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UNION TOWNSHIP

Cambridge - 1846

Centennial - 1956

By J. B. Green

"Union being a short, as well as a favorite name, was given the township when organized in 1855, comprising township 82, north range 23, west of the 5th P.M. of Iowa.

It has several creeks running through parts of the township, besides the Skunk river, which runs entirely through the township from the northwest to the southeast, and at one time was heavily timbered on both sides with oak, elm, black walnut and maple, but few oak and walnut remain to be seen at this time. The early settler fenced this land with rails split from the best oak and walnut to be found, and even at this day you may now and then see an old worm fence of black walnut rails split forty years or more ago.

Ballard and Walnut creeks, both timbered streams, enter the Skunk from the west, and in small streams passing through Center Grove on the east, also heavily timbered with ash and kindred woods.

Union township has been one of the most, and probably is yet, the heaviest timbered township in the county; a condition that early settlers first looked for shelter and firewood.

Among the first settlers, I might mention the name of Hugh McKee, J. Gross, Jno. Warren, Jno Hand, Thomas Low, Jno. Harris, Nathan Doty, Kirk Knight, Jacob Lee, E. Purvis, the Blackmores, and Ballards, a few of whom are living at this time and who can tell an interesting story of "hard times long ago before the war."

Hugh McKee, a jolly Irishman, a true offspring of the "Ould Sod," tells of his first experience in raising a crop in Union township. Hugh came to the township in 1853, driving from Iowa City and settling in Center Grove, proceeded to plant a crop of potatoes and cabbage. That fall Hugh had about a thousand head of fine cabbage which he could find no market for, and having dug a hole for the cellar of his cabin, which was not yet built, he put nearly all in the hole and covered them with a light covering of hay, expecting to 'throw a foot of dirt over them the next day. That night there came one of the old time blizzards from the north, and when morning came the cellar was heaped with snow. In the spring, before all the snow melted, Hugh dug down to see what was left, and was surprised to find the cabbage all in fine condition, and proceeded to throw them out. While engaged in this work a team drove by, stopped, and the driver looked at Hugh and the cabbage and asked what he expected to do with so many. "Sell them if I can," says Hugh. The driver had no money, and offered to take a couple of hundred head if he could trade whiskey for them. That night Hugh came home with about half a gallon of whiskey in the bottom of a bucket, driving the oxen, with one hand holding the bucket,

The other holding a sled stake. The balance of the cabbage we never learned what became of.

When the writer came to Union Township, this section was almost a wilderness, neighbors few and far between; but neighbors in those days were almost like one family, and the kindly interest that all felt for each other made up in part for the hardships endured. A trip to some trading place or mill at some seasons of the year was almost an impossibility, as there were no bridges, and it was sometimes necessary to tie the wagon box to the running gear to prevent it floating away, and every one carried a rope or log chain to pull out with when "sloughed down." To have a team mired down from ten to twenty times in crossing the country, to pay a guide for piloting one across the notorious Skunk bottoms covered with water from two to four feet deep, for passengers to wade while the team struggled through, to drive a team for nearly a mile in deep water in bitter weather with men in advance breaking the ice; there are plenty of witnesses here today that all of these were not of very uncommon occurrences forty years ago.

SKUNK RIVER AND BOTTOMS

Skunk river, the most crooked river in Iowa, so crooked the water would not run between the banks, but broke over, making new channels and flooding the flats. A good heavy rain in the northern part of the county was all that was necessary for it to go on a tear. The writer, to show how quickly the whole bottoms, in some parts a mile wide, was covered, was one fine morning, after a heavy rain, driving along the bluff up the river, and had gotten about two miles up the river when, looking across the bottom further up, saw a sheet of water coming down the full width of the flats. Turning and driving back home at a fast trot, and quickly putting up the team, I ran half a mile down to a lake in the middle of the bottoms to where I had a boat, which to save I must get to before the water. I got to it just in time, running through a foot of water for the last few rods. Getting in, I rowed to the bluffs from where I started.

The spring of 1881 was noted for the highest water ever known in Union Township. Heavy rains had washed out all the bridges except those across the Skunk. Roads were impassable until new bridges were built. The writer at that time was about to build, and needed brick for a foundation, but none could be hauled on account of the roads and high water. Plenty of brick was to be had at a yard nine miles up the river. I built a flat-boat 10 by 20, loaded it with five thousand brick, and in a day and a half had them ready to unload at Cambridge. This is the only instance on record that the Skunk river was navigable for flat-boats. Since that time no such high water has been seen, and at this time a ditch has been cut down the bottoms to straighten the river, and Skunk bottoms, the once terror of the emigrant, is in the summer time a waving field of grain and corn, the richest land in the county. To own a farm on the bottoms is to have a competency.

CAMBRIDGE, IOWA
April - 1968

And now as I take over this history of Cambridge, Iowa, we still have a prosperous town, but as paved roads and super highways have become a way of our living and with modern travel, the business of the small town have diminished some what.

A lot of new homes are being built. Cambridge is a farming community, also we have went through school reorganization with the main school in Huxley, Iowa known as Ballard Community High School.

We have a lovely new modern bank and our stores are modernizing, also have a good water supply and are in the process of a modern sewer system.

The members of the town council are: Wilbur Kooyman, Andrew Buland, John Echer, Lyle Herrold and Erwin McIntire. Kermit Green is the mayor.

The M₂sonic Lodge is the only Lodge in town. The American Legion is active.

K. L. GREEN

CAMBRIDGE STATE BANK

HEINTZ OIL CO. CAMBRIDGE IOWA
WAYNE HEINTZ, OWNER