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May 20, 2015

THIS WEEK:

Ira Cook, Exploits of the Original Iowa Surveyor

BACKGROUND:

From *The Footsteps of Ira Cook* Compiled by Daniel F. Rittel, PLS

In 1896, one of Iowa's "Original Surveyors" had the forethought to document for posterity some of his memories of his time spent as a Deputy Surveyor. This surveyor's name was Ira Cook, and his recollections were published as, *Government Surveying in Early Iowa*, in the January 1897 issue of *The Annals of Iowa*.

Though his number of years as a Deputy Surveyor was short, his memories, stories, and descriptions of the life and times of a government surveyor are well detailed and give us good insight to some of the conditions those men worked under in their struggle to survey the land for settlement.

Government Surveying in Early Iowa

By Ira Cook



Ira Cook

The following article was published in Annals of Iowa (January 1897) Third Series, Vol. 2, No. 8, pages 603-613. The text has been transcribed exactly as printed in the original, including any misspelling, capitalization, and emphasis italics in order to preserve the "flavor" of the writer and time.

It has occurred to me that it would be well to preserve in THE ANNALS some facts and incidents connected with the Government surveys in our State, and with this end in view I propose to relate some of my own experiences. Except immediately along the Mississippi and in a few

localities on some of the larger streams, these surveys preceded the settlement of the country, so that the deputy surveyor who had a contract to survey a given district generally found himself beyond any settlement, and, as a consequence, must carry with him his house (tent) and his supplies of provisions and complete outfit for a trip extending, in some cases, over many months. It followed, of course, that he was obliged to restrict himself and his men to the simplest of necessities of food and clothing. A barrel or two of salt pork, flour in barrels, navy beans, with sugar, coffee, salt and pepper, made up the sum of our larder. For bedding we had rubber blankets, buffalo robes and heavy woolen blankets. With these we could keep both warm and dry.

A surveying party would consist of either six or eleven men, depending upon whether it was intended to use one or two instruments. First, the surveyor, then two chainmen and an axeman or mound-builder, made up the field party; a cook and teamster completed the party. This would allow us one extra man in case of sickness of any of the party, or we could use him as a flagman when needed.

My first experience was in the fall and winter of 1849 and 1850. By purchase I became the half owner of a contract to sub-divide ten townships, our district being within the present limits of Decatur and Ringgold counties, then a long way west of any settlements. Myself and partner, Colonel John Evans, left Davenport early in September, 1849, going by way of Muscatine and thence to Fairfield, and so on west, crossing the Des Moines river in Van Buren county, and so by way of Bloomfield in Davis, where we tarried for a day to recruit our stock of provisions, as this was our last chance – for soon after leaving that town we left the settled portion of the country.



Ira Cook

Not far from Bloomfield we struck what was called the "Old Dragoon trail," leading from Camp Des Moines, at the head of the lower rapids in Lee county, to Fort Leavenworth. This was a help to us, as on it we found fords which enabled us to cross the numerous streams which abound in southern Iowa. On Grand river we found a Mormon town, called Mount Pisgah. I think this must have been in the southern part of what is now Clark county. There were about twenty families here. It was a sort of halfway place between Nauvoo and the Missouri river. They (the Mormons) had been driven out of Nauvoo and (many of them were too poor to go

further) made this a resting place, built log cabins and wintered and summered here, raising a crop and then moving on toward the promised land, to be succeeded by others.

We were overtaken here by the "Equinoctial storm" and were detained some days on account of high water in the streams. We employed several of these men to go with us and thus completed our party of eleven men. After leaving Mount Pisgah we saw no more white men for many months.

In due time we reached our contract and commenced work, but we had consumed two weeks and more in getting there. I have gone into these details in order to show to the present generation what their early predecessors, as pioneers and employees of the Government, underwent in order to prepare this great State of Iowa to become what it is to-day. It took time and patience and sturdy manhood to do what was necessary to bring about subsequent results. Many times we were confronted by a broad, deep river, some of the numerous branches of the Grand or Missouri Platte, no bridge, no ford, and but very limited means at our command to overcome the obstacle. All the same the job was there and we must cross, with horses, wagon and camp equipage, provisions, etc. Sometimes we would look for two large cottonwood trees on opposite sides of the stream. These we would cut down, so that they would meet and overlap each other in mid-stream, thus forming a foot bridge. Over this we would transport our movables; then we would swim the horses over; then with chains and ropes so fasten the axles and wheels of our wagon to the box that they would float; then when that was floated to the other shore hitch the horses to the end of the wagon tongue and, with the aid of the strong arms of the men, land the same on the bank, load up and go on our way rejoicing.

