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Introduction

Henry Taylor, whose autobiography is presented in this book, was born in 1824 at Leesburg, Virginia, in Loudoun County. After his father suffered financial reverses, the Taylor family in 1832 moved to Wellsville, Ohio, on the Ohio River. When Henry was seventeen, the Taylors settled near Iowa City, Iowa. It appears that they later may have resettled near Dubuque on the Mississippi River. After Henry and his brother Thomas worked a summer in the lead mines in Wisconsin, the entire family took up residence in Grant County, Wisconsin. Several years later at a Fourth of July celebration near Hazel Green, Wisconsin, Henry, now in his late twenties, met Arminda Eastman, whom he married on 1 January 1851. After Arminda suffered some health problems that wiped out the family savings, Henry decided to recoup their finances by accompanying two of his brothers, Edward and Thomas, in an overland journey to California in 1852.

Clearly the trip to California, Taylor's time in the gold fields, and his return voyage from San Francisco to New York City marked high points in his long and active life. Taylor brought back over \$1,200, a sum sufficient for him to buy and equip a farm of eighty acres. Unfortunately, his later overinvestment in land and crop failures during the Civil War drove

Taylor from farming, and he entered one or more skilled trades. In 1878 Henry and the rest of the family left Boscobel, Wisconsin, for western Nebraska. There he homesteaded in Furnas County a few miles southwest of Beaver City.

Except for two trips to the West Coast, Taylor remained on his homestead until old age forced him to move into the home of his second daughter, Louise Taylor Meyers, who lived on a farm west of Atwood, Kansas. When Louise and her husband, Edwin, retired to Atwood itself, Henry moved with them and lived in a small building adjacent to their home.

In 1924 Henry and his family and close friends celebrated his 100th birthday at Louise and Edwin Meyers's farm west of Atwood. Henry's birthday celebrations afterward became increasingly elaborate and attracted greater and greater publicity. After the election of 1928, for example, newspaper stories highlighted that Henry had cast his first presidential ballot for Henry Clay in 1844, and in the most recent election he had voted for Herbert Hoover. The writers speculated that Taylor might be the oldest citizen to cast a ballot for the Republican candidate. To celebrate his 106th birthday, the Rotarians and the Commercial Club in Atwood hosted a luncheon for ninety-eight guests, and a male quartet sang a medley of Henry's favorite songs, including "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny." The highlight of the event was the cutting of a twenty-five-pound cake with the appropriate number of candles.¹ Taylor died on 5 July 1931 when he was 107 years old.

In his introductory remarks, Taylor modestly comments that his "only claim to Notice in [is] my extreme age." Taylor's longevity did give him a degree of acclaim from friends and family, but his visit to the gold fields of California was a source of status too. It meant that he had "seen the elephant," and this probably gave him about the same standing as a returning Civil War veteran who had served his country with honor. Professor Angela Firkus of Cottey College, my former graduate student, has researched returnees from the gold fields, and she suggests that most did not become wealthy, but once home, "they were influential and largely respected in their communities." Many believed that their experiences

qualified them for leadership roles, and often they, for example, founded a bank or organized a stockyard or grain elevator in their hometown. Some lost their mining wealth due to bad investments, but most prospered without becoming rich. Taylor's life after he came back from California seems to fit Firkus's profile almost perfectly.²

Taylor also sensed that important changes had taken place during his lifetime. He notes early on that "few people I suppose have witnessed as wide a range of extremes in modes of travel and methods of living as I have." Henry no doubt recognized that the railroad and the automobile, for example, deeply affected American society. Similarly, he had witnessed the massive settlement and development that took place in the trans-Mississippi West from the time that he and his brothers traveled to California in 1852 until he twice journeyed to the West Coast in his old age.

Taylor's long life also gave him a different set of perspectives than was typical of later generations. Like most Americans of his youth, he was extremely anti-British because of the American Revolution and the War of 1812. His hostility for all things British appears when he discusses events that took place in and near Washington DC during the War of 1812, and even more so when the captain of the *Northern Light*, the American ship Taylor took from Nicaragua to New York City in 1853, saluted a small British warship while leaving the port of San Juan del Sur. Taylor and some fellow passengers were so incensed that the American flag was doffed to a British warship that they wanted the captain to pull alongside so they could board the British ship. Likewise, Taylor was extremely patriotic, and he no doubt agreed with many of his generation who saw the United States as a noble democratic creation uniquely ordained and blessed by the hand of God.³

Something akin to patriotism also appears in Taylor's admiration for American heroes such as Daniel Boone, Kit Carson, and others. He obviously had read a good deal on such individuals and may have seen himself as having almost followed in their footsteps. In the passages where he discusses heroes, his word choice and tone become more emotional. He not only admired these figures but also saw them as having a vital role in civilizing the wilderness.

