



ORA WILLIAMS

EDITOR OF THE ANNALS OF IOWA
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ORA WILLIAMS—AN APPRECIATION

By EMORY H. ENGLISH

It is a most satisfying event when a man can retire voluntarily, gracefully and with an acknowledged record of official accomplishment, rectitude, integrity and personal honor, his years of unselfish work praised by those whom he served, unalloyed by reservations of any sort. It has been so with Ora Williams, in his retirement at the turn of the year, as Curator of the Iowa Historical department, whose letter of resignation to the Board of Trustees appears upon another page.

With this issue of THE ANNALS the responsibilities of Mr. Williams, who has been its editor for eight years, pass to another. The material for the January issue of the publication was prepared and in the hands of the printer last November. The articles to appear in the April number had been selected by him prior to his retirement in December; so this final number of Volume XXVIII is just as much the product of his planning as previous issues when he was still here.

The long and notable career which Mr. Williams experienced mostly in Iowa, both as a newspaper man and a public official, is worthy of more than passing note as he lays aside his duties to enjoy the contentment of retirement, though expecting to continue his literary work. Life has never been dull for Ora Williams—and it is not now, for he continues alive, alert and active.

Without detracting in any way from the brilliant and timely work he has performed as a historian, and in other

equally important departmental achievements, unquestionably his natural forte has been that of a writer. As such he easily excelled any other living Iowan. Articles without number, some bearing evidence of his authorship, and oftentimes not, have graced the pages of *THE ANNALS*. Fortunately there is in its editorial and literary portfolio many articles, yet unpublished, which were written by him and filed for use at some later date. Because of the ripeness of his own personal experiences and first-hand acquaintance with Iowa men and events during the past seventy years, the usual laborious research of historical authorities, in which other writers must necessarily indulge in the preparation of historical data, with him was needless, and for the most part without point. His writings were always sane, steady, clear and lucid—never sensational nor unreliable. So often he has said, and truly, that the real job of a newspaperman is that of "ever seeking information and becoming a liaison man between the few who do things and the many who want to know about everything." As a news-gatherer he held the respect of men of letters, the confidence of public personages, and the good will of his fellow man.

While Mr. Williams came to the position of vantage as Curator of the Iowa Historical department and editor of *THE ANNALS* late in his career as a public servant, for many decades as a newspaper man he was close to these activities as a confidant and advisor of his predecessors. When, through the wisdom of the legislature, the department was established and the scope of its responsibilities determined upon more than a half century ago, he was actually at the elbow of the founder, and constantly thereafter assisted in its development and growth.

Retirement of this industrious man from official duties and responsibilities, therefore marks the close of the active career of one of the state's ablest and best known authorities in the field of Iowa history, though many unfinished tasks have been marked out by himself for at-

tention in a more leisurely way. His unflagging zeal in securing and preserving for posterity important Iowa records and data has marked all the years of his service.

Not as a writer and a historian only is Mr. Williams pre-eminent and entitled to credit for competency. Besides editing numerous books, pamphlets and bulletins of history and biography, including the volumes of *THE ANNALS*, he has been in demand as a speaker upon a wide range of subjects. Also, during the period of his service as Curator he directed the complete reorganization and cataloging of the state archives division, placing this vast reserve of official records in accessible condition. Likewise, largely through his foresight and efforts, and under his direction, data and exhibits for the history of World War II, and the listings of Iowa activities and casualties therein, have been secured, assembled and filed; the state museum enlarged, and countless accessions received, over 7,000 Kodachrome slides of Iowa flora and fauna obtained by staff photographers and made available to the schools of the state; specimens of the wild life of this region prepared and mounted, supplementing the fine museum displays already in the institution; also the writings, addresses, documents and correspondence of eminent Iowans received in trust for future generations, supplying unrecorded chapters in the state's history.

In the meantime he has carried on the routine office work that the position of Curator involves—engaging in interviews and conferences; attending to correspondence; answering departmental inquiries; supplying data for the press; supervising the cataloging and filing of documents and manuscripts; certifying copies of records; accumulating, indexing and filing archival material; maintaining contact with the legislature, and various boards, commissions, departments and officials of the state; preparing official reports; and doing the miscellaneous minutiae that such an exacting position requires.

As just one instance of the current value of his services to the state, it may be recorded now that but for his resourceful, persistent, and effective efforts in writing and

urging the adoption of resolutions by at least two state legislatures, and arousing state officials, the press and the public, the movement to properly celebrate the centennial of Iowa's statehood would have languished, or been carried through in some perfunctory or less notable manner than it actually was during the months of 1946 under the able leadership of the Centennial Committee finally appointed.

This quiet, amiable, unobtrusive man has accomplished so much and served so well that the state is actually puzzled to find a successor qualified to carry forward his work in the wide range of activities covered. The sense of loss experienced by the members of his staff has been marked and his guidance and counsel missed. In the fullness of years, although still keen in his perceptions and mental alertness, Ora Williams, in his accustomed determined way, chose to retire from official service and be relieved of its exacting responsibilities. Bidding friends and co-workers au revoir, accompanied by two stalwart grandsons, he drove to Decatur, Georgia, a suburb of Atlanta, to reside in a milder climate with daughters and other loved members of his family, who for many years have not been residents of Iowa. May comfort and contentment attend his remaining years, the summers of some of which he may spend in Iowa.

He can reflect with lasting satisfaction that his service to his state through the long years in varied capacities has been of continuing value. With almost matchless sagacity, tact, wisdom, ability and personal charm, Ora Williams endeared himself to the people of Iowa. His kindly spirit will long hover over and about the institution of which he was the head, and the state house that so long had been the scene of his worthy endeavors.

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