

Peter in the Pumpkin

The biographical sketch of Judge Joseph Williams in the March PALIMPSEST carries my memory back to the third year of my life, at which time my father, Lysander W. Babbitt, was a resident of Marion County, then included in the Second Judicial District of Iowa Territory to which Judge Williams had been assigned.

Organization of the County of Marion was authorized and the boundaries thereof were prescribed by an act of the Territorial legislature approved on June 10, 1845. Section nine of that act authorized the judge to appoint the clerk of the district court in Marion County, and under that authority Judge Williams selected my father and issued to him the following commission in his own handwriting, probably done with a quill pen:

Marion County, ss.
Iowa Territory,

To Lysander W. Babbitt, Esquire.

Sir Having confidence in your integrity and capacity: We do by virtue of authority [of] Law hereby appoint you to $\frac{f}{m}$ the office of Clerk of the District Court in and for the County of Marion in the said Territory of Iowa, to do and perform the duties of said office, and to have, receive & enjoy the

emoluments of said office, according to law. Given under my hand officially this 24th day of July A D 1845 —

J WILLIAMS

Judge of District Court of Marion County
Second Judicial District Iowa Ty —.

This paper, slightly nibbled by mice, is now preserved in the library of the State Historical Society. It was probably executed at Knoxville on the date given and perhaps I then first saw Judge Williams, but as I was only two and a quarter years of age I may not positively say that I remember the fact. However, when the first term of his court was held at Knoxville in March, 1846, I had just passed my third birthday anniversary and I am quite sure that I distinctly remember the Judge for he boarded at our house.

At that time we lived in a double story-and-a-half house, built on the southern plan, with passage between the ground-floor rooms and a "lean-to" across the entire length at the rear. Our house stood just across an alley from the residence of Dr. Luther C. Conrey, in which the court was held, both buildings fronting on the west side of the public square.

As a stop to hold the front door open we had in use a small "Yankee" pumpkin — one of the hard-shell kind — about the size of an average human head. Judge Williams appeared to be fond of chil-

dren and made much of me, so he and I were soon good friends. One morning as he passed out from breakfast he stopped suddenly at the front door and, looking with a semblance of surprise at the little pumpkin, he turned to me and asked, "Did you hear that? There's a little boy inside that pumpkin, and he wants to be let out."

Then I appeared to hear the boy crying and saying that his name was Peter — that he had been a bad boy and was shut up in the pumpkin as a punishment. Encouraged by the Judge I carried on a childish conversation with Peter. After the Judge had gone I determined to let the little fellow out, so I procured a table knife and began an assault upon the pumpkin which I maintained intermittently until dinner time without any material damage to the shell. At noon I appealed to the Judge for assistance in the work of freeing Peter, but he declined to help because, as he said, none but a good little boy might release the prisoner. So I resumed my task and kept at it from day to day until the morning when the Judge was to leave us. He and I then had a conference regarding the condition of Peter and means of effecting his release. During our conversation Peter cut in saying that he had been forgiven and that the fairies were taking him to his home in the big woods out near the Eagle Rock.

Thus ended the story of Peter and his imprisonment in the pumpkin. Peter was gone, never to return, but the little pumpkin, nicked, scarred, and

still unopened, remained as a door stop for many a day. It was a long, long time before the mystery was cleared up to my satisfaction.

I saw Judge Williams a number of times afterward and enjoyed his feats of ventriloquism as well as his performances on the violin. He visited my father's family at Council Bluffs about the beginning of the Civil War, and that was the last time I saw him.

My earliest recollection presents Judge Williams as a white-haired, blue-eyed man, between five feet six and five feet eight inches in height; rather spare of build and wiry, weighing from one hundred and fifty to one hundred and fifty-five pounds. He was less austere in appearance than his portrait indicates and very active. He possessed what might be called a "laughing" countenance, always appearing in a merry and cheerful mood.

CHARLES H. BABBITT