

The Life and Times of Isaac Silverthorn

Jerry Olson presented Mr. Silverthorn's story at a Cemetery Walk in 2004

Isaac Silverthorn was one of the earliest pioneers in Hartley, Iowa. He was born in Ohio on October 1, 1824, just twenty-five years after the death of George Washington. At that time, Andrew Jackson was President of the United States and Robert Lucas was the Governor of Iowa Territory.

Just a few months earlier, the Ioway Indians had been moved from Iowa to reservations in Brown County, Kansas and Richardson County, Nebraska. Later they were moved again, to become the Ioway Tribe of Oklahoma.

Isaac, who had eight brothers and sisters, lived with several different families while growing up, and was obliged to make his own living by the time he was eleven. Research does not give reasons, but one might assume the early death of one or both of the parents or perhaps financial reverses that kept the family apart.

In spite of everything, he seemed to have been quite resourceful; perhaps he had some positive role models. When he was sixteen, he found work in a carriage shop where he learned a trade. At age twenty-one, he married the petite and pretty Rebecca Willis. They would become the parents of eight children.

Isaac and Rebecca stayed in Ohio for several years before they journeyed west in 1856, to settle in Steamboat Rock, located in Hardin County, Iowa. There he worked as a carpenter and wagon maker. Eventually, they bought and operated a hotel.

Like many pioneers of his era, Isaac had the urge to farm, and became intrigued by reading about the rich land in Northwest Iowa. In 1876, at age fifty-two, Isaac traded the hotel in Steamboat Rock for a section of land and moved to O'Brien County. By that time, Iowa, which had achieved statehood in 1845, was divided into counties; and nineteen years had passed since The Spirit Lake Massacre, the state's last Indian uprising.

The first order of business was to make improvements on the farm. They planted eight acres of fruit and other trees as well as 160 acres of crops; including wheat, oats, and corn. Everything went well that first year, until they were hit with a plague of grasshoppers in July of 1876. Crops disappeared in days, and in one instance the grasshoppers ate two acres of potatoes in an hour.

Not prone to discouragement, Isaac and Rebecca hung on, and within a few years, they had made a comfortable fortune. In 1888, when Isaac was sixty-four, they sold all but eighty acres of the land, bought property, and moved from the farm into the fledgling town of Hartley.

He built his own home and operated what was apparently a hardware business in the Silverthorn Building, located across from the city scales. Different articles in the paper credit Isaac with being a carpenter, ordained minister who also studied law, and one of the most respected and learned men in the area. He held the position of Justice of the Peace for several years and also served as the first city marshal. Newspaper accounts speak of him fondly. In his later years, he was mentioned with such terms as Old Gentlemen Silverthorn or Father Silverthorn.

His time in O'Brien County coincided with some of the following bits of information about Hartley's early years:

- In 1879, the railroad built the first house and a store, which also served as the school.
- The town was platted and a new school was built in 1880 for the price of \$1200.
- Two years later, Hartley's population had grown to 185 souls.
- Some of the early businesses in town included two general stores, two meat markets, a hardware store, two lumber dealers, two blacksmith shops, a wagon shop, a saloon, an agricultural implement dealer, three hotels, and a livery barn.
- Churches began to organize. The Baptist Society had about ten members and the Methodist Episcopal Society, about seventy-five. Both met in the school building,

The Silverthorns had been married for fifty-four years when Rebecca died in 1899. Losing her must have been harder than losing crops to the grasshoppers. Their daughter, Mollie, did not marry, and continued to live at home, keeping house for her father.

Isaac married again. Both wives and Mollie are interred with him in the Silverthorn lot in Pleasant View Cemetery. The only details I have about the second wife are from her tombstone: Harriet A.—Wife of I. M. Silverthorn—Dec.24, 1833-April 10, 1913.

During Isaac Silverthorn's lifetime the country had grown from twenty-four to forty-eight states, and the Industrial Revolution brought about many changes and inventions:

- Samuel F.B. Morse—Telegraph, 1836
- Elias Howe—Sewing Machine, 1844
- Cyrus Field—Transatlantic Cable, 1866
- Thomas Edison—Phonograph, 1877—Light Bulb, 1879
- Orville and Wilbur Wright—Airplane, 1903
- Henry Ford—Model T, 1908—Assembly Line, 1913

In addition to considerable progress, the United States endured the Civil War, Indian Wars, and The Spanish American War. At the time of Isaac's passing, the world was embroiled in a global conflict called The Great World War, touted as the one that would end all wars.

At age ninety-three, Isaac Silverthorn left this earth on December 27, 1917; thirty-eight years after the establishment of the first home and business in our town.

Resources: *Hartley Public Library Website: www.hartley.lib.ia.us/*: online database of newspapers.

Hartley Archives

Industrial Revolution in 19th Century America - Industrial Revolution

americanhistory.about.com

www.infoplease.com › History and Government › US History