

THE PALIMPSEST

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Charles W. Williams

Charley Williams had succumbed to the fascination of horse racing. He owned a gelding that was a fair trotter and two well-bred mares, Lou and Mabel. He determined to buy another mare and ship them to Kentucky to be bred. Then if he were not successful he could continue in his creamery business. After all, he was making money in butter and eggs while horse racing was only a diversion.

It happened that Henry Kelley, the popular manager of the Highland Stock Farm owned by H. L. and F. D. Stout of Dubuque, had just the horse for Williams. Gussie Wilkes was lame but very well bred. Her owners wanted to dispose of her. Rest and careful training might do wonders. Williams knew the Wilkes line, its splendid racing qualities, and its power to pass this quality on. He took a chance. He bought Gussie Wilkes for \$75. Lou produced Axtell while Gussie Wilkes foaled Allerton. Both were destined to become world champion stallions.

Charles W. Williams was born of American parentage at Chatham, Columbia County, New York, on December 4, 1856. His father, George W. Williams, was the son of an English sea captain who had been lost at sea. His mother, Julina Reynolds, traced her ancestry back to sturdy Quaker stock. As a lad, Williams attended country school in New York State. He was eleven when his parents moved to Iowa and purchased a farm near Jesup in Buchanan County. For the next four or five years he attended country school, assisted his parents on the farm, and, when not needed at home, hired out to the neighbors at twenty-five cents a day.

Early in the seventies his parents moved to town, and he worked in the Laird brothers' general store for five dollars a month and board. Before breakfast each morning he swept out the store, dusted the stock, and during the cold winter months started the fire. Since the store did not close until ten or eleven at night, the tired lad probably welcomed his hard bed under the counter.

Though the frugal Charley worked a year to earn sixty dollars, he spent the whole sum in a minute. The object of this wanton extravagance was a young colt. All his spare moments were utilized in "fussing" with his colt, breaking him to ride but making no effort to harness him. During the hard times of 1873 he found occasional em-

ployment at Newton brothers' general store, after which he clerked for a time in a hardware store owned by C. W. Taft.

Williams went to Chicago and drove a milk wagon throughout the spring, summer, and fall of 1874 for which he received \$20 a month. Returning to Jesup he attended school during the day and worked nights for the Illinois Central Railroad at fifteen dollars a month. He studied telegraphy and became a proficient operator. When a vacancy occurred at Independence he was transferred to that station at a salary of forty dollars a month for night work.

A striking characteristic of the youthful Williams was his tireless energy, a trait which he continued to exhibit throughout his life. While acting as night operator at Independence he spent the greater part of the day purchasing butter and eggs which he shipped to a New York commission house. His ambitious nature attracted the attention of A. J. Barnhart and in 1878 the two men established a creamery at Independence. The enterprise proved to be a great success. Barnhart soon bought out Williams, but urged him to start a creamery at Ossian, Iowa. Such a venture demanded a considerable outlay of capital but Williams found a New York commission house ready to form a partnership whereby he was to handle the butter, poultry, eggs, and creamery business in the West while the commis-

sion house sold the produce in the East. A little later he established a creamery at Postville, Iowa. While he busied himself in these new projects his young wife kept the books.

It soon became apparent that further outlets were needed for his energy. Visions of a lucrative return prompted Williams to establish a retail butter business in Chicago. There he sold what produce he could from his two creameries and shipped the surplus to his New York partners. Within two years the Chicago venture had developed into such a thriving business that A. J. Barnhart again prevailed upon him to sell out. This time Williams might have hesitated had not the trotting-horse fever suddenly overwhelmed him. Once his mind was made up he did not hesitate but launched out with characteristic vigor into the new field.

The purchase of Gussie Wilkes and Lou by an obscure creamery man at Independence caused no ripple of excitement in racing circles. Nevertheless, within five years the consequences of that event had revolutionized trotting standards in America. Bred to Jay Bird and William L., the two mares produced Allerton and Axtell who won national recognition for Charles W. Williams, for Independence, and for Iowa. Never before or since has a man developed two horses to hold the world stallion trotting record. And what is more astonishing, Williams bred them both the

same year and they were the first colts he ever raised. From the proceeds of the sale of Axtell he bought land on which to build the first kite track in the United States. On this track at Rush Park, attracted by generous purses, the fastest horses in America shattered one world record after another.

