

One of the Best of Omaha's Institutions Talks of Retiring

An Appreciation of Father John Williams by Robert Cowell:

SOME twenty-six years ago, as I went to and from my home to my place of business, I passed daily a plain frame church with its modest parsonage, and in a little plot of ground adjoining frequently I saw a tall gentleman of middle age, in the full vigor of manhood, planting and trimming the shrubs and flowers of his garden. In the plainest priestly garb, his more than average height gave him a somewhat austere appearance, perhaps bordering on the ascetic.

The description of Samson of St. Edwards I have thought more than once seemed to fit him. "He has a mild, grave face; a thoughtful sternness, a sorrowful pity; but there is a terrible flash of anger in him, too."

During the last year I have seen many times the mild, grave face, occasionally the look of thoughtful sternness, and often and often the look of sorrowful pity as he sat considering the losses and needs of those who suffered from the terrible disaster of last Easter day. Usually of cheerful mood, I imagine that many of his parishioners would fall to recognize in this description their beloved pastor—and the people of Omaha, most of whom know and love him—who are accustomed to his kindly smile, could never believe it true that there could be "a terrible flash of anger in him, too."

Having seen his attitude and expression towards shams and impositions, I know that all the threats of a Coeur de Lion would not affright him, but that, like the good abbot, he would answer, "I, for my part, never can be bent to wish that he seeks, nor shall it by me be ever done."

Dear Father Williams, how those who have been associated with you during the last year have come to love and admire you—every member of our community will testify. I am not so sure but that in my own case something is due to racial kinship. "Blood is thicker than water," it

is said. Tradition has it that the little island where I was born, Eilan Vannin Veg Veen, (the dear little Isle of Man) was once a part of Ireland. Finn MacCoole, a great giant and magician, while in pursuit of a vanquished enemy picked up a portion of the old sod and threw it after his foe. Doubting Thomases have been silenced when confronted with proof, for does not the outline of Lough Neagh in Ireland correspond to the jagged contour of the land of my birth, set like a jewel in the Irish sea? The Celts are by nature fighters, and Father Williams is a true Celt, for he was born in the Emerald Isle, and lived there, I think, until he was 16 years of age. For a quarter of a century I have watched him battle against wrong and oppression, and it has been my privilege to labor with him in an effort to remove friction between labor and capital, so that the tollers might get justice. His leanings and his sympathies are, I believe, constantly with the masses, and yet his fine sense of right would ever make him mete out justice to those who employ labor. True to himself, he never could be false to any man, rightly fitted, indeed, to bear what George Washington considered the most enviable of all titles, the character of an "honest man."

As was said of Walter Scott, "No sounder piece of British manhood was put together," and yet he is no longer British, but thoroughly American, for has he not spent and lived almost the Psalmist's allotted span of life in this his adopted country? And, incidentally, he is showing a little of the Celtic spirit just now in fighting for his right to vote, a right which he has exercised for almost a half a century.

Nearly 80 years young, as the Autocrat would say, no man is more faithful or tireless when there is work to do. From early morning till late at night he is still ready to hearken to the call of distress and minister to the needy. "There is, indeed a kind of character in his life that to the observer doth his history unfold."

There are, I know, hundreds of people in our

city who are outside of the church, which is so dear to him, who have been cheered by his kindly word or assisted from his not too plethoric purse. In distress or suffering every needy human is treated as a brother. I know something of the affection felt for him by his own people. Some who were baptized, confirmed and married by him have expressed to me their love and admiration, and it is not a light or common thing to have this said and felt for one who has gone in and out among our people for something like forty years. Clear of head and warm of heart, may he be spared long.

To speak the simple word,
Which now and then
Shall waken their free nature in the
Weak and friendless sons of men.

Such men are needed more than ever in these days when so many important problems are facing us for solution. Many a poor Magdalene and many a friendless man have received comfort from his ministrations. He has talked of retiring and giving place to a younger man. He has earned—well earned—rest and respite from the cares and responsibilities incident to the life of a faithful, earnest priest. We hope, however, that he will still be an emeritus pastor, for his flock, I am sure, would miss, as I know I should (although only an occasional visitor at his church), his kindly greeting and fatherly counsel.

