

Amelia Smith Hay

In April, 1835, Dr. Anthony Potts and his daughter, Ann Potts, of Whitehall, Illinois, made a journey of two hundred miles on horseback through the forests and prairies of frontier Illinois to a village on the west bank of the Mississippi River, then known as "Flint Hills", later to be rechristened Burlington. The immediate purpose of their journey was to render any necessary assistance in a prospective "blessed event", then awaited in a frontier cabin.

The child was born on April 20, 1835, and was named Amelia. In the *History of Des Moines County*, published in 1879, Amelia Smith, by that time Mrs. A. T. Hay, was described, apparently incorrectly, as the "oldest native Iowan". But Amelia Smith was truly a part of pioneer Iowa. Her mother was Ellen Maria Potts Smith, a daughter of Dr. Potts. Her father was Major Jeremiah Smith, Jr. The "Major" was derived from service in the Black Hawk War and the "Jr." was added, it is said, to distinguish him from another Jeremiah Smith, an employee of the Indian agency.

Major Smith was born of Scotch parentage in

Ohio on March 23, 1802, and migrated to Iowa in 1833. He had received a good education for the period and became prominent in early Iowa where he was merchant, Indian trader, soldier, land surveyor, politician, and a leader in civic affairs. At one time he owned some five hundred acres of land at or near the site of Burlington, some of which he obtained by means of land warrants based on military service in the Black Hawk War, in which, it is said, he and his brother traveled more than two hundred miles on horseback to volunteer their services.

Jeremiah Smith was respected by his pioneer neighbors. He was chosen to represent Demoine County in the Michigan Legislative Council in October, 1835, and served in the extralegal session of the legislature which met at Green Bay in January, 1836, intending to legislate for that part of Michigan Territory not included in the new State of Michigan. He also served as a member of the Legislative Assembly of the newly created Territory of Wisconsin which met at Belmont, Wisconsin, in the autumn of 1836. In his zeal to serve Burlington, his home town, Major Smith made a voluntary personal pledge to erect a capitol at Burlington if that city were made the temporary capital. This promise he redeemed and the Legislative Assembly met at Burlington in

Smith's capitol in November, 1837, but on the night of December 12th the capitol burned and Jeremiah Smith lost the money he invested, said to be about \$7,000.

During these exciting years, Amelia Smith grew up in what was practically a wilderness, on the homestead which was later to become the scene of many unusual and varied activities. Both her father and her grandfather were "men of affairs", and much of community interest centered about their home. Even the red men were "more or less welcome guests there."

Educational advantages, beyond the elementary grades, being almost wholly lacking in so new a country, Amelia attended school in Whitehall, Illinois, the home of her maternal grandparents. There she received what in those days was considered a good education. On January 22, 1856, she was married at Burlington to Abram Tuston Hay, who later became a prominent and useful citizen of Iowa and the nation. In midwinter, they journeyed to Brownsville, Minnesota, where Mr. Hay had settled in 1854 to open a land office. On the way the stagecoach overturned in a blinding snowstorm, but young Mrs. Hay, the only woman aboard, was unhurt, thanks to the heavy robes and blankets, and the pioneer travelers reached their journey's end in safety.

They resided in Minnesota until 1857, when they returned to Burlington where they purchased a part of the Smith estate, including the homestead and cabin (still standing in 1947), and made their future home there. Here they spent most of a very busy and happy life. Four children were born to this union — a son, Alfred G. Hay, who made his home in St. Louis, and three daughters, Josephine Hester, who married Joseph H. Mason, Anna Tuston, and Laura A. Hay. Miss Laura A. Hay, the only surviving child of Abram and Amelia Hay, now (1947) makes her home in Columbus, Ohio. One granddaughter, Mrs. Adna M. Brooks, a daughter of Josephine Hay Mason, now serves on the staff of the Burlington Free Public Library.

In spite of her prominence, Mrs. Hay led the normal life of the women of her time. She was always quiet and dignified, but fond of company and entertainment in the home, and she enjoyed the warm friendship of many prominent people in Burlington, Chicago, and Washington, D. C.

In later life, she recalled as "highlights" in her life a railroad excursion trip to Chicago where she and her husband attended the theater and a ball, and an exciting steamboat race on the Mississippi, in which the boat on which she and her friends had taken passage won the victory.

She cared little for personal prominence in society and club work, but was always a willing worker with others in any good cause. For a few years, while her husband was developing the "Hay Steel", the family resided in Joliet, Illinois, where her daughters attended St. Mary's Academy. This, too, remained a memorable interlude in her very active life.

She was long a faithful member of the Burlington Congregational Church and maintained a wholesome interest in all its various activities. Dr. William Salter, the pastor, was a warm personal friend of the family. Blessed with good health and a retentive memory, she retained interest until late in life in everything that concerned and benefited the world. She kept in close touch in so far as possible with all those numerous friendships which had endured through many, many years.

After a serious illness of several months, she died on the evening of October 9, 1918, at her home at 2700 West Avenue, Burlington, at the age of eighty-three years. Burial was in the family plot in Aspen Grove Cemetery at Burlington, beside the body of her illustrious husband, who had long since preceded her into the great beyond.

BEN HUR WILSON