

## Grace Jewett Austin (1872-1948)

Grace Merrill Jewett Austin was born on January 12, 1872 in Laconia, New Hampshire. She was the daughter of Dr. and Mrs. A.H.C. Jewett. Grace graduated from Laconia High School in 1888 and went on to graduate from New Hampshire Conference Seminary and Female College in Tilton, N.H. in 1891. She later attended Ohio Wesleyan University in Delaware, Ohio. Her family moved to Washington, D.C. in 1891. She lived with them until her marriage to Francis M. Austin on March 8, 1893.<sup>1</sup> Their wedding trip included a stop at the Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago, Grace's first glimpse of Illinois. They had three daughters: Elizabeth, Lois, and Marion. Looking back on her life, she considered it in the fashion of a mathematical chart. The line would reach from one corner to another in zigzags as she moved across sections of the country.<sup>2</sup> This is how she highlighted the various events in her life. The two most important points on her chart of life were her first twenty years as a faculty wife at Illinois Wesleyan and then her twenty-four years as a newspaper woman for *The Bulletin* and *The Pantagraph*.

The first pinpoint on her chart was her birth and up bringing in New Hampshire, the second her marriage in Washington, D.C. However, she considered her story to start in 1901 on the fourth pinpoint. Grace, her husband, and two children had moved back to Washington, D.C. from Massachusetts where her husband had been a professor at the Wesleyan Academy in Wilbraham, MA. While in D.C., Grace was able to care for her widowed mother while her husband Francis commuted to and from Washington, D.C. to complete his doctorate at John Hopkins University in Baltimore, MD.

In 1902 Grace and her family moved to Bloomington where her husband had accepted a position at Illinois Wesleyan University. Grace recalled later in life the day when her husband had decided to move the family to Bloomington. They were vacationing at Harper's Ferry, WV. when he received a telegram announcing his election to the chair of Latin at Illinois Wesleyan University. Although he had been offered a fellowship at John Hopkins, the mid-west called to him.<sup>3</sup> Grace and the children remained in Washington, D.C. while Francis moved to Bloomington to set up a household. Francis sent letters back to Grace stating that he liked the city and IWU. Grace considered her interim months in Washington, D.C. between 1901 and 1902 as the simplest. She maintained an active social life despite plans to move to Bloomington. Grace attended several functions including the "Congress of Mothers" and heard Susan B. Anthony speak on Women's Suffrage. She also was a member of the Big Metropolitan Church in D.C. where many U.S. Presidents chose to worship. The Pastor of the church hailed from Kankakee, IL and told Grace that Bloomington was one of the most beautiful cities in the mid-west.<sup>4</sup>

Later in the year Grace and her children finally made their way to Bloomington where they would reside in a home located on Prairie Street. Grace recalled later in life that her first year in Bloomington was a trying one. The children had the measles and mumps, Frank suffered from rheumatism, and Grace ailed from grippe, (now called the flu). To add to the mess, the streets were not paved which caused the mud to wreak havoc on her household. And finally,

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<sup>1</sup> "Grace Jewett Austin Dies in Dallas, Texas" *The Pantagraph*, September 9, 1948

<sup>2</sup> Clara Kessler. *Hometown in the Cornbelt, A Source History of Bloomington, Illinois, 1900-1950*, Volume V. (Bloomington: self published, 1950) 116

<sup>3</sup> Kessler, 117

<sup>4</sup> Kessler, 117

Grace was attempting to cook with soft coal and hard water which created lime deposits on her cookware. Her only salvation during that first year was a Japanese student by the name of Sukesige Yanagiwara whom they took in as a boarder. He was earning his degree at IWU and in need of a place to stay and income. Francis, knowing of Grace's difficulties, welcomed him into their home. Not only did Grace find a friend and helper in the young student, but she also learned about the rich and diverse Japanese culture.<sup>5</sup> When he left, Grace stayed in touch finding that he had returned to Japan after a brief period in New York City. Following the departure of Sukesige, their house on Prairie Street was sold and they would be forced to find a new place to live. With a housing shortage, there was little prospect of them finding another home near the campus. Grace packed up and took the children for an "extended visit" to her mother's in Washington, D.C.<sup>6</sup>

After her "extended visit" in Washington, Grace and her children returned to Bloomington permanently. She would make a mark as a faculty wife and in the community as well. Grace devoted time to working with children in the community and in the church. Grace and her family joined Grace United Methodist. Within the church, Grace formed a junior league for young boys and girls not yet old enough for other young people's groups. She taught Sunday school and organized plays and pageants. Grace also became one of the first Campfire guardians in Central Illinois. This group was not affiliated with a national club but was sponsored by her church. The Camp Fire Girls included teens from Sunday school and a missionary organization. The group eventually became non-denominational as girls from other churches wanted to join.

