

Elijah Sells

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ELIJAH SELLS.

BY JOHN M. DAVIS.

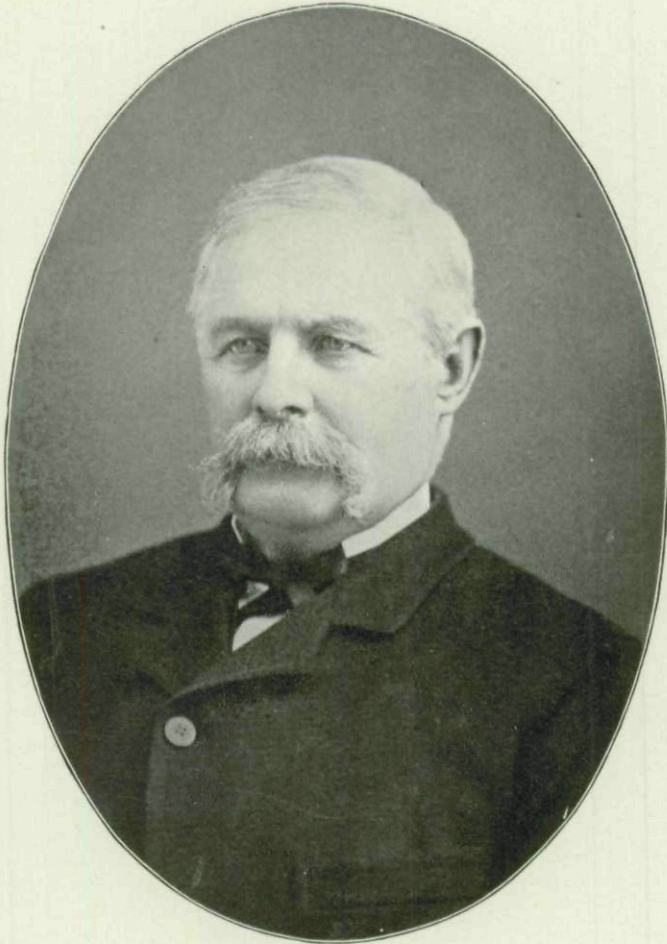
I purpose to give from personal recollection and from the best data at my command, a sketch of an Iowa pioneer who was for many years prominent in the affairs of our State; who with energy and activity seldom equalled, and with an influence truly remarkable, aided largely in moulding and establishing our laws and institutions.

Elijah Sells was born in Franklin county, Ohio, February 14, 1814. His great grandfather John Sells, from whom all the Sells in the United States and Canada descended, came from Holland in 1723. He raised five sons and one daughter. His eldest son, Ludwick, Elijah's grandfather, was born in Pennsylvania in 1743; he had five sons and three daughters, who removed from Huntington, Pennsylvania, to Franklinton, Ohio.

About the year 1800, Ludwick Sells, and his four sons purchased land on the Sciota river, about ten miles north of Franklinton, then the county seat, and now constituting a portion of Columbus, the capital of the State.

In the early settlement of Ohio, the land purchased by the Sells, was known as "Sells' settlement," and "Sells' Mill" was patronized from far and near. The center of the settlement, now the village of Dublin, was at one time a rival of the capital of the State.

William Henry Sells, Elijah's father, and the youngest of the five sons of Ludwick Sells, was a farmer and lived upon and owned the old homestead, first settled by the father. He was conscientious and upright, beloved by all, a lifelong active member of the M. E. Church and a class leader over fifty years; his hospitality was without stint, and ever most cordial was his welcome to the itinerant Methodist preachers. He died in 1872.



Youngfriend
Elijah Wells

George Ebey, Elijah's great grandfather on the maternal side, was a Revolutionary soldier under General (Mad) Anthony Wayne and was killed at the battle of Stony Point; his grandfather on the paternal side was killed at Yorktown in the last battle of the Revolutionary war. His father served in the war of 1812 under General Wm. Henry Harrison.

Elijah left his father's home in Ohio in 1833 and came to Illinois, stopping at Winchester, now the county seat of Scott county, where he engaged in manufacturing stoneware. While there he took an active part in politics as a Whig, Henry Clay being his ideal. In 1840, he was appointed chairman of the Scott county Whig Central Committee. Securing the services of William Coyle, an agent of the Washington Monument Society, and an eloquent speaker, the two with some additional aid, made a thorough canvas of the county, speaking in every neighborhood and school district and securing for the Harrison electors a decided majority, where it had always been largely democratic. In 1841, he removed to Iowa territory, stopping first at Davenport for one year, and afterwards settling in Muscatine county, where he engaged in the same manufacturing business he had pursued in Illinois.

