

# THE PALIMPSEST

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## A Man of Vision

James Wilson was a man of vision. Keen perception and singleness of purpose were his dominant characteristics. His simplicity of life and his broad love for humanity furnish the key to an understanding of his career. There are few heights of imagination or emotion to record, and no remarkable victories to analyze. Throughout his life, from early boyhood until the close of his long official career, influences and events contributed steadily, logically, and undramatically to the formulation and accomplishment of his self-imposed mission.

As James Wilson grew into manhood and assumed family responsibilities, the hardships, the social inferiority, and the unhappiness of the American farmer were borne in upon his consciousness with vivid and personal reality. When he analyzed these conditions, he found their origin in economic causes, and the solution, he concluded, lay in the application



of science. By increasing the yield of produce per acre, by improving the methods of stock raising, by developing facilities for transportation, and by finding new markets, the farmers' income would be increased and this, in turn, would break the dull routine of the farm life, raise the standard of living, and create a new rural order. So confident of these conclusions was Mr. Wilson that their accomplishment became the motivating factor of his life, the vision of his service to humanity.

A chronology of James Wilson's life is indicative of steady progress. Born on a farm in Ayrshire, Scotland, in 1835, he grew up under the rigid and careful discipline of a Scotch home. In 1851 the family moved to the United States in order to improve their financial position. After remaining in Connecticut for about four years they joined the Scotch settlement on Wolf Creek, in Tama County, Iowa, near the present town of Traer. For a number of years James worked either on his father's farm or that of his uncle, West Wilson. Just before the outbreak of the Civil War, James and his brother, Peter, began farming for themselves. In 1867 James was elected to the General Assembly where he served three terms — the last as Speaker of the House of Representatives.

His next advancement came in 1872 when he was elected to Congress. Here again he served three terms, though not successively. For a number of years he edited the Traer *Star-Clipper* in which his



articles on farming attracted much attention. Then he became professor of agriculture and director of the agricultural experiment station in the State College of Agriculture at Ames. His highest recognition came in 1897 when President McKinley appointed him Secretary of the Department of Agriculture.

Nature and heredity smiled on James Wilson in a generous fashion, giving him two significant attributes: an efficient mind and a kindly temperament that found its satisfaction in a wholesome love for humanity. His father, John Wilson, a middle-class farmer, was a man of intelligence and practical imagination. James inherited both qualities, with the result that a close bond of mutual respect was established between the father and son. John Wilson spared neither time nor effort in teaching his son, and the boy proved to be an apt pupil. When the Wilsons came to Connecticut in 1851, James, then sixteen years of age, had already acquired the rudiments of scientific agriculture.

If the boy received from his father a thoughtful bent, he acquired from his mother a sweetness of character, an appreciation of the aesthetic, and a conception of family life that was to serve as his ideal and aspiration ever afterward. The gentle Jean McCosh gave of her best to her son and he returned a devotion so exalted that it made all womankind the object of his courtesy and his consideration. It was a characteristic that sometimes



contrasted oddly with the rude, hearty freedom of the men and women of pioneer American society.

To his sisters James Wilson was always a hero. He could slide the farthest, throw the straightest, and "he knew everything." Later he became the kindest teacher, the strongest protector, and the truest friend. When he entered upon his official career they followed every step in his progress with an enthusiasm and encouragement that admitted no possibility of failure. As an old man he came back to them and they ministered to his last wants, giving the comforts that only their thoughtfulness could provide.

James Wilson seems to have enjoyed better educational opportunities than might be expected. Eager to learn, he was given ample time and means for study, though the rigor of Scottish discipline left little time for play. He was able to read at an early age and soon exhibited a fondness for history and literature. Macaulay's "History of England" was a favorite. It is said that he could tell any story that Scott ever wrote and that he was almost as familiar with Burns. The fundamentals of Latin were acquired under the tutelage of John Ross. Raised in a strict Presbyterian home, he naturally became a student of the Bible, from which he was able to quote freely and much to the point.

An illuminating anecdote is told in this connection. During McKinley's administration at the close of stormy cabinet meetings the President was accus-



tomed to turn to his Secretary of Agriculture with the question, "Now, Mr. Wilson, what's the scripture on that?" and Mr. Wilson was ever ready with a pertinent passage — not always from the Bible. In Roosevelt's cabinet, however, the tables were turned and the President did his own quoting, often from sources unknown to Wilson.

