

In Commemoration of Ellis



The Iowa Beginnings of a Great American Humorist

by Katherine Harper

In July 1919, a portly New Yorker with gold-rimmed spectacles stepped onto the railway platform in Muscatine, Iowa, closely followed by his wife, elderly father, and four children. No brass band waited to meet them, no mayoral delegation, though the new arrival had the right to hope for both. For this was a local boy who had, beyond any doubt, made good. Ellis Parker Butler was one of the most highly regarded humorists in the United States, a writer of sidesplitting tales about ordinary people in anything but ordinary situations.

Success had not caused the visitor to forget his roots. In fact, in the 22 years since he had left Iowa, Butler had been one of Muscatine's greatest boosters. His fictional depictions of the little lumber town reached a nationwide audience through the most popular magazines of the day: *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Collier's*, *Munsey's*, *The Red Book*, *McCall's*, *American Boy*, *Saturday Evening Post*. First National Pictures had purchased his 1913 novel, *The Jack-Knife Man*, set in and around "Riverbank," and he was on his way west to watch the filming. But before that, he, wife Ida, father Audley, and the children were to spend the summer in a cottage-on-stilts on nearby Geneva Island in the Mississippi. There, Butler would absorb details for what would become the well-loved Jibby Jones series of boys' adventure stories.

The family was met at the train by Ida's cousins, Edwin and Laura McColm. As always, Butler found himself a bit tongue-tied in his first few minutes around Laura, for she was a Musser, the town's own answer to the Vanderbilts, and he had once been the young man who supplied her groceries. But the couple's warmth soon overcame his discomfort, and they laughed and chatted together like the old friends they were. Seventeen-year-old Elsie Butler chose to join in her elders' conversation, while nine-year-old twins Jean and Marjorie and their little brother, Ellis, age five, raced up

and down the platform, stretching their legs after the long journey.

Later, the suitcases stowed at the McColms' home and the trunks in the station baggage room, Butler announced his desire to show his children the place where he had been born. He not-so-secretly hoped to find that the town had recognized his fame with some sort of tribute there, at least a plaque with his name and date of birth. His arm linked through his wife's, the humorist led the others confidently up Third Street, noting the sites of boyhood triumphs and tragedies—and then stopped in his tracks, for the little frame house he had expected was gone, dragged elsewhere on the property to make room for newer structures. "I had to go half way around the block and down the alley to find it," he later wrote in *The American Magazine*, "and the only tablet on it was a trivial pine affair, painted white and bearing in black letters the word ICE. It was impossible for me to believe that a grateful community placed that tablet in an outburst of gratitude to the distinguished author that was born there. I tried to believe it. I tried to think that the letters stood for 'In Commemoration of Ellis.' But when the iceman stopped and yanked a few pieces of still unsold frozen water out of his wagon and dragged them into the little storehouse that marks my birthplace, my last shred of hope vanished." Thus this world-famous humorist had learned that in his own hometown a celebrity is just the fellow who used to live down the street.

Ellis Parker Butler first entered that little frame house on December 9, 1869, the eldest of Audley and Adella Butler's eight surviving children. Like other first babies, he was coddled and worried over, particularly after a wave of illnesses in his preschool years left him pallid and easily tired. A doctor would later tell the boy

that his heart was weak and that overexertion would likely kill him. That Butler long outlived this physician says something about the accuracy of the diagnosis, though no one knew it at the time.

Worried about placing her "delicate" son among crowds of other children, Adella kept him home when he reached school age, intending to tutor him herself. But she was occupied by other, more serious concerns. She had borne three more babies in the space of only five years, and Audley, a bookkeeper for a wholesale grocer, was finding it difficult to support so many. At this point one of the strongest influences on Ellis's eventual career entered his life, for in 1876, the Butlers sent their six-year-old son and his sister Daisy, a year younger, to live with their grandmother and an unmarried aunt on the next street.

Like her parents and her brother Audley, Elizabeth Parker Butler had not been formally educated to any great extent, but she was highly intelligent and a voracious reader. Aunt Lizzie's home may have been humble, but it contained a private library of formidable size and depth. Ellis Butler would later recall how, despite having no training in languages, she devoured the works of Goethe, laboriously translating each line with the aid of a German-English dictionary and a grammar. A spare, severe-looking woman, she nevertheless had a soft spot for children. All the young Butlers adored her.

