

An Iowa Bluestocking

Much has been written about the pioneer woman and her endurance amid difficulties — how she worked for twenty years to buy wallpaper for the “front” room, how she cooked for threshers, worked in the field, bore children without anesthesia, sweated over a cumbersome cookstove and an inquisitional heating iron, mended clothing until late at night, canned gallons of gardenstuff, and still had time to take fancy-work to the county fair and to help her neighbors. This is the story of a pioneer woman of a different sort, an intellectual and an artist, who bore her share of children and trouble, and still had the energy to break the sod of crude agrarian society with the sharp edge of her wit.

Nettie Adams, a descendant of John Quincy Adams, came to Iowa in 1876 by way of Wisconsin, Chicago, and New York. She was born in Portage, Wisconsin, but her father, Nathan Adams, an excellent violinist, died before she was born and when she was four years old her mother, Rachel Vandenburg Adams, married Judge Prentiss of LaCrosse and there she spent most of her early life. Pretty, diminutive, and dark, with

curly hair and remarkable blue eyes, she was a popular local belle. She loved to dance and to play cards and she went on midnight cruises on the Mississippi River where she was fascinated by the singing of the Negro stevedores as they loaded the cargo. She also found time to take lessons on the piano, to teach music, and to acquire an interest in the Greek and Latin classics, probably with the encouragement of the judge.

She attended Milwaukee-Downer College in Milwaukee and acquired an interest in literature and politics which she retained all her life. She became an advocate of the rights of Negroes, a suffragette, and a prohibitionist. Her pet aversions were Democrats and corsets. While other girls talked about beaux, Nettie Adams talked about the tariff; when other girls found fault with a man's dress, she criticized his diction. In spite of this she attracted many beaux.

After graduating from college, Nettie Adams spent some time studying piano at the Chicago Musical College, where her teacher was Florenz Ziegfield, the father of the musical director Florenz Ziegfield, then a small boy in knee pants. This seems to have been the only time in her life when she was in the milieu for which she was intended. From Chicago she went to New York City where she studied voice and piano and sang in opera

choruses and in the elder Damrosch's production of the "Messiah".

All this suggests glamour but it does not explain why this charming, talented girl came out to Iowa. The explanation lies in her family relations. Her mother died while she was in New York and she returned to LaCrosse where she remained until her stepfather remarried. That left Nettie without economic security and she decided to teach music. In some way she heard that the little towns of Toledo and Tama City had no music teacher and she made the trip to Iowa.

At first she got a room in the Harmon House, the only hotel in Tama City. She knew no one in the prairie town and she was lonely and frightened, more lonely and frightened than she had ever been in the big cities. She cried herself to sleep every night. But the arrival of the pretty, young music teacher from the East did not go unnoticed in the two still frontier towns. When Judge George R. Struble of Toledo learned that a young woman was staying at the Tama City hotel, he took the matter up with his wife. "That is no place for a girl", he said. The Strubles agreed to offer Nettie Adams a home. In return she gave music lessons to the Struble children. From the Struble home she walked to the houses of her other pupils in all kinds of weather.

A tortuous and precarious plug railroad, with a train consisting of a dinky engine and a caboose, at that time connected Toledo and Tama City and on this she commuted to give music lessons at Tama City. One day while making this trip she met a young Civil War veteran, James L. Bracken, lately come to Tama City from Illinois. They argued politics. Other trips followed. One day the gruff, sandy-haired young man asked her to go to a reception with him. That was their first date.

Some time later, they planned to go to a dance. Mr. Bracken, having acquired an interest in the local bank and a grain elevator, was busy. At the appointed time, a strange man appeared at the Struble home with a horse and buggy and presented Miss Adams with a note from Mr. Bracken, asking that she get in the buggy and meet him at the bank. Miss Adams retorted, "You may tell Mr. Bracken that I am not a sack of grain". Then she slammed the door, and began playing the piano with such unusual vigor as to startle Judge Struble. A short time later, when the crestfallen young banker appeared at the door, the judge had to act as mediator.

Because she was from New York, Miss Adams became the court of appeal in all cases of social propriety and correct taste. At one time when she

was playing for a wedding, she had to settle the order of procedure.

Of course she married the young banker. Later on he built a house which was one of the show places of central Iowa and on his weekly trips to Chicago he would bring back beautiful pieces of china, cut glass, and wedgewood. James Bracken was always hospitable. He often brought someone along for supper — a stray Senator, or a businessman, or a preacher. It mattered not to him if all the maid had prepared was cornmeal mush and preserved peaches. Once he received an invitation to the White House and Nettie bought a new outfit for the event, but they didn't go — Mr. Bracken was too busy.

