good to donate to the minister and for some other purpose. I have been thus particular in describing this corn because it was destined soon to become the staple article of diet in the little hamlet. If it had not been for that crop of corn there is no knowing what would have become of the colony. The settlement must have been retarded if not scattered permanently. This may seem strange to the present well-fed inhabitants of this prosperous little city, but it should be remembered that like most first settlers in a new country, the first here were, for the most part, poor in this world's goods, and it will be readily seen that the expenses incident to building houses and buying everything needed for a year's subsistence and without any income whatever, were con-

siderable, so that it was not strange that the second winter found most of the settlers with very lean or quite empty purses. One man who had spent all, applied to his grocer in Omaha for credit on a supply of groceries until he could raise another crop. He got for answer that groceries were cash; but the merchant very kindly offered to furnish dry goods on time, but dry goods were not wanted. Our friend came home without either, and with Puritanic firmness sternly determined to stay and go without until such time as he could buy for cash. That man was E. H. Rogers, afterward and for many years cashier and presiding genius of the First National Bank of Fremont. How he and his family luxuriated on corn meal that season I leave you to imagine.

I well remember the case of two families, father and son, living in one house on corn meal alone for several weeks, until toward spring their cow, taking compassion on them, graciously consented to add the luxury of fresh milk to their diet. I say luxury because I mean it. The necessities of life are really very few, or as a certain ex-judge of this county once expressed it, they are mostly imaginary. People sometimes become discontented and complain of hard times, simply because they are not quite as well off as some of their neighbors. They think they are frugal and saving. What would they think of a regular diet of corn meal and salt, with variations, and plenty of good water three times a day for 90 days or so?

One thing is evident, if the early settlers of Fremont are not all in comfortable circumstances it is not for want of enforced lessons in practical economy, for they certainly had them and plenty of them, and fully illustrated.

A little anecdote may serve as a pointer and to illustrate the style of those days. A small boy recently transplanted from a home in Western New York had taken his place at table and was about to begin his repast, when his grandma told him he hadn't said grace. The little fellow looked up in his surprise and impatience and said: "I don't see what we have to give thanks for; we live in beggar houses and eat beggar victuals, and have to sit on old trunks and three-legged stools instead of chairs." He couldn't see it and the old lady had to perform that duty for him.

In June, 1857, with many others came a man with three P's, which being interpreted read, poverty, providence, and pluck. He reached

the little hamlet of log cabins, on foot—worn, dusty, and penniless—as did many others. He at once sought and found a place where he could work for his board—and such board—until he could do better. Well, he managed by hook and by crook to keep soul and body together and by the next spring had succeeded in borrowing money enough from some friend East to buy a breaking team consisting of two yoke of oxen and a plow, but before he had turned a furrow the Indians stole three of his oxen, and while searching for them the other ox strayed off, so he lost all—and had the borrowed money to pay. That was a little discouraging, wasn't it? He might have sat down and wrung his hands and prated that the world was against him, or he might have packed his knapsack and gone off cursing the country, but he did neither. He stayed and kept at it. That man to-day is the head of one of the great commercial houses of this city and a bank president—Theron Nye.

About the same time a family settled here from one of the Western states. The ladies, some of them, called upon the new-comer, as you know ladies do sometimes, and the hostess informed them that she had not been accustomed to such society, nor to living in such houses with such furniture. "Why," she said, "where I came from we had our houses painted on the inside and had painted furniture, too." As if the ladies of Fremont at that day never had seen paint. The next spring there was a rush of travel to Pike's Peak, and this very woman had tacked up on her house a sign which read, "Buter for Sale Here." She was believed to be the first codfish aristocrat of Fremont—she doesn't live here now. I have spoken thus of the humble beginnings, of the hardships, and the poverty and self-denial of those early days, which are in such marked contrast to the affluence and luxury of the present—that the disheartened and unfortunate may take courage by knowing what others have had to endure, that the lavish may learn to save, that the haughty, if there are any such, may be humble, and that *all* may *remember* not to despise the day of small things.