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AMOS BONSALL TALKS ON KANE EXPEDITION – Paper Read by the Sole Survivor Before the Historical Society Here

Amos Bonsall, the sole survivor of the Kent polar expedition, read a very interesting paper at the meeting of the Delaware County Historical Society on Thursday evening, giving much additional information. The paper follows:

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Delaware County Historical Society:

I have been requested by your members to give a little resume of my acquaintance and intimacy with Dr. Elisha Kent Kane, and as we so often in extemporaneous speeches leave things out that we wish afterwards we had put in, I have taken the precaution to prepare this in a form that will be permanent.

Being intimate with the family of Dr. Kane for a number of years as a boy, and with great admiration for his energetic efforts towards discovery and exploration, I never missed an opportunity of getting him into conversation about the different scenes of the world which were familiar to him but to me entirely novel. Though his reticence in speaking of things where he was the hero, it was difficult to obtain the particulars of his journeys through the Eastern lands. He was a surgeon on the United States expedition with Caleb Cushing as Envoy and Minister Plenipotentiary to China, and incidents would arise in which he would be called on to explain or talk over the happenings of the expedition with those who were familiar with this incident of his life.

He belonged to the navy as assistant surgeon, appointed by the proper authorities for that purpose, but he was not receiving any pay at that time from the Government and several years elapsed before he was made full surgeon. About six months after he was ordered to Hong Kong with the fleet, he got leave of absence, went into private practice, and traveled south. In this case, I have no special information to give, but after some six months he resigned his position as surgeon of the expedition and moved to start home on account of sickness from which he had suffered in his Chinese experience, and passed down to the Philippines (which at this time are more known and interesting than they were then). He made his mark there by descending into the crater Tael, a noted volcano on Luzon, one of the largest islands of the Philippines.

Nothing daunted him when he desired to accomplish a feat. When a boy, if there was a tree to climb particularly hard or a roof of a house that seemed inaccessible to all others, he would contrive a method of accomplishing the feat. Dr. Elder, his biographer, tells an incident of his boyhood showing his disposition in this respect. He took his brother, afterwards General Kane, and climbed out of a third story on to the roof of the house provided with a rope. He threw the rope, armed with a stone, into the throat of a large chimney and the stone catching into the brickwork, enabled him to use it to climb up and after getting there, he encouraged his brother to fasten himself to the rope that Elisha might draw him up to see the view to be obtained from the pinnacle. This was not accomplished on account of his lack of strength to lift his brother to his perch. He had to descend by the same means and they gained their rooms and beds without any one finding out what they had done.

Returning to his journeying in the Philippines, he then changed his route, passing over to Ceylon and India. There he fell in with Prince Tagore, who was traveling to England. He joined his suite as a physician and was thereby enabled to travel through by

caravan and boat until he reached Turkey, where he was taken with a fever (he was always predisposed to illness of all kinds) and came very close to dying.

He was then after recovering, sufficiently to enable him to travel, compelled to make his way, if possible home. He reached Egypt and travelling some distance up the Nile was engaged there in obtaining such curios as he knew would be interesting to his father and family when he was again attacked with a fever and again nearly lost his life.

Through all his difficulties he seemed to bear a charmed life. A man at no time weighing much over 110 pounds, he was still so imbued with energy and courage that he took no thought as to risks run but accomplished the work as far as possible that he set for himself.

In 1851 he sailed from New York as the surgeon of the expedition under the command of Lieutenant DeHaven being one of the most active agents in obtaining the aid of the United States Government for the purpose of searching for Sir John Franklin who had not been heard from in civilized regions since 1845, and great anxiety was exhibited by Lady Franklin whose appeal to the world for help to find her husband, was responded to by Dr. Kane. He was not satisfied with the result of what is known as the DeHaven Expedition in search of Sir John Franklin and appealed to the authorities for permission to command an expedition which would go to the regions more likely to contain records of this expedition or to find some of the people alive. The authorities of our Government at that time felt disinclined to take any active part in research, but were willing to assist in certain ways for the purposes.