I remember one occasion of this kind where we had hardly accomplished the crossing when night settled down upon us. Too tired to put up our tent, we ate a cold bite, maybe had a cup of coffee with it, and then every man seized his blanket and, picking out the softest spot that he could find, lay down for the night. My own bed was at the foot of an oak tree, using the root for a pillow. As this was my first experience of this kind, I remember I thought it rather tough, but I soon got used to that sort of thing.

The time covered by my service as a government surveyor was from 1849 to 1853, and of all the men then engaged as brother surveyors, with whom I was acquainted and more or less intimate, I can not now recall a half dozen that are living. Our work was hard, our days long; in winter or summer we were at work in the morning as soon as we could see, worked as long as we could see at night, and then tramped to camp by moonlight or starlight, often for many miles. We lived on bread, salt pork, beans and coffee. Occasionally we would vary it by the capture of

wild game. On this trip I remember one of the boys shot a deer, and once we found a "bee-tree" containing several gallons of honey; and once, with the aid of a big dog, a jack staff and a convenient snow bank, we captured a two hundred and fifty pound wild hog. Incidents of this kind helped not only our larder, but also broke the monotony of our lives.

We completed our work in January, 1850, broke camp and started for home. In order to have the benefit of the settlements in Missouri we travelled directly south, and on the first night of our homeward journey occurred an incident which I will relate as showing what men can endure in the way of cold, when inured to it by long exposure. We reached Platte river at nightfall, but found no timber in which to camp, only some scattering trees for firewood, and the ground frozen so hard that we could not put up our tent. We built a good, big fire, got supper, drew the wagon up so as to form a wind-break and camped down between it and the fire. We were painfully aware that it was cold, very cold, but just how cold we could not tell. Next day before noon we reached a settlement in Gentry county, Missouri, and, making inquiry as to the temperature that morning, were informed that the thermometer registered 31 degrees below zero!

I spent seven months of 1851, and January, 1852, in Wisconsin. For some months I worked in the heavy timber and swamps between Wisconsin river and Wolf river. This was really on the divide between the waters of the Mississippi and the Great Lakes, as the Wisconsin runs to the Mississippi and the Wolf river into Green Bay. The timber, both on the high lands and in the swamp, was so dense that a good square look at the face of the sun was a rare sight. As we progressed with our work the country become impassable for a wagon. We left that, and being provided with pack-saddles, loaded our camp equipage on the horses, but not for long, and soon we left the horses and only carried what we could on our backs. Necessarily our rations shrank more and more, until on one occasion I remember we were reduced for a day and a half to *salt pork and coffee*. During this time there happened one of the saddest incidents in my experience in this work.

In the district adjoining mine on the east, a brother of the late Hon. Platt Smith, of Dubuque, was at work. One night we had a terrible thunder storm and hurricane. Mr. Smith had been over to my camp the Sunday before and I knew about where he was at work. The second day after the storm I found his camp, or, rather, where it had been the night of the storm, and right across the spot where his tent stood lay an immense basswood tree, uprooted by the storm. In looking around for some evidence of what had happened, we found a large beech tree, on the smooth bark of which the men had cut with a marking iron a brief history of what had happened. The particulars I learned afterward. They had camped early, got their supper and

the men had all lain down for the night but Mr. Smith. He was tying his cravat to the tent pole when the storm struck them, blowing the large tree directly across their tent, killing instantly Mr. Smith and one of his men and crippling another for life. My party were so shocked and overcome by the tragedy that I doubt if a laugh was heard in my camp for a week afterwards.

Later that year I was at work further south on Fox River in the vicinity of the town of Berlin. We were now in a settled country and had more of a variety for our table.

In January, 1852, I closed my work there and started home by the way of Dubuque.

From Buffalo Lake, the head of Fox River, where we closed our work, to Dubuque was a good three hundred miles. People who know me now would hardly give me credit as a "sprinter;" still I walked every mile of that three hundred except six.

