

Grace Jewett Austin (1872-1948)

According to Grace Austin herself, the two most important periods of her life were her 20 years as a faculty wife at Illinois Wesleyan University and her 24 years as a newspaper woman for *The Bulletin* and *The Pantagraph*.

Grace Jewett was born in Laconia, New Hampshire on January 12, 1872. There she grew up and graduated from high school. She graduated from a college for women and attended Ohio Wesleyan University. In 1893, at the age of 23, she married Francis M. Austin. Their wedding trip included a stop at the Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago. This was Grace's first glimpse of Illinois where she would spend so many years of her adult life. The Austins had three daughters: Elizabeth, Lois and Marion.

In 1902, Grace and her family moved to Bloomington where her husband, Frank, had accepted a position at Illinois Wesleyan University as chair of the Latin department. They rented a home on Prairie Street.

The first year in Bloomington was a very difficult one. The children had the measles and the mumps, Frank suffered from rheumatism and Grace ailed from grippe (now called the flu). To add to the household problems, the streets were not paved at that time. Rain and snow turned them into mires of mud which came into their home on shoes and boots. Water in Bloomington was very "hard," that is containing minerals which left lime deposits on cookware and clothing. Her "salvation" as she reported, that first year in Bloomington, was a Japanese student, Sukesige Yanagiwara, who was completing his course work at IWU. He needed a home and income, and Frank, knowing Grace's difficulties, welcomed him into their home. From him, Grace learned much about the rich Japanese culture plus gaining a friend and helper in household chores.

For the next 20 years, Grace devoted herself to her position as a faculty wife, to raising her three daughters, and to working with children in the community and her church. The Austin family had joined Grace Methodist Church where she taught Sunday school and organized plays and pageants. She also became one of the first Camp Fire Girl leaders in Central Illinois.

Grace began writing during this time. She felt herself first and foremost a poet and playwright. She consistently published her writings in both religious and secular (non-religious) magazines. Unfortunately, at this same time she was experiencing personal success, she also suffered family tragedy. Her daughter, Lois, who had just graduated from the University of Illinois, died in 1919 of thyroid disease. Then in February of 1922, Frank died of pneumonia.

The death of her husband, and the need to find a way to continue to raise their youngest child, Elizabeth, required Grace to enter the next major period of her life. For the first time in her life, Grace needed to enter the workforce, to get a job.

The Daily Bulletin, which had published many of Grace's poems, had already offered her a part time job which she had refused because of her duties as wife, mother and homemaker. Now this was the solution to her problem of needing an income. She became a society writer, reporting on afternoon teas, charity events and visitors to Bloomington. She worked hard to present news of all the local clubs and colleges and to avoid favoritism to any one group. She became so successful that she was promoted to editor of the Women's Interest Page just a year and a half after she began writing at *The Daily Bulletin*.

Next, Grace began writing a daily column of style notes for women called *Dame Fashion Smiles* which reported on the latest in women's fashion. In an interview discussing her position as society and fashion editor, Grace said, (I enjoy) "taking the pulse of the city...in my mind I call it a quest for happiness...I am supposed to register only the bright hours; illness and death

and sorrow are not for me, but I am in search of records of people's happy journeying, and the guests they are welcoming."

Her work developed so successfully that her columns were carried in several hundred small town newspapers throughout the country. She was praised for her ability to mix fashion and philosophy. Grace was now known as "Dame Fashion." She had such a loyal following that many stores in Bloomington sought her approval and endorsement. One such store advertised, "Fabrics Sponsored by Dame Fashion Compose the Fall Displays." When *The Daily Bulletin* was purchased by Bloomington's other daily paper, *The Pantagraph*, Grace retained her job as society page editor. She continued to work for *The Pantagraph* for many years.

Grace was also known for her unique collection of miniature elephants. She owned over 2600 little elephants, a collection she believed to be the second largest in the United States.

Grace lived for many years at 1002 North East Street in Bloomington, and then at "The Oaks" apartments on Grove Street. She spent the last two years of her life in Texas living with her daughter Elizabeth. She died on September 27, 1948 and was brought home to Bloomington to be buried next to her husband Frank and daughter Lois in Evergreen Cemetery. In a tribute to her, *The Daily Pantagraph* wrote, "Though her gifts to the city of Bloomington were numerous, her greatest contribution can be found in the hearts of her friends and strangers who crossed her path. She smiled at everyone she approached."

Discussion question: Grace is quoted above explaining her job as society editor. Explain what she means by this quote. How does her life merit being included in this year's cemetery walk?

Bullets for her...not sure where you plan them...

- * Born in 1872 in Laconia NH where she grew up and graduated high school.
- * Married Francis (Frank) Austin in 1893. They had 3 daughters.
- * Moved to Bloomington in 1902 when Frank became chair of Latin at IWU
- * She felt two most important eras in her life; first as wife and mother, second as writer and editor.
- * Felt herself primarily to be a poet and playwright
- * Was known as "Dame Fashion" with a talent for combining fashion and philosophy
- * Died in 1948, buried with husband and daughter here in Evergreen cemetery