

# Captain Thomas Drummond

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Thos. Drummond

## CAPTAIN THOMAS DRUMMOND.

BY CHARLES ALDRICH.

[This paper was read before the Pioneer Law-makers Association in Des Moines, February 15, 1894.]

The first time I ever saw an Iowa Legislature in session was in the month of February, 1858. I was then living in Webster City, Hamilton county, where I had started *The Freeman* newspaper the previous summer. That winter was an open one, there being little snow. A fellow townsman, Hon. Walter C. Wilson, a member of the preceding Legislature—the last which met in Iowa City—drove across the country in a light open wagon, carrying Mr. George Smith, another early settler and myself. The most of the way coming down, we traveled over the prairie, four or five miles east of the road, which followed the sinuosities of the timber belt the greater part of the way. The usual autumnal fires had swept over the prairies and the ground was bare and quite smooth. Mr. Wilson was a thorough pioneer and able to pick his way regardless of the wagon road. We reached the capital without other incident than narrowly escaping a ducking through the ice, in Squaw Fork, a deep prairie creek in the south part of Hamilton county.

At that time the only legislative body I had ever seen in session was the United States Senate, a week or two after the inauguration of President Frank Pierce. I need not say that this was an interesting experience to a pioneer editor as far from shore as Webster City was at that time.

The old Capitol—now such an interesting ruin—had not long been built, and stood in the midst of thick woods. James W. Grimes, the Ex-Governor, had been elected United States Senator but a few days before. Elijah Sells, one of the ablest men who ever filled that office, was Secretary of State. Oran Faville, of Mitchell county, a most courtly and dignified gentleman, was Lieutenant Governor. Stephen B. Shelledy, of Jasper county, was Speaker of the House. Of a few of the members of the House I have always retained very distinct impressions. Our member was Cyrus C. Carpenter, a gentleman who was heard from in other useful capacities in subsequent years. He was a young man of apparently not more than twenty-five.

George W. McCrary, of Lee, had appeared in public life for the first time. He was a young man of about twenty-two. He was smooth-faced and almost boyish in appearance, but wearing an air of seriousness and dignity that would have been most becoming in a gray-haired judge. I heard him speak briefly on some pending bill, and I recall the fact that he commanded the attention of the House.

I remember Dennis Mahony of Dubuque, quite an old man, afflicted with some nervous disorder which caused his head to shake, giving his eyes a very curious and unsteady appearance. But when he spoke, deprecatingly of certain trivial and undignified proceedings then on foot, everybody listened attentively, and the House accepted his advice.

Old Zimri Streeter of Black Hawk, was one of the characters of that House, as he was of the next one. He was a wit and a wag, with all his rude speech and lack of culture. Mahony besought a member to withdraw a resolution which had been introduced in a mere spirit of badinage. "Old Black Hawk" rose and said: "Let it be withdrawn, it has sarved its purpus." The House in-



dulged in a hearty laugh, and the resolution was speedily laid aside, the House coming down to the serious work in hand.

Belknap of Lee, was also a member, not older, perhaps, than Carpenter. Something above the medium height, red-cheeked, fair-haired, with flowing beard, he was one of those men who would attract attention in any assemblage—one you would probably turn to look back at if you passed him on the street. How he and McCreary climbed the ladder of fame in after years are matters of national history.

M. M. Trumbull, later "the hero of the Hatchie," where he won his brigadier's star, was another member who made his mark that winter, though he, too, was one of the youngest members.

Another well-remembered representative was James F. Wilson. I interviewed him in the hope of securing his support of a bill which I had brought along in my pocket, providing for the publication of the laws in two newspapers in each county. He was a slender, smoothly-shaven, neatly-dressed young man, with not much color in his face, having a half-clerical sort of look. He had won a foremost place in the Iowa Constitutional Convention of the year before, as I heard frequently mentioned. I found him somewhat conservative in expression, though inclined to know all the whys and wherefores relating to the measure.

B. F. Gue, one of the members from Scott, full-bearded, red-cheeked, fine-looking, on the hither side of 30, was a man of mark in that body.

"Ed Wright of Cedar," was as noted then for the thoroughness with which he transacted business as at any subsequent period of his life. He was the best informed man in the House on parliamentary law, and whenever that body got into a tangle, he had the address, coolness and knowledge, so necessary to straighten out the kinks.

