

## Leon Wilkinson

*Bloomfield, Iowa*

*Birthday: October 3, 1932*

*Interview on November 27, 2001, in his home by Tyler Dahl*

*Heidi Tice also present*

Q, [Tyler Dahl] How long have you lived in the area?

A. [Leon Wilkinson] Born and raised here.

Q. Did your ancestors come from the Midwest?

A. My immediate family did, as far as I know. My parents and all but one of my grandparents were born in Iowa. My grandfather on my dad's side was born in Jamesport, Missouri, and raised here in Bloomfield. I haven't researched my genealogy too far. My great-granddad was born and was included in the 1860 census; he must have been born here in the 1830s.

Q. What have been your occupations?

A. Schoolteacher, thirty-two or thirty-three years.

Q. What have been your favorite social events?

A. My social events have been tied with being a schoolteacher and athletic director of Davis County High School; even after ten years of retirement I still go support the kids, just like Davis High School in Utah.

Q. What are the challenges of living here in Bloomfield?

A. Access to fine arts activities. Locally, there are few. Des Moines is a hundred miles away, which is the closest around. They have some municipal about twenty miles away.

Q. What offices have you held in service?

A. Well, you look at my resume and would wonder if I had done anything else—I am involved in multitudes of offices. Local tourism, three local historical groups—the county historical preservation, city historical preservation, and local historical society. In Rapid Lake activities, I am a member of the local Civil War Roundtable, on the Rapid Lake Association board, Foster Care review board chairperson, and involved in youth offenders program, to name a few.

Q. Where does the Mormon Trail fit in, service or fun?

A. That was something we did for fun. The romance of trails, which has stuck with me forever, started when we moved to Troy, Iowa, in 1937. Right across the road from the house was a sign that said "Mormon Trail." I had heard enough and read enough to have been aware of the Santa Fe Trail and the Oregon Trail; and lo and behold I lived on the Mormon Trail and didn't have a clue of what a Mormon was. When I got the opportunity, right after I retired, I read an article in the paper that someone was going to establish a chapter of the Iowa Monnon Trails Association here in the county in 1993 or '94. After I joined things went downhill from there. I became more and more involved.

Q. What were your responsibilities reestablishing the wagon trail?

A. I helped the Department of the Interior, Iowa Historical Association, and the Iowa Monnon Trails Association, of which I am the vice president now, putting up the interpretive panels on the trail. One of the responsibilities was to mark the trail. I was involved with one of the conservation guys, marking the trail according to the Department of the Interior map that we had.

Q. Did you work with the guys in Corridan, Iowa?

A. The guys at Corridan were members of the Iowa Trails Association long before I ever got involved in helping.

Q. What were your duties along the trail as they began to follow it across Iowa?

A. One of the local people had the idea of putting on a reenactment and wanted to know if I would get involved, so I did. The logistics came as more people got involved. A fellow by the name of Mark Ricks, the president of the Nauvoo Mission—or whatever mission it was then—and I got involved in putting this reenactment together. As things started falling into place a man by the name of Jim Bell, who was on a mission in Nauvoo at the time, was assigned to help us. Elder Bell being a retired veterinarian. It was a deep job getting the trail laid out and all the PR work involved.

Q. How did the word get spread across the country?

A. We took a few trips to Utah to get some support and get the word out—we did everything we could. I got tied in with the *Salt Lake Tribune*, which backed us financially, even though we were just a bunch of guys from Iowa that nobody had ever heard of—no credibility. The *Tribune* put a lot of ads out. A bunch of locals from Salt Lake helped us out or spent some time with us, helping us get prepared.

Q. Did you want this to be a big trek?

A. We were naive and still are. How can you anticipate people's desires? Our trouble was that the Iowa sesquicentennial happened at the same time as the exodus celebration. There were many events throughout the state in little communities to celebrate that. We had two things going on, and our move was to play both ends of it. If you do all the work for an event like this and there is already a celebration, you would hope people would join you in the activities.