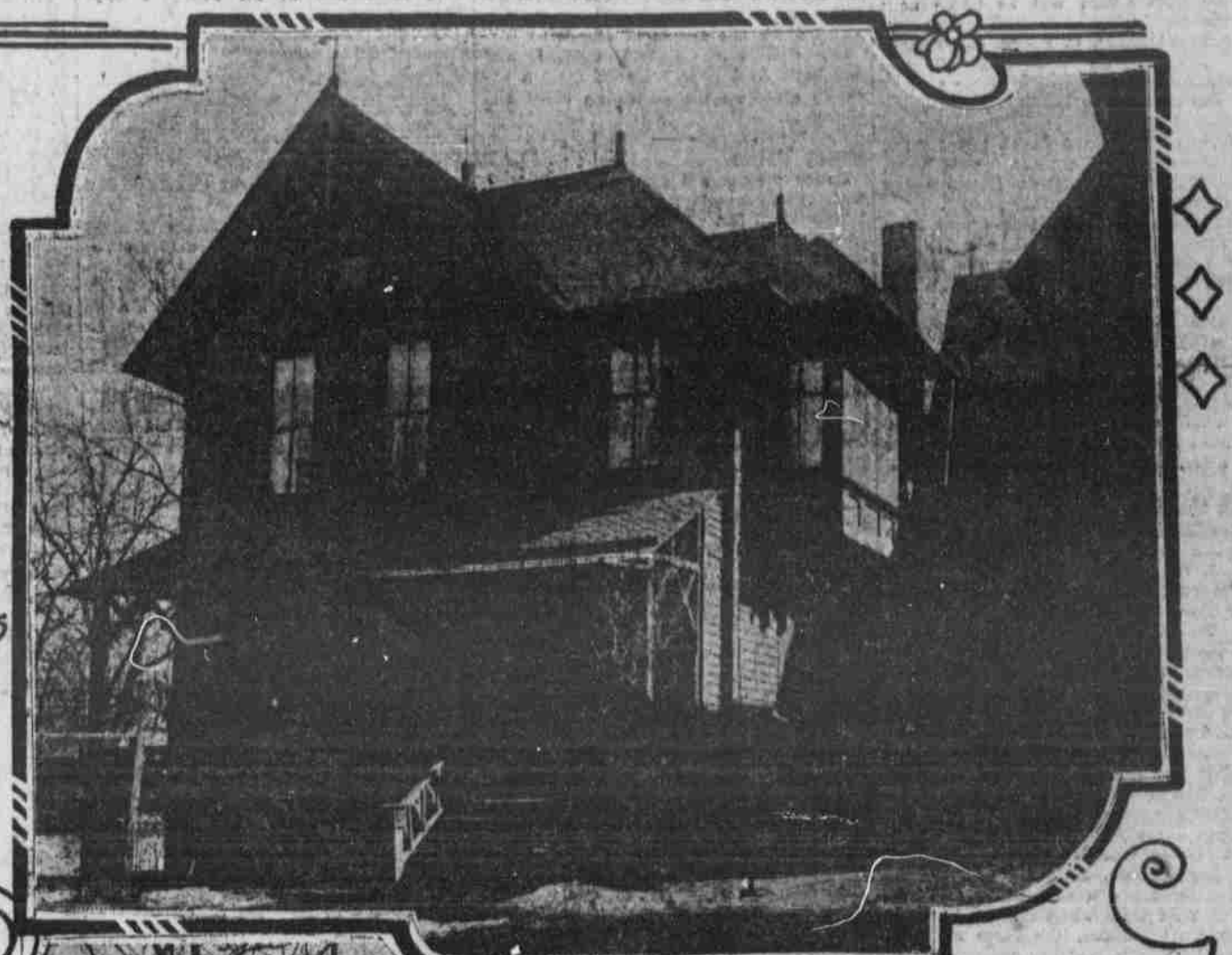
I pay this tribute with considerable feeling of trepidation, knowing as I do his abhorrence of praise and publicity, but I am prompted to do so, first, because I promised and, more than all, because I believe in flowers for the living.

Yes, intellectual, cultured, kindly, dear Father Williams, we hope that you may be spared to us for many years, and if it is your desire, and God so wills it, may we celebrate with you your century birthday. In these days when there is so much that is tinsel, it is good to know and have in our midst one who is so well fitted
To bear without abuse
The grand old name of gentleman.