Through the aid of Henry Grinnell, of New York, who donated two small vessels, the Advance and the Resolute, and supplying also a considerable amount of provisions necessary, the Government providing commanding officers, paying the men and appointing Lieutenant DeHaven of the Navy to the command, the expedition was established and sailed conjointly with two others from England of that date, and after meeting with a series of disasters and misfortunes, at the end of two years they were turned out of the ice by breaking up of the fleet off the coast of Labrador.

In April the following year, after making determined efforts to reach the north again, and failing to pass through Melville Bay on account of the obstructions, they were compelled to return home. The expeditions from England accomplished the same result but with no information from Sir John Franklin's expedition.

My immediate connection with the expedition dates from about January 1853, due to a casual remark made by me to George Thomas, Esq., of Philadelphia, an uncle of Dr. Kane. In conversation with him I expressed a desire to accompany him if he ever went on another expedition. That had been almost entirely forgotten by me until I received a note from Dr. Kane asking me to call upon him at his house on Girard Street, Philadelphia. I did so, finding him in rather feeble health, lying upon a lounge not very able to help himself, but still with a full determination of getting an expedition off the coming spring. I then became associated with the expedition and took up the art of daguerreotyping, a method of transmitting views, photography not then having been invented, and after learning the art, took charge of the daguerreotype apparatus belonging to the ship.

As I stated in the beginning, I had known Dr. Kane for a number of years, but I became more and more interested the more closely we became associated together in this work of exploration. He had told me of his romantic experience in Mexico in 1846 and 1847 at the time of the Mexican War, and his fortunate escape from death at that time from

wounds received in defending General Gaena. He was so broken up with the attack he suffered from that he was unable to rally from it and had to be taken to the hospital. From gratitude for the service he had rendered the General he took him to his own home and he was nursed back to convalescence, when he was compelled to return home. These incidents were quite familiar because he was not so reticent about telling stories where he did not consider himself the hero.

When he came on board as commander of the Advance on the day we sailed, he was brought on a stretcher from the carriage, and was placed immediately in his berth, from which he did not arise until we had been to sea perhaps two weeks.

His health gradually improved as he went further north and got into a cooler atmosphere.

When we stopped at St. John to set fresh food for immediate use and also for winter use (which we did by having beef marled and soaked in salt water), naturally the excitement for us the newcomers into that region, was sufficient to keep us active and on the alert, and Dr. Kane's health still continuing to improve enabled him to be on deck with us instead of in his cabin as he had been, and the fresh ozone of the Arctic region had such an effect on him that he was able to exercise both his mind and body. We touched at numerous points on our way north but it is not my province to describe them in this case.

He was among us constantly owing to the smallness of the vessel and lack of room, and for this reason it was very important that the officers of the expedition should be congenial and pleasant with each other. We had but a single cabin, accommodating all, and naturally our associations were more intimate than they must have been with a larger ship and more provisions where the higher officers could have separate cabins.

After divers delays we reached Renøker Bay, which seemed to be the terminus north and we made preparations for our winter quarters. This was as far as the vessel went, but we made sledge journeys northward, led by Dr. Kane himself and spent some days in research beyond the cape to the north. Our object was to find if we had the most desirable location for our winter quarters and by the time we had returned from the sledge journey, Dr. Kane had come to the conclusion that we could take no better position than we had for our quarters, and preparations were made at once to convert our ship into a dwelling. We also made preparations for sledge journeys later in the autumn.

I can only say that the principal work of Dr. Kane's expedition for the first year was the exploration of the coast of Greenland towards the north and taking in a point beyond the great glacier Humboldt.

Winter comes on space in these latitudes and with the exercise of hunting for fresh food (the great trouble we suffered from being the want of that commodity to protect us from scurvy) and preparations for the spring work in sledging, the winter passed away.