Aunt Lizzie wasted no time in beginning Ellis's education. Once the children were settled in, she sat her small nephew down with Sir Walter Scott's *Tales of a Grandfather* and in short order had taught him to read. For the next five years, winter and summer, she drilled him in penmanship, mathematics, drawing, grammar, spelling, history, and English literature. She also taught him to imitate the sorts of verse they studied together and—having cast a highly critical eye over the result—encouraged him to send it to the Muscatine newspapers. Like many women in Victorian-age America, she would have been appalled to see her family's name in print outside the marriage or

death rolls, so the boy signed his earliest efforts "Ayah," an infant mispronunciation by Daisy Butler of her brother's first name.

Aside from his home-schooling and literary aspirations, Ellis enjoyed a normal village boyhood. He played with his siblings every day after lessons, learned to swim and handle a rowboat, drove his grandmother's cow to and from pasture, ran afoul of a tomboy whose superior strength and agility left him bawling with humiliation, and slipped out one night to watch the docking at

Muscatine of the first electrically lighted steamboat. He made the ordinary unwise choices of youth, "everything," he admitted, "but blow down the barrel of a shotgun to see if it is loaded. I escaped that by never having had a shotgun. However, I did the best I could with a Fourth of July pistol that used .22 blank cartridges. I placed the nose of the pistol against the palm of my left hand in order to see why the trigger did not work. Old Doc Thompson dug out the wad and I fainted only once." These memories became fodder for the tales of "Riverbank" and "Derlingport" that he would produce over a 40-year period beginning in the 1890s.

By the time Ellis Butler was 11 or 12 years old, his father's salary had risen to the point where the two oldest children could move back home. When he joined his brothers and sisters at school, at first, thanks to his aunt's tutelage, he was placed two grades above his peers. Unaccustomed to reciting before a roomful of other chil-

dren, however, he soon found himself in a group more appropriate for his age.

He found plenty of opportunity for mischief, usually instigated by his bosom friend, Fred Schmidt, whom Butler would immortalize in a story series about "Swatty" Schwartz, a born leader of boys. "Schmitty" and Ellis were experts at getting into trouble, but not at eluding capture afterward. Their teacher generally administered a switching to the tough little tailor's son, but assigned still pale and ill-looking Ellis extra compositions, which she required him to read in front of the class. To both his and the teacher's surprise, the other

SHSI (IOWA CITY)



"I have a weak heart," humorist Ellis Parker Butler once quipped. "Thirty two years ago a doctor told me I might drop dead any minute, and other doctors have told me so—off and on—for thirty two years. Most of the doctors have since died, and the others keep dropping off every few days."

children laughed—and not at him, but at the content of his seemingly innocuous essays. Perhaps, thought the boy, this was an activity worth pursuing further.

Emboldened by his success and the more frequent acceptance of his doggerel by the two local newspapers, Ellis began mailing his work beyond Muscatine, to *St. Nicholas* magazine and the many weekly and monthly national papers aimed at a child readership. One afternoon he returned home from school to find a small, squarish package waiting for him. An ephemeral Sunday School publication, *Dawn of Day*, had purchased his story "Shorty and Frank's Adventure" for the magnificent sum of 50 penny postcards. Ellis Parker Butler—or rather, his alter ego, Percy V. Clyde—could and did now truthfully refer to himself as a paid professional author.

In the years between Ellis's birth and his first sale, his parents had continued to produce babies at intervals ranging from nine months to two years. They would eventually have a dozen children; four were stillborn or died in infancy and two lived only to young adulthood. By 1884, with Audley Butler's pay envelope again stretching too thin, the couple found themselves facing an unhappy choice. They scraped by long enough for their eldest son to graduate from grammar school and even to experience a few months of the secondary education they craved for him. But by winter, they knew that they had no choice but to ask 14-year-old Ellis to leave school and go to work.