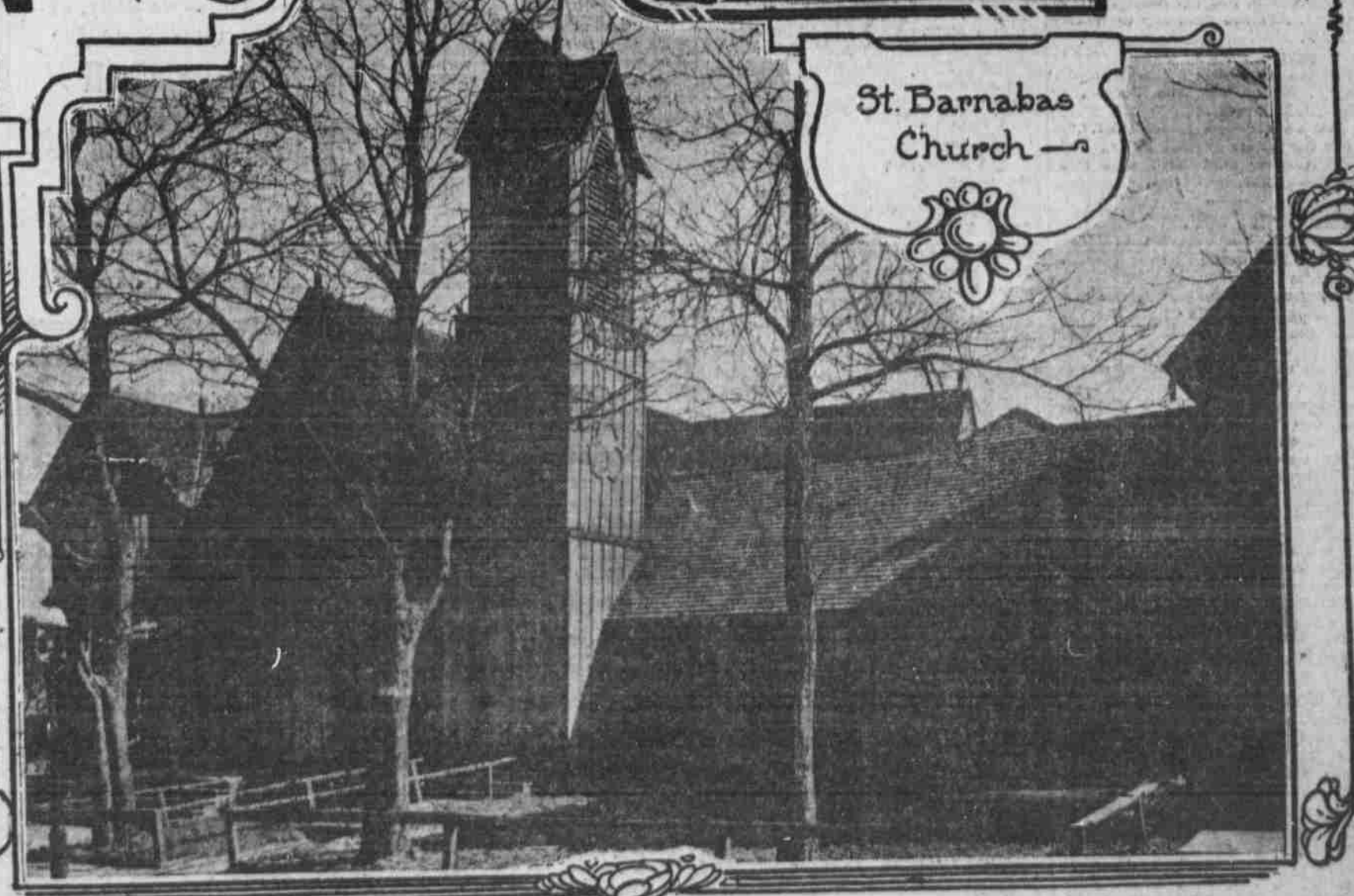


Father John Williams

St. Barnabas Rectory



St. Barnabas Church



"A man he was to all the country dear,
And passing rich at forty pounds a year."

WHEN Goldsmith wrote those lines he had no thought of Father John Williams of Omaha, Neb. No, that was long before Omaha, or Nebraska, or Father John Williams of St. Barnabas' Episcopal church were known. Goldsmith did not know at that time that the type of man he was writing about would yet be born and live out his modest, useful and elevating life of some fourscore years in a little parish in Omaha.

Passing rich, indeed, was Father John Williams in his long service of nearly thirty-eight years in the little parish of St. Barnabas. Rich, not in lumps of precious metals, stamped with official eagles and national shields, but rich in happiness born of a life of service. What better evidence could there be of his sincerity than that thirty-seven years ago he resolved to spend his life serving the little parish of St. Barnabas at Nineteenth and California streets instead of striving for greater and greater positions to bring him more and more money, and larger and larger fame?

"If there is anything I despise it is the life of a tramp priest," says Father Williams, now that he is ready to retire from the active ministry at the age of 79. "I wanted to find a place where I could go to work and where I could be established and spend my life. I didn't want to be jumping around from place to place."

