

“As I Remember” by Minnie London, 2003

In the early spring of 1891 I went as a bride to what was once old Muchakinock, an Indian name that was derived from a nearby creek meaning, I was told, "hard to cross." It was a mining camp five or six miles from Oskaloosa, the county seat.

The camp, as it was called, had formerly been inhabited by white miners. When they went on a strike the Chicago and Northwestern Coal Company, who owned the mines, brought in colored miners and their families from Staunton, Charlottesville, and other towns in Virginia. These colored men knew nothing of mining but were taught coal-mining by men hired by the Company. Besides the colored people there were also a goodly number of Swedes.

Overshadowing the town to the south was a huge pile of smoking slag, which when fanned by the wind would burst into a flame looking like a small mountain.

A branch of the C. and N. W. Railroad ran west through the town, which was often used as a street especially in muddy weather.

The coal company not only owned the mines but owned and operated a General Merchandise store, which had a system known as Order Days running, say, from the first to the fifth of the month according to the number of people and the division of the town. On these days the miners or their wives would order groceries, etc., supposedly to last a month or until the next Order Day. To the clerks it meant work and more work, for many times they would have to work all night putting up orders with no extra pay. To the women it was like a great social gathering where they could get together and visit or learn the latest news of the town, perhaps the death of a miner caused by falling slate or the birth of twins having been brought into the world by Old Lady Ross, the midwife of the town, who in her black and white apron was usually kept busy.

The store used the check system, checks ranging from one to ten dollars, and as small purchases were made the clerks would punch the check according to the amount of the purchase, so no money was used in exchange. The amount of the checks would be taken out of the miner's pay-check before the next pay day.

After a time the Superintendent suggested a Colony, an organization whereby the single men by paying 75 cents per month and the married men \$1.50 per month could have medical attention in case of sickness without being a probable burden on the county.

The new camp was named Buxton, after the Superintendent of the Mines, a name that was destined for more than a score of years to take its place among other towns of the state. It carried with it all the traditions of the old town, yet it attracted many people from various towns and cities of Illinois, Ohio, Kentucky, and Missouri, in fact from everywhere.

I am sure I am safe in saying that when the town, Buxton, was at its height, no other town in Iowa could boast so many professional and business people of our own group. Doctors, lawyers, teachers, druggists, pharmacists, undertakers, postmaster, Justice of the Peace, constables, clerks, members of the school board, and what have you were all there.

H.A. Armstrong who owned and operated the meat markets in both camps acquired considerable wealth, and I might say was a man of strong convictions and advocated that the solution of the race problem could be accomplished by inter-marriage and in his own life practiced what he preached.

The following persons were prominent at some time in camp and the positions they held: Dr. E. A. Carter now of Detroit, Michigan; Dr. C. G. Robinson of Chicago; Dr. Williams; Dr. H. H. London, and Dr. Taylor; Lawyers, Geo. W. Woodson and Jas. Spears; Druggists and Pharmacists, B. F. Cooper and Ike and Hattie Hutchinson; Undertaker, S. Billings; Postmaster, Ed Mills; Dentist, L. R. Willis; Music teachers, Cora Thomas, Josie Meadows, Mollie Tibbs, Mrs. Will Lee, and Mrs. Dumond (wife of the Congregational Minister); Justice of the Peace, E. A. London; Constable, Tom Romans. James Roberts manufactured Cuban Hand Made Havana Cigars and did a wholesale and retail business.

The Granberry Bros., manufacturers of tailor made clothes, satisfied the most discriminating customer.

Peter Abington, the caterer, kept his wagon on the street all day long selling ice cream, pies, bread, butter, and eggs.

There was a newly constructed General Merchandise Store with the same old and newly added clerks.

The Buxton Savings Bank occupied one end of the store building with Mrs. Lottie Baxter, the daughter of H. A. Armstrong, as cashier.

Among other business ventures in Buxton that stand out in my memory are: Lewis Reasby with his hamburger and hot dog stand across from the company store and in front of the Y.M.C.A. His comical manner of crying his wares would attract passers-by, who would stop and listen to him, then find themselves thrusting their hands into their pockets and saying, "A hot dog please."

London and London, the business of E. A. and W. H. who dealt in sewing machines and musical instruments, was located in the Thomas Block.

Yes, Buxton had a newspaper too, namely, the "Buxton Advocate." It was a weekly, edited and owned by R. B. Montgomery.

The Y.M.C.A. was a large three story structure built diagonally across from the company store. It was built expressly for the colored miners, and when they seemed reluctant to take advantage of the opportunity, the Supt. indicated that he would turn it over to the white people. Our people, after reconsideration, pledged cooperation and then a very efficient secretary in the person of L. E. Johnson was engaged.

The first floor of the building contained offices and recreation rooms. The second a spacious auditorium with stage and dressing rooms. The third floor was occupied by rooms for the many secret orders. To the north of the large building was a smaller building containing a swimming pool for the younger group with their own secretary.

The Langlois sisters, better known as the French Women, displayed moving pictures every night, which afforded a very enjoyable recreation for the miners and families. Road shows as well as moving pictures were featured in the auditorium. Among them East Lynne and the Count of Monte Cristo.

Among the many noted Negroes who entertained packed houses were Hallie Q. Brown, Booker T. Washington, Blind Boone and Roscoe Conklin Simmons.

I must not forget to relate to you about the roller skating rinks and the added recreation it afforded the younger folks, and I might add some older ones too. You ought to have seen how these boys and girls did skate! The jolting jitterbug of today was a mild comparison.

