

# Dorothy Deemer Houghton:

## A Memoir

by

J. R. Williams

*Mrs. Houghton was a woman from a small town Iowa background who had considerable impact on national and international affairs. Originally from Red Oak, she was President of the Iowa Federation of Women's Clubs from 1935 to 1937 and of the General Federation of Women's Clubs (an organization with eleven million members) from 1950 to 1952. In 1953, she was appointed by President Eisenhower to act as Director of the Office of Refugees, Migration and Voluntary Assistance, a job involving hospitalization, integration, or migration forty million refugees. As a result of this service she was decorated by four nations and received the United Nation's Nansen Medal.*

*She served on the Iowa Board of Regents from 1939 until 1951 and was named Iowa Mother of the Year in 1948. A year later she was voted Iowa's most distinguished citizen. A graduate of Wellesley College, she held honorary degrees from four universities and became the first woman President of the Electoral College in 1957.*

*Mrs. Houghton died in Red Oak in March 1972, at the age of eighty-two. The following memoir is written by her grandson, who is a teacher and an historian.*

The Editor

We ten grandchildren remember different things about our grandmother Hon. She always brought some sort of presents

back with her from wherever she had been. They were things like T-shirts four sizes too large or boxed alligators which hadn't survived the trip in Hon's tightly-packed suitcase. As we left Red Oak and went away to college, she wrote us letters which were addressed barely in the vicinity of where we were. We somehow got them. We knew they were from Hon because they were totally indecipherable, except for an occasional printed exhortation to write to our mothers. We remember her always quizzing us and telling us how the worst Republican was better than the best Democrat, and how her hair color mysteriously changed from time to time so that it was no surprise that newspapers varyingly referred to her auburn, silver, blonde, or red hair.

Other things we were told about or read about later. We heard that, in early days, she occasionally had been transported to speaking engagements by an accommodating Iowa Highway Patrol. We discovered with some interest that she related to an Omaha reporter how six of us had the run of the big house on Sundays at a time when only two of us could walk. We saw pictures of her at basketball games where she alone managed to smile properly for the camera as the action whirled by her. I was particularly surprised to find that Hon had informed the *Washington Post*, with regard to the lunches my grandfather used to fix me, that what seemed to me like peanut butter and jelly sandwiches were in fact "chipped beef, cheese and ground-up



celery on toasted whole wheat, or shaved carrots mixed with nuts and dates."

We rarely heard her give speeches, which was unfortunate because she was very good. She once said that for her public speaking is like "liquor to a drinking man." Clark Mollenhoff of the *Des Moines Register's* Washington Bureau stated that "the jokes she sprinkles through her talks are of the 'cute' kind, and there is sometimes just a sug-

gestion of naughtiness." What some of the naughtinesses were Mr. Mollenhoff did not say. A woman writing from an Alabama paper was more lyrical. She noted that Hon had "a distinctive style of her own" and how the audience sat "spell-bound for one hour and fifteen minutes" and how everyone "hung" on her every word. "She is a most charming personality," the reporter added, "and when she said how happy she was to be



Mrs. Houghton with President Eisenhower during the 1956 presidential campaign. Mrs. Houghton was national co-chairman of the Citizens for Eisenhower.



in Alabama, her voice sang the word!"

We also had to hear second-hand from our mothers and our fathers about the things that happened to her while speech-making or meeting-going or reception-giving. She gave, for instance, a brilliant Washington party for Governor Beardsley, complete with Iowa Senators Hickenlooper and Gillette, many of the Iowa Congressmen and federal government officials, and numerous other prominent Washingtonians—the party's success was not hampered by the fact that inclement weather kept the guest of honor hundreds of miles away. Also, we heard how rowdies tore part of her dress away, that part which sported an "I Like Ike" button, at a Chicago meeting in the spring of 1952. Moreover, we were matter-of-factly informed of a Middle East refugee mission where Hon was shown around one camp by an obscure army officer who came to be rather well known, Lt. Col. Gamal Abdel Nasser.

