

# WILLIAM ALTSTADT WHOSE LIFE HAS BEEN A BUSY ONE

Der Schudge, Who Has Been Many Things in Many Climes Before He Became a Justice of the Peace in Omaha and Achieved a Reputation and a Name that is Far More than Local

**D**ER Schudge, "Little Bismarck." By at least one of these names nearly everybody knows Judge William Altstadt, justice of the peace and pioneer of Omaha. Those who do not know the round, jovial little man are missing a good deal. Those who have never seen him are really to be pitied. That's der schudge, the serious-looking little man hurrying along the street with a cigar in his mouth, his hands in his overcoat pockets and his German cap set straight on his head, its visor drawn well down over his eyes. He walks with short, quick steps. Der schudge is a busy man. Frequently he has to stop and talk to someone, for practically everyone knows him.

But the best place to meet him is in his court room, 433-34 Paxton block, where he has dispensed justice for nine years. You find him, perhaps, busy giving instructions to his stenographer. The little cap is still on his head. At first sight of his pursed lips, with the close-cropped, grey mustache on the upper one and his serious, even sternly questioning eyes, you may expect to meet a grouchy man. But you'll soon learn that der schudge is never out of sorts. The serious look is only one act of a general plot which is hatching behind those grey eyes that look at you from above the chubby red cheeks, a plot which will have its denouement in a pleasant joke at which the judge will chuckle so deeply that every inch of his fat little person will vibrate in unison in a veritable dance of joy.

Now his joke with you is over, you have shaken hands, looked down into his honest eyes and determined to be his friend forever.

A colored man comes in, for his trial is set to take place this morning. Again der schudge has assumed his mask of seriousness. "Dit you bring your lunch?" he demands sternly. But the colored man is an old offender. He knows the judge's little ways and so he only "yah-yahs" with mirth at this joke of the man who is soon to sit in judgment upon him.

This, however, is only one side of the judge. Upon the bench his mind is seriously and studiously bent upon the merits of the cases before him. He has a reputation for sound common sense and for impartial justice which has made the business of his court reach large proportions. His decisions are seldom questioned. Of course, there is the story of his reversing the supreme court, of which more hereafter.

### Boyhood Days in Germany

Even those who think they know Judge Altstadt well may not know half the facts about him. He is not a man to boast, but when questioned he is ready to give the facts of a remarkably eventful life. He was born July 6, 1835, in Kreuznach, Germany, a city of 50,000 people, famous for its baths and for the wine made in the surrounding country. His father, Joseph Altstadt, had been a Prussian soldier during the Napoleonic wars and had married later and settled down in Kreuznach as a wine and grain merchant. William went to the common schools and finished off his education in a "gymnasium." At the age of 15 years he left home, went up to Berlin and became an apprentice in the fine store of E. M. Austrich, located on Unter den Linden, just opposite the palace of the Russian ambassador. He arrived in the capital city April 30, 1851, and the following day his provincial eyes were dazzled by a procession in which the king and queen, members of the court, great generals and statesmen rode to the unveiling of the statue of Frederick the Great.

He spent three years as an apprentice in the store and then became a full fledged clerk. He was in his twentieth year when the firm sent him out all over Europe buying goods. He traveled to Liepzig, London, Birmingham, Manchester and into parts of Russia with remarkable success in spite of his youth. It was while thus engaged, he says, that he got the "wanderlust," the fever for roaming. He wanted to see the world. Leaving Berlin he went first to Frankfurt-on-the-Main and took a position in a wholesale bookstore as bookkeeper. But this he did not like and, after one year, he "packed his grip and went to Paris." He couldn't speak a word of French, but that did not keep him from hustling right into a lucrative position with the firm of Schluss Brothers. Pocketbooks as receptacles for money had just been put on the market and it was his work to meet the buyers who came to the city from all over the world and sell them pocketbooks.

### Too Short to Be a Soldier

During his stay in Paris he attained the age which made him liable for duty in the German army. It must be admitted by all fair-minded people that few men could, single-handed, hold at bay all the powers of that mighty military organization. Yet William Altstadt did it. This is the way he tells about it:

"While I was in Paris I got notification to come to Germany and be a soldier. I went, but I was not large enough. I returned to Paris and in a year I received again an order to come. I went again and yet I didn't grow big. A year later they called for me again, but still I was no bigger. So they gave me up and I was released from duty in the army."

