

Hiram Gano Ferris of Illinois and California

By JOEL E. FERRIS

THE period from about 1820 to 1850 saw what has been called the "great migration" from New England and the eastern and southern states into Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, and Missouri, northward to Minnesota and Wisconsin, and beyond toward the Pacific. My grandfather, Stephen Gano Ferris and his wife, Eunice Beebe Ferris, residents of Dutchess County in south-central New York and both in their early thirties, became interested in this movement and, with their neighbors and relatives, made plans to move to the then far-western state of Illinois, where they proposed to take up virgin land. Jabez Beebe, a brother-in-law of my grandfather, had gone with his family to Illinois in 1831 to look over the country, and would be able to act as adviser for the rest of the relatives. Accordingly in the spring of 1832 Stephen Ferris, his wife, their six children, and their neighbors, started off by wagon on the 80-mile journey to Green Point (now Olean) in southern New York, and at that time head of navigation on the Allegheny River.

At Olean, with the help of two neighbors, they built a flatboat (cooking and sleeping facilities included), and on this they made their way down the Allegheny to Pittsburgh, at the junction of the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers which there become the Ohio. The trip to Pittsburgh took nearly nine weeks because of rapids and sandbars. At one place in Pennsylvania the three boys of the Ferris family found an oil spring in a bog, near which oil was later discovered and the first well drilled.

They sold the flatboat at Pittsburgh and obtained in its place a "batteau," on which they proceeded down the Ohio as far as Cincinnati. Ferris is said to have brought along a small cargo of window sash, which he sold to settlers along the river and in Cincinnati before they took passage on a river steamer, the *Nigra*, to Cairo, Ill., at the junction of the Ohio and the Mississippi. There they boarded another boat for the 100-mile journey up the Mississippi to St. Louis, outfitting post for the fur trade and the Indian country to the west. They had another wait at St. Louis because, as December was approaching, it was difficult to get passage up the river, but the delay gave my grandfather, Hiram Gano Ferris, a boy of ten and the subject of this sketch, the chance to accompany my grandfather on a visit to the Indian chief, Black Hawk, who was being kept a prisoner at Jefferson Barracks, and who, during the visit, held the boy on his knee, an event which speaks for itself. At the time the captain of a river boat called the *William Wallace* agreed to attempt

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the up-river trip before winter closed in, and for the fifth time the families and their belongings had to be transferred to another craft.

The point my grandfather wished to reach by river was about 200 miles north of St. Louis, directly across from Traders' Landing, the present site of Keokuk, Iowa; but upon reaching Quincy, they had to increase their payment to the captain before he would take them the 40 miles remaining. Even then, he made them debark on the *Iowa* side of the great wide river. This made it necessary to employ another boat to ferry them across (the sixth river-boat change!), and after innumerable experiences with rapids and rocks, they reached the Illinois shore. By this time it was the thirteenth of December. Immediately Ferris and his oldest son, John McFerris, set out on foot some 22 miles, across largely unsettled prairie to the cabin of his brother-in-law, Jabez Beebe, who had, as mentioned above, preceded them the year before. An ox-drawn wagon was sent back for grandmother, the children and the household goods, and on December 18, 1832, the site of their new home was finally reached. They shared the log house until the next spring when they built their own. A small settlement developed in the vicinity of these two log houses, the water coming from a large spring known as Horse Lick Spring. Stephen Ferris changed the name of the place to Fountain Green (mentioned in the following that follow), and in a short time it became a small trading point with a post office. Today, after 115 years, it is a lovely little town, the center of a rich farming country, some miles from the railroad, with about 100 inhabitants living mostly in beautiful old homes surrounded by elm and maple trees.

As part of the great migration pushing westward, my mother's family had come into Illinois soon after the Ferrises reached that state. Isaac Ferris, my mother's father, was born at Westminster, Vermont, in 1798. He came from a family of teachers and preachers, was prepared for college at Deerfield Academy, Massachusetts, and graduated from the University of Vermont in 1814 with this scholarly tradition in view; and although he studied law and was admitted to the bar in Vermont, teaching was the vocation he followed in Maine and elsewhere and at the University of Vermont until, in 1835, he too joined the throng moving to the then far west.

