

## *Jessie W. Denison*



Born on a farm in Albany County, New York, April 9, 1818, Jesse W. Denison was educated in New York and in the Baptist Theological Seminary, Covington, Kentucky. His first pastorate was in Upper Alton, Illinois in 1846.

Convinced that the future of the United States lay in the settlement of the western Mississippi Valley as much as in the growing industrial east, he decided to form a development corporation. The result was the organization of the Providence Western Land Company, Providence Rhode Island, capitalized at some \$50,000 with himself as agent.

Denison was successful in filing on some 23,000 acres of land in Harrison and Crawford Counties in 1855. Impressed by the area at the junction of the East and West Boyer, he selected this for his proposed settlement. He had Morris McHenry a surveyor already in the area, draw a plat of a "dream city" and published this in the East and abroad.

Soon settlers came. Section 11 of Denison Township as a center would make an excellent location for the county seat. Through the machination of County Judge J.R. Bassett, the planned settlement would be named in honor of the promoter.

Surmising that the Northwestern Railroad would follow the Boyer Valley as the rails were laid westward, Denison filed claims on the land south of the Boyer, thus forcing the railroad company to build their station on his land.

He built a lodging house 12x35 on the present Post Office corner and directly across the street south, a small store building 10x16.

Perhaps his most important move was to persuade H.C. Laub to locate his store goods in Denison. H.C. Laub had been in the Mason Grove area and was looking for a place to start in the mercantile business. He had almost made up his mind to locate his business in what was known as Marshall Grove northeast of Denison. Laub became perhaps the greatest single individual in making Denison's "dream city" become at least a partial reality.

Bring a minister, Denison was interested in spreading the gospel. He began to hold reaching services and weekly prayer meetings in the private homes of individuals. His efforts resulted in the organization of the, Baptist Church with sixteen members in 1857.

Feeling a need for a church building for his flock, he entered four twenty foot lots in the land registry record for its location. In time these lots became extremely valuable, as they were in the heart of Denison, on North Main Street on the east side to the north of the Denison Drug Store area. A church was built in 1868. Ten years later, these lots became so valuable the congregation voted to sell the lots singly and move their church building to the corner of Sweet and Chestnut (now 14th Street and First Avenue South).

Denison continued his service to the community as long as he was able. He lived in a story and a half native brick home just north of the present city hall on the corner where the Medical Arts Building is located now. His neighbor just west was W. A. McHenry. When he died, October 2, 1881, his county seat had grown to 1600 people.

## DENISON...

A community that is full of spirit, energy, and pride... A community that is excited to meet the challenges of the future by taking on new projects and expanding existing ones... A community where the family is the heart and soul of progress... A community that boasts itself as the home of the late, great actress Donna Reed and is now home to nearly 6,700 residents who have discovered that *"It's A Wonderful Life!"*

Located in picturesque West Central Iowa, Denison is host to a vibrant, growing business community whose residents include over 500 industrial, professional, service, and retail oriented businesses. The spirit of the business community is driven by a conscientious and intelligent work force. Denison business owners and residents take pride in their community and are committed to personal and professional excellence.

Denison benefits from the service of four highways, two major railroads, and an top-notch airport. Businesses and residents in Denison also enjoy one of the nation's lowest utility and tax rates. Economic development and growth is a priority in Denison and business and industry interested in joining this progressive business community will find that Denison is a community that can offer the work force, location, and financing needed to make any business or industry prosper.

The Denison Community School District enjoys a reputation as one of Iowa's finest. Denison annually hosts the Academic Decathlon competition and has a history of top ACT score averages and high school graduation rates. Denison's commitment to excellence in education extends from safe and sophisticated classrooms for our young people to training programs and continuing adult education.

Western Iowa Tech Community College and Buena Vista College offer a variety of classes, making it possible to obtain a four-year degree right in Denison. The Denison Job Corps Center, the only facility of its kind in Iowa, offers skills and training to at-risk youths nationwide. The people of Denison understand the importance of education for young and old. In Denison, education equals a lifetime of learning.

From swimming to the arts, Denison offers its residents a wide variety of recreational opportunities. Any sports enthusiast can take advantage of excellent hunting and fishing, while the rolling hills offer challenging courses and trails to golfers, bicyclists, and walkers. In addition, racing fans can enjoy the best auto racing in Western Iowa every weekend from April to September at the **NASCAR** sanctioned Crawford County Speedway.

The Denison Aquatic Fun Center includes a large six-lane indoor pool along with a sauna, spa, a children's activity pool, two 150-foot water slides, a diving pool, a 18-hole miniature golf course and much more. The indoor pool allows for water programs and activities to be available year-round.

