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THEY BROKE THE PRAIRIE

Being some account of the settlement of the Upper
Mississippi Valley by religious and educational pioneers told
in terms of one city, Galesburg, and one college, Knox.

By - Ernest Elmo Calkins

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This country is spotted from coast to coast and
from Lakes to Gulf with planned settlements, some alive,
some dead or dying. They were born of compelling convictions,
religious, political, social. Those who founded them saw
the "good life" ahead-a sure thing. A detailed study of one
of these settlements which has lived through a hundred years
is rich in needed lessons of what to expect of men and women
who unite to work out a common ideal. It paints, too, a
vivid picture of the changing face and changing mind of the
United States. Such a study is Ernest Elmo Calkins' "They
Broke the Prairie."

The prairie broken was a fertile, virgin stretch in
Knox County, Illinois. There in 1836 and 1837 upwards of
three hundred people, colonists from the Mohawk Valley of
New York state, undertook to build a community devoted to the

worship of God and the salvation of what we call the Middle West. The plan they had accepted with whole-hearted zeal originated with a Presbyterian revivalist, George Washington Gale, who believed that the great need of that day was to create leaders who would prevent our political institutions from falling into the hands of "those who are no less enemies of civil liberty than of pure Gospel." This could best be done, he thought, through a college where manual training was combined with study, but in which the absorbing interest was the "cause of God's Kingdom." It was of that they were to think as they labored - it was of that they were to talk and write. They followed the rule literally much to Mr. Calkins' irritation as he searched in vain in their records and letters for details of their everyday life, of their human interests.

Gale had already tested his ideas in the Oneida Institute of Science and Industry which he founded in 1825 but he wanted a broader field, an institution built up in territory uncontaminated by any one of the seven deadly sins he fought and which were common enough in the Mohawk Valley to weaken his teachings. He turned his eyes to the prairie as yet unsettled.

Those who concern themselves with subsistence, farming, colonizing and re-settlement could not do better than to read Mr. Calkins' story of the way Gale and a few able sympathizers who had joined him, went about realizing his dream.

Gale himself took a full year to perfect his plan, convert leaders, hand pick colonists, form committees. This done a Provisional Committee raised money. Enough guaranteed, an Exploring Committee "spied out" lands. Gale gave them explicit directions as to water, drainage, timber, soil, communications, people. Knox County seemed to them to meet the specifications most closely. A Purchasing Committee followed and early in 1836 bought some ten thousand acres of rockless, treeless, unbroken prairie and, adjoining, two quarter sections of primeval timber, mostly hard, and two improved farms to serve as a camping place for colonists while they built their houses on their individual plots and went about breaking the soil and putting in crops. Twelve hundred and eighty acres of the purchase was deeded to the college which was to be the soul of the enterprise. It was founded early in 1837. Prairie College it was named - later Knox Manual Labor College, now Knox College or simply Knox.

Two years were gone before all of the Mohawk Valley colonists reached the new settlement. They came in groups of thirty or forty persons, by land or water - slow journeys since they never travelled on Sunday wherever the day found them, journeys marked by hardships and deaths but never apparently by despair or doubt. No sooner had they arrived than all in health went heartily at their work of "sowing the seeds of salvation with the first breaking of the turf."

This breaking of the turf was a tough business. It took a plow of special construction drawn by three to four yoke of oxen to turn a furrow. The prairie broken no fit plow to cultivate it existed so they invented one - the first steel plow. One by one difficult agricultural problems were solved by Galesburg inventors. After the steel plow a cutter for corn stalks, ^{then} a corn planter, and the inventors set up shops to make them for their neighbors, and the shops became factories drawing labor and wealth. Mr. Calkins shows his readers a Galesburg gradually adding manufacturing to farming, new forms of manual labor for the evangelists, also with their rise new forms of the "Seven Deadly Sins."

There was a rapid evolution of each factor of their physical life. They must fence their fields. They began with logs - turned to osage orange hedges - tried a home-made stake and wire and sighed with relief when finally an effective barbed wire fence had fought its way past rival patent claimants and rival manufacturers to a solid position in the market.

They must have building materials to replace logs. From two men on a saw they went to small saw mills, then a town plant working for all. They discovered clay fit for bricks. Men began firing for their private use. Then came a town brick kiln and soon a big and profitable industry.

They saw they must diversify their crops.

It could not be hogs and corn alone. A settler brought a cupful of timothy seed with him - raised seed - and soon the farmers had "tame hay". One man saw a future in popcorn, raised it in quantity and sought a European market actually demonstrating "the corn that turned to snow" as the English described it, before Queen Victoria, so amusing her that she gave him a French wax doll to bring back to his little girl. Mr. Calkins calls this a Galesburg fairy story. It is one of the merits of his book that he misses no fairy story, no pithy adventure, no native word or phrase throughout the hundred years he traces.