A new railroad running from the city of Kirn to Paris had just been opened. It ran through Mr. Altstadt's home town, Kreuznach. He made application for a position as clerk. These positions were usually given only to men who had done or were doing service in the German army. But by reason of his high references and good handwriting, young Altstadt got a place in the civil engineering department at \$30 a month, which was equal to \$100 now. After being located in his home town one year he was transferred to a similar position at Kirn, the terminus.

There he met his wife. She was Miss Sophia Land. The parents of both objected to the marriage because she was a Catholic and he a Protestant. When the young man resigned his position, left Kirn and went to Paris the parents probably thought the match had been broken off. But those directly concerned knew better. Within a month Miss Land received a railroad ticket to go from Kirn to Paris. Two days later she arrived in that city and they were married April 17, 1856.

"We was married the same month as the emperor, Napoleon III, was married with Eugenie," he says, with a twinkle in his eyes, "but we did not invite them to the wedding because we were not on speaking terms."

### American Vision of Wealth

They continued to live in the gay French capital for four years after their marriage. Then they went to Mr. Altstadt's old home on a visit, accompanied by the two children which had been born to them. A sister of Mr. Altstadt's who had moved to New Orleans, U. S. A., was home on a visit and she painted golden pictures of America. "She told me," says the judge, "that if I would go to America I would be in a few years a millionaire."

So he determined to go to the United States. Leaving his wife and two children at the home of his parents, he set sail for New Orleans. There he presented strong recommendations from leading business houses of Berlin, Paris, Frankfurt and other places where he had worked and he soon secured a position with Koenig Brothers, a fancy dry goods house, at \$50 a month.

"With so much money I thought I could soon buy the United States already," says the judge. "Then the editor of a German newspaper coaxed me to come and be a reporter. I took the place at \$150 a month. Every Saturday night I had on my desk an envelope with \$26.50. Then I thought I would buy not alone the United States, but also Germany and England."

When the yellow fever broke out in New Orleans his eldest son was stricken down with the malady. They fought for his life through weeks and with the aid of the best American doctor in the city they pulled him through safe. Judge Altstadt saw some of the horrible scenes of those awful days when the carts went around from house to house with the cry, "Bring out your



WILLIAM ALTSTADT.

deed." When his son had recovered he determined that New Orleans was no place for him. He had heard of Omaha and determined to move thither. With his family he came up the river by boat to St. Joseph, thence by rail to Council Bluffs and on a raw April morning in 1867 he came across on the ferry boat to Omaha. "The first step I took off the boat I went up to my knees in mud," he says. He walked several blocks and then asked a man where Omaha was. The man told him he was in the heart of Omaha. He had been looking for a city, but made the best of what he found. He established his family in a little hotel kept by a German at the corner of Tenth and Douglas streets.

### Busy Days in Omaha

He immediately began looking for work and secured a position as clerk in the "Farmers' hotel," located on the southwest corner of Fourteenth and Harvey streets. This was kept by a Mrs. Riley. Her husband was the city marshal and it was he who first dubbed Mr. Altstadt "Little Bismarck." The title was bestowed partly because of a facial resemblance between Mr. Altstadt and the great Iron Chancellor, but more largely because, during the Franco-Prussian war Mr. Altstadt exhibited such a lively interest in the

newspaper reports of the great conflict and discussed the various battles with everybody who would talk of them.

Next we find our hero again in the field of journalism. In partnership with Charles Banks he founded a German newspaper, "Der Beobachter," which the two issued for two years from their printing office on the northwest corner of Thirteenth and Farnam streets. Then the red ribbon movement became prominent and Mr. Altstadt immediately threw in his weight upon that side of the fight opposed to Dr. George Miller. This was just at the time of the founding of The Bee by Edward Rosewater. Mr. Altstadt founded a paper which he called "The Flea."

