

Prospects from Prospect Hill, Part 2: The Prayer Meeting

The only way to get to the Prospect Hill monument is a map or GPS. There is no signage to speak of, and the monument isn't what you might call *stunning*. It's big, but not huge. Both itself and what it commemorates seems little more than a footnote. Go on up and read it for yourself.

On Prospect Hill, Sheldon Jackson, T.C. Cleland and J.C. Elliott, strict Presbyterians all, pledged in prayer to beget a campaign, as the monument still claims, to "win the west for Christ."

Let that sit for a minute.

Fifty-some years later, in 1923, thoughtful Presbyterians honored those prayers and created a wide white monument that still sits on an oddly cut parcel of ground, high--high!--above the city and the river that created it, a monument that gives those missionaries grand billing: "who on April 29, 1869, from this hill top viewed the great unchurched areas and after prayer went out to win the west for Christ."

So genuinely American! In 1869, Prospect Hill stood high above a river town that had begun to sell itself as the jumping off place, the "last stop," for an unending train of emigrant settlers going west. Most had no interest in winning anything for Christ; they just wanted a better life. Some, just as noteworthy as the pastors, felt called to a similar task with a wholly different end--to win the West for their pocketbooks. But they were all going out west to land white America thought it deserved—a matter of Manifest Destiny.

In 1874, a rowdy Sioux City newspaper editor named Charles Collins began a nationwide crusade to drum up a thousand people--as many as he could

enlist--to strike out from here to the Black Hills, flouting the law. The Ft. Laramie Treaty, a year earlier, had granted possession of the Black Hills to the Great Sioux Nation; but Collins, et al, could honor nothing but gold. When Custer's explorations let it be known that the Black Hills had gold, entrepreneurs like our own Charles Collins trumpeted the call. "A treaty, you say? Who wants to get rich? Hey, come on along."

An old photo of Prospect Hill makes all of this perfectly visible. There are no houses and it's treeless, nothing but windswept bluffs outfitted as far as you can see in knee-high grasses waving in the winds all of us know are simply always there. Imagine what all of them see, Collins and the Presbyterians--no farms, no groves, no dwellings of any kind, maybe even a small herd of buffalo. Nothing was out there. Nothing. Sioux City was perfectly positioned to be the nation's biggest and last truck stop for thousands of emigrant prairie schooners.

That's what the three of them saw. That's how all of them dreamed.

In the middle of the 20th century, the soft sandstone of Prospect Hill got worn away by wind and rain, putting that strange old monument at risk. That's when it was moved to where it stands today, still teasingly close to that brimming overlook Leonias once halfway blundered down.

It's an amazing place really, a sliver of land amid a handful of dwellings that appear to have lost some energy.

If you ask me, the monument is still a wonder. There's far more history here than that included even in its own grand ambitions. In an odd way, it still tells our story.