



*Pieces of Iowa's Past*, published by the Iowa State Capitol Tour Guides weekly during the legislative session, features historical facts about Iowa, the Capitol, and the early workings of state government. All historical publications are reproduced here with the actual spelling, punctuation, and grammar retained.

**February 25, 2009**

**THIS WEEK: *What the People Were Doing Around 1890***

**BACKGROUND:** This article appeared in "Iowa Through the Years" by Cyrenus Cole. It was published at Iowa City Iowa in 1940 by the State Historical Society of Iowa.

**Cyrenus Cole**, a Representative from Iowa; born near Pella, Marion County, Iowa, January 13, 1863; graduated from Central University, Pella, Iowa, 1887; newspaper publisher; business owner; author; elected to the Sixty-seventh Congress by special election as a Republican to fill the vacancy caused by the resignation of United States Representative James W. Good, and reelected to the Sixty-eighth and to the four succeeding Congresses (July 19, 1921-March 3, 1933); was not a candidate for renomination to the Seventy-third Congress in 1932; died on November 14, 1939, in Washington, D.C.; interment in First Dutch Reform Church Cemetery, near Pella, Marion County, Iowa.

**WHAT THE PEOPLE WERE DOING AROUND 1890**

While waiting for the next elections, it may be worthwhile to take note of what the people of Iowa were doing during those years. The times were not unprosperous and there was a progressive expansion of activities both on the farms and in the towns and cities.

One of the most striking things occurred in Sioux City in 1887. To advertise the State of Iowa and its chief product, they erected there that year the first of a series of Corn Palaces. This was a huge frame building decorated with corn in all its forms and colors until it looked like an agricultural mosque. It was to look at the Corn Palace of 1887 that President Grover Cleveland may have crossed the Mississippi for the first time. In 1889 Sioux City boosters outfitted a "Corn Train" in which they crossed the country to participate in the inauguration of President Harrison.

In a vision of the future of their city, promoters built in Sioux City an elevated railroad a mile and a half long. The track on stilts led the way to Morningside, where a college was founded in 1894. Transportation absorbed many efforts in the growing cities. To be rid of alternating dust and mud, many kinds of paving materials were tried. Wooden pavements made out of swamp pine shipped in from the South were tried. The blocks were embedded in sand and filled and covered with preparations of tar. The blocks soon began to decay and were abandoned.

Pavements made of brick fared hardly better. The bricks were ground into dust that was blown about the streets. Mixtures of crushed stone, gravel, sand, and cement were then deemed fit only as foundation materials. Now concrete pavements are in universal use. To facilitate transportation in the cities miniature railroads were built in the streets, over which little cars were operated by horse power. A revolution was wrought in such travel when electric power was applied to these cars through an overhead wire with a trolley wheel and a motor in the car. One of the first lines to be electrified is said to have been the Sioux City elevated line in 1893.

In 1887 the first six-story building was erected in Iowa, the second Savery House in Des Moines. Thousands lingered to see so daring a feat of construction. To outdo its constructors, an eccentric man named Gerrit Van Ginkle began the erection of a nine-story building, surmounted by a four-story tower from which he invited the curious to view their smoke-begrimed city. Van Ginkle came to Des Moines from Pella, where he had mastered the printer's trade. When he was not setting type in the composing room of the Des Moines *Leader*, he gardened and thereby stumbled into a coal mine which made him rich enough to build a street railway and the nine-story Tower Building.

The farmers were quite as active in devising and doing new things. One of their first problems was to get rid of surplus water. This problem was solved by the manufacture of tiles moulded from native clays. Drainage was laborious work, for the tiling had to be laid below the frost lines. Today there are few farms in Iowa that are not in part underlaid with such tiling. The improvement of farm machinery was under full way around 1890. Self-binders, self-loaders, and self-stackers relieved the farmers of much drudgery.

What might have been called the horse and buggy age soon became the "bicycle era". The high-wheeler bicycle had been one of the curious objects at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876. About 1889 what was called the safety bicycle was invented. On this vehicle the rider sat between two equi-sized wheels, instead of on the top of a high wheel with a little trailer wheel. The safety bicycles met with so much approval that manufacturers could not make them fast enough to supply the demand.

At first the bicycles met with scant courtesies on the roads, where the man with the horse and buggy refused to turn out for the man on wheels. To protect their rights the bicyclers organized the League of American Wheelmen. In their organized capacity they were not handicapped by modesty. They soon began to talk of "good permanent highways". They were the first men to do much talking about improving the roads. In Iowa the members of the League invaded the General Assembly to lay before it their ambitious plans. When the lawmakers paid no heed to their pleas, the wheelmen undertook to solve some of their problems by the construction of gravel and cinder paths along main roads.

For a time the bicycle almost crowded the race horses from their tracks. In a State "race meeting" at Jefferson, Iowa, on the Fourth of July, 1895, Emil Kostomlatsky of Oskaloosa covered ten miles in twenty-six minutes and fifty-two seconds. The League formulated strict rules for bicycle races. One stipulation was that "no race meeting will receive official sanction if it is to be held on Sunday, or has upon its schedule any event which is open to women competitors". The men who rode in races were required to wear shirts that "shall not bare shoulders", and their trousers "must reach the knee".

What women should wear on bicycles became a matter of much dispute. Those who favored the Amelia Bloomer costume were warned that it involved "an enormous loss of gracefulness which every woman should religiously consider". If short skirts were worn, women were admonished to wear them with high gaiters, "as the rider would seem to herself and to her spectators not to be sufficiently dressed without them". It was still too early for feminine legs to be exposed.

For the preachers the advent of the bicycle presented problems of its own kind. When they looked down from their pulpits they saw more and more empty pews; those who ought to have filled them were out seeking worldly pleasures on their bicycles.