TABOR HISTORICAL SOCIETY

June 2020 Newsletter

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Tabor Historical Society News

Chuck Douglass

South side of the Todd House showing the original porch, around 1892

Our society is proud to announce the completion of the Todd House Museum south porch restoration project, an important part of protecting the structural integrity of the 167-year-old home. The original porch, constructed as an add-on in 1868, was removed along with an outside concrete barrier with steps, both added in 1890, in order to gain access to the home's foundation, which was also rehabilitated with modern footings. These long-awaited improvements along with new below-ground drainage pipes should solve the problem of water leaking into the basement which threatens fragile and irreplaceable adobe brick walls. Under the supervision of Pinnacle Construction, the project cost over $88,000. The work necessitated preserving original components, where possible, and the fabrication of historically correct replicas when preservation was impractical or cost prohibitive. For instance, porch posts were specially fabricated to match the one remaining original identified through old photographs of the structure.

The work will continue on John and Martha's home—many projects remain and will be tackled in accordance with a comprehensive architectural survey conducted in 2013 by the Franks Design Group. If you think you'd like to be a part of our group, we meet at 7:00 p.m. the fourth Tuesday of every month at the Music Hall on Orange Street and we'd love to see you.

Replacing the old porch necessitated not only the removal of the old structure but extensive excavation alongside and under the home's foundation, exposing the original stone foundation. The porch and foundation were buttressed with concrete blocks which will ensure structural integrity for years to come.

Did You Know?

The Tabor Historical Society maintains a rare collection of photographic portraits of the Reverend John Todd and his family taken in 1862. The Todd photos are called Ambrotypes, a "wet plate" photographic process that was common in the 1850s and '60s. Itinerant photographers frequently traveled from town to town and set up shop for a day or two, and more than likely that's where these originated. How did it work? The photographer coated a square piece of glass with light-sensitive silver nitrate and other chemicals and inserted it into the camera. The wet plate was then exposed to the light through a shutter for several seconds, removed, and then quickly developed in a darkroom with fixing chemicals. What made Ambrotypes unique is that the photograph was exposed as a negative but became a positive image *on the glass itself*—there were no separate negative strips—each finished glass image was one of a kind and often contained minor flaws inherent during the handling and development. The procedure took no more than 30 minutes and customers often waited for the finished pictures. One drawback to the wet plate process was the fragility of the glass plate photograph itself. To protect the image, the photographer secured the plate in a small brass frame and nestled it in a wooden frame box. We don't know how much Reverend Todd spent, but he probably got a package deal for the entire family and $5.00 would be a reasonable estimate, based on records from the era. In today's dollars that would be well over $100.00.

The separate framed portraits nestled in their wood box for storage. John Todd (upper left) and his wife Martha (upper right) with their seven children in 1862.

The pictures are small with each plate measuring 2¼ by 3 inches. The viewer sees the positive image which is imprinted on the back side of the glass. The dried chemicals used for exposure remain on the glass, sealed by a paper cover.

John and Martha's seven-year-old daughter, Flora Atkins Todd.

Listen for the Voices of Tabor's Pioneer Women

Harry Wilkins

The founding fathers of Tabor, as most of us know, are George Gaston, Samuel Adams and John Todd. Almost any account of the early struggles to start a Christian community on what was then a frontier focuses on the *men* . . . but these gentlemen did not operate alone—all were married, and their wives, Maria Cummings Gaston, Elvira Gaston Platt, and Martha Atkins Todd played a critical part in the settling of southwest Iowa during the 1840s and in the momentous events associated with Iowa's Underground Railroad in the 1850s.

Maria Cummings Gaston

If George Gaston's wife Maria could talk to us today, she would likely tell us about the arduous 1000-mile trek she made from Oberlin, Ohio, to the Nebraska Territory in 1840 by train, steamboat, and wagon, including a crossing of the Missouri River in a dugout ferry in her eighth month of pregnancy while holding onto her two-year-old son. She could explain the challenges of living on the Pawnee Mission, caring for her family, coping with austere living conditions, and assisting her husband's efforts to teach the Pawnees how to farm. Maria could tell us about the chilling attacks by Sioux and Otoe warriors on the mission during the spring of 1844 and her attempts to improve the lives of her native charges, in spite of indifferent and corrupt mission administrators.

Another voice we seldom hear is Maria's sister-in-law, Elvira Gaston Platt—she and her husband Lester joined the Gastons at the Pawnee mission in 1843 in what she described as the "years of toil, anxiety and self-denial cheerfully passed in mission work." Elvira, like Maria, had attended Oberlin College, and set about teaching the native children, providing them with what she characterized as a Christian education. She fought an uphill battle and admitted to limited success in the cultural tug-of-war of the mission; she did, however gain respect for the natives' dogged reverence for their own beliefs, something as an evangelical she likely found frustrating.