Many employment opportunities existed for young boys in a Mississippi River port of that day, but most required brawn, something Ellis decidedly did not possess. Thanks to Aunt Lizzie, however, the boy wrote a fairly legible hand and was competent in (if not enthusiastic about) mathematics. The manager of the Muscatine Spice Mill took a chance and hired him as a bookkeeper's helper at \$5 per week. Young Ellis "did as little work as possible" in his first job and surrendered his weekly pay to his mother. When, a few months later, he was offered a position as bill clerk at the Muscatine Oat Meal Mill, producers of Friends Oats, he was astonished at the good grace with which his supervisor took the news and the effusiveness of his good-bye.

Ellis resolved to apply himself at his new job and settled in at what must have been painfully dull work for an active youth. But his employers possessed him only during office hours. The moment the six-o'clock whistle blew, he raced home, bolted down his dinner, and shut himself in his room, where he scrawled verses and stories for hours by the light of an oil lamp. Presumably inspired by Benjamin Franklin's early account of his early work as "Silence Dogood," Ellis signed the name "Elpabu"—an amalgam of his given names—to a

series of topical essays and began slipping them under the door of the *Muscatine News*. The paper's editor chose to print them verbatim, which spurred the teenager to stay up even later and write still more.

The resulting lack of sleep was probably the cause of an incident that he would recount with rueful laughter for the rest of his life. At that time, barrels of Friends Oats were shipped throughout the United States via steamboat and railway. Time was of the essence to get the product to storekeepers before the inevitable weevils made an appearance. One summer day in 1888, Ellis absent-mindedly processed a C.O.D. order for a boxcar of oats in the usual manner, mailing an invoice to the buyer, in care of the freight office in the town of shipment. In this case, the town was New York City and the agent's name was Henry Smith. "It seems that this was an especially good summer for weevils, and there were about seven hundred and sixty-two Henry Smiths in the New York directory," Butler confessed more than 30 years later. But what happened next was not entirely his fault, for instead of notifying the sender of the need for a more complete address, the New York freight office began posting the invoice to one Henry Smith after the other, beginning with the first in the book. Meanwhile, the boxcar sat on a siding in the beating sun, with storage charges mounting and the number of weevils soon exceeding the number of oats.

When the mistake was finally conveyed back to Muscatine and the enormity of the expense calculated, Ellis's supervisor quietly approached the boy's desk and laid in front of him an envelope covered front and back with crossed-out and rewritten addresses. "It was the most painful moment of my career," he later recalled. "There I sat, frightened and ashamed, with my hair cut pompadour and my mustache almost visible to the naked eye, a young and tender being on the very threshold of life, and already an outcast and a ruin. I was the weevil in the oatmeal of industry." Minutes later, he and his hat were out on the street.

Not by coincidence, the bureaucratic insistence of railroads on using the rule book instead of common sense lies at the heart of Butler's most famous story, "Pigs Is Pigs" (1905). Its main character, freight agent Mike Flannery, refuses a customer's payment for a C.O.D. shipment of two guinea pigs, stating that the fee should be five cents per head higher, the livestock rate. When the customer insists that the rate should be the one used for household pets, Flannery points to the rule book, declares that "pigs is pigs," and refuses to budge. A long correspondence ensues between agent, railroad, and an

eminent biologist. By the time all three are convinced that "pigs is pets," the original pair of guinea pigs has multiplied into the thousands—and the customer has moved away.

With his local employment options dwindling, Ellis appealed to George Dillaway, a dealer in glass, silver, and crockery. This merchant knew and trusted Audley Butler and was willing to take on his 17-year-old son in a sales capacity. That was in the late summer of 1888. Although Ellis later claimed to have broken twice as much crockery as his salary would cover, in truth, by November, he was the store's ranking clerk and earned a princely \$30 per month.

But that was not to be the year's only triumph. Butler had by then abandoned the "Elpabu Letters" in favor of another project, one that was less time-consuming and infinitely more fun. The *Muscatine Journal* had recently begun serializing a sensational novel of a few years before, Fergus Hume's *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab*. Butler seized upon this as an opportunity—why, the title alone was ripe for parody. After writing the first few installments of *The Mystery of the Unhandsome Cab*, he submitted them to the rival *News* under his Elpabu pseudonym, but this time he handed them over in person. The paper's editor, George Van Horne, had long since guessed the identity of his young contributor. He accepted the installments (which burlesqued the serial as it had so far appeared) and agreed to print them if Butler swore to carry his project through to the end. Butler did, and then some: *Hansom* ended its run only a few issues later, but *Unhandsome* continued for a total of 47 installments.

