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Reminiscences of Famous Pioneers of the Platte Purchase

Special Correspondence of The Times.

PLATTE CITY, MO., April 20.—Why is it called "Atchison Hill?" was asked during the course of a Sunday's walk about the suburbs of the little town of Platte City, the capital of the far-famed Platte county.

We were on an imposing eminence commanding a full view of the town—little more than a village—which displayed its picturesque contuor a rifle shot to the north of our station. A modest residence crowned the crest of the graceful hill; a little Catholic church near by on its declivity lifted to the fair April heavens its greater cross above the marble-graven ones in its graveyard inclosure; a negro church was not far away, while all about were motley-colored negro cabins and boisterous children sprawling in the sun; the Platte river, a stone's throw in width, lazily crawled a few hundred yards to the west, its northward serpentine approach marked for miles by a line of willows and stately trees not yet yielded to the ax; symmetrical farms, handsome farm houses and spacious barns lent pleasing effect to the more distant view. The village of Tracy, which is the railroad depot for Platte City, lays, like a map, a mile away in a graceful bend of the river, its grain elevators and mills suggesting a commercial importance. The scene was as enchanting as the weather was divine.

"It was named for old Dave Atchison, who once lived here and owned scores of acres including this hill," was the answer to my question.

The spot then whereon we stood was identified with the personality of one of the greatest figures in the history of Missouri—not one alone, but of many, for this village of less than a thousand souls has had more than the usual complement of human greatness.

The act of congress of 1837, providing for the purchase from the Indian owners of the triangular strip of territory between the western boundary line of Missouri and the Missouri river—embracing the present counties of Platte, Buchanan, Andrew, Nodaway, Holt and Atchison—thenceforth known as the "Platte purchase," its addition to the state, the resultant creation of Platte county and its opening up to settlement brought hither a subsequently famous coterie of immigrants. Amongst them was David R. Atchison, afterward a senatorial colleague of the immortal Thomas H. Benton and, for one brief Sunday, by virtue of his office as president of the United States senate, president of the United States. When he lived in Platte City he was a lawyer and also the editor of the village newspaper, the Eagle.

General James W. Denver, for whom the city of Denver, Col., was afterward named, was also a citizen of Platte City, preceding Atchison as editor of the Eagle.

Major Jesse Morin, who died but a few years ago, also lived here. As a state senator he framed the act creating the county of Platte. Later on he commanded a company of Platte countyans under Colonel Sterling Price in the Mexican war, and was an active factor in the conquest of New Mexico. He was for many years a recognized power in county and state politics. He died, if I am correctly informed, at the old Pitt homestead, a mile south of the town.

Colonel John E. Pitt, from whose long residence there, the place takes its name, was also a noted early settler of Platte City. He was a brilliant but erratic lawyer and statesman, and several times, despite his minority in politics, represented the county in the state legislature. He was an uncompromising whig, and it was while he was a member of the legislature, in 1860, I believe, his beloved party having passed away, that he described his political isolation in the most humorous speech ever made in a legislative body, likening himself to "a bob-tailed bull in fly time, tearing about in the tall grass and fighting his own flies." His speech was published far and wide and earned for him the sobriquet of "Bully Pitt," which attached to him ever afterward. He was a dignified and accomplished gentleman of the old school. He died several years ago at Las Animas, Col.

Very near my standpoint on "Atchison Hill" stands the residence of Colonel James H. Chinn, where Dr. A. M. Robinson died. Dr. Robinson was one of the most illustrious of his compeers in the Platte purchase. He was speaker of the Missouri house of representatives and president pro tempore of the senate. His oil portrait, painted by order of the general assembly, hangs conspicuously in the hall of the capital by the federal forces during the civil war the portrait was punctured by vandal bayonets and thrown among the rubbish in the basement, but was subsequently found, repaired and restored to its place.

On an adjacent hill is seen the residence of Judge Elijah H. Norton. No history of Missouri would be complete without the mention of the name and civic services of this distinguished associate of the famous personages herein mentioned. Though in the sear and yellow leaf of honorable age, he is still an active and vigorous little body and can be seen any day on the streets, his mentality as dominating and his interest in public affairs as keen as in his prime. His strong personality and cultured intellect have made him better known and probably better beloved than any other man in the historic "Platte Purchase." He was a great lawyer, a judge of the circuit court when there were giants at the bar, a member of congress, and a delegate in the last constitutional convention that framed the present state constitution, constructed mainly after his fashioning, the excellencies of which are so greatly appreciated that all efforts to change its essential features have thus far failed to receive the sanction of legislatures or the indorsement of the people. As a judge of the supreme court his reported opinions are now classics in legal literature far beyond the confines of the state.

On another eminence near by are located the handsome college building and beautiful grounds of Gaylord institute, one of the oldest female colleges in the state and famous in educational annals. Among its presidents were Hugh B. Todd, its founder, an educator, long since passed away, almost as well known in Kentucky and Tennessee as in Missouri; the Rev. A. B. Jones, the friend and co-worker of Alexander Campbell, and one of the most scholarly divines of the Christian church in Missouri, still living in quasi retirement in Liberty, Mo., and Prof. Frederick G. Gaylord, who so stamped his beloved individuality on the school during nearly thirty years' service that, in affectionate memory of his qualities as a teacher and virtues as a man, after his death the institution was given its present name, a change from that of Daughters' college. The names of the three great educators here named are ineffaceably written in the history of Missouri as the pioneers of higher education.