Elvira Gaston Platt

The voices of Elvira and Maria are heard again some years later after they moved with their families to the area of southwest Iowa known as Civil Bend, near present day Percival. The pioneers set to work to build their community constructing homes, a church and a school, and preparing fields for planting. Elvira and Lester arrived first, and beginning in the fall of 1850 she started teaching in a log house school, which welcomed the children of free blacks living in the community. I'm certain she would tell us with pride about the painstaking progress that was made in spite of Missouri River flooding and coping with the plague of mosquito-borne diseases. She could also, no doubt, describe the anguish she felt watching the village school burn on New Year's Eve, a fire intentionally set by those who rejected fair and equal treatment of all people.

But beginning in 1854 there was other work that would focus their attention and test their resolve: providing assistance, at considerable risk to their lives and property, to those seeking freedom from

chattel slavery, most coming from Kansas Territory and Missouri through Nebraska and across the Missouri River. Elvira would describe Civil Bend as "the first depot on the Underground Railroad, on this [Iowa] side of the Missouri River and Tabor the next." She told about retiring for the night and hearing a knock on her door followed by the question: *'Are you going to Tabor tomorrow? I have a passenger for you.'* And the answer, of course, was *Yes*. The runaway who appeared on their doorstep was concealed the next morning in a wagon full of shingles driven by Elvira 16 miles to Tabor where her charge was transferred to other conductors.

Elvira could also tell us about a violent invasion of her peaceful village in December 1858 by armed men under the leadership of Stephen Nuckolls who ransacked Civil Bend and terrorized residents looking for two women Nuckolls held in bondage at his home in Nebraska City. In Elvira's words, the people of Civil Bend endured the criminal assault "amid threats of death and destruction, [hearing] . . . the crackling of burning houses . . . property worth several hundred dollars destroyed."

A third voice we should listen for is Reverend Todd's wife, Martha, an Oberlin graduate and daughter of a strong Ohio abolitionist family. Martha, like Maria and Elvira, could describe the trials of daily life in Tabor in what she called her "far off, quiet, prairie home"; of struggling with the constant shortages in the early years; of severe weather and rampaging disease, which claimed the life of her eight-month-old son David in 1854; of keeping her home running while meeting the steady obligations of a preacher's wife, accompanying the reverend on home visits, to prayer meetings, and church services, all while suffering from epilepsy.

The ladies of Civil Bend and Tabor could tell us of marching to Sidney, the county seat of Fremont County, on September 15th, 1855, to conduct an anti-slavery meeting and how they were met with a hostile and abusive mob that disrupted the proceeding by shouting epithets and throwing rocks on the roof of the school where the people gathered, quieted only with the singing of hymns as the abolitionists left town.

Martha could tell us about meeting Kansas Free State fighters like James Lane and John Brown, men who used Tabor as a safe haven for training and caring for their wounded men—Martha's commitment to their cause evident in her willing acceptance of weapons and ammunition being stored in her basement. Martha Todd, Maria Gaston and Elvira Platt were witnesses to the lengthy caravans of settlers headed south into Kansas in the summer of 1856, many of whom camped in the town square across from the Todd and Gaston homes. It was a harrowing summer, with Free State fighters and settlers converging on the village, most in need of help; in Maria's words, "Our houses were full and our comforts shared with those passing to and from Kansas. When our houses would hold no more, woodsheds were temporized for bedrooms where the sick and dying were cared for." Martha could tell us about the bounty hunters who came to town looking for runaways stoking fear that if warrants were issued, the arms and ammunition stored in Tabor homes would be discovered.

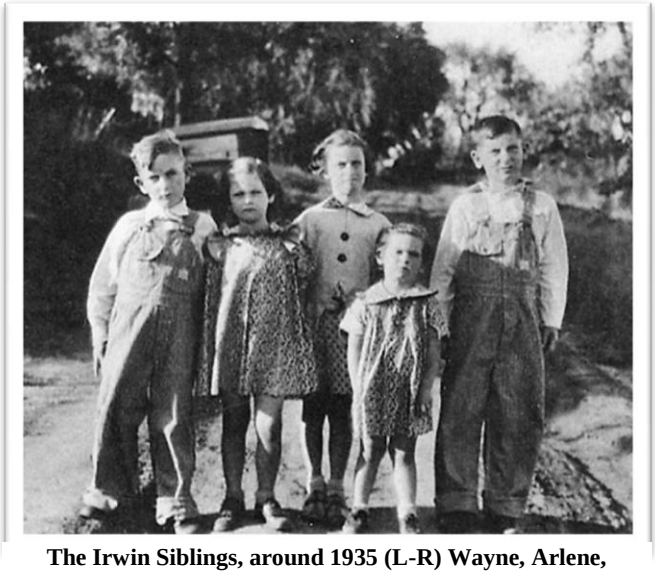
Martha Atkins Todd

These and other voices of our pioneer women might be harder to hear than those of their male contemporaries, but they deserve our attention and admiration for their perseverance in living life according to their convictions under the most trying circumstances imaginable, never doubting that society could be improved through adherence to a moral foundation built around a spirit of equal and fair treatment for all.