Grace also began writing during this time. She consistently published her writings which appeared in both religious and secular magazines. She was first and foremost a poet and playwright. Among her varied works she penned throughout her life were *Scythe Left Behind* (1941), *The Pot O' Magic* (1922), and *Sarah Bradlee Fulton, A Patriot, A Colonial Drama in Three Acts* (1919).

Unfortunately, with outward success came personal tragedy. First, Grace's daughter Lois died on July 8, 1919, at the age of 28 from a goiter, (a swelling of the thyroid). She had just graduated from the University of Illinois a month prior. Next, Grace's husband Francis passed away on February 22, 1922 from pneumonia. The death of her husband and the need for a way to continue to raise and support their youngest child Elizabeth would require Grace to enter the workforce.<sup>7</sup>

At the age of fifty she took a part-time job at the *The Daily Bulletin* in the summer of 1922. Grace had never before worked a day in her life outside of family and social duties. She did however have poems printed on a daily basis in *The Daily Bulletin* during the final year her husband was alive. The paper had offered her a part-time job but her duties at home as a wife and mother kept her from accepting it at the time. However, after the death of her husband, this was the solution to her problem. She was expected at her desk at seven in the morning every day. As a society writer, she would often stay late into night if there were any social or civic occasions to be reported on or until her review of concerts etc... was written to her satisfaction. Examples of events she would have reported on included afternoon teas, charity events, and visitors to Bloomington. In addition, to avoid any favoritism she worked hard to appropriately present the news of all the local country clubs and colleges.

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<sup>5</sup> Kessler, 120

<sup>6</sup> Kessler, 120

<sup>7</sup> Kessler, 124

Grace was very successful in her work writing for the society page. In fact, she was so successful that her bosses promoted her to editor of the Women's Interest Page a year and a half after she began writing at *The Daily Bulletin*. They praised her work stating that "the altitude the social column has reached after its long stretch of development brings home a bit of laurel to Bloomington....*The Bulletin's* Woman's Interests Page, under the direction of the capable Grace Jewett Austin, pleasingly attests."<sup>8</sup> Grace was now expected to write a daily column of style notes for women. This entailed interviewing stores that advertised the latest in women's fashion. The column became known as *Dame Fashion Smiles*. Upon her accepting this position, Grace was interviewed by a trade journal known as *The City Editor and Reporter*. In this interview she was asked whether she felt that she could handle the social page alone. She replied that she felt she could even though she had a heavy burden of responsibility from three sources: the city, her editor, and the foreman of the composing room. She had to work hard to balance the needs of those three sources to put out an accurate, respectful, and quality page.<sup>9</sup> She also said that the part of the work she enjoyed the most was the hour she spent in the morning "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."<sup>10</sup>

Her work developed so successfully that it became syndicated by the *Western Newspaper Union* and was distributed in several hundred small town newspapers throughout the country. Several papers including the *United States Publisher* carried her column, which lauded her ability to mix fashion and philosophy. Grace was from now on known as "Dame Fashion." She had such a following that many stores in Bloomington dressed their store windows to meet her approval. One such store advertised, "Fabrics Sponsored by Dame Fashion Compose the Fall Displays."<sup>11</sup> Amid her achievement, *The Bulletin* went out of existence having been bought out by Bloomington's other daily newspaper, *The Pantagraph*, in 1927. Luckily, Grace retained her job as society page editor and from that day on, Grace was now a member of *The Pantagraph* family until her retirement in 1940.

Beyond writing, she had a rather unique hobby of collecting elephant trinkets in all sizes. Her collection numbered over 2,600 elephants. Grace even made the acquaintance of the woman, Miss Vera Warrock of Rosebud, Texas, who owned the record collection of 11,000 elephants. Although Grace's collection fell short of the largest, she believed she held the second largest collection in the United States.

Grace resided for many years at "Three Elms" located at 1002 North East Street and then at "The Oaks" apartments on Grove Street. In 1946 she moved to Dallas, Texas to live with her daughter Elizabeth. After just two years living in Texas, Grace passed away on September 27, 1948 in Dallas. Her body was brought back to Bloomington and she was buried alongside her husband and daughter Lois in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery. Grace Jewett Austin's lifelong stories and adventures could fill pages. For a half century she traveled and gave lectures, but never strayed from her passion as a poet and playwright.<sup>12</sup> Even though her gifts to the city of Bloomington were numerous, her greatest contribution can be found in the hearts of her friends

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<sup>8</sup> Kessler, 125

<sup>9</sup> Kessler, 126

<sup>10</sup> Kessler, 127

<sup>11</sup> Kessler, 128

<sup>12</sup> Kessler, 129

and strangers who crossed her path. As put by one Pantagraph editor, “she smiled at everyone she approached.”<sup>13</sup>

By: Emily Swartz, 2010

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<sup>13</sup> Kessler, 129