When the Iowa Association of Trotting Horse Breeders met at Cedar Rapids the Cedar Rapids *Standard* of September 13, 1888, noted the presence of such prominent horsemen as the Stouts of Dubuque, Judge Walter I. Hayes of Clinton, and Colonel W. W. Aldrich of Tipton. Williams was present but his name was not included among the elite. Two years later the Cedar Rapids *Republican* acknowledged the supremacy of Independence as the "great head center of horsedom" in the West. It believed a very large part of this new impetus in Iowa was due to Williams, and felt that the Independence races marked the beginning of a "new era in which our state, now chiefly famous for school houses, corn and pork, will also be famous as the native home of the American trotting horse."

Williams had "grandly demonstrated" to the *State Register* how much "knowledge and energy can accomplish" by the success of the races at Rush Park in 1890. A great number of world-famous horses had been brought together by the "enterprise of one man" who had given Inde-

pendence "more fame and brought her into greater prominence" than any other city of equal population in the United States. The Rush Park races constituted the "greatest turf meeting" Iowa ever had.

The meteoric rise of Williams in the trotting world attracted national and world-wide attention. A Saint Paul paper referred to him as "Captain Williams," causing the *Buchanan County Journal* to declare that by the time "Charley" reaches Kentucky his rank will not be below "Major General." A writer in the *Kentucky Stock Farm* urged every one to patronize that "game and energetic horseman" who had more "courage than half the track owners of the country." The "high praise" of Williams and his "plucky management" of Rush Park in the *Spirit of the Times* led the secretary of the Trotting Union of Great Britain to write the young "Napoleon of the Sulky" for advice regarding the laying of a kite track on the outskirts of London.

Williams was not as wealthy or experienced as some other famous horsemen, but he was richly endowed with enthusiasm, courage, and faith. Above all else he was energetic and persevering. He was convinced that to develop colts properly, intelligence, judgment, self-control, and a large amount of natural ability were required. These qualities Williams himself possessed to a marked degree. Horses responded to his masterful touch.

A number of contemporary papers and turf magazines spoke lightly of "Williams' Luck" each time a new record was hung up. Horsemen throughout the country resented this and sprang to his defense. None knew better than they the long hours and sacrifices necessary to register his astonishing victories with Axtell and Allerton.

"When the time came to handle these incipient wonders of the trotting world," the *Live Stock Indicator* remarked pointedly, "no very encouraging displays of speed rewarded his first efforts, but by persistent work, and that indomitable will that has characterized his undertakings, he fed, cared for, jogged and drove his two horses till he succeeded in landing them, victorious above their years and all previous records. . . . It was the cool calculation of a steady brain, coupled with the industrious cunning of the hand, moved by the fire of will force, that nerved him to the accomplishment of his hopes, and not the intangible phantom of *luck*, flitting before the eyes of the easy-going dreamer, that gave to C. W. Williams his unparalleled success."

Early in 1891 he disclosed his theories on breeding and training in a series of articles in *The American Trotter* entitled "Developing the Colts." Mindful of his own inexperience and aware that none agreed with him, the noted owner of Axtell and Allerton humbly addressed himself to the young breeder. The selection of a

proper location he thought was of primary importance. Proximity to other stock farms, a first class track for development and display, and a region where trotting horses were favored he conceived to be the foundation of success. Although he developed only one Axtell and one Allerton, Williams continued to produce great trotters at Independence and later at Galesburg, Illinois, many of them entering the 2:10 class.

He firmly believed that the development of a colt began long before it was foaled. To him the mare was even more important than the stallion. A young breeder must select a mare bred in the "height of fashion" on both sire's and dam's side for several generations. This mare must be fed liberally, jogged throughout the winter, worked for speed during the spring, and about June 1st, while in training, bred to a stallion that not only had a fast record but was being trained at the same time. In order to pass the trotting instinct on to her offspring, Williams would continue to train the mare and actually campaign her after she was in foal.

