

JOHN BIDWELL; CITIZEN AND NEIGHBOR

MEMORIAL ADDRESS

by

W. J. COSTAR

ADDRESS

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at

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JOHN BIDWELL, CITIZEN AND NEIGHBOR

by W.J.Costar

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen, Fellow Citizens and Neighbors of him whom we honor to-day:

How true it is that our thoughts, reflections, conversation, and meditations are influenced by our surroundings; how true it is also that Nature faithfully portrays human character in rocks, rills, rivers, and mountains.

Seated upon the shady bank of some prattling brook, watching the hurrying and scurrying of its waters as they dash into spray upon the rocks, and listening to the melody and rhythm of its music, we are pleased and entertained for a while; its babblings and laughter amuse us, and our conversation is light and commonplace. The little brook reminds us of people we have met.

Now go with me to the canon of the upper Sacramento, where that majestic river begins its journey to the ocean. Standing upon a shelving ledge and gazing into that placid pool at our feet, these grizzly giants of the forest standing around and about us, the mountain breeze making soft music through their branches, causes our thoughts to take a higher trend, and our thoughts become more serious. The little brook is forgotten. Our surroundings remind us of characters we have met.

Go with me a little farther; let us climb out of the canon, cross the divide, and enter the little meadow beyond. Stepping out of the fringe of timber that skirts its border, into the open, suddenly and without warning our eyes behold for the first time at close range old Mt. Shasta, in all his gorgeous splendor. That colossal sentinel of the high Sierras, rearing his snow-capped, sun-kissed peak over 14,000 feet above the sea level, awes us. We stand and mutely gaze upon that silent witness of the power of God. No need for conversation now; we could not speak if we would; we are busy with our thoughts. Instinctively our minds travel back eons of time, when the foundation of the world was laid, when the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters, and God said, let there be light. Our thoughts are in the realm of the Omnipotent and Omniscient.

Fellow Citizens, that is where my thoughts are to-day, at this moment.

John Bidwell: Citizen, Neighbor. When the character of this grand specimen of the highest type of the American citizen stands before me in all its purity and beauty, I am overcome. Words that I would frame into sentences seem hollow and meaningless. All that I can do in the brief time allotted to me is to speak in a general way of the man whom we loved and who made the world better because he lived in it.

What was there about him that caused him to tower head and shoulders above us? What was there about his personality that caused him to scintillate with such dazzling brilliancy? You could not pick out any one particular trait that caused it, no more than you could segregate the sun's beams and endeavor to find one more brilliant than his fellows. His life was the perfect whole.

Since my early boyhood I have known him, part of the time intimately and in his employ, and I will mention a few of those traits of character that came under my observation and which distinguished him.

He was progressive and patriotic, honest and truthful, pure and temperate, Godfearing and generous.

I have often heard the General say that if a man was not progressing he was going backward, if he was standing still he was going backward.

How easy it would have been for him, and what a temptation to some, when he first came here to have placed a fence around this fertile and well watered tract of land, said to civilization thus far shalt thou come and no farther, stocked it with a few head of cattle, sheep, and horses, marketed the increase every year, and leased the proceeds at usurious rates, built no roads, fostered neither churches nor schools. His estate to-day would have been one of the richest, from a money standpoint, in the West. For the benefit of civilization and mankind in general he chose rather to be the progressive citizen, and to-day, instead of John Bidwell, the Cattle King, unhonored and unsung, we have John Bidwell, the man of progress and these Memorial Services.

Patriotism was born and bred in every fibre of his being. On two occasions he offered his life to his country's service, and in 1863 he was appointed Brigadier General of the California State Militia. Our Fourth of July celebrations were incomplete without his presence; on those occasions he was usually found upon the speaker's stand, firing the hearts of the young with patriotic utterances, and the stars and stripes floating from the topmost pinnacle of his dwelling.

Could his fellow citizens rely upon his word? Yes, his word was as good as his bond. As a man of truth his soul was like the sparkling mountain spring, reflecting the light of heaven, blessing and purifying all with whom he came in contact.

Was he an honest man? If his sainted mother, who passed from this life in 1857, were here to-day, she could tell us when this cornerstone was laid in his character. For many years he marketed the varied products of Rancho Chico in this and other cities of the state and nation, and it was an axiom in business parlance that any box, bag, or bale bearing the name of John Bidwell was a guarantee for quality and measure. Yes, he was honest, and upright in thought, word, and deed.