The editor was so pleased with his literary find that he mailed episodes of the serial to other newspapers across the state. H. S. Kneeder of the *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, described by Van Horne as "the acknowledged poet-laureate of Iowa," found Butler's satire such a refreshing change from the mannered fiction he ordinarily received that he composed a flowery paean for his editorial page. The *Muscatine News* proudly reprinted Kneeder's essay under the headline "Iowa's Literary Promise." It read, in part: "The boy who has thus turned to authorship in the odd hours snatched from sleep, writes with much of the quality which distinguishes the descriptive passages of Dickens, but he reminds us also in his style of Nathaniel Hawthorne, there being the same use of effective iteration in the quaint dwelling upon grewsome detail. There must be a future for such a boy. . . . We believe that in him Iowa has found a story teller who can catch and hold the interest of the reading world, and with gathering strength and growing talent will be able to develop the talent so manifestly in him."

How did Iowa's Literary Promise react to such praise? According to Butler, "I swelled up like a toad."

A day or so later, Van Horne summoned the budding writer to his office and offered him the city editorship of the *Muscatine News*. His vest buttons now nearly popping, Butler gave his notice at the store. His initial cocksureness, however, slowly turned to panic as he realized all that would be expected of him, a youth of 18 with only three years of formal schooling who, in his own estimation, had already proven himself a failure.

A local business school was then accepting new students, and Butler wasted no time in enrolling. But after so long away from a classroom, the pressure proved too great. Just weeks after he had begun, he returned to Van Horne to confess that the notion of such responsibility was too much for him: he couldn't take the job. This admission was embarrassing enough, but to return to Mr. Dillaway's store and beg for his old job was unthinkable. Butler took the only step he saw available to him; he approached his father, who interceded with his own employer, wholesale grocer and patent-medicine dealer Fred Daut. Thus it was that, instead of settling at a desk to review birth notices and the latest boilerplate proof, Ellis Parker Butler took up a post behind a counter, a spot he would retain for the following eight years.

Although his swelled ego had been deflated by this experience, the young man remained convinced that his future lay in writing—specifically, writing with comic content. After all, Bob Burdette of the *Burlington Hawk-Eye* had become a national success with exactly the sort of verses and sketches that Butler liked to write. Humorists John Kendrick Bangs and Bill Nye—his own favorites—were enjoying huge popularity, to say nothing of one-time *Muscatine* resident Mark Twain. Butler began expanding the range of his submissions far beyond his hometown. The weekly satirical publications *Truth*, *Judge*, *Puck*, *Up to Date*, and *Life*, all based in New York City, were soon purchasing his humor regularly. So were the *National Magazine* in Boston and numerous small magazines in Des Moines and Chicago. Many of his contributions from this period do not bear his name, but a satisfying number include his initials or even a full byline.

This period saw an equally satisfying development in the budding writer's personal life. One cold winter's day in 1895, on his way home from work, he paused beside a skating pond. A group of teenagers was playing Snap the Whip on the ice, hands joined, skating rapidly in a long, curved chain until one or two at the end lost their grips and sailed away, sometimes tumbling into the snow at the edge of the pond, sometimes bowl-

ing over their fellow skaters like so many ninepins. As Butler watched, the line zigzagged and a female figure broke away and swooped toward him, shrieking and flailing her arms. Just as it seemed that the girl would plunge into the frozen drifts, Butler stepped forward and caught her, swinging her up to the bank. The pair straightened, their laughter frosting in the cold air, and looked for the first time into each other's faces. The young clerk never looked away. For the next 42 years, this woman would remain the love of his life.