Eternal vigilance was necessary to raise and develop a young colt successfully. Oats, bran, carrots, and fresh grass constituted an ideal diet. When two or three weeks old, the colt should be halter broken. Constant and judicious handling would soon dispel fear, but the trainer should be careful not to make a pet of him. "Try and con-

vince yourself," Williams urged his readers, "that this youngster will *surely* prove to be a great colt if you develop him as you should. Don't let yourself think otherwise, and at the same time keep thinking that the least inattention on your part may make him worthless. Develop him as you would a child, watching every move he makes, and at the same time watching yourself closer, if possible, than you do the colt. Successful colt trainers must be on their guard at all times. They must first be able to control themselves, after which it will be an easy matter to control the colt."

The young trainer was cautioned not to attempt to prove the colt a trotter too quickly. After being faithfully jogged all winter, Williams advised that the distance should be gradually increased through the spring until the road work amounted to about seven miles daily. By the first of May, if the colt was a year or more old, he might be hitched to a sulky and taken to the track for the first time. Scalpers and shin and quarter boots must be used to insure protection. "After jogging two or three miles the wrong way of the track," Williams directed prospective drivers to "turn him around, and for the first time in his life ask him to go faster than a good, stiff jog. Don't try to find out yet how fast he can go, but simply score him two or three times well within himself, after which take him to the barn, giving him good

care after arriving there, as this slight exercise, as you may think it, will make him more or less muscle sore. For the next three days jog him on the road, not going near the track with him until the fourth day, when again work him as you did before, only ask him to show you a little more speed this time than he did the first; but require him to do it at the same place in the track. It will only take him a short time to learn that he is to go faster at this part of the track than the rest, and he will soon learn to make speed very fast at this one particular place."

Williams believed that the breeding and training of the trotting horse was one of the most fascinating games in the world. He watched with unalloyed joy the steady development of the colt from halter, to harness, to cart, and finally to sulky. An eternal mystery seemed to enshroud each colt. No one ever knew when the divine spark had fallen. Few would deny that champions must be made as well as bred. Even so keen a horseman as Budd Doble had paid \$7,500 for a full brother of Axtell only to learn there was but one Axtell.

It was not merely by means of races, attractive purses, fashionable breeding, and skillful training that Williams sought to develop prestige. On March 4, 1891, the first number of *The American Trotter* was published. Williams entrusted the management to C. B. Gildersleeve and appointed

as his assistants S. S. Toman and Milton A. Smith, men of "exceptional ability and experience." The first editorial declared that the paper would be "devoted exclusively to the American trotter and the interests of his breeder." Subscriptions poured in at a marvelous rate. One enthusiastic Indiana subscriber wrote: "I expect to renew annually for the next fifty years; after that I do not expect to be interested in trotters." At the end of the first year the magazine had 8,467 "fairly won and honestly esteemed subscribers" exclusive of exchanges, advertisers, correspondents, and sample copies.

The first issue of *The American Trotter* elicited a deluge of praise from all sections of the country. A handsome cover page, timely articles and editorials by noted horsemen, a veterinary department, and the usual "question box" won the instant approval of horsemen. Newsy letters from every corner of the Union, scintillating paragraphs from Iowa towns, together with dispatches from surrounding states made up the first twenty pages. An equal amount of space was devoted to advertising.

In the spring of 1892 Williams paid \$10,000 for the corner of Chatham and Mott streets and began the construction of a three-story brick hotel and opera building. A large force of men was employed day and night in order that the building might be ready for the August races. The

Gedney Hotel opened on August 21st and drew unstinted praise because of its unrivaled elegance. The floors of the lobby and dining room were handsomely tiled. The dining room was designed as a hunting lodge. The parlors were finished in mahogany, carpeted with Axminster, and elaborately furnished. A chandelier in the ladies' parlor cost \$175. The best suites were furnished in mahogany and the bridal chamber in bird's-eye maple. The rates for the bridal chamber were \$10 a day. There were seventy-three steam-heated guest rooms, all with hot and cold water.