While absent from the territory in 1844, he was nominated as a Whig candidate for delegate to the First Constitutional Convention of Iowa and was elected. The other members from his county were Ralph P. Lowe, Whig, and General Jonathan E. Fletcher, Democrat. Mr. Lowe, afterward Governor of our state, (1858-60), then in his best days, was one of the ablest men in the Convention.

In 1846, Mr. Sells was elected to the first legislature under the Constitution of that year, and served in the first and second sessions. He declined a nomination in 1850. In 1852 he was nominated for the State Senate and declined, but afterwards accepted a nomination for Representative

and was elected. In 1854 he was tendered the nomination for Secretary of State by the Whig State Central Committee, the nominee of the convention having declined, but did not accept.

At the county convention of Muscatine County, he prepared and introduced its platform, incorporating in it the Republican doctrine of "no more slave territory," declaring that the territories are the wards of the General Government and that Congress had the right to prohibit slavery therein—the first Republican platform adopted by a regularly constituted political convention in Iowa. The same principle was adopted and declared at the next Iowa Whig State Convention, and embodied in the National platform of the Republican party. At the first Republican State Convention, held in 1856 at Iowa City, Mr. Sells was nominated for Secretary of State, and elected for the term of two years, succeeding the Hon. George W. McCleary, Democrat, who had held the office six years. He was elected for two successive terms of continuous service, ending January 5, 1863.

In December, 1856, he was appointed Adjutant General of the State by Governor Grimes, and discharged the duties of that position in addition to those of Secretary of State, until after the inauguration of Ralph P. Lowe as Governor in 1858, when he resigned in favor of Dr. Jesse Bowen, of Iowa City.

A Joint Resolution of the legislature of 1858, also made him custodian of the State's property, instead of the State Treasurer, who had previously held that office.

He was appointed the first Collector of Internal Revenue, under the law of Congress creating that office, which he declined.

Soon thereafter, he received the appointment of Additional Paymaster in the army, with the rank of Major. After due investigation, he discovered that payments were being made in violation of the army regula-

tions, which practice he refused to comply with. At that time his friends at home were urging his nomination for Governor and telegraphing him to return. He therefore, in consequence of the embarrassment arising from his refusal to violate the army regulations referred to, and in consideration of the requests to return, tendered his resignation by wire. Through the kindness of his personal friend, General Samuel R. Curtis, then in command of the Department of Missouri, who recommended that his resignation be accepted at once, the Secretary of War replied by wire the same day, accepting it. He then returned to Iowa and attended the State Convention held at Des Moines.

The candidates for Governor before this Convention were Mr. Sells, Gen. Fitz Henry Warren and Col. W. M. Stone. The contest was both animated and protracted. Repeated ballots developed no change in the strength of the several candidates from that at the start. Colonel Stone's supporters, though few in number—less than seventy—clung to him with unyielding tenacity. At length, while the seventh ballot was being taken and before any count was made, Mr. Sells, the leading contestant, requested his friend, Thos. F. Withrow, to ask his friends to change their votes from himself to Colonel Wm. M. Stone, which change made as requested secured the nomination of Colonel Stone.

Many of Mr. Sells' friends, having knowledge of the situation, claim that had not that change of votes been made, he would have been nominated—being the second choice of numerous delegates, who were ready to come to his support. This action of Mr. Sells, I have always regarded as a mistake. As soon as the result was known in Washington, Mr. Sells received notice of his appointment as an officer in the U. S. Navy, which he accepted, and soon after reported to Admiral Porter who assigned him to the command of the receiving ship *Grampus*,

stationed at Cincinnati, Ohio, where recruits were received, instructed and assigned to duty. His official instructions required him to assign officers and crews to the gunboats then being prepared. The officers sent to the Mississippi squadron were also required to report to him for service.

After more than a year's service in the Navy, Salmon P. Chase, Secretary of the Treasury under President Lincoln, telegraphed him to come to Washington. Upon the advice of Admiral Porter, he complied, when he was tendered and accepted the position of Third Auditor of the Treasury Department.

Sometime later difficulties arose between the Postmaster General and the office of Auditor of the Treasury for the Post Office Department, and to secure harmony between the Departments, the Post Master General, Mr. Denison, asked for a change of Auditor, and in Cabinet Council, Mr. Sells was selected to succeed the deposed official. Notice of his selection was conveyed to him by the Secretary of the Treasury, Mr. Fessenden, who stated that it was by request of President Lincoln and the Post Master General.