Rural life on the Iowa prairie afforded neither the incentive nor the opportunity for classical training, and the young Scotchman entered upon a new phase of his education that savored of the soil and the needs of a new country. Three winters spent in the public schools — two as a student and one as a teacher — revealed in a concrete manner both the paucity of the rural schools and the imperative need for further school legislation. One year of work in Grinnell College seems to have convinced him of the inability of the private and denominational colleges to provide the secondary and technical education for an agricultural population.

Henceforth his principal subject of study was people: the farms of Iowa were his laboratory. Although a number of American colleges and universities awarded him the honorary degree of doctor of laws, he never received an academic degree. His mind, however, trained in methods of study was directed toward the analysis of a practical problem — the improvement of conditions for the Iowa farmer.

James Wilson and his brother Peter had scarcely



begun farming for themselves in 1861 when the Civil War commenced, and it became a matter of patriotic duty for one of them to join the army. After considerable thought a plan was formed. Peter, who was the stronger, agreed to enlist: James was to remain at home, take care of the farm, and divide the profits with Peter when he returned. The scheme worked well, for Peter returned with a commission and the farm had doubled in size and was stocked with all the horses, cattle, and hogs it could support.

During these early years of farming, James Wilson experimented with a theory that has since been generally accepted throughout Iowa as a fundamental of scientific farming. All the fodder, grain, and hay that was raised on the farm, he thought, should be fed to live stock and converted into meat and dairy products. While this practice had many obvious advantages, it also produced a series of other problems. As perceived by Mr. Wilson, these included the development of a satisfactory market for butter, cheese, and meat; improved standards of stock breeding; and the eradication of animal diseases.

The advent of Mr. Wilson into politics was a direct outgrowth of his agricultural efficiency. He could raise good crops and good stock. He was honest, and he inspired the respect of his neighbors. It was a mark of their esteem that he was elected to the county board of supervisors in 1864.



Three years later his constituency had widened and he was sent to the State legislature as the Representative from Tama County. His first election in 1867 came in the midst of the corn husking season when there was very little time to prepare for his legislative duties. He was determined, however, to become proficient in parliamentary procedure. For that purpose he fastened a manual of parliamentary law on the end gate and studied the rules while he husked the down-row behind the wagon.

Three terms Mr. Wilson served in the General Assembly, the last as Speaker of the House. It was asserted that he was "the man in whose hand the gavel of the House has for the first time in the history of the State been placed by the cordial consent of all the members of his own party". Railroad regulation, prohibition, suffrage, and revision of the fence laws were the dominant issues. In the enactment of legislation on these subjects, Mr. Wilson took a prominent part and acquitted himself creditably. His experience in the Iowa legislature was a valuable asset when his public service took him to Congress in the years that followed.

When he became professor of agriculture at Ames, he was obliged to expand his field of vision. His active farming came to an end, and he turned his attention to the scientific analysis of the problems of agriculture in general, but particularly in Iowa. Six years he spent in quiet, intensive study.

National recognition came to James Wilson in



1897, when President McKinley called him to serve as Secretary of Agriculture. The honor meant much, but better than that the position gave him the opportunity of utilizing the resources of the whole nation to inaugurate the broad program of education in behalf of the American farmer that he had been formulating throughout almost half a century. Henceforth his service was national in scope.

He entered upon his new task with enthusiasm. The College of Agriculture granted him an indefinite leave of absence, and from that time, except for occasional trips to Iowa where he retained official residence, Washington was his permanent home and the United States his field of thought and responsibility.

One bond of duty always attached him to Iowa. He believed that every man should exercise his privilege of voting, so he made it a rule to return at election time. Often he aided his party in political campaigns, sometimes speaking in districts that others feared to enter. It was his habit, however, to deliver his last speech in a campaign to his home constituency — a custom pleasing to himself as well as his friends.

Mr. Wilson stated his attitude toward the work of the Department of Agriculture very clearly in his first annual report. The Department was organized, he said, "to help farmers to a better knowledge of production and its tendencies at home and abroad, so as to enable them to intelligently meet the re-



quirements of home and foreign markets for material that may be profitably grown or manufactured on American farms." It was also intended that the Department should organize a comprehensive system of teaching agricultural science to farmers. The three agencies through which Secretary Wilson hoped to obtain these results were the State agricultural colleges, the experiment stations, and a corps of competent research scientists in the Department of Agriculture.

It was through the latter that he expected to accomplish the most practical and far-reaching results. They were to be his personal assistants, appointed to do specific tasks, and held responsible for the successful execution of their assignments. He planned to secure these workers from the agricultural colleges which were turning out every year scores of intelligent and ambitious young graduates who desired further opportunity for study and research. Congress, he proposed, should make appropriations that would attract the most promising of them into government work. Well equipped laboratories at Washington were to be the center of this activity, but the men were also to be sent wherever else they might be needed.