Williams spared nothing in his endeavor to make the Gedney Opera House "second to no other in the west in point of elegance and completeness in all its details." It had a seating capacity of eight hundred and twenty-five. A self-appointed committee deposed the proprietor for the "First Night," took over the reins of management, auctioned the tickets to "Fra Diavolo," and bestowed \$2,689.50 on the man whose "energy, courage, and large public spirit" had made all this possible. Boxes had sold for \$100; single seats from \$5 up to \$30. When Stephen Tabor concluded his Dedicatory Ode with "Where there's a Williams, there's a way!" the audience heartily agreed.

To cap his astonishing activity Williams constructed an electric trolley line at a cost of \$40,000. The cars ran from the Illinois Central

Railroad depot past the Gedney Hotel and on to Rush Park. Williams had a complete monopoly! The transportation system to the hotel and to the races belonged to Williams. A stranger might dine and lodge at his hotel. The Gedney Opera House furnished the best entertainment to while away the evening. Upon retiring, *The American Trotter* provided the most appropriate literature. And yet, in an era when James B. Weaver, "Sockless Jerry" Simpson, "Calamity" Weller, and a dozen other anti-monopolists stalked the land, nothing but praise could be heard of this public-spirited man.

"What one man can do for a town is plainly shown in what C. W. Williams, of Axtell and Allerton fame, has done and is doing for Independence," observed the Cedar Rapids *Times* in 1892. "And Williams has no partners, no agents, and no advisers, but gives his personal attention to everything, keeps his own counsel and manages his own affairs. And the start of all this was a single horse — Axtell."

Suddenly there came a crash. The panic of 1893 destroyed countless fortunes and Williams himself was caught in the financial maelstrom. He quickly recognized the utter futility of holding on and turned over to his creditors real estate valued at \$250,000 to satisfy debts approximating \$100,000. Citizens of Galesburg, Illinois, made him a flattering offer to build up trotting interests

in their city. On the morning of April 11, 1894, Williams left Independence with his string of fifty-four horses aboard several cars. A special passenger coach carried him and his family together with a little band of loyal followers. Independence and Iowa had lost its most noted representative in the trotting world.

Sobriety as well as industry were indelibly impressed in his character. Born and reared in a religious atmosphere, ready to forego personal comfort in order to taste the joy of achievement, immune alike to the pitfalls of success and flattery, Williams exhibited throughout his career a sober moral character unique among horsemen of his day. He neither smoked, drank, nor used profane language. His iron will seemed to present an impregnable shield against all temptations. He would not tolerate anything offensive to good taste at Rush Park. With him there was no middle-of-the-road policy on matters of righteousness and human conduct. A man had to take a definite stand — either with the Lord or on the side of the devil. He firmly believed in total abstinence and would not employ a man who drank. At a banquet in honor of Axtell at Terre Haute in 1889 only one man except Williams refrained from drinking. His views were known and respected by horsemen wherever he went.

Religion was always a vital force in his life. From early childhood Williams identified himself

with the church. The simple Quaker teachings of his mother must have left their imprint upon him. His faith throughout life was patterned on the old fashioned religion whose foundation was laid upon the Gospel. As a young man he attended church regularly each Sabbath, and Rush Park was locked so tightly that no man was permitted even to see his horses on the day of rest. A half century has not altered his views. Each tenant on his Canadian farms must agree "that in no case will he do, or allow others to do, any work of any kind" on the Sabbath Day.

A crucial moment in the life of the noted horseman came as his boys grew to young manhood. He fully appreciated the snares his business presented to a family of boys. In order to shield his sons from these dangers he traded his entire string of horses for Canadian land.

