

Edith Neville (1885-1936)

Edith Neville, one of Bloomington's most wealthy and eccentric citizens, was born in Bloomington on August 29, 1885. She was the daughter of James and Nellie Bent Neville. James was born in Tazewell County, Illinois and came to Bloomington in 1877. He began his career as a lawyer and was admitted to the bar in 1880. He was later appointed Postmaster of Bloomington by President Benjamin Harrison, was elected a city alderman, and finally was elected Mayor of Bloomington serving from 1905-1906. Edith's mother Nellie Bent Neville was a well known society woman from the same family that the Horatio G. Bent Elementary School was named after.

As the daughter of the mayor, young Edith had a very privileged upbringing. She never attended school but she was well educated by a private tutor. Her childhood home was one of the nicest homes in the city. Despite his rapid acquisition of wealth, James identified himself with the common people and disliked the grandiose display of wealth common to high society. These sentiments would remain with Edith the rest of her life. When Edith was about 20 years old, her father died several months after his term as mayor expired in 1906. Her mother Nellie would pass away several years later in 1924.

Edith never held an actual job preferring to devote herself to charity, travel, and the study of art, particularly poetry. The 1902 Bloomington City Directory lists her occupation as "student," which is quite accurate in light of Edith's passion for the study of literature. She was personally acquainted with Edgar Lee Masters, Carl Sandburg, and Vachel Lindsey, all influential poets of that time.

In 1930 she constructed a "Poetry Playhouse" behind her home, located at 1002 Broadway Street in Normal. According to Melba Kirkpatrick, an Illinois Wesleyan University student who spent much time visiting Edith's home, the Playhouse was a small frame building with a stage inside. The audience sat in chairs with writing surfaces on the side. Here, Edith and other local thespians would perform short plays and of course recite poetry. Although it is said that she did not have a great voice nor did she pay attention to meter and rhythm, her passion for the poem came through strongly and often moved the audience. She is also known to have given poetry lectures in Bloomington and other places in Central Illinois.¹

Her home itself was very modest for a woman of her wealth and status. She lived there with her housekeeper and two dogs, a large wolfhound named Libby and a pug named Hans. There are also references to a male servant named William West. Edith never married probably because her wealth eliminated any financial need for a husband. She was however a very social person and often entertained guests in her Playhouse. Because of the Playhouse, she became very popular in society despite the fact that she had no aspirations to be a society lady and host teas, as was the custom of the day. Edith was a portly, heavy set woman who wore loose, light-colored cotton clothes. Unlike the other wealthy ladies, she was not interested in fashion or style and did not use her clothes to show off her wealth.²

Despite her aversion to "polite society," Edith was very active in local affairs. She was a member of both the Bloomington History Club and the Normal History Club as

¹ Interview with E. Melba Kirkpatrick about Edith Neville, April 3, 2001. McLean County Museum of History Archives

² Interview with E. Melba Kirkpatrick about Edith Neville, April 3, 2001.

well as an active member of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church. She was also a member of the Society of Companions for the Holy Cross which was a national church organization for women and attended their retreat in Massachusetts every year.

Edith was also known for her love of travel. She visited Europe several times and, in 1934 set off on an 8-month trip around the world. Melba Kirkpatrick remembers Edith leaving New York Harbor on a freighter loaded with bananas. Along the way, she planned to read, talk to the crew members, and see exotic places often in out-of-the-way locales that most Americans had never visited. In Hong Kong, she bought a little Chinese dog which she named "Captain Silver Line." Captain Silver Line came home with her and presumably moved in with Libby and Hans.³ In 1936 Edith planned another extended trip, this time to Kansas City, around the Midwest, and New York City. Unfortunately, she suffered heart failure on May 13, 1936 at almost the exact hour she was supposed to depart. She died the next day after being unconscious for over thirty hours.

At the time of her death, Edith's total estate was worth \$125,000 (today, that would be \$1,869,967), and her only living relatives were her aunt, Mrs. Horatio G. Bent and a cousin, Horatio C. Bent. The Bent family received a trust of \$25,000, while the rest went to various charities. She left \$10,000 each to St. Joseph's Hospital, the Mennonite Sanatorium, the Amateur Musical Club, a personal friend, and her two servants. The rest of her estate went to St. Matthew's Episcopal Church.⁴

Her funeral was held at St. Matthew's Episcopal Church. Per her written instructions from a 1930 letter, all the flowers and church hangings were white. There was no music or sermon and every mention of her included a reference to her love of poetry as the "greatest of all arts."⁵ Rather than being buried, Edith Neville was cremated and her remains were buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery next to the bodies of her parents.

By: Laurie Peterson 2008

³ Interview with E. Melba Kirkpatrick about Edith Neville, April 3, 2001.

⁴ "Miss Neville Leaves Gifts," *The Pantagraph*, May 30, 1936, page 3

⁵ *The Daily Pantagraph*, May 15, 1936. McLean County Historical Society Archives.