"I went to Mr. Rosewater," he says, in reviewing the fortunes of his short-lived but active publication, "and asked him if I could print it on his press, which he gave me the permission to do. He had just a little wooden press and a big negro to run it. There I printed The Flea. I decided to make a trip out in the state to get subscriptions for my paper and I said to Mr. Rosewater I would solicit for his paper also. I sold the first subscription for The Weekly Bee to a man in the state house at Lincoln. It took me two days and a half to drive in a wagon from here to Lincoln. But after the people read The Bee they would no longer read The Flea, so the bee killed the flea."

## Physical Side of Handling Millions in Gold Coin

**N**EW YORK, Nov. 16.—The man in the street who isn't hard hit by the financial troubles has read many figures in these last few weeks. He has wondered if the typesetting machines hadn't stuttered while speaking ciphers and asked, "What's \$2,102,641,523.90 (the bank cleistings for the week ending October 26), and is there really so much money in the world, and where is it all at?"

The money represented by those twelve Arabic numerals isn't all in one place, nor in a thousand places, but there's a good big lot of it in the somber subterranean that stands downtown among a host of slender, ornate structures which seem to penetrate the skies. That squat and columned building grew up in seven long years (a neighbor five times as tall went up in as many months), but it has walls that are eight feet thick at the base and five at the eaves, and it has dozens of rifles and revolvers and two Gatling guns and scores of cases of ammunition, also some holes in the roof of the portico just over the doors, so the protectors may drop bombs on the heads of any persons who can't be repulsed in any other way.

In the little desk-crowded office—first floor to the right as you enter the building from the Wall street steps—a rotund, gray-haired man reached to the flat-top desk adjoining the one at which he sat, picked up a tall spindle, dropped his silver-rimmed spectacles into place and held the top-most paper on the peg beneath the light. It bore nine figures—no explanatory memoranda, not even a symbol.

"Two hundred and seventy million dollars," the rotund, gray-haired man interpreted. "That's exactly how much money we had on hand this morning."

If one goes down into the depths of the build-

ing and sees a little white sack filled with double eagles and peers into the gray vaults and sees also what looks like a dozen loads of the same kind of bags, and if he closes his fingers on a package that would easily slide into his overcoat pocket and which, he learns, contains 500 \$10,000 gold certificates—\$5,000,000—and then sees several safes filled to capacity with similar packages, he can realize, even if his mind cannot comprehend the amounts, what the big figures that appear in the subterranean statements mean.

This store has been more violently disturbed of late than in many years. Nearly \$50,000,000 in currency and an enormous mass of gold and silver certificates came in, and the fact that the daily balance didn't fluctuate much (only a few millions) indicates how hard the office force has worked and explains why they and W. G. Marlor, the cashier, were "all in," as one of the money toters said. Yet another view was expressed by one of the squad of scrubmen who entered the building on the heels of the last messenger hurrying out with his bag of gold.

"Shure, this bank business is about as hard as me own," she said. "Th' bankets you see around here lately do more sweatin' than I do on me knees scrubbin' up the dirt they leave behind. And the poor men here in th' bank (the subterranean she meant) they work harder 'n my ol' man. He's a hod-carrier."

So the physical aspect of these millions the public has read so much about lately is a matter of muscle to those who are in actual contact with the cash. Take, for instance, the coming \$10,000,000 in bullion on the steamship Lusitania. It sounds good to the workman whose savings are too securely locked up in a perfectly solvent bank, for he has read that all that is needed is more cash in circulation. But a million millions in gold bars aboard a hundred ships, or the

same amount piled in City Hall park wouldn't relieve the situation if it were not for the wailing of Uncle Sam's wand over it in the subterranean. There the bullion or coin is presented, after it is carted from the pier, and in an hour, if there is call for such swift exchange, John Jones may get a piece of it—a piece of the actual coin just come from Europe—when he presents his check at a bank window uptown. More likely, though, he would get some of the certificates issued against that value in gold.

As to the gold bars, they are taken at once to the assay office, the crowded little building that adjoins the subterranean on the east. There their weight and value are determined, and when that is done certificates are issued against them up to 90 per cent of their value. The bullion is not made into "coin of the realm" until later—until Uncle Sam or his men at the mints find it convenient to do so. That stock which has been tested and stored in the subterranean vaults is "as good as gold," so there's no hurry about converting it into eagles since the certificates are flying around.