The steady flow of settlers, such as those belonging to both branches of my family, into Illinois after 1832, resulted in counties being organized among them Hancock County where Stephen Ferris had settled, and the adjoining McDonough County where the Holtons took up land, the respective settlements being some ten miles apart. In 1830 the population of both of Hancock County and McDonough was only about 300, but ten years later the leaders of the Mormon Church, together with most of their followers, having been driven from Missouri through conflict with the settlers there, purchased a large tract of land in Hancock County, and established their headquarters, the church capitol, upon a site to which

... gave the name "Nauvoo." It became the Mecca for the new faith, converts and followers poured into the city along with a generous number of promoters and rascals, giving Nauvoo an estimated population of twelve to twenty thousand in 1844 and making it the largest city in Illinois. Social and religious problems entered too, resulting in the murder of the founders of the church, Joseph and Hiram Smith, at Carthage, Illinois, and the ultimate migration of the Mormons across the plains to Utah in 1847.

My father, Hiram Gano Ferris, grew to manhood along this troubled frontier. He secured his early schooling at home, but for about two years, when he was well matured, he attended an academy conducted by Isaac Green, his future father-in-law. Besides running their farm, the Ferrises owned a small tannery and sawmill. Hiram was always interested in politics and at the age of twenty-two was appointed a deputy sheriff¹ under Capt. Stephen Backenstos, a controversial character in the early history of Illinois. Though friendly to the Mormons, Backenstos was not himself a Mormon. On one occasion he was called upon as sheriff to arrest Orrin Porter Rockwell, a prominent Mormon who had been charged with the murder of John Worrell. Hiram Ferris drove with Backenstos to Nauvoo, and, being able to find anyone willing to assist them in finding Rockwell, they started to search the Mansion House—the combination hotel, tavern and church offices. They had gone through the first two floors, and were climbing up the stairs to the third, when Rockwell stepped out with drawn sword and said, "I will kill you, Backenstos, if you come any further." The sheriff said, "I have a duty to serve a warrant on you and arrest you and will do so." And to my father he said, "Hiram, when he shoots me, kill him." Rockwell said, "I will go with you." He was afterwards acquitted, his case being tried in an adjoining county.

In 1846 when twenty-four, my father, according to old letters, was deciding whether to enter the army or go to the pioneer Knox College at Galesburg, Illinois—a primitive small college, but it had a classical course and some able instructors. His decision may be inferred from the following paragraph, which gives an idea of student life at the college and speaks of Hiram Ferris' arrival:²

The rooms, twelve feet square, many students lived for four years, carrying water from the pump in the yard, coal from a pile outside the door. . . . The out-of-town students were mainly drawn from the immediate vicinity, sons of pioneer Galesburg farmers, but a few came from greater distances. One was from William Green, a hundred miles away. He was already twenty-four, and had served in the army of Hancock County. He arrived riding a horse named Mike, his sole asset. Mike was fed up and curried to fetch as high a price as possible and sold to pay college expenses.

I recently found his receipt for the first year's tuition, \$7.00. In college he created a disturbance by defying the college president who was opposed

to fraternal orders, and was expelled for affiliating with the Masonic order in the city of Galesburg. Upon his threat to sue the school, he was reinstated.

The discovery of gold in California in 1848, with the excitement it caused in all parts of the country, was a subject of discussion by the young men at Knox College, and when, in the spring of 1850 my father, a member of the Junior Class and twenty-eight, and a Freshman, David D. Colton, eighteen years old (whose people were prominent residents of Galesburg) left town by wagon for California, they did the expected thing. Their outfit consisted of a light wagon and three horses, and the first part of their route lay west to the Mississippi, with a stop at Fountain Green to say goodbye to the Ferris family. The Mississippi was crossed by ferry at Madison, Iowa, whence they journeyed across Missouri to St. Joseph, one of the outfitting points for emigrants, and where Hiram bought two bibles, a Bible and a copy of Shakespeare, the latter of which I have. From St. Joseph they went north along the Missouri River to Council Bluffs, a place called Kanessville, another important outfitting point. Here they completed their purchases and on April 25, 1850, started on their overland journey of about 1500 miles to California.

