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Adopted by Iowa

"I was born in Pennsylvania, weaned in Ohio, kidnapped by Illinois, adopted by Iowa and married to California," Robert J. Burdette, the humorist, declared. His "adoption" by Burlington proved to be a happy one, for that Iowa community gave him the encouragement and help to become a nation-wide figure. Through the town's local paper, the Burlington *Hawk-Eye*, Burdette found an admirable springboard for his wit. His columns were so widely reprinted that before the end of the nineteenth century he became one of America's best-liked humorists and lecturers.

Later he turned to the pulpit, becoming a popular Baptist minister. But he is chiefly remembered today for his homespun, grassroots humor as it came from the press of the hilly town on the Mississippi River. If Iowa can be said to have a state humorist that man is Robert Jones Burdette.

Born in Greensboro, Pennsylvania, July 30, 1844, his family moved to Cumminsville, Ohio, two years afterward. He was the oldest of eight

children, two of whom died at an early age. Young Burdette had a happy childhood in Ohio and later in Peoria, Illinois, where his parents made their home in 1852. His literary account and sentimental memories of youth reveal an antipathy for mathematics, a fondness for history and a genuine liking for "composition writing." Burdette stood "third in his class — a class of three," he whimsically reflected, and graduated from high school in 1861.

During the Civil War he enlisted in the 47th Illinois Regiment from Peoria, going in as a private and being mustered out the same, three years later. For the next decade Burdette dabbled in many things, apparently seeking to find himself. He taught school for a few months near Peoria and entered government employ as a mail clerk in the same Illinois city. He also served as an "extra" man on trains handling U. S. Mail on what is now the Toledo, Peoria & Western — Pennsylvania route to Logansport, Indiana.

Not content with postal work he went to New York and studied art at the Cooper Institute. Next he took up arms again and embarked on the blockade runner *Lillian* for Cuba where he was injured while landing military supplies for the Cuban insurgents. In 1869 he returned to Peoria to try his hand at journalism.

Burdette's first newspaper work was with the Peoria *Daily Transcript* and his earliest assign-

ment was to interview Horace Greeley who had just arrived in town. In writing for the paper the young reporter could not resist making droll comments and investing the most commonplace people with whimsy. But his employer failed to see the humor, and Burdette subsequently turned his talents to the rival *Peoria Review*, which he helped to organize in 1871.

With the *Review's* demise in 1874, Burdette was out of a job. Inasmuch as he had married Carrie S. Garrett, the daughter of a Peoria businessman, shortly after starting his newspaper career, Burdette's essentially jovial nature was sobered by the thought of earning a livelihood for her as well as for himself. But it was his comic, philosophical outlook on life, so much in evidence in his reporting, that led to new employment. In short, the owners of the Burlington *Daily Hawk-Eye* had noted with interest the levity and spirit in Burdette's copy. So when the *Peoria Review* was about to expire, Charles Y. Wheeler of the prosperous *Hawk-Eye* called on Robert Burdette.

The outcome was the talented young newspaperman was offered a position on the *Hawk-Eye* as its city editor and reporter. Furthermore he came with a contract which was almost a *carte blanche* to peddle his humor as his fancy dictated. And he did. By so doing the circulation of the historic Iowa paper rose in proportion to the laughs elicited by the genial foolery of the new editor.