Several people that might have come and join us were involved in the Utah Statehood celebration, which was around the same time, 1996. Max Pitcher was on it but went across in the second train. There were two trains across Iowa in 1996. Our philosophy was one authentic group—we called it "JL2"; the other was fostered by the Iowa Trails Association. Jeff, Lloyd, and Leon—one J and two L's is where the name came from. The team was supposed to be called J2L, but the guy must have had dyslexia because he sent it in incorrectly—but JL2 flows nicely too. Jeff was Larry's son, Lloyd Meitzner is our local Mormon, and myself.

Q. What activities separated the Iowa and Mormon Trail celebrations?

A. The trail was in the main celebration of the Iowa statehood celebration. Those that weren't trail-related were mostly patriotic celebrations. The bulk of my time was made up of logistics—making sure all the contacts and camping areas were set, making sure law enforcement was aware, planning and making sure everybody had access to a meal and water.

Q. How did so many people with wagons find out about the trail? A. There seems to be a whale of a grapevine. How we got tied in with Ben Kearn from Casper, Wyoming—I don't know; he is a non-Mormon who has been over trails and trails. Q. How long was it before the idea became a reality?

A. It was a year and a half. A year of intense planning—I could probably drive from Montrose to Council Bluffs in my sleep, following the trail. You just know the trail, the people along the way and the places we camped. It was about a three-week walk. It was beginning to get hot by the time we arrived at Winter Quarters, 3 July. We left June 17 or about there. The next spring, 1997, they went the whole way to Utah. We left from Miller's Park in April and got to Salt Lake in July.

Q. Who has made a great contribution to the Western Iowa area?

A. From a national point of view, the exodus really opened the West for settling. It may have happened eventually, but it was the impetus to the settlement of the West. Some of the things the Mormon artisans did along the route led us on. We have a couple cabins and a well here in town. There was only one grocery store, and the city put a bank in. I told them they may find a well right where they were putting in the parking lot. I read that there were houses built by the Mormons there in 1846.

Q. Did you find any other artifacts along the trail?

A. I could show you some original ruts. I could stand you in some—they are right where they are supposed to be, on a place where we lived. As children we painted those and would hide and play war in them. When I was up in Wyoming, there were some original ruts, and as I was walking across them I realized I knew where some of these are; I knew where they were for forty years. Didn't dawn on me as a little kid that we had wagon ruts in our yard.

I went to see the man who owned the house in Troy; he knew what they were and wasn't going to disturb them. There are two sets of them in the yard. They had become so deep—across the creek and up the little hill—that the wagons had to move over a few feet.

Q. What is your understanding of the causes of the Mormon conflict in Nauvoo?

A. As I understand, a lot of it was jealousy. Because Nauvoo had almost city-state authority—the people being free from being governed by law outside the city—a lot of people moved into the city and were robbing and stealing throughout the country and come back to have safety in a free island, so they couldn't be arrested as they should. I read it in any books that I can get my hands on.

Q. Is there any reason the Mormons may have provoked the actions?

A. I haven't dug into that too deeply. The citizens were pretty hard people—they were strong in their convictions. They had to be strong or they couldn't survive.

Q. What stories have come down through the community?

A. I assume that is in reference to the stories in here [the *Bloom field Democrat*, "A Sesquicentennial Collectors Issue," 19 June 1996]. There are three or four stories in here that are pretty interesting.

Q. Did you have any ancestry in Nauvoo?

A. Not that I am aware of. The student center at BYU is the Wilkinson Student Center; Gordon Romney's wife is a Wilkinson. I have never seen if we had any connection. Initially there were not too many Wilkinsons in the world; whether there is a family connection I don't know.

Q. What is your understanding of the anti-Mormon activists' newspaper?

A. A local guy whose great-grandmother joined the Church, Mrs. Humphrey was blind but knew that Brigham Young and Joseph Smith would cure her blindness. Her husband, a bishop, yielded, and they made the exodus to Utah. They had a nice enamel stove, and when they finally reached Utah, the elders stole, or should I say "appropriated," it. He went to Brigham Young and complained about the stove. Brigham said he should get another wife to do the cooking so the blind wife wouldn't have to be in danger of starting a fire. Before long the blind lady got sick and died.