Those were the heydays of Chautauqua, and the Brackens were always hosts to the traveling lecturers and artists. Mrs. Bracken stayed up until all hours, listening to her husband and Southern army officers re-fight the Civil War; and she played the piano while Carrie Jacobs Bond sang.

Having two children, a son and a daughter, wasn't enough to bog Nettie Adams Bracken down in the dull details of housekeeping. She directed and sang in home-talent productions of the "Mikado" and "Pinafore". This was the era when minstrel shows were all the rage, and she directed the first ladies' minstrel show in Tama

County. The Scotch families at Traer had annual festivals at which she always sang Scotch ballads. She played for the Presbyterian Church for thirty years without a cent of pay. When she found there was no music teacher in the public schools, she directed all the musical entertainments they had.

Dissatisfied with the instruction given in the public schools, she taught her own two children at home for several years, and did it so thoroughly that her daughter was the youngest student enrolled at Rockford College. She taught her maid, who had come from Czechoslovakia, to read and write English. She learned shorthand by studying secretly and taught it to a young girl who needed to earn a living. One day she surprised her husband by asking him to dictate a letter to her. She must have done well, because her husband hired her as his secretary. Commenting once upon his wife's versatility, he said, "She's done everything but take the veil."

She took such an interest in livening up the prairie community that she started five "improvement" clubs for women — the Octagon Club, the Clover Club, the Tuesday Study Club, the Political Equality Club, and the Woman's Club, a literary group which was the first club in Tama County to join the State Federation of Women's

Clubs. This group was responsible for Tama's first library. Mr. Bracken donated a musty room above the bank, and the women collected books which no one wanted. Then Mrs. Bracken got the idea of providing a better library. Of her own accord she wrote to Andrew Carnegie for a grant of money and got it. Tama's present Public Library is the result.

Beginning a half-dozen societies wasn't enough. She belonged to the Musical Club, the Dramatic Club, the P. E. O., and was president of the W. C. T. U. for several years. In addition, she was the first Worthy Matron of the Eastern Star, and she used to forget her sparkling dignity when the guard, who spoke broken English, referred to her as the "Wordy Matron". She was a much better toastmaster than any lawyer or preacher in town. As a result, when she wasn't introducing some speaker, she was being introduced herself.

All of this sounds as though she might have been the typical intellectual woman of her time; frustrated, repressed, compensating for a barren emotional life by a passionate interest in current events and art. Nothing could be more misleading. She was first and primarily a physically beautiful woman living a genuine emotional life. Her vivacious poise came from an inner life, as rich in love as it was in interests. For the clue to

her personality was that she had a tremendous capacity both to absorb and to give life. Her interest in ideas never flagged. She was never niggardly in spirit; she gave to everyone who knew her the force of her sympathetic insight. She was always an Adams in her hatred of the vulgar, in her independence of mind and integrity of motive, but vanity was alien to her.

The essential sweetness of her being was never curdled by the bacilli in the air of her time which soured so many idealists. She lived through financial reverses and personal tragedies and endured the constant pain of rheumatism which attacked her while she was in middle life, but she never became bitter. People who did not see deep into her nature were always impressed with her sense of humor. They never realized that the quality of mind which gave her a sharp sense of the ridiculous, also gave her a keener sense of the tragic.

After her husband's death in March, 1923, she began writing poetry to divert her mind from her loss. It was not great poetry, like that which she loved to quote for her children and grandchildren, but it was another evidence of the force of her mind, which was always casting about. When she became too old to sing, and her hands were too crippled to play the piano, she would recite her poems to music.

In her old age she gave the most characteristic evidence of her nature. The bank her husband had owned failed during the crash of 1929. Although she was under no legal compulsion to do so she voluntarily gave up her beautiful home and her life-insurance policy. From then on, she was poor and without a home of her own. She gave her china and her cut glass, her walnut furniture and her books, her recordings of classical music and her piano, to her friends and family, keeping nothing for herself. It was the revelation of her nature. She never thought of it as a sacrifice. Instead, she sat in her daughter's kitchen, peeling potatoes and singing, "My Blue Ridge Mountain Home".

She lived until her mid-eighties but her old age was not happy and dying was long and difficult. She felt increasingly the loss of her closest friends; she felt she had never accomplished anything. Even so, when her vital force was not strong enough to hide the "pain that was native to her nature", when she was dying and her grandchildren came, she roused from her delirium and sang with them.

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