After disposing of his horses Williams devoted much of his time to evangelistic work. He held meetings at Waterloo, Jesup, Independence, Des Moines, Cedar Rapids, and Mount Pleasant, besides conducting services at Galesburg and in adjoining Illinois towns. Every week during the winter he spoke several times in different Galesburg factories. He conducted meetings in the tabernacle and on the street. His influence over the young men was said to be remarkable. Once he gave a dinner to all the Galesburg grammar and high school students. "The work of this

night alone was worth a life time and the influence of this man of God in Galesburg will be felt in years to come." Simple in habits, steadfast in purpose, sincere in motives, faithful to himself, his friends, and his God, Williams' exhortations were unusually effective.

On the occasion of one of his visits to Independence he preached a strong and impressive sermon on faith. He selected as his text the twenty-third verse of the ninth chapter of Mark. "Jesus said unto him, If thou canst believe, All things are possible to him that believeth." Although a quarter of a century had passed, his old friends quickly recognized a personal portrait as he drew illustrations from his own rich experiences. Many churches, he told his audience, were lacking in that spiritual atmosphere without which the saving of souls was impossible. Just as the telegraph instrument must be properly adjusted in order to transmit messages, so God required certain conditions to be present before he could reach the hearts of His children here on earth with His messages of love and promises of life everlasting. He spoke of a certain man who had loved his horses, but he loved his Christ more and for the sake of his three boys, and for the sake of the Savior, he had disposed of his horses in order that he might live a consistent Christian life. He had prospered far beyond his greatest expectation. He gave the Master credit for this

success, believing that the spirit of Christ had led him along unknown paths to a distant country. He declared his land was not his own but the Lord's and that he was merely the steward, to look after it, and to turn it back into the Lord's work. Accordingly he consecrated the balance of his life to the Master's service and declined financial remuneration for any service he might be able to render.

In 1925 Williams moved to Aurora, Illinois. He established a small stock farm a mile from his beautiful home on the outskirts of that city and began breeding registered cattle. It was his belief that his Axtell Hereford cattle were the "most royally bred herd of Hereford Cattle in the World." He enjoyed working with them and they proved to be a profitable investment.

His youthful energy was still in evidence when the writer met him in Aurora in 1932 for, although nearing four score years, he visited his Canadian lands monthly during the summer, and supervised the work of nearly fifty tenants on his vast domain of 33,280 acres near Regina in Saskatchewan. The land was not in one body but scattered over a territory forty miles long and fifteen miles wide. A drive of 350 miles was required to visit all of the farms. Charles W. Williams claimed to be the largest individual grain farmer in North America.