Such activity earned her the sobriquet "Dorothy the Dynamo" (Dorothy was Hon's other name) from her colleagues on the State Board of Regents and also brought her diverse honors. Stanton, Iowa named its women's club after her. The Dorothy Houghton orchid entered botanical encyclopedias. She became an honorary citizen of states and an honorary member of an Indian tribe. The General Federation of Women's Clubs set up a Dorothy Houghton fellowship to allow a woman from another nation to continue her studies in the United States. To some, however, her name was not quite a pleasant household word. On one occasion she was introduced as Mrs. Hiram C. Hootin of Red Oaks, Ioway, while

another introduction, this one a promotional headline, dubbed her "The Rootin' Tootin' Mrs. Hooten." One Texas minister resented her scope, her ambition, and her energy enough to write my grandfather: "The Bible says woman's place is in the home. Why don't you assert your rights?"

Hon actually did agree that home is the woman's place, but she was quick to add that it was "not her circumference." Sometimes her words would have been more than palatable to the Texas minister. She asserted on one occasion that, above everything else, she loved "charm" in a woman. When she wrote that it was "inevitable" that a woman will shop "wherever she may find herself and whatever the real purpose of her mission" she must have pleased the most ardent male chauvinist.

When Mildred Pelzer, Fine Arts Chairman of the Iowa Federation during Hon's 1935-1937 presidency, declared that "women are like flowers . . . some like violets, some morning glories, all beautiful! . . . singly, or assembled, your inspiration for life beautiful is unsurpassable!" she was echoing Hon's attitude. It was important for women to be "charming" and ancient ideas that women could be side-tracked by shopping from more important considerations were not rejected. Like the flowers, women were to provide the inspiration for "life beautiful."

She did not deny that there was or should be a psychological difference between men and women, a view that is being increasingly challenged today. She affirmed that difference, but by no means suggested that it would keep women in the back seat. In a 1935 speech she proclaimed that women "must bring the



world to its senses, to an appreciation of the old fashioned human values such as faith, trust, thrift, and love." As the Cold War set in, she urged women of various nations to meet and know each other, for no country could go to war against "another country whose women know, love, and understand each other." A Corning, Iowa, paper perhaps best summed up her views when it applauded her picture of "serious minded women" seeking to be "better prepared to meet life's complex conditions, not laughed at or ignored as in the early days of club organization, but respected, consulted, even leaned upon in the solving of economic, moral, and political problems."

Some of her arguments were not totally convincing. Hon claimed that "ninety-two labor saving devices" allowed women more time to think about and act upon the affairs, events, and problems of our times. She noted the tremendous economic power of women, a conclusion based upon a statistic that women spend eighty-five cents out of every dollar used for consumer goods purchase. In a speech in Philadelphia she even went so far as to say that "men do not build houses or castles or beautiful churches or diesel trains, or even make soap, for themselves. They do it for, or because of, women."

She dramatized issues. She tried to make women believe that there was nothing they could not do, and that there were numerous areas where their responsibility and power were greater than that of men. With the Iowa Federation in the 30s, she worked for paved roads and municipal clean up drives; for forceful county safety councils, wild life federations, and county councils for better



*An earlier portrait, inscribed to her grandchildren.*

education; she promoted and raised funds for cancer control; she stimulated theatrical presentations by and through the Federation; she led the Federation into conferences investigating the "cause and cure of war." She urged that women take the lead in fighting inflation, that they serve on defense boards, and that they powerfully shape the cultural and educational nature of American life.

Her life emphatically demonstrated that women could serve just as well as men in areas that had previously been denied to them. Hers was a life of firsts. Throughout her life she served as the only woman on committees or spoke on subjects which had been previously taboo. She was the first Red Oak woman to attend such a school as Wellesley and the first Iowan to serve as President of the sprawling empire of the General



Federation of Women's Clubs. Appointed by Governor Nate Kendall as a member of the state conservation commission in 1916, she was the first woman to serve on an Iowa state board. She became the first woman President of the Electoral College in 1957, and one of two women to receive the United Nations' Nansen Medal.