The husband began to teach sedition and to be very anti-Brigham. His friends told him to lay quiet because they were already trying to put out the Danite movement. But being as hardheaded as he was, he still preached against Brigham. One night there came a knock at the door; he jumped out the back door and had a running gun battle from Salt Lake into Nebraska. This doesn't put too much good light on all the Mormons [story from the *Omaha Daily News*, Sunday, June 9, 1907].

Q. What is your understanding of how Joseph Smith was treated and thought of by his enemies?

A. As a kookie. In some circles the view on him probably hasn't changed a lot. There are so many views in psychology that we don't even understand today. He was years before his time in a lot of things.

Q. Do you think he was logically sound?

A. I don't know.

Q. With perspective of 150 years behind us, what is your view on that period of time?

A. They were really industrious people. If persecution would have been different and they were allowed to stay in the area, this would have been a great Mecca, extremely prosperous.

Q. What would have kept their standing up with the communities surrounding Nauvoo?

A. If they had been more forceful with those that were causing problems.

Q. Would that have involved changing the charter?

A. No. but enforcing it evenhandedly would have helped.

Q. Are you familiar with the wine industry?

A. I know the Icarians came in after the Mormons left, and that is about all I know.

Q. With the announcement of the Nauvoo Temple being rebuilt, what are the community's feelings?

A. Most of them are excited. I don't know a lot of Mormons, but locally it will benefit them. They were driving to Chicago, some to St. Louis, some to Minneapolis. And the St. Louis Missouri Temple hasn't been there too long. I

think it will affect things in the area; just the presence will be an influence.

The comment was made that the wagon train was probably the biggest proselyting tool the Church has ever had. This temple and the one in Winter Quarters in Omaha, Nebraska, will make a big difference in the number of missionaries—that people can see something tangible.

Q. What about the future of the area? What could the Mormons do to improve the area?

A. One of the things locally that we are trying to do is get our tourism act together for those coming to the temple. There is a lot of history in this area and across the trail that a lot of people don't know about. You hear all the stuff about Nauvoo, and you should. It was a bright spot, and Winter Quarters too, but nothing in between. It was the most arduous part of the trip—from Nauvoo to Winter Quarters—to Salt Lake City, and you don't hear nothing about it.

There were things that happened because there were a lot of people coming through Iowa and not all were of the greatest character [opens *Bloomfield Democrat*], like "Local Man Is Robbed." A few people decided they would liberate some oxen and a wagon—the man just happened not to be home. He met them en route as they left.

Q. [Heidi Tice] How did you find out the story on the girl that eloped? Lucile told us we had to ask you where it came from.

A. There is a history of Davis County, a reserved book. Ms. Gano thinks I know things I don't, but she's a real nice lady.

[The following articles appeared in a feature called "Riding the Mormon Trail," in the *Bloomfield Democrat*, June 19, 1996.]

"Stealing the Mormon Poll Books," p. 1 IB, reprinted  
from *A Pioneer History of Davis County*

The exodus of the Mormons in that early day was by stages like the children of Israel. Several little colonies or villages were established in Western Iowa. The largest one was at Council Bluffs. Their stay in the state was sufficient to entitle them to vote and they always did. All the Southwest of the state was then attached to Monroe County for election purposes.

The poll books had to be returned to Albia to be canvassed by the election board. The political parties then contending for various offices were the Whigs and the Democrats. The election and event, the subject of this report, were about the year 1848. The candidates for congress were Colonel Thompson and Daniel F. Miller. Colonel Thompson was a Democrat and had been elected to various offices in the State and once in Congress. He was a lawyer of splendid ability. He first lived at Mt. Pleasant and then Burlington. He was an expert politician and commanded great influence with his party.

Daniel F. Miller came to Iowa Territory in 1838 and settled in what was then known as the Blackhawk Purchase. For many years he lived and practiced law in Fort Madison. From all accounts he must have been a fine looking specimen of manhood as ever graced our State. He was an ardent Whig and leader of his party. His success at the bar as a lawyer was perhaps unequaled in the Territory. He was right on the seat of trouble during the Mormon war in Nauvoo. He was employed as an attorney by the Mormons whenever a lawyer was needed and they regarded him as a friend, regardless of politics.