But next to our own representative, the man of whom my memory is clearest, was Thomas Drummond of Benton county. He was then editing *The Eagle*, which was one of the best known county-seat papers in the State. Tom, as everybody called him, could not have been older than twenty-five, and he may have lacked even a year or two of that. He was of slender build, rather above the medium height; his hair was as black as a raven's wing; his complexion rather dark, and his eyes like jet; he had a bright, laughing eye, but it flashed like fire when provoked to anger. I have often heard it said that he claimed descent from Pocahontas, though I never heard him allude to the matter. I remember, however, that he was occasionally mentioned by editors with whom he had tilts, as "Mr. Pocahontas." I met him at the Scott House, a favorite boarding-place with the members. I believe it stood on the ground now occupied by the gas works. It was kept by Alexander Scott, who donated to the State a portion of the ground upon which our beautiful capitol now stands. Tom freely used what General Fitz Henry Warren afterwards called the "energetic idiom"—in fact, he "swore like a trooper." When I was first introduced to him he gave me a "piece of his mind," and with a degree of emphasis which I have never forgotten. The point was this: I had warmly supported Governor Grimes for United States Senator, believing—and I have never changed my mind on that point—that he was the greatest man in Iowa, and for that matter, in the Northwest. Tom had supported F. E. Bissell, of Dubuque, largely upon the ground that he was a *northern man*, while Grimes lived in Burlington, not far from Mt. Pleasant, the home of Senator Harlan. Tom deprecated the idea of giving all these offices to men living "down in the pocket." I did not care where the Senators lived—if they were the two ablest representative men in our State. I will not try to reproduce his language, but he gave me a "cussing" for not



"standing up" with him for a northern United States Senator. "But for you and two or three other newspaper men," said he, "we would have had a northern Senator." We both freed our minds on this topic of the day, neither convincing the other that he was wrong. I was under the distinct impression that I had "stood up." But I had a good time with Tom, and from that time until his death we were fast friends. I can scarcely account for this even now, for our habits were totally different. He was a wild youngster, indulging in sundry dissipations which I will not stop to particularize. But he was an impulsive, large-hearted, breezy, good fellow, whose eccentricities of behavior were always freely forgiven. Actions which would have irreparably ruined an average good character never affected him in the least. A cold bath in the morning banished all traces of a night's hilarities, and he came into the House in the morning in all the glory of high spirits, clear complexion, sparkling eyes and pearly teeth. Even the staid old Quaker members who only saw him on the floor, deemed him a model of all the proprieties. At the very worst, they only regarded him as a "little wild," but not more so than could be readily condoned in one whose other qualities made him so genial and companionable. He was a ready speaker and popular debater. Graceful in action, handsome in person, a born orator, thoroughly informed, as became a journalist, he was a man of mark, easily a leading member of the Legislature, as I believe he would have been of the Congress of the United States, had he been chosen to that theater of usefulness.

During this session he secured the passage of the bill for the location of the Blind Asylum at Vinton. He may be regarded as the founder of that institution, and it certainly never had a more vigilant supporter or so eloquent a defender.

At the next session—1860—Drummond came to the Senate. Unusual efforts were put forth to build the Insane Asylum at Mt. Pleasant, and it was determined by the Republican majority to suspend work for the present on the Blind Asylum, in fact, to “sit down upon Tom Drummond.” This awoke all the wrath that was in him. But his party counted its chickens before they were hatched. It had a majority of but three, including Tom Drummond. There were two members who would to-day be styled “mug-wumps.” They voted with their party when it suited them, but could not be counted on at all times. They favored the appropriation for the Blind Asylum and were opposed to the other institution, unless both should be treated alike. The Democrats stood solidly by Tom, and he was therefore able to bring things to a dead-lock. The speech he made against the proposed action of his party, and in favor of “my Blind Asylum,” as he called it, was one of the most powerful and scathing that ever woke the echoes of the old Capitol. Prominent Republicans—even Governor Kirkwood—besought Tom to give up the fight and not “block the wheels of Legislation.” But he was immovable and his friends sustained him. He boldly declared on the floor of the Senate that the Mt. Pleasant Asylum should not have a dollar, nor should any member have his per diem, unless the Blind Asylum was taken care of. He carried the day and won his point. The Senate came down from its high horse and gave him the appropriation he asked. The Blind Asylum went ahead, though the second story was unreasonably and awkwardly shortened in from the original plan, making the beautiful edifice that Tom Drummond’s foresight would have made of it, a deformity. But if it is a benefit to the city of Vinton to have that great charity within its limits, the citizens should place within its grounds an enduring monument to the memory of their first citizen in those pioneer times.