Ida Anna Zipser was just 15 years old. A native of the tiny village of Atalissa, five miles northwest of Muscatine, she had lived for much of her girlhood in a sod hut on the Nebraska prairie. After her musician-turned-farmer father went on what was to be a brief trip and never returned, Ida's mother took the girl home to Muscatine to live with her well-to-do aunt and uncle, Lee and Sally McColm. In the years that followed, Ida had grown into a slim, graceful teenager with a level gaze and long, light-brown hair that she had only recently begun to pin up. Today, a girl in her mid-teens would be thought far too young to keep company with a man ten years her senior, but in that winter of 1895, Ida was considered a fine catch. Butler's low-key courtship, appropriate for a girl her age, involved walking her (and her friends) home from school, escorting her to church picnics, and reading aloud to her from the humorous books of John Kendrick Bangs.

Only months after meeting Ida, Butler made his first sale to a "name" magazine. The story had as its genesis a pair of squibs—short "filler" items—that Butler had found in the newspaper, one about a man who constructed a house on a swivel so that it would not be torn off its foundation by high winds, another about the naval theory that a waterspout could be stopped by a cannon blast. In Butler's story, "My Cyclone-Proof House," the narrator is an Iowa inventor whose revolving dwelling has a built-in cannon on the back porch. After a false start, in which a steady breeze leaves the house with its front porch adjacent to the pig pen, the man is given the chance to test his tornado-buster in action. Unfortunately, he misses the oncoming twister and instead blows out a wall of his barn. The story is short but engaging, a series of gag situations squeezed into less than a page of finished type.

Richard Watson Gilder, in whose *Century Magazine* the piece appeared, was renowned for his gentle, encouraging letters of rejection and his advice-filled acceptances. He sent Butler one of the latter in August 1896. Flustered by the attention being paid to him by this literary celebrity, Butler wrote back to thank Gilder for his comments. Unsure about the "references as to

identity"—by which Gilder meant a short biography for the magazine's files—he instead provided a list of a dozen prominent people who could vouch for his character. Butler, Gilder, and *Century Magazine* associate editor Robert Underwood Johnson eventually became good friends and had a good laugh over his mistake.

The *Century's* approval of his work marked the start of a restless period, a time when Butler wondered if he could sell more stories if he lived nearer to the magazines he was supposed to be supplying with up-to-the-minute topical humor. To prepare himself for a move to the city, he spent the payment for his *Century* story on "the first derby hat, narrow trousers and plaid socks ever seen in Muscatine," an outfit that, when he finally did visit a major city, in fact branded him as a greenhorn. After that extravagant purchase, he began cutting back on the few luxuries he allowed himself and putting money aside. By autumn 1897, he had saved \$200, enough to sustain him for months, even given New York City prices. Having made inquiries among his humor markets, he erroneously believed a job was waiting for him at one of the weekly magazines. Suitcase packed, he bought a railway ticket, embraced his parents and Aunt Lizzie, and kissed Ida good-bye, vowing—like so many other romantics before him—to send for the woman he loved as soon as he had made his fortune.

It took an initial period of unemployment and mental drought, but Ellis Parker Butler eventually found all that he had dreamed of. He made a fine career for himself, not only as a writer, but—an odd thing for a man who so disliked figures—as president of one bank and vice-president of another in the New York City suburb of Flushing. He married the beauty of the skating pond, and together they raised four children. Butler had a knack for making new friends, especially among his fellow authors and artists; these would eventually number into the hundreds. He even found immediate fame in 1905 thanks to "Pigs Is Pigs," a story no better or worse than the 2,200 other short stories, poems, essays, stage and radio plays, motion picture scenarios, and other writings published in his lifetime. That story gave him a degree of lasting fame; it has remained in print almost continuously since 1905 and has been adapted for the screen four times.

Most of his achievements—his rise from trade magazine paste-up man to editor to owner (and later, the more surprising jump to bank president); his appearances in silent film, stage productions, and early radio; and his creation of dozens of popular series characters—came after he left Iowa. Yet he remained very much an Iowan at heart. He kept up to date on his hometown with sub-

scriptions to local newspapers and returned to Muscatine or nearby Geneva Island nearly every summer. In addition, he set many of his early stories, including the popular series starring book salesman extraordinaire Eliph' Hewlett, in the fictional hamlet of Kilo, Iowa. And when novelist Theodore Dreiser made an unprovoked attack on the region's intellect in *The Independent* in 1923, it was Butler who publicly lambasted him for it, both in the same magazine and, hitting closer to home, in the *Authors' League Bulletin*.