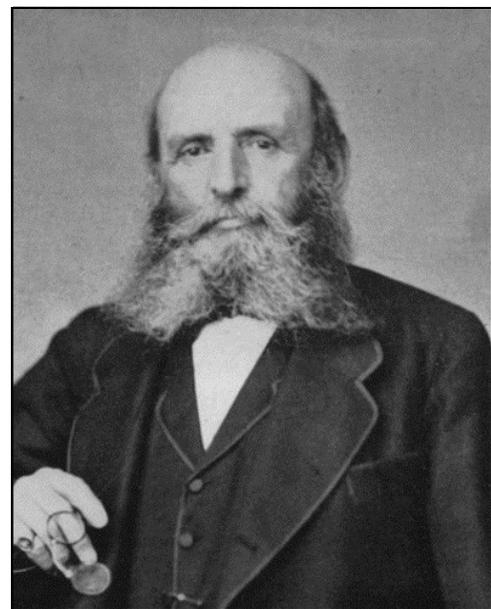
Early in 1852 the United States commenced the location of the boundary line between Iowa and Minnesota. As soon as the commission was well under way, I was sent up there to close up and sub-divide Township 100. I think my district included five ranges in Allamakee and Winneshiek Counties. My work was partly in that portion of those counties which a writer in a recent number of the "Midland Monthly" calls the "Switzerland of Iowa." Here among swiftly running streams, deep canons, mountainous hills and rocky precipices, I worked for two months and really here I had the most pleasant and enjoyable time of all my different trips. I found that the brooks and creeks were pretty well stocked with speckled trout. I had not seen one since a boy of ten years, and I could not resist the temptation to go after them. And go I did. For one whole week a cousin and myself whipped the streams, large and small. How many we captured I do not say, as I am not writing "Fish Stories," but it is enough to say that we were satisfied.

One incident that happened on this survey I must relate as a curiosity. The most of the land that was available had been taken up by squatters, and so there were a good many settlers in my district. This township 100 consists of five full sections north and south, but the sixth section was only about two or three chains wide, say eight to twelve rods. One day in running up one of my range lines I struck a man's farm. It was partly in Iowa and partly in Minnesota. When I was through with running my lines, his cultivated land was situated in two States, four townships and six sections! I thought he was pretty well scattered.

My work completed, we came down to Lansing, expecting soon to get a steamboat for Dubuque. We were, however, informed that there would not be a boat down for five days. This was a good while to wait, with the wages and board of five or six men going

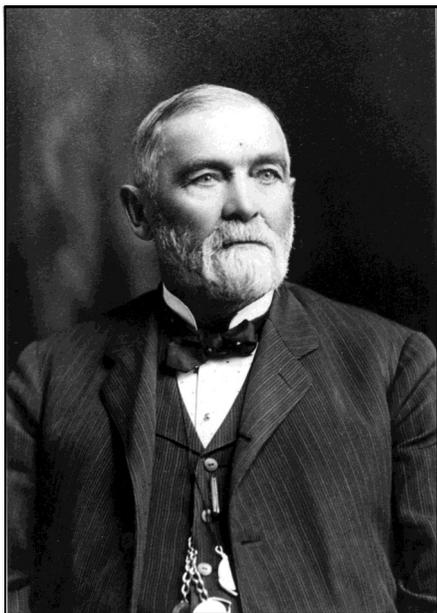
steadily onward; so I decided to build a boat of my own. I bought two Indian canoes about twelve feet long, some two-by-fours and enough lumber to deck my craft. We lashed the canoes firmly side by side, decked them over, loaded our traps, and we *seven* men stepped on board. When we were all on board, we had not more than four inches between the surface of the water and the top of the canoes, but the craft was as steady as a seventy-four gun ship and we pulled out and made the trip to Davenport in safety.

In September, 1852, the Surveyor General, Hon. George B. Sargent, sent me to sub-divide a district comprising ten townships, pretty well up on the head waters of the Raccoon river, now comprised in the counties of Carroll and Sac. At that time this district was many miles beyond the limits of white settlements and was the home of the elk, the deer and the wolf. My home was then in Davenport, and, with my company of ten men, I made the trip to Des Moines on foot, my one pair of horses being sufficiently loaded with our supplies, camp equipage, etc. Here at Des Moines we spent a day replenishing our stock of provisions and necessaries for the long months we expected to spend on the prairies. Down on Second street, well toward the lower end, I found B. F. Allen with a general stock of merchandise, of whom I made my purchases.