He accepted the promotion and served until Senator James Harlan was appointed a member of the Cabinet. He had been active in his efforts to secure Senator Harlan's appointment as Secretary of the Interior, and the Senator insisted that he should take a position in his Department. Their relations had been so close and friendly that he felt obliged to acquiesce, and was thereupon appointed Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the Southern Superintendency. This necessitated his resignation of the Auditorship.

He was ordered to go to the Indian Territory to investigate the reported cattle-stealing from the Indians, as well as to inquire into their condition and needs. After careful investigation he reported that 300,000 head of cattle had been driven from the Territory without compensation to

the Indians, and had been delivered upon beef contracts for the army. He organized a force which captured twenty-five hundred head of the cattle, and effectually broke up the long-practiced system of cattle-stealing in that Territory.

He was appointed on a Commission with General Harney, Judge Cooley, Colonel Parker and Friend Wister, to negotiate treaties with the Indians who had violated their treaty stipulations and forfeited their rights thereunder. He served more than a year in that capacity. He sat in the council when a treaty of amity and peace was made at Fort Smith, Arkansas, with the Indians who went into the Confederate Army. He negotiated a treaty with the Osage Indians for the purchase of a portion of Southern Kansas, going alone to the Osage Reservation for that purpose. Afterwards he was engaged with other Commissioners in settling treaty stipulations between the two wings of the Cherokee Indians, who had been bitter enemies for forty years; the Ross party on one side, and the Ridge party on the other. Weekly sessions were held for more than a year, each side represented by able attorneys.

About this time President Andrew Johnson was making efforts to establish his "policy," restore the Democratic party to power and make for himself enduring fame. From a statement I have received, it appears that General Fitz Henry Warren of Iowa, a man of large ability and a brilliant writer, had joined the "Johnson party" and was a candidate for Congress; that the President was told that Elijah Sells, then holding a federal office, had influence in Iowa and would greatly aid General Warren, if he could be induced to go to Iowa and canvass for him; that a very prominent Democrat came to Mr. Sells with a message from the President, in effect, that if he would adopt the President's policy, go to Iowa and canvass for General Warren he would give him any place at his disposal, a

cabinet office if desired. His reply was, that he could not accept the generous offer but could resign, which might suit the President as well. Thereupon he tendered his resignation, which was not accepted for more than six months.

From Washington City he went to Kansas, and engaged in the lumber business in the historic town of Lawrence. While in Kansas he was elected to the House of Representatives of that State three successive terms, each session filling the position of chairman of the committee of Ways and Means, and doing much in shaping the financial policy of the State.

From Kansas, he went to Utah Territory, as the president and general manager of a silver mining company. From 1878 to 1894 he was engaged in the lumber business in Salt Lake City. In 1889 he was appointed Secretary of Utah Territory by President Harrison, and by virtue of a law of Congress was ex-officio Secretary of the Utah Commission and acting Governor during the Governor's absence from the Territory. By the laws of the Territory he was also Bank Examiner of banks organized under Territorial law, and Superintendent of Insurance. He held the office of Secretary four years.

It will be remembered that in the impeachment trial of President Andrew Johnson, Senator James W. Grimes, with other Republican Senators voted against impeachment. Mr. Sells, his warm personal friend, advised him of the disapprobation that awaited him from his Iowa friends, for under the high state of excitement then prevailing, he knew that neither motives nor convictions would be properly considered. In their frequent conversations, the Senator gave but one reason for his action, which he regarded as in itself sufficient. It was in effect, that not more than four months could be taken from Mr. Johnson's term of office, were he impeached, while the official changes consequent under the administration that would

come into power in that event, would, as he believed be productive of too much disorder, danger and harm.

When the result of the impeachment trial was publicly announced, it was received with general indignation; many going so far as to charge the Republican Senators who acted with the opposition, with impure or mercenary motives. The press was profuse with items of disapproval and criticised their action unmercifully. Lapse of time has tempered the feeling which the unusual excitement of the occasion engendered, and a more reasonable and dispassionate judgment has succeeded that which was formed in haste and without consideration. The severe criticism of the Senator's action at the time, with the radical change of feeling toward him, is believed to have told upon his sensitive nature and hastened his death.