Though not totally liberated, Hon was a pioneer and a women's advocate. Her strongest position, her views that seem most contemporary, came in a 1951 *McCall's* article. Here she wrote that "to discuss 'equal rights' in connection with American women at this stage of our history is sickening." She suggested that a much more important source of discussion ought to be how to get women inside the framework from which decisions are made. She blistered those who come to women, asking for their support, *after* important decisions have been made. She criticized decision makers, concerned with "know-how" matters like tractors and electricity, who overlooked women and their "know-why" talents. She called for the "draft of womanpower" and she assailed anyone who tried to "protect" women from the truth.

Although Hon once occasioned the wrath of the D.A.R. for urging women's clubs to display the United Nations flag beside the American flag, her belief in America and Americanism was as firm as her belief in women. In the 30s, 40s, and 50s a frequent theme was her call for a "raging epidemic of Americanism."

Hon was no witch-hunter; she strongly believed in a way of life firmly grounded in the conservative American tradition, a tradition so dominant in the rural Iowa setting from which she came.

She defended rugged individualism and voluntaryism and criticized those who would "let the government do it." She saw preparedness as the greatest hope for peace, and she opposed those who would restrict our options on the use of military might. She assumed that people throughout the world cherished freedom above all else, an attitude that made her oppose systems which would restrict freedom for whatever purposes or for whomever's benefit. Although the term "law and order" was not yet fashionable, her urging of the death penalty for drug peddlers would seem to typify such a proponent. She liked political victory best, though, and that made her a political pragmatist, enough so that the *Des Moines Register* more than once put her in the liberal camp. Furthermore, her memoirs reflect her dismay that she was never able to work with John Lindsay and her hopeful prediction that he would some day be a Republican President.

Her thoughts about women and most of her political ideas were rather remote from the grandchildren. We did hear from time to time that she might run for political office, particularly the Senate, but she never did.

We knew that she loved the midwest, Iowa, and especially Red Oak. She told clubwomen that the 1952 national con-



vention was held in Minneapolis largely so that "Eastern and Southern women can see our midwestern culture." She sang Iowa's praise, watched its teams play, told of its rich lands, boasted of its nation-leading literacy rate. She saw much of the world in Iowa terms. The Marshall Plan, for example, was "simply an extension of Iowa farm philosophy . . . you always help your neighbor when he's down." And, in her memoirs, "I have tried to see the world as a community of men, each one like an Iowa neighbor."

Red Oak was where her women's club work, her work with libraries, traffic safety, and crippled children all began. It always remained her focal point. On leaving Washington in 1955 she told her staff: "My lovely home is waiting, my church, my good husband, my family and my friends. I love that little town and I shall love to work for it and the welfare of our people like I did for so many years."

Red Oak and Iowa friends returned that love. Red Oak, for instance, had a homecoming banquet in June 1950, after the Boston convention had named her President of the General Federation. The banquet was sponsored by a plethora of women's clubs, the Chamber of Commerce, the American Legion, Rotary, and more than a few other groups. Visitors and congratulations came in from throughout the state. The town gave her a silver tea service, presented a dramatic production of "Red Oak's Most Distinguished Citizen's" life, and sang a few fond songs like "Queen Dorothy" which included

such lines as "The town of Red Oak's on the map, and Dorothy put it there" and "Our Dorothy's Queen upon her throne, and everything's all right."

Twenty-two years later, when it was time to bury Hon and to remember some of the things about her, a day when nine of the ten grandchildren got together again as in the old times when we had the "run" of the big house, one Iowa friend, writing on behalf of the *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, paid tribute by saying that although she "hob-nobbed at times with royalty, she never lost common touch with the average citizen" and that she would now take her place as "one of the all-time outstanding citizens of Iowa as well as one of its outstanding women." Another friend, Robert Ray, Dean of Iowa University's Division of Extension and University Services, spoke at her funeral, and although he probably did not know a side of Hon that we grandchildren affectionately remembered, he did know of her concern and her accomplishments for America and for the women of this country.

Mr. Ray also knew, as we did, what Red Oak was to and for Hon. He ended his words with: "So it is that we come today to the Red Oak, Iowa, that she lauded in every speech, and sooner or later mentioned in every conversation—the community on the Nishnabotna where her children were born and where the Monday Club sparked a long chain of events that took her to the far corners of the world."





