

Who was Lenny Burton?

Lenny Burton, firm in his belief of the futility of his life, was one of the more colorful characters in local history. He traveled many miles from a castle on the Rhine to a log cabin in Martin County. Once known as Lionel V. Archer-Burton, scion of an ancient British family and a black sheep of his other relatives, he would become Register of Deeds in Martin County and a prominent citizen of this area.

His parents were British aristocrats living in Germany. His father was a high sheriff of Hampshire in 1847, and his Uncle James was killed in the charge of the Light Brigade, made famous by Tennyson. His lineage also traces back to Robert Bruce, King of Scotland, and Robert South, a famous English divine who served as chaplain to King Charles II.

He spent his infancy in Coblenz on the Rhine while his older brothers and sisters were living in England in the family home there. Castle Lehneck on the Rhine was his childhood home.

When Lenny was twelve years old, his parents sent him to Baden-Baden to a school where cadets for the German Army were trained. While there, he was a schoolmate of William Hohenzollern, later to be Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany. Lenny was unsuccessful in school and decided to join the Navy. However, when he went back to England for a visit, he became so seasick that he decided the Navy was no longer an option.

Lenny's tendencies to spend time playing with the "ragamuffins" in the streets of Coblenz coupled with his failures in school led his parents to send him off to the new world at the age of fifteen to join his two brothers that had gone before him. He made the journey alone.

He sailed from Liverpool about the same time a British sea captain, Frederick Wherland, left with his young daughter and six sons. When Lenny arrived in Fairmont, he described a tiny town of not more than 100 inhabitants, a few old shacks, three feet of mud and billions of flies and mosquitoes. But, the first thing he heard about was the arrival of the sea captain with the most beautiful daughter any of the settlers had seen. Lenny and the Captain's daughter would eventually marry.

He arrived in 1876, the year of the grasshopper plague in Minnesota. He joined his brothers and began buying land. At the age of sixteen, he was a big landowner, although he knew virtually nothing about farming or livestock. Eventually, of the 400 Englishmen that had settled in the area since 1873, nearly all had left, including his brothers. However, Lenny stayed, partly as a result of his marriage to Sally Wherland, the daughter of English sea captain Frederick Wherland.

Lenny Burton and Sally Wherland began their lives together by running away to be married by a justice of the peace in Fairmont. They went on to farming together and rode horseback to town as they had no wagon. At the outset, Lenny states, “Everything looked bright. She was so lovely, so beautiful, so clever, so good to me, such a wonderful mother. Her beauty was the talk of the whole county – the talk of all. We were a pair of kids.”

However, being inexperienced, many took advantage of them. He started out with three farms and ended up broke, owning no land, and having five children to support. He went on to try horse trading and fur trapping, but only acquired the reputation of being a good loser.

He returned to England in 1883, but the call of the west remained within him, and he returned to Minnesota again at the age of twenty-three. The money he inherited from his family was quickly gone. He worked at anything he could, including showing animals at the fair, raising chickens and keeping a zoo, The Burton Zoo, on the west bank of George Lake.

In 1909 he filed for the office of Register of Deeds for the first time. Although never embarking on a consistent campaign, he kept after the office for eighteen years, finally being elected in 1927 by a large majority of the voters. He was perhaps best known in later years for this position.

Of Mr. Burton, Fairmont Daily Sentinel Editor Frank A. Day wrote the following: “It is not an extravagant statement to say that he has been an ideal husband, father, son and citizen all the days of his life. We do not know how to frame words to pay a man a higher compliment than is included in that sentence. Our long time neighbor is a gentleman, a student, a scholar, a man who lives up to his highest lights and gets all the light he can. The nice thing about his is the spirit of contentment that rules his life and habits.”

Yet, on Lenny Burton's letterhead is inscribed the following: "A Life Wasted."

Lenny Burton, a 61 year beloved resident of Martin County, passed away in 1937 at the age of 76.

For more information about Lenny Burton, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.

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