

The Norwegian country boys were very inept at throwing a ball. They had never had the practice of playing ball, such as we American youngsters had had almost from the cradle. I could throw a ball twice as far as they could, and they were astonished that I could throw a stone from one side of the river to the other side. That was unheard of. But

their ten year olds could beat me all hollow on skis.

The winter I was in Norway I took an extensive and thorough course in double-entry bookkeeping and accounting. The course was given by a professor of economics and accounting from the University of Christiania, and has been of great value to me all through my business career.

Chapter 6

I returned to Beloit in October, 1879, and secured a job as bookkeeper in the Citizens National bank, where I remained for about four months, until my father took me in as a partner in the business under the firm name of J. Thompson & Sons. In this business I have continued all my life and never worked for anyone else.

1881 was the year of the big flood when the dam went out. That winter there had been a very heavy fall of snow all through Wisconsin, and the snow remained until way into April. I remember there was considerable worry and anxiety over what might happen if the weather turned suddenly warm.

And this is just what happened. About the middle of the month, I think it was the 20th, the headgates at the head of the race gave way and the water rushed down the race and broke through the dikes and flooded Third Street and the down town area. It looked as though the whole business district was going to be wiped out. The water rushed around the north end of our factory building on its way to the river and cut a deep channel, but fortunately, our north wall did not collapse. I was in a boat and narrowly escaped being carried down in the torrent.

That day was an anxious day. The next night about 3 a.m. the dam broke with a great rush of water. Six men in a boat were just crossing the river above the dam, and were carried down in the rush of water. All were drowned except one man who clung to the boat and was carried down to Boney's Island, south of Beloit, where he manag-

ed to climb into a tree. The next day he was rescued. John Cunningham and some others went down in a boat and brought him to land. The dam was rebuilt and made stronger and better and has stood the strain ever since.

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In 1883 we had the big cyclone. The storm came on in the late afternoon. We could see the black clouds coming over from the west, and all of a sudden about 5 p.m. the blast came. It seemed to be all over in a minute or two, but the damage done was great. When it struck we were in our office in Third Street. Soon the water came pouring down through the roof, as the tin roofing was gone. The storm came up from the southwest and followed the path of the river and swept through the main business district. The old covered Northwestern R. R. bridge was torn from its piers and thrown into the river. Many store fronts on the south side of West Grand Avenue were blown out and demolished. Plate glass windows along the streets were shattered. The roof of Bort Bailey Dry Goods store was ripped off and the streets were littered with glass and roof materials.

Two churches lost their spires. The steeple of the Presbyterian church in Broad st. was blown down, also the 200 foot steeple of the First Congregational church. The tall steeple of the Baptist church was badly damaged but did not fall. It was bent over to one side, but seemed firm and remained standing till the church was burned. The clock in the First Congregational steeple was not injured and continued to run.

A large number of big elm trees in Broad st. were uprooted and toppled over. Only one man lost his life, which occurred up at the paper mill, where a wall collapsed and fell upon him. The total damage and destruction ran into many thousands of dollars.

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In 1884 at midnight Easter eve the Baptist church caught fire and burned to the ground. In those days whenever there was a big fire everybody turned out and hastened to the scene of the fire. I remember my mother was one of the number, and when she came home after it was all over, she said she felt so sad and depressed. Not only was the church gone, but the familiar town clock in the tower which everyone had learned to cherish, was gone forever. The saddest of all was when the flames reached up into the steeple. The clock was still running, until it struck the hour of twelve, as if to say good bye, and then the clock and steeple fell to the ground. She said she had tears in her eyes.

In 1886 we had a terrible tragedy in our family. My brother,

Albert, and my cousin, Jacob Flack, both lost their lives by drowning in Rock river.

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As I recounted before, while I was in Norway, I acquired the art of handling a sailboat and liked to sail. My cousin Flack had been a deep sea sailor all his life but had lost a leg in the shipwreck of his vessel, so had to retire from the sea. We offered him a job as bookkeeper in our office, so he came over to Beloit. He, being a sailor, also liked to sail. So we built a fine keel boat, and fitted it up with mast and sails, and enjoyed the sport greatly. We had the fastest boat on the river. On October 24, '86, in the morning, Jake asked my brother to go along with him for a sail—"the last sail of the year." Albert did not want to go, but being urged, finally went along. Up near the Big Hill a sudden gust of wind capsized the boat and both were drowned. Tragedies are not uncommon and most families at one time or another experience them. But this was a terrible blow to my mother and to all of us.

Chapter 7

In the early days of the sixties, Beloit was protected by two volunteer fire companies who served without pay. Company No. 1 had its station in a building on East Grand ave. where the Municipal Court is now located. The city still owns the building. Company No. 2 was housed in the present Fourth st. fire station.

The apparatus at each station consisted of a small hand engine and a hose cart. The engines were pulled through the streets by hand by means of long ropes which enabled many men to grab them and pull. Engine No. 1 was named the "Water Witch" and Engine No. 2 was called the "Ever Ready." It was considered an honor to belong to the fire companies. Their monthly meetings were held upstairs in the respective fire stations when officers were elected and other business transacted. Each company had a firemen's library and members were permitted to draw books.

There was considerable friendly rivalry between the two companies and frequent contests were held to see which engine could throw a stream the farthest. Usually No. 1 won for distance but No. 2 for volume, as it was of slightly larger capacity. These hand engines were operated by what was called "hand brakes," which was a walking beam device with a long bar running lengthwise on each side of the machine, which the men grabbed and worked up and down to drive the pump pistons. When a fire alarm was sounded, the firemen and other citizens rushed to the stations and started for the fire on the run. The hose cart went first to lay the hose. The water supply was drawn from the river in the business district and from cisterns in residence districts, provided they could find a cistern available.

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In 1885 a paid fire department was organized, the old hand en-