Knowing that there was at one time a warm friendship existing between Mr. Sells and the late Ex-Governor Kirkwood, followed by an estrangement which I believed to be causeless and unnecessary, I wrote to Mr. Sells in regard thereto. At my request he furnished a statement of the affair, which as it is of interest, and can be productive of no harm to the memory of any one, is given in full:

DEAR MR. DAVIS: I give you herewith the history of my early friendship for Governor Kirkwood and what followed, for such use as you may think best to make of it. In 1857 at Iowa City, as you may remember, he asked me to secure his appointment as chairman of the Republican Central Committee of the State. I used whatever influence I had to secure for him the chairmanship, which was easily effected. He requested me to take charge of the campaign for him, which I did, and we had a Republican victory in the election of Ralph P. Lowe, as Governor. He informed me that he wanted to take an active part in political work and would be glad to receive the nomination for Governor, after Governor Lowe. I went to work early for him and received the nomination, and you will remember that he brought his desk into the Secretary's office and requested me to take charge. When his nomination was desired for the second term, you may remember that I worked earnestly and faithfully for his re-nomination, and had pledges enough to secure it on the first ballot. At the convention there were other candidates, and one of the most prominent was Hon. Samuel F. Miller of Keokuk, a warm personal friend, who appealed to me earnest-

ly for help; he was extravagant in his estimate of my influence; he said to me, "you can nominate me if you will; you were for Kirkwood before, you ought to be for me now." I said that for him it was hopeless, that Kirkwood would be nominated on the first ballot, that votes enough were pledged to him to secure it; that I was unconditionally for Kirkwood; that I had been working for him in good faith from the beginning and could not and would not stultify myself. The outside opposition was very bitter, and a certain gentleman from Johnson Co., a warm friend and supporter of Governor Kirkwood became alarmed and charged me with being responsible for the opposition. I told him Kirkwood would be nominated on the first ballot. He would believe I was Kirkwood's friend if I would go into the Convention and make a speech in his favor. I told him I could not and would not go into the Convention where I was not a member; that his fears were without warrant. He replied, "I will hold you responsible for this bitter opposition," and informed Kirkwood accordingly, who believed him, and a coolness existed therefrom. I was so indignant, after all the work I had done for him, that I did not ask a reconciliation. You will remember that in his next biennial Message, he recommended the abandonment of the building for the Blind Asylum at Vinton, which I had taken a great interest in, and upon that issue war was declared. Ample appropriation was made for the Blind Asylum, and the location remained. Afterwards, Mr. Harlan was a candidate for re-election to the U. S. Senate and Governor Kirkwood was his opponent. I had charge of Mr. Harlan's campaign and he was nominated and elected, and I was never forgiven. In later years an Iowa man said to me that he heard Kirkwood say, that he was misled in reference to the part I had taken in his second nomination for Governor. As to that I know nothing. When the friends of Judge Miller thought his chance for nomination was doubtful, they came to me and said, they were satisfied I could be nominated over Kirkwood, and urged me to be a candidate. I told them no, upon no condition would I consent to the use of my name, and if I were nominated I would not accept—that I was unconditionally for Kirkwood's re-nomination.

From my personal knowledge I can corroborate much that is contained in the foregoing; Mr. Sells was the true friend of Governor Kirkwood and labored for his nomination for both terms, as he states. I know that prior to Kirkwood's second nomination, Mr. Sells was frequently solicited to be a candidate for that office, and on the day of the State Convention several parties called upon him and tried to induce him to be a candidate; but he steadily refused to comply with their wishes, because he was loyal to Kirkwood, and desired his re-nomination. This ill

feeling between the two should never have arisen; there was no adequate cause for it; in after years both parties doubtless realized this, and regretted its occurrence, as did their friends.

My acquaintance with Mr. Sells commenced in the latter part of 1856, when he was elected Secretary of State. In size and general appearance he resembled the Hon. Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois, for whom he was several times mistaken; upon one occasion the mistake was somewhat embarrassing. It was in a locality where Mr. Douglas was posted for a political speech. Mr. Sells appearing upon the ground in advance of the speaker, was greeted with rousing cheers by the crowd assembled; as soon as order was restored, he gracefully acknowledged the compliment mistakenly conferred, and explained that it was only another instance where appearances were deceptive.

Ever true to his political faith, he never lost an opportunity to aid his party by the most effectual methods. He furnished for the press many carefully written articles of a political nature. No man ever stood firmer for a friend, and any one aiding him in the hour of need could rest assured that such favor would be reciprocated at the earliest opportunity. He despised the dissembler and the whiffler. He seemed to have inherited the courage of his ancestors, for there was nothing of the coward in his nature, preferring always to meet an opponent openly and squarely, and to succeed in any undertaking by fair and honorable methods. He was never stubborn or arrogant, but always willing to listen to suggestions or advice in matters of importance, using his judgment as to their correctness or propriety and acting accordingly. Kind to those in his employ, having charity for faults, he was ever ready to condone mistakes or offenses unwittingly made. I had the pleasure of being his deputy during his six years' service as Secretary of State, and can bear testimony to