Denison is also the home of the Donna Reed Foundation for the Performing Arts which hosts an annual performing arts festival that draws famous movie stars, actors, musicians, and hundreds of students and visitors from throughout the country.

The Foundation has also recently completed the remodeling and restoration of the historic Ritz Theatre. The theatre restoration along with the 700-seat Denison High School Fine Arts Center, allows Denison to host performances by many professional theatre groups, musicians, dancers, and other artists.

Denison is also proud of its many beautiful historic homes. Close to 40 homes featuring varied architectural designs dating from 1870 to the early 1900's are located in Denison including the beautiful Victorian style McHenry House which displays the "Oscar won by Donna Reed for her performance in "From Here to Eternity."

Industry, business, recreation, education, medical facilities, community safety, quality affordable housing, churches, focus on the family, and an unparalleled standard of living and quality of life...Denison, Iowa, has all this and more.

Whether you are a visitor or a long time resident, we invite you to share in the spirit, pride, enthusiasm, opportunities, and positive progress that Denison continues to experience. Just take a look around and you will quickly find out that Denison is a community for you, a community where *"It's A Wonderful Life!"*

## **HISTORY OF CRAWFORD COUNTY, IOWA**

The area of Crawford County was once a part of the empires of three great European powers: Spain, England, and France. These countries did little to govern this territory that was the tribal hunting grounds at various times of the Sioux, the Omaha, and the Otoes. Occasionally the Pottawatami visited the southern part of the county. Game was plentiful and intrepid French fur traders carried on their activities on the Missouri slope.

The Louisiana Purchase in 1803 brought Crawford County into the United States. President Jefferson sent Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to explore the territory the government had just purchased. They passed through this area and spent a night camped at the mouth of the Boyer River, a well known spot to fur trader and early travelers.

Iowa and Crawford County became parts successively of Louisiana, District of Louisiana, Michigan Territory, Wisconsin Territory, Territory of Iowa, and finally the state of Iowa in 1846. The oncoming tide of settlers made it necessary for the Iowa State Legislature to divide the western area of the state into counties in 1851. Crawford was among those created, and was named in honor of a statesman from Georgia who at various times served as U.S. Senator, Secretary of War, Secretary of the Treasury and minister to France during the first quarter of the 19th century.

The early settlers of Crawford County came from three sources: the natural oncoming from the east starting in 1849, the Mormon migration from the west in 1846, and the promotion of land on the frontier by the Providence Western Land Company of Providence, Rhode Island. The company had purchased 20,000 acres in the center of Crawford County. Jesse W. Denison was chosen by this company to carry on the work of beginning a settlement and encouraging settlers to buy the company lands. He arrived in Crawford County in 1856 to find about 235 settlers scattered throughout the county. He pointed out the advantages to the district judge and 3 county commissioners of locating the county seat in the center of the county: the central location, equidistant from other settlements in the county, and the future route of the railroad. Furthermore, the Providence Western Land Company would donate to the county the square upon which the courthouse was to be located. The commissioners accepted Mr. Denison's offer, then followed the suggestion of the judge's wife and named the town for the company agent, Jesse Denison.

Mr. Denison's next move was to construct a lodging house for prospective settlers and a small store. The company put on an extensive advertising campaign in eastern papers and travel books, and within 15 years the population of Denison was 800 and growing fast.

The War Department in Washington recalled the soldiers stationed at the frontier forts in 1862 to fight in the Civil War against the Confederate armies. This resulted in the entire frontier, including Crawford County, to be open to Indian raiders. Roving bands of Sioux Indians began to appear. The county called for volunteer scouts to warn against Indian attacks. 40 Enfield rifles and a number of rounds of ammunition were obtained from the state to be used in defense. These rifles were all returned to the state at the end of the Civil War.

The period immediately following the Civil War was one of railroad expansion. Instead of quiet, orderly settlement that had marked the steady growth of Denison, the community became a railroad or frontier town. A

lawless element came with the railroad and a number of altercations took place. As the rails moved westward the lawless element went with it.

The year 1881 marked the beginning of agitation for a county jail. There were no funds available and it was recommended that a tax levy of one mill be assessed for the purpose. "It was further ordered that J.P. Miller purchase a steel or iron cage for jail purposes and to erect a suitable building to contain same in the town of Denison." The proposition was approved by county voters in 1885.

From 1899 to 1902 three elections were held before a bond issue was approved by the people of the county for a new court house. Crawford County has been represented in the General Assembly or State Legislature since the 5th having its own representative since the 20th.

This brief history of Crawford County has been condensed from an address written and delivered by Anna Schneller of Denison, Iowa at the Old Settlers' Picnic at Denison, August 23, 1956.