Not all of the material growth was so natural and peaceful as this multiplication of crops, this rise of factories from hand-made ~~house-made~~ supplies. Galesburg fought hard, cunningly, and often questionably to win the place in Knox County which George Washington Gale felt was hers by right of her noble ambitions and her cult of godliness. Mr. Calkins' spirited stories of how she made herself a railroad center, of how she took the county seat from her neighbor and predecessor in the County, Knoxville, are stories of hard fought battles by men who understood both financial and political strategy and in a pinch could be depended upon to use the necessary trick ahead of their opponents.

Heated and bitter as were those struggles to make Galesburg first in her territory they were nothing in heat and bitterness to George Washington Gale's struggle to oust all Congregationalists from the government of the college and make it pure Presbyterian. The two sects had lived together peacefully in the Mohawk Valley and in the early days of the college, but Gale decided that the time had come to turn the institution over to his denomination. It was his Plan, his college. He claimed a vested right in it as a patentee in his patent. He was a Presbyterian - the college must be Presbyterian. It was the only true church. Methodists, Baptists, Campbellites, Unitarians, Universalists followed "heretical superstitions." As for Congregationalism it was a "peculiar religion" which he would not countenance and against it he waged a fifteen years war. His most violent and eloquent opponent in the long contest was one of the redoubtable Beechers - Edward - a Congregationalist minister in the town. He had no connection with the college, no business in the contest, but no Beecher could turn his back on a fight. They were predestined to take sides. Edward Beecher lost no time in siding against Gale and in carrying the crusade to the world at large. Much and long as Gale suffered he may be said to have had the last word in this unholy affair for he lived to see a Presbyterian president installed. But his victory did not live out the century the college is celebrating. Today Knox is non-sectarian.

But if Presbyterians and Congregationalists fought over which was the true church they were united on the issue of slavery. It was one of the deadly sins they had set out to destroy and though surrounded by Southern sympathizers they never wavered in their outspoken challenge of the institution. Throughout the '40's and '50's when a Federal law ordered the return of run-away slaves to their owners and defiant abolitionists were running an underground railroad through Illinois with a terminal in Canada, Galesburg operated one of the largest and safest stations on the route.

As the agitation against the extension of slavery crystallized into a political party, the Republican, Galesburg went along. When in 1858 she was chosen as one of the seven points in the state set for the Great Debates between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas loud was her rejoicing. Lincoln was her guest. Mr. Calkins' chapter on the Day, October 8, 1858 will delight readers who know their Lincoln story. It is fresh, direct, packed with lively human details and comments - one of the best in the book.

There was poetic justice in Lincoln's argument that Day, for it was here in this town founded on the sternest notions of right and wrong, hating slavery because it was wrong, that for the first ^{time} in the series he put above constitutional, economic and historic reasons for keeping slavery back - the unanswerable argument that it was a wicked institution.

The Day of that Debate^{is} the greatest in Galesburg's history and the one which most nearly justifies George Washington Gale's rigid code. Nevertheless it passed unnoticed until in 1908 the then President of Knox - Dr. John H. Finley - now editor of the New York Times - realizing its historic significance arranged a celebration so picturesque and impressive that the whole country took notice. It may fairly be said to have introduced the college and the town to the Nation.

Dr. Finley did much for Knox as Mr. Calkins shows but nothing for which she should be more thankful than the interpretation for the first time of the significance to her and to the Nation of the Debate between Abraham Lincoln and Stepehn A. Douglas held on the East Front of "Old Main" on October 8, 1858.

Slavery is the only one of the seven deadly sins Gale fought which is dead - the rest all live in modified forms both in his town and his college. The war on them has not ceased as Mr. Calkins' list of churches and societies show but time has changed the tactics. There is increasing emphasis on virtues rather than sins and the virtues are active not negative. Tolerance is reckoned a virtue, so is temperance rather than abstinence, so is liberalism rather than autocracy, ~~and~~ moderation, even in religion, rather than excess, enjoyment of life rather than self-mortification.

The college has changed in outlook and ways as the town has. Its curriculum is broader, more flexible. Cultural interests absorb it rather than militant denominational religion. Its society is less stern, unbending, more human and enjoyable. Like the town, the college does not consider itself finished. It is still growing, growing like the country of which it is an epitome for one realizes more and more as he reads Mr. Calkins' careful and honest presentation of the facts of life in Galesburg through its first century, facts gathered with such earnest intent to miss nothing of significance, that this is America he is talking about, that this is what she has been going through in the last one hundred years, that this is about where she has arrived.