I think the year was 1848 that Col. Thompson and Dan Miller were the opposing candidates for Congress southern District of Iowa, from the Mississippi to Missouri. His campaign was extremely partisan and the candidates master politicians. They then held the balance of power and always voted the same ticket. Miller was their old time friend and had no trouble to muster full Mormon vote at the polls. The election passed off in due time and the Mormon poll books were sent to Albia to be canvassed as provided the law.

When the day came for the canvass of the votes. Col. Thompson had the foresight to be well represented at the session. J.C. Hall, a former partner, a lawyer and Democratic politician of wide reputation and influence, was on hand to see and honest (?) count. Israel Kister, of Bloomfield, who was also a hard boiled Democrat, happened to be on hand. He was capable as a Democratic layman as hall was a lawyer.

Well, the canvass began in the forenoon and at noon the Board adjourned for dinner. The poll books were all there at the dinner bell, but when the Board returned the Mormon poll books were est inventus. It was well understood

that the Mormon vote was considerable and all for Miller, the Whig. No trace could be found of the books. Everybody looked innocent, especially Hall and Kister. Perhaps the Board called out, "Button, button, who's got the button. Rise up old buttoncr." But buttoncr did not rise and the Mormon vote for Miller was lost. Thompson was declared elected and went to Congress but was unseated and a new election held.

It has always been a political puzzle what became of the poll books. Hall's prestige with his party was not injured by the event. Kister, by some inscrutable providence, was elected Treasurer of State the next year by the Democrats. His picture may now be seen in the State Treasurer's office. After that day at Albia he could say with Byron: "I awoke one morning and found myself famous." However, nobody can prove who stole the poll books. The actors are dead and the larceny is barred by the Statute of Limitations. Those are some of "the dear dead days gone beyond recall."

This incident was the cause of a great deal of political gossip. If any other class of people than the Mormons had been cheated out of voting privileges, the people would have cared more about it. This and otherslams on the Mormons angered them and they hastened on their Westward journey. They have done a good job of counting votes since they organized Utah. As years passed the local hatred in Iowa and Illinois subdued and the Mormons sojourn in this state is only a fading memory.

"Local Man is Robbed," *Bloomfield Democrat*, p. 12B,  
from *A Pioneer History of Davis County*

Mr. (Samuel B.) Downing's father and family lived on the Mormon Trail and he was at home when the Mormons were crossing through Davis County on their way to Utah.

One day when the men were all away from home some Mormons came and stopped at his father's. They told him they were going to take an ox team and wagon belonging to the father. The women asked then why and they said the Lord had told them to do so. In spite of protests, they yoked the oxen, hitched the wagon, loaded in some goods and drove away.

Mr. Sam Downing had been in the timber at work and returning with a maul on his shoulder and an iron wedge in his hand, he met the party. Recognizing the team he stopped the party. He asked them what they were doing and they replied that they had taken the team for the Lord. He demanded of them they surrender the team. . . .

In the dispute, the man in the wagon made a motion as if to draw a weapon and Mr. Downing threw the iron wedge and struck him in the head killing him instantly. Of course the wagon was given up and the Mormons fully occupied in caring for the dead.

Mr. Downing was greatly shocked at the result, but his act was fully justified by the people. It was all done on the spur of the moment, the property was being stolen and he had the right to take it by force from the thieves. The death of the man was really not intended and was always a matter of great regret to Mr. Downing. It was a subject upon which he could not be induced to talk or comment.

### "The Rescue and Wedding of a Mormon Girl"

This was not the rescue of Helen of Troy. It was a foray to prevent the abduction of a pretty Mormon girl.

For many months the Mormons were passing through Davis County along the old Mormon trail from Nauvoo to Salt Lake City. They traveled mostly in covered wagons with ox teams. Sometimes families would stop along the way for weeks in a place.

