

An Adams in Iowa

One afternoon in July, 1854, a young man landed at Dubuque. He saw the sky arching over three States, the Mississippi River linking north and south, the sun setting on hills to the west. He visualized the freedom and opportunities of the new West and decided to make Dubuque his future home. This blond, tall, slim young man was Austin Adams, one more of New England's gifts to Iowa. Henceforth he was a loyal and devoted Iowan — worthy of a place of honor in the annals of Iowa history.

Austin Adams was a member of one of the renowned families of American history, a family which included Samuel Adams of Revolutionary fame; John Adams, second President of the United States; John Quincy Adams, sixth President of the United States; and Charles Francis Adams, diplomat and statesman. Alvin Adams, founder of the Adams Express Company, was his uncle. All these men were descendants of Henry Adams, who came from England and settled at Braintree, now Quincy, Massachusetts, in 1632. Almost two hundred years later Austin Adams was born at Andover, Vermont, on May 24, 1826. His father

was Jerry Adams, a veteran of the War of 1812, who had married Dorcas Austin.

The boyhood days of Austin Adams were spent on a farm in the Green Mountain State, where the outlook upon life was lofty and "humanity seemed to borrow the grave, enduring, reticent, and solid qualities that belong to the rocks and hills". But there were things to be enjoyed too — a trout brook, a grove of sugar maples, a fruit orchard in which birds sang in spring, a district school where windows opened to the larger world.

Interest in law and public service seems to have been a part of his very being. Writing in later years he said: "When a boy I would go any distance to hear an eloquent address. If there was a law suit in the town I was never easy until I found out all about it. Long before I attended a trial, I remember a suit brought for fraud in the sale of a horse." His interest in public affairs, no doubt, was due in part to his training. His father, returning from a session of the legislature, brought his ten-year-old son a copy of Watts' *On the Improvement of the Mind*. His mother later gave him Pope's *Essay on Man* which he learned by heart.

When he was fourteen years of age Austin went to Ludlow Academy and afterwards to another academy at Townsend, Vermont. At the

age of sixteen he taught a school where several of the pupils were older than himself. In one case of insubordination, finding that the pupils appeared to be indirectly enlisted with the delinquents, he converted the school into a court and had the subject discussed, much to the benefit of both teacher and pupils. He did not advocate the use of physical force in schools, although he was considered a good wrestler, able to throw boys twice his weight.

After graduating from Dartmouth College in 1848, Austin Adams pursued legal studies during the five years he was principal of an academy at West Randolph, Vermont. In 1853 he attended the Harvard Law School for a short time, taught school again for a brief period at Woodstock, Vermont, and was admitted to the bar in January, 1854. Some influence led him to decide to come to Iowa. "I wanted", he said, "more liberty, a society with more variety than I had ever seen in the East." His friends prophesied an early return, but Austin Adams found Iowa to his liking and remained.

When he came to Dubuque, in July, 1854, he found that his reputation as a student and teacher had preceded him to the new West. Many parents in Dubuque urged him to open an academy, for there were only limited advantages for youth in the higher branches of education. Yielding to

this pressure, he taught for a period of six months in a school in which Mary Mann, a sister of Horace Mann, was also a teacher, but in 1855 he became a member of the law firm of Cooley, Blatchley & Adams. During this year he was also active in assisting with the teachers' institutes and in working for the establishment of the public school system in Iowa.

During the winter of 1854 and 1855 Mr. Adams gave three public lectures "to gain a fund for the nucleus of a public library" sponsored by the Young Men's Library Association. The books, bought with the receipts, were kept in his office, and for two years he and his partner, Mr. Blatchley, kept the record of books taken and returned. In 1856 he was a member of the law firm of Lovell, Adams & Lovell. He was active in politics, and a staunch supporter of John Charles Fremont for the presidency.

Austin Adams had been shocked by the terroristic sermons of his childhood, but he remained deeply religious. He defined religion as the "conscious effort of the finite to realize the Infinite", and he took an active part in the religious development of the community in which he lived, respecting the beliefs of Jews, Protestants, and Catholics alike. Soon after his arrival at Dubuque he delivered an address on "The Study of the Bible as

Aiding People to Constitutional Liberty". For several years he conducted an adult Bible class, at first in the Congregational Church and later at the Universalist Church.

He helped to organize the Young Men's Christian Association in Dubuque and, to aid in the cultural program, he conducted evening classes in science, unrolling "the gospel of the storied world to the youth gathered there." To him the truths of science and religion were one — a revelation of God. On one occasion he wrote: "All science may be regarded as sacred. It reveals the creative energy through which God expresses himself." Later in life he said: "We believe that God is not revealed by the imaginations of men, but in the truths of history, and of the physical and moral world. We are therefore reverently seeking such truth, believing that as we find it we shall find God and that as we find Him He will command our unfeigned worship and love."