Secretary Wilson was well qualified to make this policy effective. He was a good judge of men and he insisted upon the same standards of energy and efficiency among his assistants that he maintained for himself. In scientific fields in which he, himself,



was not an expert he employed specialists, thus extending the scope of research work to any subject that seemed to need attention. Both the research assistant and the trained scientist, he thought, should be adequately paid: the former a living wage and the latter a salary sufficient to prevent him from accepting inducements outside of government service.

The magnitude of the task Secretary Wilson undertook and the energy with which he proceeded to its accomplishment may be indicated by a few special problems. Early in 1897 it became apparent that there would be a surplus of butter on the American market. By midsummer the price of the best creamery butter had fallen to fifteen cents a pound. If this condition continued dairying would decrease and the farmers would sell instead of feed their grain and provender — a policy which Mr. Wilson had discouraged for many years. In this contingency the Department of Agriculture made a number of experimental exports of butter for the purpose of creating a foreign demand and securing exact information concerning the opportunities afforded. The butter was obtained from leading dairy States, prepared with special reference to the demands of foreign trade, and consigned to a representative of the Department at London who disposed of it himself. He attempted to ascertain the candid opinion of each buyer as to the quality of the butter. Agents of the Department followed the



transportation of the butter in an effort to avoid delays, provide refrigeration, and prevent careless handling. These experiments demonstrated that American butter could be delivered in prime condition to British consumers within fifteen or twenty days from the time it was made, that the only absolutely pure butter imported into Great Britain came from the United States and Denmark, and that the price of butter in America could be increased over fifty per cent in a few months.

Another problem of an entirely different nature attracted Mr. Wilson's attention. Enormous sums of money were being lost each year because farmers had no authoritative means of forecasting weather conditions. This was true in the grain States, but more particularly in the fruit regions of the Far West. Daily weather reports were telegraphed to thousands of towns and broadcast to surrounding farms over rural telephones.

A number of corollary functions developed from the daily weather service. Mr. Wilson conceived the idea of sending out weekly climate and crop reports to all parts of the country. This data enabled the farmer to judge future market conditions, it indicated the type of product best suited to a particular locality, and it suggested the adaptation of new products to fit peculiar conditions of soil and climate. Losses from storms and floods were curtailed by means of special reports based on daily temperature and rain-gauge readings from all parts



of the country. Specialists were able to predict river floods with astonishing accuracy, while advance reports of storms made it possible for lake vessels to seek safety in time.

In the biological field Secretary Wilson was especially interested in the study of the geographical distribution of plants and animals with a view to locating the boundaries of their natural habitat, the study of the food habits of birds and mammals to ascertain the economic relations of native species, the eradication of insect pests by the development of parasites, and the prevention of disease among domestic animals.

By means of chemical analysis of soil and the comparison of American soils with those of other countries, the Secretary determined what grains and grasses could be successfully introduced. He wanted to secure products that would withstand the alkali and drouth of the West, that would rejuvenate the worn-out soil of the East, and that were adapted to the cheap land of the South. The object was to substitute superior foreign grasses, grains, and fruits for inferior native varieties.

Nor was Mr. Wilson unmindful of the needs of women on the farm. Under his direction some educational work was begun in dietetics, methods of cooking, and food values. On this subject let him speak for himself: "In the great work of helping the women of our land, nearly half of whom are toiling in the homes upon our farms, this Depart-



ment, it is believed, has a large duty to perform. For, whatever will be effective in raising the grade of the home life on the farm, in securing the better nourishment of the farmer's family, and in surrounding them with the refinements and attractions of a well-ordered home, will powerfully contribute alike to the material prosperity of the country and the general welfare of the farmers." Later he carried the idea much farther when he expressed the wish that the Department might extend its assistance to those "who are engaged in the noble task of giving practical training to the future wives and mothers of our farmers and to the vast army of faithful women who are bearing the heavy burdens of keeping the farmers' homes pure and sweet and rearing the future masters of our vast agricultural domain."

James Wilson was Secretary of Agriculture for sixteen years — serving through the administrations of Presidents McKinley, Roosevelt, and Taft. He was a member of the cabinet longer than any other man in the history of the United States. His achievements were amazing. He began with a great purpose and remained to witness the fulfillment of his vision. His final report closes with this sentence: "Men grow old in service and in years, and cease their labor, but the results of their labor and the children of their brains will live on; and may whatever of worth that is in these be everblooming."

BERTHA ANN REUTER