So when he had been at the head of the parish in Omaha for a year he resigned and gave his people a chance to accept the resignation or take him for life.

They agreed to take him for life. He has served them for thirty-eight years and now retires, as he will be 79 years old next summer.

During all these years he has preached in the little frame church building, built when the echoes of Civil War cannon had scarcely died away. For the little St. Barnabas church was built in 1869. This modest little structure, which like the noted tower of Pisa, today leans considerably from the perpendicular, is soon to be torn down. The parish is to move west a mile or more. There is talk of building the church somewhere west of Thirty-third street, perhaps on Douglas.

"I want the little church torn down and destroyed," said Father Williams when it was decided to sell the property. "I most assuredly don't want it to be used for somebody's barn. I can't bear to see it put to some common use. So I shall insist that it be torn down instead of moved away bodily."

Seeking no high position in the world, Father Williams has yet been active in Omaha. Here he cast his lot, and here he worked not to make dollars, but to make others happy, to do what he could to assuage pain, to help others bear their burdens. In critical times in Omaha his advice and counsel was sought by the men of affairs in the community. When friends and acquaintances were in distress they wanted Father Williams near.

And he came. No night was too dark, no weather too violent, for him to go when duty called. Thus it happened that years ago, hurrying through a black night to visit a sick friend in the south part of the city, he was held up by two robbers under the Seventh street viaduct. Hardy men refused to walk under that via-

duct alone at night, but Father Williams had no qualms. The ruffians stuck pistols in his face and demanded his valuables. He consented readily, but when they saw he was a priest they dismissed him without taking a single thing from his person, and begged his pardon for having interrupted him. He went on, gave what comfort he could to the sick friend and returned home unharmed.

It is nearly a quarter of a century ago that a big strike was on at the American smelter near the Douglas street bridge in Omaha. The 300 impassioned strikers came upon the 100 or more strikebreakers under the bridge and a riot commenced. The few policemen available were soon shoved into the corners and clubs and bricks began to crunch human flesh and bone. The strikers were administering fearful beatings to the strikebreakers. Among the people who had strolled to the bridge to view the strike situation that morning was Father Williams.

While the crowd stood helpless, there was a stir in their midst. Strong elbows began to bump their way through the crowd, and the next instant the sightseers saw the figure of Father Williams rush out toward the fight. Unarmed, alone, dressed in clerical garb, he plunged into the midst of the brutal spattering of fists and clubs. He raised his great voice, once, twice, and again, in behalf of peace and common sense. And as if by magic, the trouble subsided. Injured men slipped to the side lines and the aggressors slunk away as if ashamed.

The priest had accomplished by a message of peace what an armed force of policemen could not accomplish with clubs and "blackjacks."

Then he went back within the friendly walls of his little home at 523 North Nineteenth street. No Carnegie medal distributor sought him out, and if he had he would have been driven from the door. For Father Williams hates publicity.

"We are living far too much in the public eye today," says Father Williams. "I don't see why we can't go about our business without being written up in the newspapers and having a big fuss made over everything we do. The society pages of the newspapers are perfectly ridiculous. When anyone has a few friends in for luncheon it must come out in the newspapers. I think it is a shame. I don't see why, if I choose to have a few friends in for dinner or a little conference, why it should be anybody's business, or why I should be dragged into print about it."

Pugnacious always, when he feels he is in the right on a question, Father Williams is always in the thickest of the fight in a conference or any gathering in which an issue is being fought out. Unlike so many, however, he did not carry personal enmity out of a convention or conference.

He could fight a man all day in a parliamentary squabble involving vital public issues, and yet be the warmest friend of the man he was fighting. He saw only the issue, and the personnel of its champions made no difference to him. So strong was his faith in the inherent honesty of men that he gave all credit for believing what they advocated, and was willing to accept them as personal friends while he would fight their cause forever.

Thus he has engaged in many a tilt with Rev. T. J. Mackay, while he and Mr. Mackay are the warmest of friends.

Although anyone who lives west of the Allegheny mountains seldom cuts such figure in the general conventions of the Episcopal church in the east, Father Williams has always been recognized at these gatherings. He was always placed on some of the most important committees. It has been said of him that he was "always in the

minority," but always fighting for what he believed to be the right.

Born in Ireland, young Williams came to America with his parents when he was but 16. The family came to Massachusetts, where young Williams' father gave him his choice of going to school or getting a job and making his own living.

The lad chose work. "I did not want my father to be supporting (Continued on Page Eleven.)"