Drummond had in him all the elements of a soldier. Possibly "he was sudden and quick in quarrel." He certainly would have been had he believed himself imposed upon in any way.

"He bore anger as the flint bears fire,  
Which much enforced, shows a hasty spark,  
And straight is cold again."

But it was as a soldier that he was destined to crown his life of usefulness and end his days. As soon as the first indications of the great civil war became visible he told his friends that he was "going into it." In February, 1861, he organized a military company in Vinton—being the first man to enlist. He left for Washington the same month, some two weeks before the inauguration of President Lincoln. Very soon after reaching the Federal City he was offered a second lieutenancy in the United States regular cavalry. He was not long in reaching a captaincy, and at one time his lineal rank in the army was higher than that of Gen. Custer—and they were both in the same regiment. He was appointed lieutenant-colonel of the Fourth Iowa Cavalry, in which he served several months. Upon being mustered out of that regiment he returned to his own command only to be detailed for recruiting service, with headquarters at Cleveland, Ohio. He remained at that post, or in this duty, for over a year. But near the close of the struggle he was ordered into the field with his regiment, just in time to take his part in the battle of Five Forks, Virginia. In this engagement, when the fighting was really over, he was struck by a random shot and so severely wounded that he died during the following night. He was buried in the churchyard at Dinwiddie Court House, where his grave was seen by Cyrus C. Carpenter, afterward Governor of Iowa, who was a lieutenant-colonel and commissary of subsistence in Sherman's army which marched from Atlanta to the Sea. At the time of his death I was taking *The New York Tribune*, and

in reading the account of the battle of Five Forks, I saw the announcement that "Captain T. Drummond" had been mortally wounded and was dead. I marked and sent the paper to Honorable Frank W. Palmer, who was then publishing *The Des Moines Register*. In the issue of April 29, 1895, he printed the following paragraph:

"DEATH OF CAPTAIN DRUMMOND.—Yesterday we received a copy of a New York daily, sent to us by a friend, containing a list of the killed and wounded in Sheridan's command, during the five days' fighting preceding the fall of Richmond and surrender of Lee. The name of Captain Drummond, Fifth U. S. Cavalry, was among the officers reported as mortally wounded, and on the margin of the paper was written: '*That is our poor Tom.*' Our Iowa readers will remember Thomas Drummond, as editor of the *Vinton Eagle*, member of the House of Representatives from Benton county in the first General Assembly which convened in this city. He was subsequently elected Senator from that county and served during one session. When the war broke out, he was commissioned first Lieutenant in the Regular Army, and when the Fourth Iowa Cavalry was organized, he was commissioned as Lieutenant-Colonel. He served with the regiment several months, and was then transferred to the Fifth Regular Cavalry, in which he was promoted to the rank of Captain. This is the officer of whose death our friend now notifies us. We *hope* the information may not be well founded, but *fear* that it is. Captain Drummond had his faults—who has not? He was a devoted, self-sacrificing friend, an earnest, able advocate by tongue and pen of just principles, and a gallant defender of his country in the field. Peace to the memory of this brave Iowa soldier."

Thus perished "one of the bravest of the brave," freely giving his young life that our nation might live. He was one of the foremost of our rising Iowa politicians,



one of our most able and versatile editors, one of our clearest headed legislators. If he had glaring faults, he was also possessed of magnificent qualities of head and heart. Had he continued in civil life there can be no doubt that he would have attained higher recognition than that of State Senator. His nature was irrepressible, but his aims as a public man were praiseworthy in the highest degree. He contended for progress, improvement, education, substantial sympathy for the unfortunate classes—benevolence, charity, in their highest, noblest manifestation—sympathy for those most deeply afflicted.

I thank you for the opportunity you have given me, to place upon your records this humble tribute to my early friend. He was one whose memory should not be allowed to perish, but kept forever green in the Annals of Iowa.

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In the history of men and nations, while we remain immersed in the study of personal incidents and details, as what such a statesman said or how many men were killed in such a battle, we may quite fail to understand what it was all about, and we shall be sure often to misjudge men's characters and estimate wrongly the importance of many events. For this reason we cannot clearly see the meaning of the history of our own times. The facts are too near us; we are down among them, like the man who could not see the forest because there were so many trees. But when we look back over a long interval of years, we can survey distant events and personages like points in a vast landscape, and begin to discern the meaning of it all. In this way we come to see that history is full of lessons for us.—*Prof. John Fiske.*



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