

# Ora Williams, Iowan

BY EMORY H. ENGLISH

Born in this state, Ora Williams' love of Iowa was constant and abiding, always expressed by him upon every suitable occasion. While his last years preceding death at the home of a daughter in Decatur, Georgia, near the close of February last, had developed an interest there, his quiet hours still were "lived in Iowa." He never ceased in his admiration of the state that gave him birth and where most of his life was spent, although he was cosmopolitan in breadth of vision and interest. His talents were varied, but a newspaperman's instincts were uppermost to the end. An appropriate biography appears upon another page.

The writings of Mr. Williams, continuing throughout a long and active life, were marked by accuracy in statement, clearness in reasoning and integrity of purpose. Never was he just a hack writer. Several periods in his career also were spent outside of Iowa, but mid-west environment embraced his active years. His education was obtained in the rural and small town schools, under guidance of instructors who rose to eminence. Ora often said that he was the product of the McGuffey reader and Ray's arithmetic age, and considered himself fortunate. But, in reality, other potent influences gave him a finished education.

He entered a newspaper office and rapidly acquired the helpful traits of trustworthy reporting. Items of news recorded by him were clearly and simply stated, without distortion or innuendo; he had a passion for objectivity that always was evident. Early he became a country editor; afterward rather quickly he came to the *Iowa State Register* as city editor under "Ret" Clarkson, its brilliant editor, a favorable association for a young writer. And years later, he became managing editor of the *Sioux City Journal*, while George D. Perkins yet was

its editor, and then was an editorial writer upon the *Omaha Bee* with Edward Rosewater, the eminent Nebraskan.

As an editor, Williams became a vigorous advocate, a staunch defender and an opponent whose logic and conviction were to be reckoned with always. His concept of editorial duty was the presentation of articles possessing reader interest and somewhat colorful exposition of subjects and events, rather than prosaic recital of trends and personal views, to which he gave scant consideration. On occasion he would paint a word picture of a landscape or sunset as beautiful as the skilled work of the most gifted artist.

During a portion of his career, the syndicated column of Iowa official and political news sent by him daily from Des Moines for many years, scintillated with inside information, representing hours of tireless work and evidencing his standing with the sources of information. Occasionally during the period devoted to this work he had charge of publicity in campaign headquarters, which was handled with energy and the rare judgment of a professional. Public men frequently used his talents as a "ghost writer."

In official life he brought ripe experience to several stations of responsibility, serving with fidelity and intelligence. For eight years he was division chief at Des Moines of the U.S. internal revenue department, for six years state document editor in charge of state printing, then secretary of the state industrial commissioner ten years, and lastly curator of the Iowa state department of history and archives for eight years. This, the last assignment of his career brought out his exceptional capacity for historical research and use of his memory of events and personages.

Ora Williams possessed a great fund of information that goes with him in his passing; and his remarkable memory perhaps was actually the greatest historical index in all Iowa. He stood high with colleagues and in the estimation of all who knew him—a sturdy worker long after other men of his years had retired. Fortunate-

ly his declining years came late in life. They were serene and peaceful, filled with deep satisfaction, contentment and continued interest in passing events. He wrote voluminously even in later years, doing his own typing, evidencing retained alertness and clearness of mental faculties. The pages of *THE ANNALS* have contained many such articles since his retirement.

A short while ago this quiet man closed his eyes and slept to the end of a long, active and useful life. This gentle, modest character, who gave so much more to the world than it bestowed upon him, will be greatly missed in circles that knew him in life and activity. The influence of his life upon the affairs of the state will be felt long after the close of his valuable service both as an official and a citizen.

It is fitting there should appear with this appreciative expression of his worth, his word of greeting written to be read by him at a recent annual meeting of the Des Moines Pioneer Club, which unfortunately he was not able to attend, that expressed his steadfast love of Iowa and his longing to be here once again. He said:

#### HERE IS THE BETTER LAND

I doff my hat to those who carry on the traditions that make up the romantic history of the Capital city of Iowa. I first saw Des Moines about the time of the arrival of the first railroad train. As a boy, I clambered over a huge boulder that is now a part of the granite work table course of the state house. I was at the barbecue at the Raccoon fork when the Rock Island silver-mounted train brought the officials from Chicago, and we were regaled by a brass band and speeches. I saw the last of the stages scurrying along the old stage road that wound in and out among the muskrat ponds adorned with bulrushes and lady's-slippers.

But the American spirit leads ever toward the newer and the better land. I was free. I once drove my car up to the home where Longfellow was born in Portland, Maine, and I have trod the streets of Portland, Oregon. I have found my way out of the maze of narrow streets on Beacon hill; and I have climbed the steep inclines of San Francisco. I drove a car down Broadway and on a ferry boat that took me past the statue where all the oppressed of the world are welcomed to America; and I have turned my kodak on the passing floats of the Pasadena rose festival. I set type in a newspaper office in

Bismarck, N. D., I was editor of a paper in Sioux Falls, managing editor of a paper in Sioux City, wrote editorials for an Omaha newspaper; have crossed the big rivers at Lake Itasca, at St. Louis, Memphis and Vicksburg, and listened to Booth and Barrett in the old French opera house in New Orleans. I have seen Niagara from the Canadian side and have peered across the Rio Grande at El Paso into the bleak hills of Old Mexico. I served my state or the nation for 35 years, and went to the Southland seven years ago to await the end.

But the wanderlust is persistent. I came back two seasons to Iowa by train. Then I drove my car back two seasons. For the second time, I came by the sky route. And so, I find it impossible to resist the lure of this beautiful midland region. My search for the better land is over. I have gone far and always come back. There are alluring mountains, green valleys and wonderful cities. America is the fairy-land of legend and reality. I have lived in and through the Golden Age of the western world. I have seen its best, have enjoyed the triumphs, have faced the failures. But it is the best world I recollect ever to have lived in, and certainly the best country that ever was made for the abode of man.

My wanderings are over, my search ended, the end of the road is in sight. I have come back. I have come back not to boast, not to mourn; but to find that here, here is the better land. Here is beautiful Iowa, my Iowa.

#### ON THE WAY

A date I have with destiny  
 Secret it is as to place, and time,  
 Some trivial thing, a song, perhaps a rhyme,  
 Will set off the now from ages yet to be,  
 Only a pause at the rim of eternity's sea.  
 Why worry as to when, or what the way,  
 Not for me to plan, not mine to say.  
 I've come quite a way on the pleasant lane,  
 Higher yet the peaks I hoped to gain.  
 Perhaps, who knows, my date may be  
 A happy one with destiny.

—Ora Williams, 1949

#### The Man Who Leads

The meaning of history is never apparent to those who make it. A leader in any age or generation is no more than a man who sees somewhat beyond the end of his nose.—Thomas Sugrue.

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