The Passing of Jesse Birch

By Elmore Barce

In the purple and gold of the summer—with the cone-flower and the helianthus in full bloom, Jesse Birch passes—passes forever from the great prairies, the pleasant groves, the places made sacred by the memories of the past. He loved them all—the vast perspective of sky and plain—the fields of corn rustling in the sunshine—the songs of the birds and the beauty of the flowers.

To live wholly in the past—to search out every nook and cranny for some fact of historic interest—to walk in the footsteps and record the experiences of men and women long since dust—may not arouse the enthusiasm or engage the attention of the present age, but the day will come in this community when future generations will have cause to revere the memory of a man who for a quarter of a century assiduously scrutinized every tradition, unraveled every tale, pored over every ancient document and dusty tome, to preserve to the people of this locality and of the whole State, the story of their pioneer forebears. There was not a single ancient landmark, a cluster of oak trees, an old rock by the wayside, that did not hold for him an absorbing interest. To a mind such as his, the one element of life above all others was loyalty—loyalty to all the sorrows and struggles of the past—loyalty to tradition, tribe and clan—loyalty above all to one's own hearthstone and family fireside. To him the little village that sprang up on the edge of the grand prairie—that became and was the parent and mother of all the civilization that followed—was a hallowed place. The old paths that reached out into the plains beyond—the places where the children played about the old academy—the quiet cemeteries with their flat slabs of stone—were all sacrosanct. To wander too far away from these old associations and
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scenes—to cast aside as worthless all the lessons of the past—were, perhaps, fraught with danger.

A nation of people being made up of its component parts, the foremost workman in the temple is the town or country chronicler—the man who takes us into the homes, and teaches us the manners and customs of the every day folk—the common men and women who have always made up the great preponderating body of America’s citizenship. To understand these people the faithful annalist records their sacrifices. Did they seek out new lands? It was but to build up a home in the wilderness for their coming children. Did they erect rude frontier churches and log schools? It was but to enlighten and educate those children. Did they establish the court house and the seat of justice? It was but to bring about the rule or right in the affairs of men. Enlightenment, intelligence, decorum—these are always the marks of true greatness. It was given to Birch to vividly portray all the struggles, the pains, the adversities and the heroic sacrifices of the early settlers of this county. He did it faithfully and well, without any possible hope of reward, and the children of the future who read his narratives will have a loftier conception of those stalwart souls who blazed the trail. To work, to strive, to arduously endeavor for the good of others, is the highest conception yet attained of man’s duty to his Creator and to his fellow beings.

Birch commenced his investigations at the time when he first began to edit the old Oxford Tribune. A few still survived who had been young men at the time of the establishment of the town in 1843. Many remembered distinctly the stirring scenes of ante-bellum days—the call for volunteers—the going forth of the Tenth and Fifteenth Indiana Regiments. From these original characters, from old family letters and papers, from the records in the public archives and other sources, he began the construction of a series of short tales and accounts, which, as time passed, and the correlation of facts and events became apparent, gradually evolved into a connected whole. Never was a tale more interesting or dramatic! The migration of the Potawatomi Tribes, the coming of the prairie schooner that boldly struck out from the banks of the Wabash into the great prairies—the building of the cabin and the breaking up of the sod—the fight with fevers and malaria—the struggles with prairie fires in the autumn and with the terrible blizzards
of the winter—the opening of the Civil War—the bugle call to arms and the marching away of the hosts—are all in the picture. Out of these gradually emerges the gigantic form of the Republic.

The days of reconstruction that followed the War—the herds that roamed through the bull-grass and the blue-stem—the yokes of oxen that plowed up the plains and furrowed out the first drains—the laying out of the primitive roads and highways, and eventually the construction of the long lines of iron rails that connected the fields of corn and droves of cattle with the marts of the great cities, are all accurately and sedulously set forth, and all at once you perceive that he whom you had rated as the village annalist, is in truth and in fact one of the historians of the Nation, setting forth in detail and for the permanent advantage of the people the story of one of those typical communities which go to make up the body of the empire.

Nor has Mr. Birch neglected those finer things of life—the eager reaching out of the people for art and story, for song and poesy, for the higher and nobler sentiments and emotions, that make the weary toil for existence lighter and happier. One of the proud moments of his life was the occasion when he was able to present the charming tale of the Carey Sisters, of their long residence in Oxford, and of their first efforts in that field of literature and song in which they afterwards became so justly famous. For years he was a contributor to historical magazines—took pleasure and delight in preparing articles on family history and church affairs, and closed up a long and useful career by preparing and compiling for the American Legion a painstaking list of all the soldiers living and dead who had entered the World War from Benton County.

His was an unostentatious life. For years he was a sufferer from physical ills that gave him endless distress and misery. That he was a true lover of his fellow men is evidenced by his long and patient toil in their behalf, and in and about the preservation of the traditions which have made their history illustrious. The only fitting monument to his endeavors would be the publication of his many and interesting writings for the edification of that public which he so faithfully served.