The first expedition sent out in March was disastrous to our people, and to show the affectionate disposition of Dr. Kane he seemed the one most deeply affected when the three men returned from a long tramp through the snow to report three disabling of other members of the party, under Boatswain Brooks, which had started for the opposite side of the channel across Kane Sea, leaving behind them four seriously wounded comrades frozen about the feet and not able to walk. Without a moment's delay, although they arrived a 2 o'clock in the evening, preparations were immediately commenced for the sledges to go out and bring them in. They started at 2 o'clock in the morning and arrived the next evening about 10 o'clock after an exposing march of over 50 miles, finding them

in a tent and much depressed by their condition. They were all wearied out by that time and rested by walking all night, as the sun was not yet circumpolar. The next day preparations were made to return to the ship with the wounded men of the frozen company. This we all looked upon afterwards as one of the most destructive and dangerous expeditions we had undertaken during the whole term of our residence, in the north, and Dr. Kane was, as usual, in cases of emergency and danger, the leader in the beginning and throughout the trips.

Weak and feeble as he was he never showed any weakness when work was to be done. After this expedition quite a number of weeks were given over to recovery from disease, and after the death of two of the party from the effects of freezing, preparations were made for later journeys and longer distances. The ice by this time had begun to get soft and tender and our experiences were by no means edifying as we had to travel sometimes over long distances through lakes formed on the ice and varying in size from 100 yards to a quarter of a mile in width and from two to twelve inches in depth with always the danger of going through to the salt water. This rendered it impossible not to get wet feet and often wet clothing. Altogether we had a journey of over 100 miles and in this instance, to show the disposition of Dr. Kane, when crossing one of these surface lakes, he called to me and said: "Come here, Bonsall. I want you." And he made a leap and landed on my shoulders. "I want a donkey," he said, and I called out that I was willing to be his donkey and carry him over piggyback, but when right in the middle of a spot eight or ten inches deep, I proposed to lie down and roll after the manner of donkeys, and he then begged hard to let him off without a wetting.

He was always cheerful and always hopeful and in the most difficult and dangerous positions, never lost his heart and energy nor had moments of doubt as to the expedition being brought safely through. In the spring, after the second winter, preparation were made but not so much for sledge journeys, though one or two were made with Dr. Kane himself as leader, and after they had traveled some 150 miles from the ship he was taken with an attack similar to uphold fever and it was again brought to the vessel and placed on a cot upon the deck and stayed there for six weeks or more, when under the treatment by Dr. Hayes, he was successfully brought around.

He was always planning out something to be done later. He was thinking out a plan to get up another expedition after he had returned home and had full confidence in being able to take another voyage to the north. On his return home when we had reached Upernavik, he received a letter from George W. Childs, offering him a certain sum of money for the copyright of his narrative of the expedition. He received numerous offers from publishers, but agreed with Mr. Childs, and on much better terms than at first offered by him in his letter to Dr. Kane.

As always occurred, his health deteriorated when he came into a temperate climate and while his weakness made it difficult to accomplish the work, he turned with his accustomed energy to prepare the manuscript for publication. About one year was devoted to this work. When he had accomplished it, he again lost his energy and ideas and his health sunk faster than before and it was deemed politic as well as pleasant to make a journey to Europe, as numerous very flattering reports had been sent him from the English Admiralty, and owing to his energetic efforts on behalf of Sir John Franklin, they were very anxious to have him go to London, which he did after he had finished the manuscript of his expedition and while it was going through the press.

Very shortly his health failed so that it was very important to take him somewhere to recuperate and where I think was a serious mistake made in the English surgeon's diagnosis of his case. In my intimate association with him I never recognized that his heart was in any way affected. Never did he complain of anything of that kind, but they came to the conclusion that there was a deformity about the heart which needed treatment in more moderate climates, and instead of sending him to the Alps for the purpose of strengthening his physical powers, they sent him to the tropics where he weakened, and after some six weeks succumbed to the dread destroyer.

His other history, of course, is not necessary for me to repeat. His residence in Delaware County as a boy is known to some of my older hearers, and it is not necessary for me to much on matters of a more private nature.

He was a favorite as a boy and as a man with all who became acquainted and were intimate with him.

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