Ferris and Colton, with a wisdom dictated by what seems to have been typical college-student desire for independence, did not attach themselves continuously to any of the slower caravans which often drove on, but pushed along by themselves. I recall as a boy hearing my father tell of the necessity, but, at the same time, the difficulty, of getting along with people. He mentioned the numerous disputes in the wagon trains, some caused by refusing to travel on Sundays; and at times there was selfishness toward the weak, sick, or slow travelers. In addition there was the dread disease of cholera, which took a terrible toll among the thousands jogging along toward in the wagon trains. By following the plan of traveling alone, the young men were able to reach Placerville, then known as Hangtown, by September, having made the trip from the Missouri River in the shortest record time of 76 days.⁴

As shown by the letters that follow, the two partners mined in various places, such as Center Diggings, then gradually worked up the Sacramento River until they reached its headwaters at the foot of Mount Shasta, where had been located a new mining camp, at times called Shasta Butte, Thompson's Diggings, or Little Klamath, but which finally became Yreka, the county seat of Siskiyou County. His first three or four northern California letters are written from Shasta Butte City, but beginning in February the name Yreka is used altogether.⁵ The first records of Siskiyou County are in Ferris' handwriting, as he was one of its organizers in 1851 and acted as first county clerk.⁶ Colton, his partner and junior by some ten years, became the sheriff. Their duties included participating in fighting the Modoc Indians and discouraging those between miners and lawless

Hiram Ferris and Colton were Democrats, but the Whig party was strong and contests between the two were apt to be exciting. In one of the campaigns, both sides were expecting important papers by Wells Fargo Express (in which mail was often consigned), and spent some time at the company's office waiting to receive them. As it happened, the Democrats received their mail but the Whigs did not. This caused charges of fraud, and the Whig managers accused the Democrats of delaying the mail. The Whig managers were from the South and hot-headed, and one of them said to Colton that he was from too far north to resent an insult as a gentleman. Colton was born in Maine. He resented this and reached over and twisted the Whig manager by the nose, saying, "Try me and see." This caused a challenge to fight a duel; all the arrangements were made, but my father succeeded in stopping it. Everyone at that time carried a revolver, and each morning cleaned and freshly reloaded it. Colts were the most popular. They were carried openly, as may be seen in the photograph accompanying this brief biographical sketch.

From the letters which follow, one can judge that Hiram Ferris was reasonably successful in his business and mining operations; he also acquired a ranch, but finally decided to return to Illinois to visit his parents. Late in 1846 he sailed from San Francisco for New York via the Isthmus. The Colt was part of his luggage, and when the hack driver said that the charge for carrying him and his small trunk from the docks in New York to his hotel would be five dollars, Ferris drew his revolver and said: "I will pay the usual charge but not five dollars." This was said to have cleared up the question in Siskiyou fashion.

Upon returning to Illinois, Ferris decided to remain there, married Julia Holton, the daughter of his teacher, Isaac Holton (see above), and became fairly prominent in business and public life. Their home was at the county-seat town of Carthage in Hancock County, and there I and all of my mother's family of nine children were born and raised. I might add that after his marriage my father had a long chain made for my mother from the gold he had brought back from the West. In time she had part of it made into gold rings for her five sons. My own ring forms part of the gold in my two daughters' wedding rings.

David D. Colton, my father's partner, has been the subject of a good many articles on early history in California and San Francisco.⁸ He moved to San Francisco about 1859 and became a prominent figure in the group of promoters led by Stanford, Huntington, Crocker, and Hopkins—the well-known "Big Four." Colton, with the title of general, organized a military company which pursued and practically exterminated a tribe of the Modoc Indians. His political activities involved him in one or two duels, among them that between U. S. Senator Broderick and Judge Terry, Colton acting as second for Broderick. In my collection are many letters from him