Various parts of Buxton were named for the leading citizens of that section, thus: Coopertown town took its name after B. F. Cooper, the leading Negro druggist there, or in fact, the leading druggist in the state at that time. Gainesville was named for Reubin Gaines, a well-to-do man in the community.

There was one part of the camp in which we lived that was known as "Gobbler's Nob." Why, I never knew, but I do know it was an elevation at the foot of which was a ravine that could be reached by a foot bridge in rainy or muddy weather.

"Sharp End," I suppose, was the sudden termination of the town to the south, and located in this area was a drug store owned and operated by Ike Hutchinson, whose wife Hattie was the registered pharmacist.

Following the road a little farther west was a grocery store managed by J. W. Neely, who also was a pharmacist. By all means we must not forget H. D. (Hustler) Williams looking out for business

Near the depot Anderson Perkins and Son operated a hotel and confectionary. They advertised good meals and first class service. Hotel rates \$1 .00 and \$1 .50.

A. G. Rhodes owned a shoe shop and did repairing while you waited, he also sold foot form shoes to order

If you desired an old-fashioned meal and did not wish to go home or bother to cook on a hot day, all you had to do was to stop in Jeffer's Restaurant, run by Andy Jeffers and his wife, Maggie.

The hair dressing, manicuring, face massage, and chiropody was all done by Madam Ella Yancy. She was an honor graduate of the New York College of Hairdressing. Madam Yancy was Buxton's best specialist in scalp treatment. "If your hair won't grow, won't straighten, all you have to do is to see Madam Yancy and find out the reason and get a remedy"; and "If your wrinkles won't leave and your cheeks won't fill out, see Madam Yancy"; and "If your corns bother you and just won't stop hurting, see Madam Yancy."

Rev. Lucas operated an up-to-date bakery and kept the town supplied with fresh bread.

Manie Lobbins had a livery barn in the Sharp End, and since this was in the horse and buggy days no one was required to take Hobson's choice.

If you wanted coffee like your mother made, you would go to the Rising Sun Restaurant in Coopertown, operated by Mrs. Anna Lobbins. She would serve you a hot lunch or a complete dinner at reasonable prices.

Peter Carey's barber shop was also in this section, located across from Cooper's Drug Store. He was always in whenever one wanted a haircut or shave.

The schools took the name of the streets, if we may call them streets, on which they were located or the section of town. Thus we had a Fifth Street School, an Eleventh Street School, and a Swede Town School. They were two story buildings of four rooms, each thus employing twelve teachers.

The rooms were all well filled with pupils and often a teacher would have to instruct several grades. The grade work done in these schools compared favorably with any in the state. For instance, whenever pupils from these schools went to school in other places, I have been told by the teachers of other towns that they were always glad to get the Buxton children because of their thoroughness.

After several years the number of pupils to enter High School became greater so the School Board erected a large building east of the Fifth Street School maintaining two years of High School to begin with. They employed a Prof. Gilliam as Superintendent.

After one year of occupancy it burned down just the Sunday before the beginning of the first semester of the second year. The cause of the loss was said to have been due to the construction of the building. It was never rebuilt so to other towns in the state High School pupils had to continue to go.

The closing exercises of school, which marked the graduation of the eighth grade pupils was always looked forward to with great anticipation, and at such times the County Superintendent was usually present. To the Y.M.C.A. we went and the plays, pageants, and drills were always greeted with cheers and enthusiasm.

I now remember some things concerning the store. Two things one could not purchase were revolvers and alcoholic patent medicines, the kind in which alcohol was so prevalent that it became a cheap grade of whiskey. At one time a certain patent medicine was withdrawn from the stock when a miner was found drunk with two bottles, empty, in his pockets.

The store at night after the miners had cleaned up and eaten their supper was like a large auditorium where the miners gathered to trade, smoke, and visit. There was no comment on loafing. The manager considered it far better to have them pass their time in that manner than in the nearby saloons. One proprietor of the store said at one time that he had within a three year period cause to remove only one drunkard from the building. The store was a boon to the town and the miner's friend always.

About 1921 many of the pioneers were destined to be moved to another coal field as the mines at Buxton were just about worked out. The new camp was called Haydock, still in Monroe County about eighteen miles distant over hills and valleys. Fewer still were willing to follow up the unstable life of a miner and so many continued to go to various cities. The camp had already been populated by many white miners and their families, mainly from Illinois, thus there were less colored people and very few business ventures.

The Buxton Wonders, a ball team of the camp, enjoyed an enviable reputation for being one of the best teams in the state. Some of the boys on this team were: George Neal, Cliff Wallace, and Skinny Wilson.

Some intimation at times endeavored to decry the law-abiding attitude of the camp owing to the fact that two or three crimes were committed. When we think of the duration of the town and the diversity of its population - say 4000 or more- few indeed were the tragedies.

The churches of the new camp were about the same type structures as the ones in the old town, perhaps somewhat larger with different interior arrangement. There were in the life of the community two Baptist Churches, one Methodist, a Congregational Church, and the Church of God. The Congregational services were held in the Y.M.C.A.

I think I never saw church members so spiritually imbued. I recall a revival at the A.M.E. Church with an eleven year old evangelist, Lonnie Dennis. Well, grown-ups were converted in that meeting that I'm sure that as long as they lived, putting it in the words of James Weldon Johnson, "were true to their God and true to their native land." Truly a little child led them.