The circumstances of Taylor's completing the autobiography are far from clear. It appears that he dictated the account to his daughter, Louise Taylor Meyers, who cared for him in his old age. She was a school-teacher and skilled at spelling and quite literate. Clearly, Taylor dictated the work in at least two parts. The first of these was probably completed around 1901 and carried his life story to that time. Nothing additionally was done with the manuscript until late 1906 or early 1907, when the *Beaver City Times*, a local weekly newspaper, published Taylor's memoirs under the title, "Across the Plains." Apparently, the newspaper used the handwritten version that Louise recorded in dictation. Virginia Mansfield, a Quaker cousin, in a letter to Taylor on 21 February 1907, commented, "I would like to see the History of thy life which was published in the county paper when you get done typewriting it."⁴ This typed version may be what I edited, and, if so, the typist was likely responsible for many of the numerous errors of spelling and punctuation and the typos contained in the manuscript. As a historian, I wanted to use the original account, but unfortunately the handwritten version has disappeared. Leitner remembers as a child seeing it in "an old Brown or Blue dapple-colored ledger" that was bound in cloth and kept in Louise Taylor Meyers's home. Somehow it later disappeared.

Around 1928, when Taylor had nearly reached 104 years old and almost three decades after dictating the first part, he updated the autobiography. It seems at this time that he added the stories about rescuing his brother, Edward, from the veterans' home in Los Angeles and his own trip to San Francisco shortly after the 1906 earthquake. Also, he dictated the passage that I entitle "Reflections of a Centenarian," which brings his life story to 1924. This part of the autobiography is badly disorganized. Taylor begins by describing the celebration of his 100th birthday and the three birthdays that followed. After a charming discussion of how many candles he blew out at each birthday celebration and a few comments on his health, he suddenly jumps back to 1887 and relates the tragedy of having his leg amputated at Arapahoe, Nebraska. Perhaps because of his possible embarrassment at having a disability, Taylor may have chosen to ignore this event in dictating the earlier version.

Regardless of that, the loss of his leg forced major changes in Taylor's lifestyle. Although he at first used a peculiar prosthetic device that resembled a shortened stilt (see photographs) and initially reportedly could walk very rapidly, the injury meant that he went from being a highly active person to living a more sedentary life. He could no longer do field work, ride horseback, handle livestock, or carry out the many other arduous chores required of a farmer. As he mentions in the autobiography, he eventually switched to crutches and still later was forced to crawl from place to place. If anything positive resulted from the amputation, it was that Taylor could now read a great deal. As he comments, "after the loss of my limb, Reading . . . afforded me pleasure until my eyesight failed me." Based on the works he cites, I suspect that he became well read in the sense of consuming adventure stories and popular literature.

In editing Taylor's autobiography, I tried to present the text almost exactly as the draft that I received from John Prideaux, Taylor's great-grandson, who lives in Wickenburg, Arizona. If words were badly misspelled or missing, or the syntax badly garbled, I added the needed changes in brackets. When to add corrections or ignore mistakes was, admittedly, somewhat subjective. If a sentence started in lowercase, I inserted a capital letter in brackets in the first word. Also, I inserted paragraph breaks to improve readability. The chapter breaks were placed where Taylor's life entered a major new phase, such as when he left Wisconsin for California and when he departed that state to make his voyage to New York City. I deleted improper punctuation and added commas and other punctuation marks where needed. If words were redundant, I simply omitted the extra word.

I normally researched three categories of identifications in the text: personal names, place names, and terminology that today's reader might not understand. I documented nearly all the items selected for identification, but in instances where I drew on my personal knowledge, I did not provide a source but discussed the topic in an explanatory footnote. Unfortunately, I was unable to find information on everything I researched. The failures sometimes resulted from Taylor's vagueness or misinformation, but