his uniformly kind and courteous treatment. Never during all those years did I receive from him a word of displeasure or disapproval. As Secretary of State he was as able, thorough and competent, as any one who ever occupied the position. His ability and fitness were known and recognized throughout the State; and I may add, that in all positions of honor and trust in which he has been placed, the duties have been invariably performed honestly, ably and satisfactorily. I do not know that he was a church member; he may have been, but I know that he has always been a firm believer in christianity, a regular attendant and supporter of the Methodist Episcopal church, thoroughly orthodox in his views and ready at all times to energetically defend them from attacks of opponents. He was always sympathetic and charitable, ready and willing to aid the needy and unfortunate.

It was during the first term of his service that the capital was removed to Des Moines, that event occurring in November, 1857. The removal of the effects of the State was under the supervision of Hon. Martin L. Morris, State Treasurer, and at that time by the terms of the law, custodian of the State's property. Through the generosity of the Western Stage Company, all State officers and employes, who desired it, were furnished free transportation from the old to the new capital. A few of the deputies and clerks came through in a private conveyance.

Our life in Iowa City and in the old State House, had been very pleasant, and was not relinquished without regret. It is true, that about the removal there was an excitement and some pleasurable expectations in contemplation of a trip across an expanse of new country, much of which was wide stretches of unbroken and unoccupied prairie, with the prospect of a home and new scenes of operations, to which we were about to be transplanted by decree of the State. When we arrived at our destination,

and found an incompleated capitol building, with an extra gang of mechanics and laborers working incessantly, to finish it in time for the accommodation of the Legislature, with the confusion of piles of boxes and packages awaiting the completion of storage room for their contents, there were forebedings that our life here might be a weary one, and like the Israelites of old, there may have been sighs, in secret at least, for the scenes that were left behind. But events proved that there was no occasion for such fears, the building was completed in season, ample room provided for the State's property, and the archives of the offices arranged in excellent shape. In addition to this, we were so cordially welcomed and so kindly treated by the people of the new capital city, that the anticipated loneliness was never realized.

At that time Des Moines, especially that portion on the east side of the river, was very primitive; the buildings were few and scattered; the Capitol, the old brick structure now removed, was built in the woods, the timber to the east and south of it unusually heavy and the present Capitol Square a virgin forest, except a small portion on the northern limit, which had been the home of Harrison Lyon, one of the donors of the Square.

The only bridge across the Des Moines river, was a pontoon, but through the enterprize of Alex. Scott, one of the most public spirited of men, and a large donor to the State, the river was soon thereafter bridged at Market street. Not a street leading to the river on the east side was raised above the black alluvial soil of the bottom, nor was there a sidewalk along any of them. Early in 1858, Court Avenue was slightly raised by a fill of perhaps a couple of feet across the low ground, and a sidewalk constructed along the north side of the street, principally upon piles.

In the timber to the east and south of the Capitol, small game, such as squirrels, quails, grouse, etc., was

plenty; while the hoot of the owl and the melancholy note of the whippoorwill, were familiar nocturnal greetings. In a natural pond, where now is Franklin Square, numerous muskrats had reared their houses. The ponds on the arm of prairie, east of the timber belt, were favorite resorts of the various kinds of migratory water fowl. Still farther to the east, the timber of Four Mile creek, was the home of the wild turkey, where deer occasionally sought shelter. Fish also were abundant in all the streams. As may be imagined there was much in the surroundings at that early period to afford rare pleasure and enjoyment to the lover of nature as well as to the sportsman which has forever disappeared before the march of improvement.

In all this life in the new Capitol the subject of my sketch was an important factor, always interesting and entertaining, whether in public or in private. The surviving old settlers will remember him as the genial, cordial and warm-hearted official, ready at all times to greet his friends with a smile, about which there was no pretense, for his friendship was natural and unassumed.

The home of Mr. Sells is now in Salt Lake City, Utah, where he has resided many years. He has contributed much toward the growth and development of the city and State of his adoption, and has had the satisfaction, there as here, of witnessing the transformation of the Territory into the State.

Of the early settlers of our State the number is being rapidly reduced from year to year. It causes a feeling of sadness when we realize how many have passed away and how few comparatively remain. In a little while all must submit to the inevitable fate.

In the preparation of this sketch, I have been somewhat minute and particular in details, paying little attention to mere embellishment, for fear of making it unnecessarily lengthy, satisfied if it will aid, in some measure, in keeping in memory our early pioneers and the scenes of days long past.

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