

MY GRANDFATHER: A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

My grandfather, Elmore T. Ide, was one of those sterling characters for which New England, and , in particular, Vermont, is noted. His life was not rich in incidents, nor did he ever do anything that will make his name go down in history, along with those of Washington and Emerson, but, in all the simple happenings of his ordinary, homely life, he was the embodiment of that best kind of American, of whom we think in connection with Abraham Lincoln.

Born in 1839, in a small town in Vermont, my grandfather began life among the rarely beautiful surroundings of country and farm, far from the noisy city, which, though it offers many advantages peculiar to itself, is, in my opinion, not a fitting place in which to grow up. If I make strong statements and over-idealize the country, which, of course, has many prosaic and unlovely aspects, it is only because I had the luck to be brought up among the exceptional advantages of a large university town, a land rich indeed in music and learning but poor in balsom and high hills. I am, at heart, a Vermonter, as was my grandfather, by far the greater part of whose life was spent in this state

wherein he was born.

The boy Elmore grew to man^hood, then, in this little village so typical of many others in Vermont, with its one unpaved street, bordered by shady trees and by old Vermont farmhouses, so different from the formal colonial houses found in Massachusetts. The center of village life was the country store, where the men gathered of an evening to hold the so-called "store court", in which current politics and town affairs were discussed. Through listening to these debates, my grandfather, when still a boy, formed his political opinions. Like most true Vermonters, he became a staunch Republican.

His boyhood days passed, occupied in attending the village school and in helping his father with the work about their small farm. Occasionally he may have done odd jobs at his father's grain mill near the waterfall. When he became a man, instead of going away to college and becoming a lawyer as did his brother, or entering on any other profession which necessitates years of preparation, he took over his father's small business, which he greatly enlarged. Through his honesty and exceptional, natural business ability, rather than through luck, he made a success of this as he did of every enterprise which he undertook. When the Civil War came, one of his younger brothers joined the army, but Elmore, being the eldest, saw that it was his duty to stay

at home and help with the business. About this time, he married. My grandmother was, like him, a native of Vermont, where she, too, spent nearly her entire life.

Several years later, my grandfather and his family left the white farmhouse in the tiny village and moved to a pleasant, comfortable house in St. Johnsbury, a somewhat larger town nearby. This second home, which was his for the rest of his life, though it lacked many of the rural aspects of the former one, still possessed the spirit of Vermont. Indeed, it is in connection with this home and its surroundings that I usually think of my grandfather, for it was here that I always saw him during the all too brief summers, which we spent in Vermont.

The town of St. Johnsbury is not so large that it has lost that characteristic of neighborliness peculiar to the country village. That is, practically all the townspeople know each other; they are eager to hear and tell any bit of interesting gossip concerning one of their number, but each one of them is ready to give help or sympathy to his neighbor, should he be in trouble.

St. Johnsbury has not yet overstepped a reasonable limit of space. It is still possible to get quickly out of the town into the country even with a horse. My grandfather and his family in the good old days before automobiles were invented, used to drive with their span of horses, through

the quiet country roads. They kept this up within my memory. We would drive leisurely through cool woods, where the songs of birds and the wind in the trees could be heard above the regular sound of the wheels and the thud of the horses' hoofs. Then the road would lead across a sunny meadow and past a deserted farm. Here we would gather some of the lilacs or apples flourishing all untended. We would drive on, slowly and with frequent halts for the sake of the horses, up a hot, steep hill. At the top, my grandfather would tell us to look at the view before us; pastures, green hay fields, with little white farmhouses and big red barns dotted here and there; the rolling green hills beyond, and, dim against the horizon, the Green Mountains. A fairer scene could not be found in all Europe. We would all, now, begin to look out for a suitable place for a temporary camping ground, and, when everyone was satisfied with the spot, we would hitch the horses, climb over an old rail fence into a pleasant pasture, and eat the picnic supper we had brought. Our meal over, we would drive home, tired but happy, through the sunset. No all-day trip to the White Mountains, when one is whirled through the air at a lightning speed which blurs all objects of beauty along the way, and when we may not pause, for in less than six hours, we have over a hundred miles to cover, can compare in pleasure with one of these

leisurely excursions, where the distance traversed was not more than ten miles.

When long drives with horses became no longer practicable, however, my grandfather fully appreciated the value of automobiles, only he would too often compel the heavy machine to leave the smooth, but dusty, high road and to go ploughing through the sandy, or muddy, byways, which he loved so well. I well remember numerous painful episodes, when the car stuck fast in the mud, for example, or when the engine got badly overheated on a long, steep hill. On such occasions, when the rest of the party were worried and nervous, my grandfather alone would be calm and unannoyed. Another of his pet fancies when on a drive was that we should always return home a different way from that by which we came. Many a time, we have gone miles to avoid retracing our steps. Aside from these often taxing requirements, however, the drives he planned were always the best.

But, until shortly before his death, my grandfather never gave up driving his favorite horse, an animal of a somewhat freakish temperament and whom few but he dared to handle. It was a striking and familiar sight to see him driving home from work each day up the long main street, the man and the horse both well past their prime, but both playing the game of life eagerly together. My grandfather, knowing well my decided preference for horses over auto-

mobiles, used, in these later years, to take me for occasional short drives. We would take a road which led by the side of a river, which, at some points, would appear in full view, shining dazzlingly in the afternoon sun, and, at other places, would be seen sparkling in the distance through the trees.

Though my grandfather never went to college, he always appeared in society as a well-informed man, because of his extensive reading. When still young, he formed the habit of reading books which were really worthwhile, a habit which he kept all his life. How well I remember him as he sat every evening in his big leather armchair, the lamp on the table lighting up his white hair and peaceful face. His reading embraced infinite variety, ranging all the way from the "Atlantic Monthly", to the Burgess bedtime stories, which appeared each night in the Herald, and to which he looked forward each day with almost as much eagerness as a child. In fact, I know of few other people who understood children as he did. When we all used to chase him over the house with a Jack o'Lantern, and he would hide in every available corner in turn, making all kinds of exhibitions of terror, I really believed that he was genuinely frightened.

My grandfather also found time for public affairs and was always active in the town meetings. For many years he served as deacon in the Congregational Church, an office

for which he was admirably suited, and which he performed with great dignity, both the weekly passing of the plate and the special duties in the baptism service. I well remember how he looked, leading in the parents and their little ones. No one would have thought that he was eighty years old, except for his white hair, which only made him appear venerable.

There was one memorable Sunday when an event happened in church which I must not fail to relate. My grandfather rose from his pew as usual and approached the front of the church, calmly, though he grew somewhat surprised and disconcerted as he became aware of the heroic efforts of the entire congregation to control their mirth. Not until he held the plate in his hand, did he turn, to find his small granddaughter close beside him. She had been placed under his care, and he should not desert his post for the sake of religion. Also, the young lady had a great curiosity to see what the altar and the pulpit looked like nearby, and did not intend to let the opportunity slip.

To whatever duty he undertook, my grandfather was always faithful. With the exception of the winter months spent in Florida during his later years, he went regularly to his business each day, until less than a year before his death, at the age of eighty-three. On the Sunday before his last Christmas, since he was far from well, those about

him practically forbade him to attend church. "I will go," he said, and they could do nothing more. He performed his duties as usual, but for the last time, for he did not leave the house again after that day. The last public act of Elmore T. Ide was one connected with religious devotion; a fitting close for a happy and useful life.