George B. Sargent

Having now more "plunder" than my team could haul, I procured the services of our genial fellow-citizen, Ed. R. Clapp, to aid me in getting my "traps," including corn for my horses, up to my district. Ed. was not the millionaire then that he is now, but he was the same whole-hearted, good fellow that the citizens of Des Moines have known all these years. At the crossing of Walnut Creek, he suggested that a farmer at that point was famous for the "watermelons" he raised, and, of course, we all wanted some. We could find no one about the premises, but Ed. said we must have the melons, and, as he knew the way to the "patch," we soon increased the weight of our wagon-load. Ed. Said something about stopping on his return and settling the bill, but I guess it is pretty safe to say that he came back by the other road.



Edwin R. Clapp

About two miles beyond the present town of Panora, which had then just been surveyed and platted, there

lived a squatter by the name of Van Order. His cabin of rough logs was occupied by himself, wife and a half-grown son. I mention this man and his little cabin because we had to do with them later. Here we left a barrel of pork and a barrel of flour, to be sent for when needed. From this point we would have no traveled roads, portions of the way were rough, and it became necessary to lighten our loads. On the third day after leaving Des Moines we reached our destination and found on the prairie a "Township Corner" that marked the beginning of my district. Here we camped, unloaded Clapp's wagon and the next morning, bright and early, he started on his lonely ride home.

For the next three or four months we worked early and late, in sunshine and storm; amid rain, sleet and snow we toiled on, but we had glorious appetites and our rations of bread, beans, salt pork and coffee never went begging, but were eaten with a hearty relish; and although we slept in a tent without other fire than that out of doors, and with the mercury often down below zero, yet we did sleep, and sleep well.

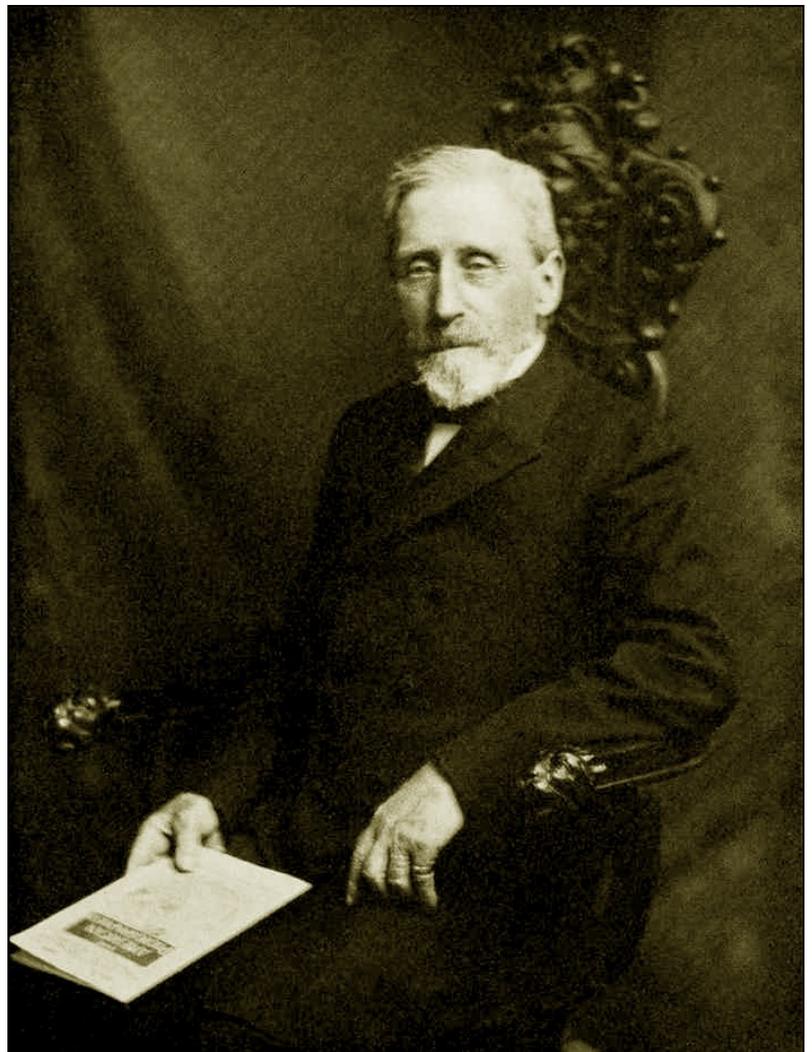
I will here relate a discovery we made, and to us it was wonderful as showing the instinct, sagacity and almost human intelligence of an animal. This was a beaver dam across the main branch of the Raccoon river. This dam was by measurement one and one-half chains (six rods) in length. Built with the skill of an engineer, diagonally across the stream from one high point to another, the breast of this dam was *four feet high*, constructed of trees from two to five inches in diameter, built as children build cob houses, a course up and down the stream, then a course crosswise, and so on until the required height was reached. These were filled in with smaller limbs and with clay until it became sufficiently tight to retain the water. We used this dam as a bridge for a week and never crossed it, that we did not wonder at, and admire the almost human sagacity of this little animal.