In his later years, the humorist could look back on himself as a founding member of the Dutch Treat Club and the Authors' League of America, organizations that still flourish today. He could remember his seemingly endless tours on the lyceum circuit (including a year in tandem with poet Joyce Kilmer), his stint as an official U.S. government propagandist, and a self-parodying moving-picture performance that sent F. Scott Fitzgerald into a laughing spasm. In the few hours when Butler was not busy with bank business or his writing, the local YMCA, library, hospital, and Boy Scouts always found him a willing volunteer. His published stories alone were enough to fill several filing cabinets. The full life of Iowa's Literary Promise ended when he died in September 1937, three months short of his 68th birthday.

Ellis Parker Butler's hometown still lacks a monument to the man who once put it on the literary map. However, shortly after his death, an outside source paid him exactly the sort of tribute he had hoped for back in 1919. The authors of the WPA/Federal Writers Project guide to Iowa, published in August 1938, thought Butler's anecdote about the ICE placard so amusing that they recounted it in their chapter on Muscatine—and listed the little frame house, in its new location, as a city landmark. The man once bylined as "America's Foremost Humorist" had received many awards and recognitions during his lifetime, but he surely would have taken special pleasure in this one. The fact of his existence had been vindicated at last. ❖

Katherine Harper is a literary scholar based in central Ohio. For her doctoral dissertation, she manually located and annotated 1,415 of Ellis Parker Butler's published works. (Many more have turned up since.) She is at work on a critical biography of the humorist; its tentative title is "Laughs Is Laughs."

NOTE ON SOURCES

Sources for this article include the Ellis Parker Butler Papers at Special Collections, University of Iowa Libraries (Iowa City); the Ellis Parker Butler and *Century Magazine* collections at the New York Public Library; Ellis Parker Butler, "Back to the Old Home Town," *The American Magazine* (May 1920); Ellis Parker Butler, "Ten Ways to Make a Fool of Yourself," *The American Magazine* (June 1927); "Ellis Parker Butler, Author and Humorist—An Autobiography," *Judge* 3 (Nov. 1906); Louise H. Guyol, "Ellis Parker Butler Emerges from the West," *Boston Transcript* (May 1, 1926); and various other items provided by the Butler family. Annotations to the original manuscript for this article are held in the *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* production files (SHSI-Iowa City).

Joking around with Edgar Harlan

In 1912, Edgar Harlan, curator of the Historical Department of Iowa, set out to inventory Iowa talent. He sent a four-page questionnaire—an "Outline of Personal History"—to everyone he knew in the literary field, intending to collect biographical information about literary figures, living and dead. In response, he received hundreds of books, photographs, and autographed biographical outlines.

Naturally, Harlan sent the questionnaire to humorist Ellis Parker Butler, then living in Flushing, New York. Butler filled it out and sent it back to Harlan. But did Harlan really expect a humorist like Ellis to give him straight answers? Here's a sample of some of Harlan's questions on the form and Butler's responses:

Name in full	Ellis Parker Butler
Chief occupation or profession	Author
Former occupation of author	Iowan
Date and place of beginning each	Born 1869
Emigrated to American, when	From Heaven 1869
Education	Never had any to brag about. Common school, Muscatine Iowa
Place of death	Somewhere on good old Earth, I hope.
Date of death	Sorry, but I can't give this
Place of burial	Grave.
Political office	None,—always earned my own living.
Politics	Anything to beat Bryan
Religious denomination if any	Golf
Religious preference	Belief that my religion is nobody's business but my own
Miscellaneous	It seems to me that you can't get as good a cigar for a dime as you used to.

Butler also sent Harlan a copy of his most popular story, "Pigs Is Pigs," presenting it "freely to the great State of Iowa which can't afford to spend 25 cts for it." He inscribed the book with this poem.

Dear Iowa
State of my birth
Accept this book —
A quarter's worth.

O, State of Corn
Take it from me,
And ever let
Thy motto be —

"Three millions year—
ly for manure,
But not one cent
For literature."

—The Editor