In September, 1857, Mr. Adams married Mary K. Newbury, a daughter of the Reverend Samuel Newbury, with whom young Adams had coöperated for community betterment when he first arrived in Dubuque. In the establishment of their new home Mr. and Mrs. Adams sought "to have some inspiring thought woven into the duties of each day." They recognized that "the ornaments

of a house are the friends who frequent it" and their hospitality brought to their home many choice and inspiring guests. Among these in later years were Bronson Alcott and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Four children were born in the Adams home — Annabel, Eugene, Herbert, and Cecilia. Mr. Adams frequently joined with the young folks in their pleasures, and aided and encouraged them in their industry and tasks — "his sunny disposition and exquisite imagination being a great inspiration as well as help." His attitude toward youth can perhaps be best expressed in his own words, when he said: "We cannot make children perfect, but we can place before them such visions that they will be greatly stimulated in working out their own salvation." In the home Mr. Adams cultivated freedom and cordiality. "He guided by reason in government, but used no force to compel obedience, allowing each to reap the error of wrong doing."

His educational interests were always apparent. In 1865 he was elected president of the board of education in Dubuque and he always manifested a deep interest in the educational program of the city. In December of the same year he and a few of his friends formed a literary club called "The Round Table". They hired a room, furnished it, and had a large round table around which fifteen

or more men could congregate. When Wendell Phillips and Ralph Waldo Emerson visited it, they were much pleased and carried back to Boston complimentary reports of their "find in the West". Austin Adams was president and an active participant in the activities of this club until it disbanded when he went upon the bench in 1876.

Possibly his congenial marriage was one reason for his advocacy of the right of women to equal status in the fields of education and law. In 1868 he protested the refusal of the authorities of Iowa College (now Grinnell) to permit a woman to address the Ladies Literary Society commencement program and he is said to have been the first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Iowa to admit a woman to practice in that tribunal.

As a lawyer, Austin Adams ranked high among the members of his profession. Edward H. Stiles said of him: "He was a lawyer of deep learning and exalted principles". He believed in the sanctity and dignity of the court and in the security and protection of the law. He greatly lamented the unauthorized attempts "to subject principles of law to some imagined expediency." He felt that the courts must prevent the ignorant and impetuous from destroying the stability of the law. His strength of will, his courage of conviction, and his familiarity with the law, made him a leader in his

profession and a man of influence throughout the State.

Mr. Adams practiced law in Dubuque from 1855 until 1876 when he became a member of the Supreme Court of Iowa. In 1870, he became a member of the Board of Regents of the State University, serving in that capacity for a period of eight years. Two years later he was appointed one of the Curators of the State Historical Society. In 1875 he became a member of the University faculty. In the University catalogue for 1875-1876 his name appears in a triple role — as a member of the Board of Regents, as Lecturer on the Laws of Corporations and Insurance at the University, and as Justice of the Supreme Court of Iowa.

When he first lectured at the University, his academic rating was designated by the letters "M. A.", Master of Arts. In August, 1883, however, his alma mater, Dartmouth College, conferred upon him the honorary degree LL. D. When he retired from the bench, at the end of 1887, he returned to Dubuque where he resumed the practice of law, but he continued to lecture at the State University until the year before his death.

Judge Adams had an impressive personality. It was frequently said of him that he "looked like a college professor". Indeed, it is not strange that

he should have acquired a professorial appearance. He was a scholar, a teacher, and a gentleman of culture, before he was a judge, and he never failed to display these high qualities. They were a part of his very being.

In figure he was of good height and rather slim. His face was long, his nose prominent, his forehead high. His complexion was fair. His light brown hair and whiskers were both luxuriant — the former being combed up without parting, the latter cut round slightly under the chin, the upper lip being clean shaven. He wore spectacles, due, perhaps, to his studious boyhood, when tallow dips and whale oil lamps were the best lights available. His dress was described as in harmony with his person — always a Prince Albert coat and otherwise neat attire.

Judge Adams was elected to the Supreme Court in 1875 and served on the Supreme bench for a period of twelve years. Although he was interested and qualified particularly in corporation law, his Supreme Court decisions, reported in thirty-two volumes of the Supreme Court Reports, cover many phases of the law. The first case which Judge Adams was called upon to decide on the Supreme bench was one involving the question of whether or not the State University of Iowa is a corporation which may be sued. Judge Adams

ruled that it was not such a corporation, but rather a creature of the legislature, the property of which belonged to the State. His ruling is still accepted.

Under the constitutional rule which provided for the advancement of Judges of the Supreme Court to the office of Chief Justice by rotation, Judge Adams served as Chief Justice of the Iowa Supreme Court in 1880-1881 and again in 1886-1887. His many able decisions are evidence of his aptness for expressing legal principles by means of well-chosen phrases. If a litigant failed to receive a favorable decision from the court, he was nevertheless made to feel that he had been given a fair trial and just treatment.

By whatever criterion he is tested, by whatever standard he is judged, Austin Adams was a man of full stature — learned, dignified, cultured, refined. Contented and serene in his later years, his pleasure and enjoyment could have been increased only by having leisure to enjoy that which he had. "Malice or misfortune could not injure him, his happiness was in the state of his mind, not exterior conditions." Thus he lived, and thus he died, quietly at his home, in Dubuque on October 17, 1890, having enjoyed sixty-four fruitful years.

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