

Reminiscence of an Old Settler - Benjamin Winchester

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Reminiscence of an Old Settler.

"Thirty-five years ago to-morrow I took the first family across the Missouri river from this city that ever settled in Omaha," remarked Mr. Benjamin Winchester as he stepped into THE BEE office yesterday morning.

"Anyone would scarcely believe it, to look at that wonderful city to day; but it is a fact that on the morning of July 25, 1854, there was not a dwelling or shanty of any kind where Omaha now stands, and now they claim a population of 140,000 people. It hardly seems possible, but the old settlers here have witnessed some astonishing changes.

"I came to the Bluffs that same spring, landing here on the 17th of May. It was about that time that the old ferry company organized, and they wanted me to go across the river and start a brick yard. The result was that on the 25th of July I took a family named Duell over there to board my help. We put up a little shanty on the prairie somewhere southwest of Steele & Johnson's and that was the first building erected there. At that time there was not a sign of human habitation nearer than where Florence is now, and there were only a couple of miserable dugouts up there. To the south and west there was not a trace of civilization.

"All around where the center of the city is now was a heavy growth of grass, and I used to cut fodder for my horses down around where the postoffice is now located. Back among the hills was a growth of scrubby timber, and off to the south was a lot of pretty fair sized trees. There wasn't a thing to indicate that in a few years those hills would be covered with handsome and substantial business blocks, from four to ten stories high, in the center of one of the most prosperous cities in the country.

"Well, to go on with my part of it: We made all our preparations, and after a while I burned my first kiln of about seventy-five thousand brick there. It so happened that it was the last one. You see, the ferry company claimed a tract of land a mile square, and there were several parties who had gone over from the Bluffs and staked out claims back from the river, and the tract claimed by the ferry company cut into some of them. These parties did not live on their claims, but the proposed to hold them just the same, and they swore that if they couldn't hold it there should be nothing done there. I intended going right along with my brickmaking, but they begun to break up everything and I had to quit. Duell only stayed a little while, and then started west to find a tract of land that suited him, and I got Bill Snowden to take his place. His was the second family in Omaha, and I guess he is there yet.

The squatters were determined to run me out, and I had a pretty tough time of it. One day I took over two chain pumps and set them up, but that night they turned in and smashed them to pieces. I had a canvas top made for my kiln by some woman on this side, and I took it over and stretched it in place. I had an old fellow employed to watch the kiln, but he was so blind that he couldn't see six feet from his nose. Well, the squatters made a visit one night to destroy the canvas top. They cut the ropes on one side, and that startled the watchman. He started after them with an axe, but they kept running around the kiln, cutting and slashing as they went, and in a little while the canvas was cut up so that they could pick it up and carry it off, and the left the watchman still chasing around the kiln with his axe, too blind to fully understand what was going on.

At that time Dr. Lowe, Dr. Ballard, Sam Bayliss and Jim Jackson were all here, members of the ferry company, and they wanted me to try to keep along. Dr. Lowe offered me the whole block between Thirteenth and Fourteenth streets, opposite Milton Rogers' place, if I would stay, but I told him I could not put up with it, as they were cutting me to pieces, and I was losing what little money I had.

"The upshot of the whole matter was that they bought me out, and I parted with my property at quite a sacrifice. I then went back to Pittsburg and got my family. The railroad only came as far as Rock Island, and it took two or three weeks to cross the state. When I got back, Omaha had experienced her first boom, and there were six or eight little houses there. I remained on this side of the river and went into the brick business, and burned all the brick that went into the older buildings in this city.

"My experience on the other side of the river was quiet varied and often exciting. One day we started out to mow a swath around the ferry company's land with a scythe, and we killed sixteen rattlesnakes in going around that mile tract. There were plenty of fights with squatters, and hardly a week passed that we didn't have a dead man to carry back across the river. When they had the McHenry fight, down at Bellevue, here were two killed, and we brought them over to the Bluffs for burial. Indians were not scarce in those days, and settlers were killed by them every little while. They would make a raid occasionally, and give the squatters a red hot fight. I tell you, those were exciting times, and I don't want to see them repeated. It doesn't seem so very long to look back over those thirty-five years, but when I look around and see what has been accomplished in that time, I can scarcely comprehend it. It seems as if it must be a dream, but the evidences of progress on every side are altogether too real for imagination. Yes, sir, all these changes are bounded by a period of thirty-five years."