*Mrs. Houghton in her study at Red Oak.*

How did she love Red Oak? Said Mr. Ray: "She loved Red Oak with the zeal of the Greeks who pledged their lives to the defense of the city, their devotion to its laws and who pledged, further, to pass the city on to their children as a better place for their having been there." And, finally: "In a sense she has come home. In a larger sense we know that she never really left Red Oak, Iowa—she simply

brought the best of Iowa and Red Oak to the world."

All these words had meaning for the grandchildren then, of course, but it was at another level, and in another way, that she had affected us. What was important to the world really seemed less relevant to us than the fine, funny stories about her we remembered and we shared together. □



## Book Review:

Bess Ferguson with Velma Wallace Rayness and Edna Patzig Gouwens, *Charles Atherton Cumming, Iowa's Pioneer Artist-Educator* (Des Moines: Iowa Art Guild, 1972) 54 pp. \$6.00.

Charles Atherton Cumming was a father-figure in Iowa art. In the period of his pioneering efforts (the 80s to the 20s) he founded the art departments of Cornell College and The University of Iowa, the Des Moines Academy of Art, and the Iowa Art Guild. He also painted scores of portraits of important Iowans to hang in centers of learning and government. This book is an Official Portrait. The authors, Bess Ferguson with Velma Wallace Rayness and Edna Patzig Gouwens, have written a memorial "in praise" of Mr. Cumming. They explain on page ix that they use "mister" deliberately, out of respect.

What emerges from these pages is a glimpse of art in Iowa in the days when culture meant Chautauqua circuits, and the social columns described art meetings as "dainty and tasteful." Here was Cumming, the artist-goateed, socially in demand, a lover of the beautiful and the good things in life (including tweeds and exotic foods)—genuinely trying to bring to Iowa what Europe had given him. His counsel was sought, too, by state house officials and school board superintendents.

In his school of "elegant artistic adventure," he was teaching good, sound, academic stuff, involving, as all visual art does, the art of *seeing*. He had plaster casts and geometric solids; his standards were sure and his values demonstrable. With diligence, knowledge and training, one could somehow pin down art. ("Each day you spend here in this school," he told a student, "will be worth ten dollars to you.") Inspiration—and he had an eye out for this, too—should come the hard way, with no slick tricks. In his view, you painted "the truth, the whole truth." You studied and drew with understanding what you saw in God's world. You learned to lay on paint with such skill that you could forget technique. And, almost mystically, the qualities that

were art emerged from the painting and were communicated to the beholder. Art should have an uplifting, "lovable quality" (his words). The art Cumming valued was "white man's art," which had grown from the Graeco-Roman heritage and was ever evolving along realistic lines. When cubism appeared on the scene, his world rocked, and he reacted with the vehemence of a religious fanatic. His "vehement attacks" and "conservatism" helped bring about the rift between Cumming and his first wife, "his Nell," and embittered much of his later life. The authors' remark that there was "something heroic and pathetic in those last years" seems an understatement.

There are fifteen reproductions of Cumming's paintings in the book (eight of them in color) which give some idea of his style and skill—but inadequately, since the photographs are small and mostly undated, and the styles are many. Some landscapes are as impressionistic as you would expect from one who had seen France from the vantage point of the Academie Julien: informal outdoor scenes seen in terms of light. Other landscapes are as solid and consciously composed as Millet's. Among the portraits, some are "official portraits" of dignity and a minimum of warts; some are classic, eternal; some are dynamic. (The energetic Major Byers, who told war stories as he posed, is painted with slashing, fluid strokes that catch the quip on his lips.)

The authors have organized Cumming's life into areas: educator, teacher, artist, community influence. The style is that of a collection of remembered anecdotes, strung together in rather bland English. Great care is taken not to hurt feelings, to leave out no one who would expect to see his name in print. The liveliest parts are the words of the protagonist himself, gleaned from publications. Perhaps because of this style of writing, some parts seem undigested.

At any rate, the authors probably have done what they set out to do: collect the scattered facts about this man and pin them down before they escape. The result is a portrait of Mr. Cumming, who painted in a studio full of carved furniture and oriental rugs, dressed in a velvet smoking jacket.

Barbara R. Priester