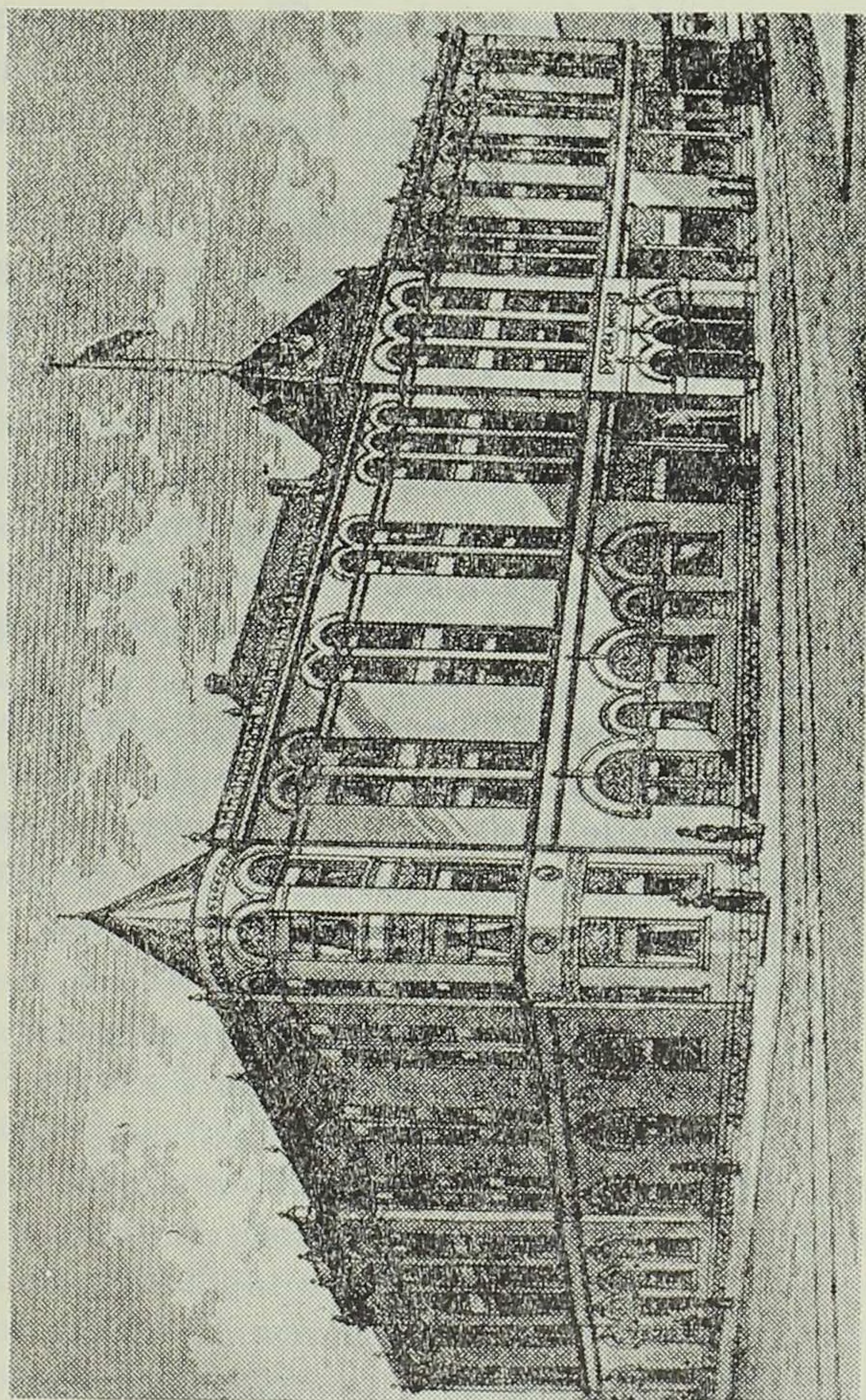
A half century of intense activity as a mature man had not robbed him of the devout Christian

spirit that marked his youth. On August 8, 1932, he wrote letters to each of his tenants urging them to be "thankful to God for the necessities of this life. There are millions of people in this old world right now, who are on the verge of starvation, and many of them are more worthy of a comfortable living than we are."

On February 18, 1936, citizens of Independence received word that Charles W. Williams had died at Aurora that day. The *Bulletin-Journal* of February 20, 1936, felt that young and old alike grieved at his passing. According to the editor:

"He brought fame to Independence. He was a man of unusual ability, aggressive, persevering, with unbounded energy and nerve, as evidenced by his life history here and his purchase of and belief in the ultimate value of Canada land. Remembrance of his activity here will never die. Monuments to his enterprise stand today, the Gedney Hotel, the Grand theater and others. His life was one of remarkable energy, foresight, industry, he lived to a ripe old age, and his death recalls vividly to old timers the active days here in the late eighties and the early nineties, when he was active locally. One trait of his that we have heard often is that in all of the busy life here he never would allow any training or activity at Rush Park on Sundays."

Charles W. Williams revealed his sentimental attachment for Independence when he designated



From *The American Trotter*

GEDNEY HOTEL

that he should be buried there. The deep respect of the Independence community for Williams is attested by the fact that all stores were closed during the funeral hour.

The destruction of the Gedney Hotel and opera house by fire in March, 1945, was a severe loss to the citizens of Independence. The Gedney Hotel block was valued at \$300,000 — the hotel itself containing 76 rooms while the theater had approximately 580 seats. The hotel dining room was the only place in Independence large enough for social functions and over a period of half a century had been the scene of "outstanding midwest social functions."

Today only the Williams home and one of the Rush Park barns stand as monuments to the memory of this gentle, visionary, public-spirited man. But the good that Charles W. Williams did lingers on in the hearts of countless thousands of Iowans who respect and cherish his work.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN