

Skirmisher

*The Life, Times, and Political Career of
James B. Weaver*

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The Hairy Nation

ON APRIL 30, 1843, outside Keosauqua in southeastern Iowa, the family of Abram and Susan Weaver prepared to journey west. The couple and their children packed the last items into a family wagon already stuffed with household supplies and Abram's rifle. A chicken coop hung off the back, and a solitary cow trailed on a leash. When all was ready, the modest caravan departed, with a pair of horses pulling the load and the family dog trotting alongside.¹

It was the third time in eight years that the Weavers had moved. In 1835, Susan and Abram left their home near Dayton, Ohio, to carve a farm out of the forests of southwestern Michigan. After seven years, they left Cass County for Iowa. They wintered outside Keosauqua before continuing their journey, but this time their destination was relatively close at hand. The Weavers and thousands of others were headed immediately to the west, territory once reserved for the Sac and Fox Indians. By treaty, the land opened to white settlement at midnight on April 30, but prior to the official opening, Abram and other pioneers had surreptitiously scouted out potential homesteads while pretending to hunt. When the hour struck, soldiers patrolling the border fired guns to signal the start of the west's first great land rush. Believing that the prairie was only good for grazing cattle, the Weavers and the other families pouring into the newly opened region headed for wooded areas. At about 3 p.m., the Weaver wagon halted. Susan and Abram laid claim to a quarter section along Chequest Creek and began to build a new life.²

One of the children who helped unload the wagon was a blue-eyed nine-year-old boy. Born near Dayton, Ohio, on June 12, 1833, James Baird Weaver was the fifth child in a family that would eventually produce thirteen children.³ When the wagon stopped, the Weavers settled in a place that young James called home for most of his life. At another time, growing up in different circumstances, he might have become a preacher or prospered in business. Instead, reflecting the influences and experiences of his childhood in southern Iowa, Weaver gravitated to politics.

Survival in the new territory was the first order of business, and the Weavers immediately addressed the challenges of pioneer life. A bark shanty built on the creek's edge served as the family's first shelter. Corn, potatoes, and other

vegetables soon went into the ground. Eventually, Abram erected a house built from green timber with a clapboard roof, a floor made from split logs, and doors and windows hung on wooden hinges. The family's kitchen stove was a luxury not enjoyed by many other pioneers, but in other respects, the Weavers' experiences were similar to those of their neighbors. "Mother's loom and father's handicraft had been busy preparing for the approaching winter so by early fall all was ready for any stress of weather that might come," Weaver recalled in a brief autobiographical account written toward the end of his life. As the homestead developed, Abram supplemented the family income with his skills as a carpenter and cooper. He helped build houses, made furniture and barrels, "and busied himself with an almost endless variety of handicraft for which he was noted throughout the widely scattered neighborhood," his son remembered. As the pioneer family settled into its homestead, young James attended a log schoolhouse, where Friday afternoon spelling bees "stimulated youthful ambition to blood heat"⁴ and he discovered a lifelong love for public contests of wit and wordplay.

A family heritage of civic and military service came with the possessions Susan and Abram brought along to Iowa. Abram was born in 1804 in Butler County, near Cincinnati, to Henry and Susanna Weaver. In 1824, Abram married Susan Imlay, a New Jersey native. Both claimed descent from Revolutionary War veterans. That heritage was a point of pride with James, who in later years would incorrectly number Betsy Ross, the seamstress credited with creating the Stars and Stripes American flag, among his ancestors.

According to family tradition, Abram's father was active in local political affairs in southwestern Ohio and played a prominent role in the frontier wars against the Indians. Abram immersed himself in the local political scene almost immediately after he settled in the new territory. In April 1844, he was elected to the first board of commissioners for newly created Davis County.⁵

Thus began an active but often unsuccessful lifelong quest for elective office. Contemporary accounts and family lore indicate that Abram held the offices of district court clerk and postmaster in the 1840s and 1850s, but county election results show that voters frequently spurned his bids for office.⁶ Despite Abram's disappointments in politics, James clearly looked up to his father, describing him as a hard-working provider who presided over a warm and loving home. When chores were done, the family gathered in front of "the open cheerful fireplace," where "there was merry chatter, song, and a thrilling touch of music, father leading with his dear old flute." Abram was a Democrat,

and when the talk around the hearth turned to politics, he passed his partisan leanings on to his son.⁷

Along with Abram, other members of the extended Weaver family guided and influenced young James. Calvin W. Phelps, who married James's sister Elizabeth in 1844, practiced medicine in Bloomfield and won a term as the Davis County sealer of weights and measures in 1849.⁸ Phelps would play a significant role in one of the major events of James's youth.

Rivaling Abram as a political influence and role model was Hosea B. Horn. Born in 1820 in Mercer County, Kentucky, Horn and his family relocated to Indiana in the 1830s, where he learned the printing trade and became active in Whig Party politics. In 1839, Horn became an assistant in the office of the Bartholomew County district court clerk, where, along with his official duties, he studied law. Horn edited a newspaper published in the county seat of Columbus to support the presidential candidacy of Kentucky Whig Henry Clay in 1844, and he continued to carry the Whig banner after moving to Iowa and marrying James's sister Margaret in 1847.⁹

One can only guess at the kind of political discussions Abram and Hosea conducted over the dinner table or around the courthouse. If they were loyal adherents of their parties, however, they may well have debated two opposing views of the proper role of government in the American republic. Democrats believed strongly in an egalitarian—though racially exclusive—social order. They feared that a strong federal government, in the hands of wealthy bankers and merchants, would favor the monied classes and restrict freedom. The party stood committed to what one newspaper described in 1854 as “the great principles of equality . . . individual liberty and . . . governments instituted and controlled by the people of the sovereign States.” Whigs, Horace Greeley argued, subscribed to a more expansive view of the role of government, seeing it as “an agency of the community through which vast and beneficent ends may be accomplished.” In the wake of the Panic of 1837, Whigs contended that the government needed to play a direct role in promoting economic recovery. Moreover, many Whigs, particularly in the party's early days, abhorred the notion of party politics because it required the subordination of the individual conscience to the survival of the party.¹⁰ With his father as a loyal Democrat and his brother-in-law as a leading local Whig, young James was exposed to a potent blend of political ideas involving social and economic equality, the role of government, and the relationship of the indi-

vidual to political parties—a blend that he would carry with him throughout his adult life.

In many ways, the Weavers typified the settlers arriving in the Iowa territory in the 1840s. The archetypal newcomer was a Protestant Democrat born in Michigan, Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, or Wisconsin, with Ohio contributing the greatest number of Iowa's residents. The mid-Atlantic states of New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware also contributed significantly to the population of the territory. While tolerant of religious and political minorities, most newcomers wanted nothing to do with Indians, blacks, or other racial minorities. "The typical Iowan had no love for slavery or for the slave," historian Joseph F. Wall has written. "This was white man's country by conquest and occupation, and he intended to keep it that way." While it is not clear if the Weavers subscribed to the prevailing opinions about race, on another matter, it is more likely that they differed from the typical settlers. Iowans viewed lawyers, bankers, and politicians with suspicion, but the Weavers, whose family was headed by an aspiring politician and included a lawyer by marriage, probably did not share this distrust.¹¹

Like many other settlers, the Weavers gravitated to the church as they settled in the new territory. Before setting off to claim their Davis County homestead, the family lived in an unfinished farmhouse on the Des Moines River. The house, which belonged to James Purdom,¹² may well have been the site where an early Iowa Methodist congregation met for about eleven years beginning in 1836.¹³ After settling in Davis County, the family often hosted the traveling preachers who fanned out across the territory. Methodists in particular made use of such circuit riders, reflecting the denomination's pragmatic willingness to take the Gospel to where people lived and worked. On their circuits, which often took weeks to complete, itinerant pastors held services, performed marriages, and attended to the spiritual needs of the families living on isolated farms. Their arrival left a lasting impression on Weaver, who recounted the visiting preacher as a typically "jolly fellow" whose services provided inspiration and fellowship. "With good cheer [the preacher] hunted up the remote settlers, through rain and sunshine . . . reminded us of God and duty and invited us all to the big meeting which was always soon to occur at some pioneer home," Weaver wrote. "All formality was discarded at those religious gatherings. They sang and prayed with uncton. Amen and Hallelujah resounded as a matter of course."¹⁴

Faith was stoked at services where preachers roused the spiritual passions

of the congregation. The story of a camp meeting hosted by the Rev. Francis Carey, a Methodist minister who served in Bloomfield in the early 1850s, illustrates the emphasis on oratory and drama in worship. The featured speaker was the Rev. Henry Clay Dean, a noted Iowa Methodist, who was scheduled to give two sermons on the last day of the meeting. The first, "full of humor and oddities," was disappointing. When Carey chastised him for his effort, Dean apologized. " 'Frank, I was fishing. This morning I was using the hook. Tonight I will use the dragnet.' " That night, Dean was far more effective. "The people were completely overcome," Carey's grandson wrote. "They wept and sobbed all through the audience. . . . [M]any were converted and professed religion, as the Methodists called it."¹⁵ This was the ardent faith commonly practiced when Weaver was growing up. While his political positions evolved over the years, he remained a devout Christian throughout his life.

The status of the territory in which the Weavers settled remained in flux into the mid-1840s. Acquired as part of the Louisiana Purchase, by 1834 Iowa was governed as part of the Michigan Territory, and then, when Michigan achieved statehood, the Wisconsin Territory. President Martin Van Buren created a separate Iowa Territory in 1838, but there were many detours in the path to statehood. In 1840, voters defeated an attempt backed by territorial governor Robert Lucas to call a convention to write a state constitution. A conflict regarding the territory's southern border with Missouri almost erupted into war when the governor of Missouri called up state militia to enforce his state's claims and Lucas responded by calling up three divisions of Iowa militia. A second bid for statehood in 1845 also ran afoul of border complications. Northern congressmen wanted to modify the territory's boundaries to permit the creation of new states if, as many anti-slavery Northerners feared, Texas was subdivided into four slave states. Not until 1846 did Iowans and Congress agree on the state's boundaries and its admission into the Union.¹⁶

The contours of the Iowa political landscape also began to take shape during this period. Predominantly Democratic, the new territory nonetheless possessed an active and growing Whig organization, which briefly enjoyed control of the office of territorial governor when William Henry Harrison was elected president. Harrison's victory mobilized Whigs in the territory, but Democrats remained dominant in Iowa well into the 1850s. The leading figures on the political landscape were a pair of Democratic senators, George Wallace Jones and Augustus Caesar Dodge, whose ties to Iowa dated