One family stopped off in this county for a protracted period. The heroine of this story was a member of that family and is reported to have been beautiful to look upon. A young man in the neighborhood became her lover during the sojourn and it was not long until "eyes looked love into each other's eyes" and both parties were as "willin' as Barkis." The cruel old father forbade the bans, and although the maiden was of age, a marriage was prevented. Finally the old man concluded to move on his Mormon way and loaded up his stuff, and the young lady was included in the movables and ox-carted off against her will. Her lover soon learned by wireless that she was gone but wanted to stay, and her cruel papa would not let her. Before the movers had gone many miles they passed through Bloomfield and soon after followed the grief stricken young man. He learned that the movers had gone on. and he stopped for legal advice.

He told his story, that the girl was of age, that she had promised to marry him, that her old Mormon daddy was forcibly taking her against her will, and he wanted her to stay here and become his wife. The news soon spread and the romance of the situation was magnetic. The principal place of rendezvous at that time was at Jimmer's grocery. He encouraged the attractiveness of this meeting place by keeping on hand a certain corn product which might be called "liquid enthusiasm." The wholesale price was only 25 cents a gallon. A crowd of 25 or 30 men volunteered to go out to

rescue the girl and Jimmer inspired the boys. By the advice of some wiseacre, a Justice of the Peace joined the party. No marriage license was then necessary. In less than no time the cavalcade swung out over the hills towards Fox River and the feet of the flying steeds played the Hairy Nation Wedding March. Mendelssohn was not in it. A cloud of dust might have been seen along the old Mormon Trail rising as the Sir Knights galloped by. Somewhere this side of Drakesville, along the river bottom, the Mormon caravan was halted and surrounded. The old man was greatly alarmed by the size and manner of the Crusaders. They demanded to speak to his daughter. They explained to her that the young man said they were engaged to marry and her father was taking her against her will. They asked her if she was of age and she said she was. They asked if she wanted to stop, get married and become a permanent resident of Hacklebarney. She said that was her wish and pleasure. They turned to Barkis and he said he was willing. They told her to get out of the wagon and set foot on the free soil of Iowa. The father restrained his wrath and she got out and became a free woman. She and her young lover were told that they could be married at once if they wished. They wished, and the Justice of the Peace was ready to perform the ceremony. That was surely an occasion and scene to be long remembered.

The witnesses consisted of men who afterwards became prominent and well known, such as Judge Trimble, General Weaver, Col. Moore, Hosea B. Horn, Judge McAtee, the Duffields, Doctor Findley and others. The bride was dressed in homespun. The bridal veil and Marshall Neill roses were omitted. There was no mirror by which to arrange her ear puffs, nor vanity case containing lip stick, lily white and rouge. But she was just happy, A fast beating heart reddened her cheeks a healthier color. The groom was not dressed in the conventional black and no swallowtailed coat flapped against his trousers. I think Hosea B. Horn was the officiating magistrate, and he could take any part in a play. He was at his best and they say it was a swell ceremony.

The couple joined hands and looked pleasant. The surrounding cavalymen formed the only ring needed. He asked the bride if she would honor and obey this man. She said yes—she would have promised anything. The groom promised to endow her with all his worldly goods. By the way the only thing on earth he had was a borrowed horse, saddle, bridle and spurs. Then he was told to say "I" give his name, and repeat after the Squire that beautiful passage of Scripture from Ruth so often quoted by Uncle Mose Downing afterwards at weddings, "Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee, for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and they God my God; where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried. The Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me." They were then pronounced man and wife. The Squire purposely omitted asking if there was any one present who objected and if so to speak or forever after to hold his peace. No one knew what the old man would say. Kissing the bride was also omitted. The leader of the rescuing party then spoke to the old Mormon, pointed toward the west and said drive on and he drove. The Sir Knights of the Crusade then assisted the bride to mount the horse behind the groom and the procession galloped back to Jimmer's. The lemonade was again passed at the expense of the happy groom. Two motives impelled the rescue. The romance involved was enough. A similar affair caused the siege of Troy, of which old Homer wrote. The second reason was everybody wanted to have the country settled up. The motto was "multiply and replenish the earth." The young couple located in this county, and some of their grandchildren may read this late report of the wedding of a Mormon girl to a Davis County son of toil and pioneer.