Now and then in the recent series of runs on banks attention was called to the actual physical transfer of the cash which some depositors demanded. On one occasion an automobile carrying several bags of gold to a bank in Brownsville broke down near an East river ferry entrance and a crowd of tenement dwellers that gathered about the treasure car had to be held back by a squad of policemen. Again, a messenger boy skipped for a few hours with several thousand dollars in bills which he had drawn for his employer. But the general public, even close readers of the newspapers, did not know the circumstances of the transfer of an infinitesimal proportion of the total. Those few persons who stood in the main corridor of the subterranean saw the procession there—long lines of men, with here and there a woman, who rushed in with empty

bags or satchels, and walked out a little more sedately, bearing nobody but themselves and the paying tellers knew how much money.

And when the bearer of the gold or its equivalent got out into the crowded streets—what then? Why, he just walked along endeavoring to stimulate the careless stride and idle curiosity which in New York mark the man who has no deep concern. That no robberies of such messengers were reported in the course of the recent "panic" speaks well for their ability to "act just naturally" and in that way keep their valuable secrets; also it tells, perhaps, that the "trailers" were on the job—for trailers were there, strong detectives who are capable of handling any ordinary thief with lightninglike rapidity.

And while the messengers filed in the main corridor of the subterranean, got their money and hurried out, there was another channel from the building through which disbursements flowed even more rapidly. It was the little door in the Pine street side of the building, near which were lined up a curious array of vehicles—at one moment a hansom cab, a coupe, four automobiles, a grocer delivery wagon and a motorcycle. Men with proper certificates rushed into the building and, with short delay, helped the attendants to carry bags and bundles to the curb. Then into the tangle of traffic in the narrow downtown streets went the currency conveyors, to dispute the right-of-way with troubled truckmen.

All the time this extra work made necessary by the stringency is going on at the subterranean there is no respite from the regular business. Money continues to pour in from the postoffice, the customs, the internal revenue and other departments of the federal government, and the paymasters check against the deposits for the salaries of the men of the army, the navy and all other branches of the government service—a business which proceeds with precision, panic or no panic,

Abandoning the field of journalism after the demise of The Flea, he donned the grey uniform of Uncle Sam, not as a soldier but as a letter carrier. He holds the distinction of being the first letter carrier in Omaha. Later he entered the registry department and altogether he was an employe of the postoffice for eighteen years.

In 1885 he left Omaha and went to North Platte, where he leaped for the first time into the political arena and was elected justice of the peace. All of his time was not taken up with the duties of the position and he was part owner of the Bismarck saloon. It was in North Platte that he attained to national reputation by his celebrated reversal of the supreme court. The keeper of a saloon and beer garden was arrested for keeping open on Sunday. The case was brought before Judge Altstadt. The man pleaded guilty. Things looked bad for the thirt emporiums of North Platte at that moment. Scarcely had the offerer made his plea when Judge Altstadt said:

"You are discharged."

The county attorney was on his feet in an instant, wildly waving his arms.

"Your honor surely cannot have heard the prisoner's plea," he exclaimed. "The prisoner pleaded 'guilty' and besides, the supreme court has decided conclusively that saloons cannot keep open except on week days."

"The prisoner," said the court, "is a man of poor repute in the community. It is true what you say about the supreme court and about his pleading guilty, but how can I believe a man with such a reputation when he pleads guilty. He is discharged."

His fame went over all the country and his local popularity was so great that he was re-elected almost unanimously to the office. In North Platte he became acquainted with Colonel Cody, "Buffalo Bill," and traveled all over the United States with "The Prairie Wave" company, of which Buffalo Bill was the head. Mr. Altstadt was treasurer of the company and played the part of the German comedian with eminent success.

On his return to Omaha he entered the employ of the postoffice again and later held positions in the offices of the register of deeds, the county clerk and the city treasurer. Then he leaped once more into the political arena as candidate for county clerk. He secured the nomination, but when the votes were counted after the election it was found that he had just three votes less than J. R. Manchester, his opponent.

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