



History of Poweshiek County, Iowa: A Record of Settlement, Organization, Progress and Achievement, Volume 1

Leonard Fletcher Parker

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The master builders of a new country are Youth and Hope; and both were incarnate in Leonard Fletcher Parker. Among all the young men who came in their early thirties to build up this county and commonwealth, no one has played a better part than he in making the History to whose record as a Grand Young Man of eighty-seven he is heroically devoting his sunset days.

"In the small town of China in Western New York, a rural region conspicuous for intelligence, radical reform, and religious character," he was born August 3, 1825—the youngest child of Elias and Dorothy (Fletcher) Parker, both of Puritan and Revolutionary stock. Of his forbears, one of whom settled in Concord in 1635, a Fletcher and a Parker served on the town "Committee of Correspondence" that helped prepare the way for Independence and both probably held the bridge with the other "embattled farmers" who "fired the shot heard round the world." Thus the lad came honestly by his fighting blood which no good cause ever failed to arouse. Left fatherless at four years of age, he grew up on his mother's little farm till he was twenty taking his part in all the labor of the seasons until at sixteen the simple schooling of the countryside had fitted him for varying the round of "Works and Days" by teaching winters. Meantime, the plan of life was taking definite form; and at twenty-one he set out for Oberlin with five dollars in his pocket and an unlimited fund of youth and hope on draft. At his journey's end he had a dollar left; but he turned the less tangible capital to so good account that he presently found himself a tutor as well as student in the new college and at home in the family of Professor (afterward President) Fairchild. He taught his way through and graduated in 1851, out of debt and with one hundred dollars cash in hand !

Oberlin at the mid-Century was a ferment of reforms. Abolition and Prohibition were Law and Gospel; and Finney (Boanerges) was calling men to repentance with the authority of a Hebrew prophet and an Apostle to the Gentiles rolled into one. One is little surprised to hear how, while still an undergraduate, young Parker in his Professor's absence once taught the last Latin of the course for half a year. Bred in this tonic atmosphere and in the com-

panionship of kindred spirits such as his classmates, Jacob D. Cox, Samuel F. Cooper, and Sarah Candace Pearse, he looked to a life of service, and thought to find it in the missionary field. He entered the Seminary at Oberlin and had actually been assigned to the Siam mission in 1852, when failing health—dying of consumption, the doctors said—broke off his studies and his plans.

Happily, it proved a false alarm; and presently he was able to take up work as superintendent of schools at Brownsville, Pennsylvania. Meantime, on the 21st of August, 1853, he entered upon a more important and enduring engagement when President Finney joined him in marriage with his classmate, Sarah Candace Pearse, who was to be his helpmeet through the century. After three years' happy work at Brownsville, he visited Kansas -in search of a wider field; but he found the territory in the throes of civil war and offering more inducements to the sharpshooter than the schoolmaster. Returning East for his wife with a view to establishing himself at Des Moines, the new capital, he now set his face toward Iowa. But on the way he

heard of the new colony at Grinnell and in September, 1856, stopped there to look about him. The village with its "grassy walks, few houses, 200 or so inhabitants, most of them from New England," with "their purpose to make everything vastly better and their spirit of pitching into everything that promised good with a cheerful abandon"—all appealed to him; and, though there were those in the community who seriously doubted if any good thing could come out of Oberlin, a bargain was promptly struck with the new-comer that he should take charge of the public school and prepare the way for "Grinnell..

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