After New Year's, 1853, the cold became too intense even for us, hardened to cold as we were. Then our provisions were getting very low, and only that we found a camp of beaver trappers in a large grove on the river, from whom we were able to purchase venison, we would have been out entirely. Then, I should not wonder if we were getting "homesick." Think of it. For four months we had not heard one word from the outside world. A presidential election had been held and we had no word of the result. We decided to break up camp, go home and come back in the spring and finish up. We were about two and a half day's fair travel from Van Order's cabin, and, taking an inventory of stock, found we had just three days' rations. The first day we made good progress, after packing up, fully one-third of the way. The second morning the weather looked threatening, but we made an early start, following down the "divide" between the middle and south forks of the 'Coon river. About nine o'clock it began to snow and in a very short time the air was so full that we could no

longer see our course. As a matter of safety, we turned down into the timber and camped on "Middle 'Coon." This was on Saturday. It snowed all day, and the most of that night, and Sunday morning we awoke to find two feet of snow covering woodland and prairie. I saw trouble ahead and directed the cook to boil the remainder of our slender stock of beans, and make up what flour we had left into biscuits. When we had done this, I put the whole into the "camp chest," locked it and put the key in my pocket, gravely informing the boys that I was commissary-general for the rest of that campaign.

Monday morning we dug our way out of the snow, crossed the river on the ice, and started on our weary, weary way home. The men were formed in two lines and broke a path for the horses and wagon. When the leaders were exhausted, (remember the snow was knee-deep) they would step outside and the next two men take their

places as "breakers," the former leaders falling in behind. And so for three days we worked steadily, but our progress was slow. The days were short and much time (nearly one-half) was consumed going back and forth to the timber for camping purposes. On the morning of the seventh day we decided to leave our wagon. The horses had nothing but hazel brush to eat and were getting weak. The seventh day was warm and pleasant and the sun melted the snow considerably. That night we camped at the mouth of Willow Creek, in Guthrie county. We had no tent or shelter, but at dark the weather was not cold, and with a good fire we were fairly comfortable. We made coffee, ate a biscuit apiece and congratulated each other that we were doing so well. However, about nine o'clock the wind shifted suddenly into the northwest and blew almost a gale, growing colder each minute, and for the rest of that night we were not very comfortable, but we had enough fire to keep us from freezing. At four o'clock next



Ira Cook
(1821-1902)

morning, the cook made a pot of strong coffee and distributed the very last of our food, which consisted of one small biscuit (then five days old) and one very small spoonful of cold boiled beans to each, and long before daylight we were tramping over the prairie by moonlight, nine men in a string, breaking the frozen crust of the snow to make a path for the horses and the two other men, (one sick, the other the cook, a cripple) who rode the horses. In this way we traveled until about eleven o'clock, when, ascending a high divide, we saw, several miles to the south of us, a house on the prairie and knew that our troubles were nearly over. We stopped that night with the settler and the next day before noon were at the cabin of Van Order.

We opened that barrel of flour and that barrel of pork in a hurry and set Mrs. Van Order to work, and for six days, and I may say nights, that blessed woman worked



A ridgepole cabin

incessantly trying to fill up eleven empty men! The old man was a "mighty hunter" and deer, turkeys, prairie chickens and other game hung dangling from every ridgepole of his cabin. We were able very shortly to reduce the stock on hand, while our flour and pork were as greatly enjoyed by these good people, who had seen nothing but corn bread and wild game for months.

Here I hired a man with an ox team to go after my wagon, and when he returned, having pretty well recruited our horses, we started on our homeward journey and arrived safely, without any further incident of note.

This trip closed my career as a government surveyor.

—Des Moines, November, 1896.