Two blackened and crumbling chimneys mark the site of the old homestead of "Honest John Wilson," as he is universally known. A contemporary of Leonard, Donlphan, Birch, Atchison, Craig and others of a bar famous for its strength and brilliancy, he probably overtopped them all as a lawyer. His sturdy integrity as a man and his scrupulous honor in his profession and fidelity as a legislator justified the title which prepetuates his fame. The stately mansion of his eloquent son, ex-Congressman R. P. C. Wilson, is not far from the ancestral home.

From my serie on "Atchison hill" is also to be seen in its envelopment of trees the residence of the venerable William M. Paxton, said to be the oldest practicing lawyer in Missouri. What Colonel Switzler is to Missouri Mr. Paxton is to Platte county—its historian—and no man is better equipped for the task. Having come in the vanguard of the pioneers, nearly all of whom have gone to the other shore, he survives to be their biographer and the chronicler of their deeds. Being a scholar, a writer and a literateur, he has kept a faithful and invaluable record of the events of early years, which has recently been printed in a large quarto volume. He has also contributed to the literature of the state a volume of poems of legendary interest and recognized excellence.

From the same perspective one also gets a view of the old Dorris residence and spacious grounds, a farm, indeed, around which cluster pathetic history, romance, legend and anecdote too abundant to be chronicled in detail in this cursory sketch. The place has long since passed from the original owner into the possession of others.

General George P. Dorris was a notable one of the group of pioneers who have given to the town and county so much of old-time interest. He was able, ambitious and a money-maker, and amassed great wealth for that early day, much of it in the tabooed business of a slave trader. Until very recently the remnants of his commodious slave pens stood adjacent to the big brick mansion, the object of sinister consideration by the casual visitor, for, be it remembered, while the people of the slave states recognized the legality of ownership in slaves, they never lent their moral indorsement to the traffic. In the old days the manor house, still in an excellent state of preservation, and not much altered from its original appearance, was famous for its prodigal and unique hospitality, and its stury walls may still be haunted by the sounds of nightly wassail and high revelry. Certainly they recall the tragic fate that has attended the family. Here was married the dear daughter, Mattie, to Hon. John A. Brown, well remembered as a distinguished lawyer and politician of St. Louis. But after the birth of several children, of whom Russell Brown was the youngest, she was divorced under circumstances in no wise reproachful to the unhappy husband and indulgent father. Here, also, in magnificent splendor, was married the younger daughter, Annie, to John A. Halderman, a handsome young lawyer, who afterward became the United States minister to Siam. She was accounted one of the most beautiful, gracious and vivacious women Missouri has produced. A few years ago she, too, was divorced from her husband. General Dorris twice represented Platte county in the house of the general assembly, but early in the '60s he removed to St. Louis, where, by judicious investments, bold speculations and profitable army supply contracts, he added to his wealth till he was classed among the millionaires of that city. He owned enormously valuable property on Olive street, known as "Dorris Row," which he is said to have won at poker from a rich resident. He built a suburban residence renowned for the elaboration of its architecture and finish and the magnificence of its equipment. About this time General Dorris aspired to election to a seat in the United States senate, but failed in the achievement of his ambition, and soon afterward died. His aged widow, a little later, was murdered in her apartments in the splendid mansion by her grandson, Russell Brown, a dissolute youth, aided by a notorious criminal companion, in an effort to obtain her jewelry. The boy was sentenced to imprisonment in the penitentiary for a long term of years, but escaped from prison after a short incarceration, and finally died a refugee in Canada. His broken-hearted father did not long survive the death of the son. The mother married a Mr. Van Wisker and died in 1883. Thomas Dorris, the only then surviving son of General Dorris, after an aimless life, died a few years ago in Texas. Excepting Mrs. Halderman, the immediate family is extinct. However, the old home still stands, but little worse for time and wear, to commemorate the tragedy of life.

Only a short distance from the old Dorris residence is the house from which the young, handsome, debonaire Benjamin J. Franklin bore off in romantic fashion his bride, the beautiful Anna Johnston. Franklin several times represented the Kansas City district in the national legislature, was United States minister to Siam, and but lately governor of Arizona, where he died.

Peter Burnett, the first elected governor of California, formerly lived in this county, and it was here at Weston that Ben Holliday, famous as the projector of the "pony express" and "overland stage route," sold whisky, prospered, married the pretty Notley Calvert and entered upon the career that made his name familiar on two continents.

The limitations of this communication necessarily embrace only the names of a few of the remarkably large number of persons, living in and adjacent to our little village, whose fames and reputations have gone beyond the confines of the county.

Platte City was first known as "Platte Falls," and later as Martinsville, in territorial days, though the present town has edged northwardly, and only a few grass-covered depressions here and there mark the excavations of the older settlement, overtopped by Atchison hill, from whose summitt so much of history, filling the state and nation with its volume, can be read.

T. W. P.

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