

Maps and Survey Notes of Original Government Survey of Pottawattamie County, Iowa

Prepared by: George M. Hilton

The original government survey of Pottawattamie County, Iowa was made by contract surveyors in the years 1851 and 1852. Twelve Deputy Surveyors were employed to do the work. The procedure uniformly followed by the Deputy Surveyors and their parties, working in Pottawattamie County, was in conformity with the laws of the United States and with the instructions issued to them by George B. Sargent, Surveyor General of the United States for Wisconsin and Iowa.

Each surveyor was assigned to separate townships to be surveyed. Usually, one Deputy Surveyor laid out the exterior lines of the township, while another survey party divided the township into 36-mile square sections. Land corners were marked with pointed oak posts driven into or set into the ground at each section and quarter-section corner. Pits were dug from the sod and thrown around the posts, thus making a mound.

Each survey party was made up of at least two chain bearers, one mound maker and one or more axmen and flagmen. The chain bearers made the measurements. Mound makers, sometimes called markers, made, and set the corner monuments. Axmen cleared the course being measured of brush, trees, and other obstacles so that the view fore and aft was clear. Flagmen kept the chain bearers on the course between land corners.

This party would travel out to the township to be surveyed in horse drawn wagons equipped with camping equipment, as there were very few settlements or towns in the country at that time, all supplies and equipment were carried along.

Once the Deputy Surveyor and his party arrived to their assigned township their operations usually started at the marker at the southeast corner of the township. There they would trace or retrace the south boundary of section 36, at the southwest corner, a line would be measured north to the northwest corner then east to the point where they intercepted the east line of the township. From section 36 they duplicated the procedure in section 35 and so on west to section 31. After section 31 was completed, they began on the second tier of sections. So on until all 36 sections were completed. All corrections were made upon the northern and western boundaries where their survey closed upon that of the exterior survey. That is the reason for our land titles carrying the condition such as 160 acres more or less.

Concurrently with the survey, the Deputy Surveyor made notes covering the courses followed and a record was kept of all distances measured. They often included observations of the surveyor as to the topography, rivers and streams, wooded areas, cultivated tracts, settlements within the township and trails crossed. There was a lack of complete uniformity in the preparation of field notes and summary remarks by the Deputy Surveyors. Each used his own style of reporting. Items which were important to one surveyor was often omitted by a fellow surveyor working in an adjoining township. For instance, the Mormon Trail, the only distinct trail across the county from east to west, was called Kanesville to Ft Des Moines Road by one surveyor and the Council Bluffs to Mississippi River by another, and the Pisga Road to Kanesville Road by another. One surveyor called it the Bluffs Road. However, by careful application of their notes, we are able to reconstruct a fairly good map illustrated to locate various settlements, streams, wooded areas, and trails.

The notes made by these surveyors contain no spark of romance or fiction. Their pages contain a brief account of the course they traveled and in summarizing the natural qualities of the

township they surveyed, they had little time to spare on details. According to their own reports the subdivision survey of a township, 36 miles square required only 10 days to two weeks. The expression often used by surveyors "to run a line" could truthfully be applied to describe their work. An old resident in Boomer Township who lives near the Harrison County line told me that his father had seen a party of surveyors at work in 1852. He said the chainmen would run across the prairie stripped down to the waist, their skin torn with briars. Of course, their courses were more open, and they were not hindered by fields of crops, fences, highways, or building improvements.

In the hundred years past since this survey, very few traces of their actual work exists except that generally speaking improved roads and property line fences mark the lines which they followed and established. The written record for their work, however, has been preserved and to this date we are able to draw conclusions as to the vast changes which have taken place within the county. It is remarkable that their surveys compare favorably with more recent resurveys made with more accurate equipment.