The American Dream

The American dream supplied the framework for this country, but the men and women laid the foundation and made this dream a reality. William Thomas Baird was one such man.

William T. Baird was born in Carroll County, Kentucky, in the early 1830s. He was born the son of Barzilla Adams and Mary M. (Scanland) Baird.

William Thomas was raised on a farm as one of six children. His mother, Mary, died in February, 1846, at the age of 47. His father, Barzilla, remarried Eliza Wright; they had six children.

William received his education at a district school in Carroll County during the winter months while he spent the remainder of the year helping his family on their farm. After leaving the farm in 1856, Mr. Baird taught school in Grant County, Kentucky. Mr. Baird left Grant County with his close friend Professor William P. Nason, a teacher, and headed for Kansas in 1857. Traveling by steamer to La Grange, Missouri, the men traveled on horseback as far as Kirksville, where they stopped due to fierce March weather.

Mr. Baird spent his first two years in Kirksville teaching. The first seven months he taught at Ely’s district. The next four months he spent teaching in Wilson Township, and the remaining year he taught with Professor Nason at a school Mr. Nason had built on what is now the northeast corner of Buchanan and Florence Streets.

On August 24, 1858, William Thomas Baird married Martha C. Hannah and they had four children. Frank, the oldest, went into the banking business and became a banker in Helena, Montana. Ella died at the age of two and Aggie Myrtle died at two months. The fourth child, Alta Melone, became a singer and studied at Mission Valley College in Marshall, Missouri.

Before Mr. Baird came to Kirksville, banking was a state-conducted affair; however, the banks could have branches. One of these branches was the first bank to come to Adair County, the Kirksville Branch of the Bank of Saint Louis which opened in November of 1859. The bank was located where Pagliai’s Pizza stands today. Mr. Baird held jobs of both clerk and janitor from the opening of the bank until
1863. In 1863 he was promoted to cashier, a job he held for two years. On February 15, 1864, the state passed a piece of legislation that eliminated branch banking and in 1865 the branch in Kirksville closed. In 1865 Charles M. Stebbins and Henry Porter bought the fixtures of the Kirksville branch for the Stebbins and Porter bank. Mr. Baird took another step upward when he was named manager of the Stebbins and Porter bank. He held this position until 1867 when Mr. Stebbins and Mr. Porter were forced to sell their bank because both men were from Denver, Colorado, and the laws of Missouri did not allow non-residential ownership of banks. Mr. Baird and Samuel Reed entered into a partnership and bought the Stebbins and Porter firm.

On September 2, 1868, a Mr. Malone and a Mr. Epper- son, both from Macon, bought Mr. Reed’s share of the bank. Mr. Reed later formed a rival bank, the name of which is unknown. June of 1878 also marked a major step in Mr. Baird’s career when he became the sole owner of a new bank, the Exchange Bank of W.T. Baird. This building, however, was still in the same location. Later the name was changed to the First National Bank and had a capital stock of $50,000. Mr. Baird was becoming quite successful. He had the town’s first mansion built at 304 South Franklin at a cost of $18,000 in 1893. Mr. Baird sold his interest in 1906 to the Citizens Bank and retired.

William Thomas Baird was involved in church, education, and community betterment activities. He was a very active member of the United Presbyterian and Cumberland Churches. Mr. Baird served as superintendent of the Sunday school for 45 years, an elder for 46 years, and the treasurer and session clerk for 44 years. He donated $16,000 to the endowment fund of the Missouri Valley College and guided the school as a trustee for 17 years.

A Bairdean Literary Society and the Baird-Mitchell chair of Greek were named after him. At the Kirksville State Normal School he was a member of the Board of Regents, serving as treasurer for a number of years. For declamatory contest winners he gave the Baird Medal. The declamation contest was started by Mr. Baird in 1880 and was for the men and women of the sophomore class of the Kirksville State Normal School. In 1889 a special declamation contest was held for men. Then in 1890 the contest was confined to sophomore women. At first, the prize was a $15 set of English poetry books but later the prize was a $15 gold medal. The contest was no longer held after 1900. In 1899 Mr. Baird gave $500 dollars to Kirksville to help the town after a tornado. The tornado struck on the night of April 27, 1899. The storm left 30 people dead, 179 injured, 40 destroyed homes, and many more damaged.

William T. Baird was a charter member and master of Kirksville Lodge No. 105, A.F. & A.M. and he was a charter member of the Caldwell Chapter No. 53 of the Royal Arch Masters. After Mr. Baird’s retirement he lived in Kirksville until the time of his death on March 7, 1912. He was buried in a large family vault in the Forest-Lewellyn cemetery.

The life of Mr. Baird was a classic example of the American dream. As a poor farm boy, William Thomas Baird began with hard work, courage, and persistence, he became a wealthy and prominent citizen of the community.

By Marty Montgomery
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