He stood for purity and temperance. He was a total abstainer from all those vices that ruin manhood and degrade womanhood; his language was chaste and never caused the blush of shame to mount the cheek of man, woman, or child. He never mentioned the name of the Supreme Being but with that awe and reverence due from the creature to the Creator.

On the Temperance question he was plain, outspoken, and fearless. He considered the liquor traffic to be the bane of society, the curse of

mankind, and a menace to the stability of this republic. He was not only a total abstainer, but for years he spent his time and money to make it easier for others to become the same. Why did he do it? Because his warm heart throbbed for others' woes, because that great heart of his throbbed for the widows and orphans of this land, made such by this awful traffic in human souls.

Was he a Godfearing man? Yes, more. Daily and devoutly he worshipped the Supreme Being who gave him his existence. He thanked Him for his daily bread, and prayed for wisdom necessary for him to discharge the duties incident to the great trust that the Master had placed in his keeping. He was not only a conscientious Christian, but he did all in his power to influence others in the path of right.

Was he a generous citizen? His fellow citizens will tell you that he robbed himself that others might be benefited thereby. Because he was generous, we have for years been permitted to enjoy these lovely avenues, these shady drives, these exquisite flowers, as much as if we had been part owners in Rancho Chico. Because he was a generous citizen, we are enabled to meet in this building to-day, and our children to enjoy the advantages of this splendid institution of learning. When the citizens who had the business in charge for the location of a Normal School site, the General was away in a foreign land, but not out of reach. The Atlantic cable found him. A message was sent, asking what he would do for a site. Quickly came the response, "Any place on Rancho Chico is at your disposal except my dooryard." Fellow citizens, I firmly believe that if the committee had wired back that in order to secure the prize it would be necessary to have the dooryard, the reply would have been something like this, "Well, you are on the ground; you know best. Take the dooryard." Many a man owes his start in life to the generosity of John Bidwell.

His generosity was philanthropic, and the great beauty of his benefactions was that they were unaccompanied by the blare of trumpet and the noisy cymbal. He took great delight in keeping in ignorance the doings of his left hand from his right.

What was he as a neighbor? In early youth he was taught to regard the Holy Bible as God's gift to man, as a rule and guide of his faith, and he followed its teachings through life. A volume of that sacred Book was always to be found within reach on his desk. Its pages were familiar to him, and he no doubt read in the thirteenth chapter of Romans, ninth verse, these words: "and if there be any other commandment, it is faithfully comprehended in this saying, namely, thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Thus fortified, how could he be anything else than a magnanimous neighbor? Did he love his neighbor as himself? Ask the early settler who, when far from home and friends, it was that raised the cup of cold water to the fevered lips and spoke the kindly word of cheer.

Did he love his neighbor as himself? Ask the widow who, when her only support in life was taken to yonder burial place, who it was that helped to smooth her rugged road with sympathetic words and substantial aid.

Did he love his neighbor as himself? Ask almost anyone who has lived in Chico for any length of time, how often he has seen that carry-all and those two big black horses pass along our streets on missions of humanity.

Did he love his neighbor as himself? Ask the dumb animals on Rancho Chico, and if they could speak, they would tell you, "He was good and kind to us."

Because he was a good neighbor, he made it possible for the Indians in yonder village to be now enjoying the advantages of schools and churches.

Because he was a good neighbor, he made it possible for two Indians to assist in carrying his mortal remains to their last resting place. Lafonso and Billy Preacher were naked savages when General Bidwell first saw them, but he recognized the fact that they had immortal souls, and he made it his business to look after them.

Because he was a good citizen, he made it possible for a choir composed of Indians to sing in notes almost divine his last requiem, and strong men wept when they heard the pathetic refrain.

Because he was a good citizen and a kind neighbor, the road leading from his dwelling to his grave was strewn with flowers. It was more like the triumphal entry of the victor to his home than a funeral cortege.

His life, what a victory, what a grand success! His example, O what a legacy for the youth of this land!

My friends, what a meeting there must have been that day, when he stepped across the threshold into the new life beyond and was greeted with, "John Bidwell the Just, John Bidwell the generous, John Bidwell, the grand old man of western civilization, well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into thy reward."