Yesterday's Quarantine

Glenn Irwin

The health challenges facing our community today got me thinking about times past when other diseases, some long forgotten, kept families isolated from friends and neighbors. One disease that plagued our country beginning in the 1920s was Scarlet Fever, a bacterial infection that most commonly afflicted children between the ages of five and 15. It was an uncentralized disease, making it difficult to predict when and where outbreaks would flare up and how long they might last. For example, Iowa reported 718 cases in February 1945, up from 389 cases the month before. But a year later state officials reported a total of only 13 cases. It was, nevertheless, serious business and health officials moved quickly to quarantine the homes of individuals exhibiting symptoms.



The Irwin Siblings, around 1935 (L-R) Wayne, Arlene, Verlene, Velma, and Bob

Before I was born my family lived in Tabor, directly across the street from the Christian Church on New Street. My father, Bill Irwin, worked for the high school as a custodian. In February 1937, Scarlet Fever revisited the town and my 11-year-old brother, Bob, came down with the disease—the Irwin family found itself quarantined along with the residences of Reverend J. P. Wagner, H.P. Goy and Lee Aistrope. In an attempt to stem the spread, Malvern and Tabor canceled all joint high school sporting events.

My sister Arlene told me about how my siblings coped with being isolated since the State of Iowa mandated 21 days in quarantine for Scarlet Fever. She said that every chance they got,the kids would slip out of the house, go out to the barn and peek out through the cracks in the walls to watch the traffic passing through Tabor on Highway 275, about two blocks away. If they were lucky, there might be a truck or two to add some interest.

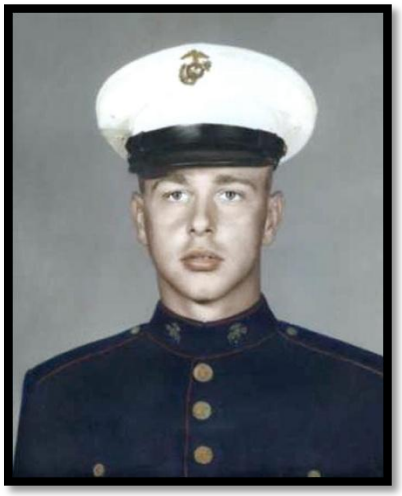
What a contrast to our current situation! Tabor in 1937 had no grocery store deliveries, no school lessons delivered via the computer, no television to watch, and no experts offering advice on how to cope with stress. One thing we did have was a grade school health book, used throughout the State of Iowa, which included the vocabulary word "Quarantine" along with a picture of a warning sign. Today we have a new word in our vocabulary to remind us of those past days: ***self-quarantine***.

A quarantine sign from Dubuque, Iowa, in 1940. From the Library of Congress

Remembering one of Tabor's fallen, Randall Allen Vanatta.

Randy was born in Hamburg December 2, 1946, to Junior Guy and Hazel Rice Vanatta. He was raised and went to school in Thurman, along with his sister Patty but transferred to Tabor in the 9th grade; he graduated with the class of 1965. Randy was remembered as a helpful person who was a "friend to all," a young man who enjoyed hunting, baseball and music–he played trombone in the school band throughout his high school years. After graduating, Randy worked for the Iowa State Highway Commission before enlisting in the Marines on March 1, 1966. After completing basic training at Camp Pendleton, California, he was sent to the Republic of Vietnam, arriving September 1, 1966. He served with Company M of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment.

Randy's unit was operating near the Chu Lai military base and airfield, a large American installation located on the north central seacoast of South Vietnam. At the time of his arrival, Marine infantry units were manning a network of outposts built in a terrain of tropical forests and hills protecting Chu Lai, while searching for what was often an elusive enemy known as the Viet Cong. On December 12th Randall's unit was told to occupy Hill 71 and begin constructing bunkers and other defensive features. The enemy watched the Marines dig in and decided to launch their attack before the Americans could complete their fortifications. Beginning at 3 a.m. on December 14th, the Viet Cong shot rockets and mortar shells at the Marines before commencing their ground attack. An American observer from a nearby hill reported seeing incendiary flashes and bright lights where the Marines on Hill 71 "fought fearlessly" holding their positions and "not giving ground." The Viet Cong assault failed but Randy was one of ten young Americans who died that night, twelve days past his 20th birthday. Private First Class Randall Vanatta was awarded the Purple Heart and was buried in Tabor Cemetery with full military honors.



The original Purple Heart was known as the Badge of Military Merit, and was established by George Washington. It is awarded for "Being wounded or killed in any action against an enemy of the United States or as a result of an act of any such enemy or opposing armed forces"