

Omaha Men Who Have Won Distinction as Orators



G. W. Wattles



A. W. Jefferis



John Mellen Thurston



John L. Kennedy



Judge Lee Estelle



H. D. Estabrook



Senator Norris Brown



C. J. Smyth



Wm. E. Gurley



John S. Ryder



Robert Cowell

EVEN as Greece boasts Demosthenes, who perfected his speech for his chosen field of oratory by haranguing the mad waves with his mouthful of gravel, so can Omaha boast of men who developed oratorical abilities here in one manner and another. Even as Hanover county, Virginia, can boast of cradling the ambitions of Patrick Henry as this laxy boy dropped his fish pole on the banks of the Pamunkey river long enough to deliver an oration to the audience of gasping pickerel and sunfish he had arranged on the bank before him, so Omaha can boast of fostering the ambitions of a dozen men who have become more or less well known for their ready tongues in public speaking.

True, these were not all cradled in Omaha. True, a few of them may have delivered orations as boys to droves of sheep in their father's pen back in the east before coming to Nebraska, but it was the real life and activities of Omaha that brought these abilities to maturity.

Where Smyth Made a Start

Was not C. J. Smyth caught reading law on the sly back in 1881 in the Union Pacific office in Omaha? To be sure, he was born in New York City, but he had to come west to give his ambitions a chance to swell. So he got a job as a clerk at Union Pacific headquarters in Omaha. There he worked at a high desk all day. If he hurried through his work it did no good, for someone was always at hand to shove more work upon him. So C. J. solved the problem. He put a ledger before him on the high desk. That made it look like he was working on the ledger. Then he pulled out a drawer farther down. In that drawer lay a law book wide open. Just as boys in the country schools set up a geography on their desk and then read "Diamond Dick" behind its covers, so C. J. Smyth read law behind his ledger at the Union Pacific. These stolen moments were the start that finally brought the young man to the bar in Omaha. Soon his abilities as a speaker attracted attention. His speech of several hours in the United States circuit court in Omaha in defense of Agnes Prizell of Little Rock, Ark., attracted attention and was looked upon by many who heard it as a masterpiece. In 1896 Mr. Smyth went to the democratic convention at Chicago as a member of the contesting delegation, of which John A. Creighton and William J. Bryan were also members. Mr. Smyth there made a brilliant speech pleasing W. J. Bryan in nomination for the presidency for his famous free silver campaign. Through the ups and downs of the great campaign Smyth has stuck by him, and has this year been rewarded by receiving the appointment as special assistant to the attorney general, where it is his business to run down illegal combinations in big business throughout the west.

Judge Estelle Some Chautauker

Judge Lee Estelle, now of the district bench in Douglas county, has long been known for his oratorical abilities. Not only Omaha people, but many throughout the state, have known of his powers for years through hearing him at chautauques and at Memorial day exercises. Being a veteran of the civil war, he has long been in demand for addresses over the graves of the soldiers at various cemeteries throughout the state, and many are those who can quote from the fine sentiments expressed by him on such occasions. Years ago he was an assistant secretary of the Nebraska senate. There he acted as reading clerk. That was back in the early '70s. Reading all the bills, with their endless verbiage, was no small task. Reading them aloud, and so that all in the senate could hear them, was also no small task. Here he discovered that he had some powers of voice endurance at least. Throughout his law practice, his county attorneyship, and later his judgeship, his oratorical powers have been developed until they rank among the first in the city and state.

Jefferis the Official Booster

A. W. Jefferis has become the official booster orator for the Omaha trade excursions whenever

these plunge out into the state to tell the good people what good people Omahans are. Mr. Jefferis can do it, too, and he means what he says. For a number of years he has been one of the star orators on whom the delegation depended at the republican state conventions. When the Ak-Sar-Ben wants a good man to close the season's circus at the Den, Jefferis has been known to deliver the closing oration in a way that made visitors and Omahans alike sad at the thought that the season of tomfoolery was drawing to a close. When in honor of the first second-term boom launched for Taft the president sent a flag to the little bunch of Taft boosters in Omaha in 1911, Jefferis made a great speech at the hoisting of that flag. It was there when the flag was hoisted on Greer's lawn September 9, 1911, that A. W. Jefferis made one of the great tariff speeches upholding the president, his policies and the republican administration. He is president of the Pennsylvania society in Omaha, and there is always looked to for something good.

Gurley Has Won Many Triumphs

William F. Gurley of Omaha went to Galena, Ill., a few years ago as the star orator on the occasion of a celebration there at the birthplace of General Grant. Gurley's abilities as an orator had been thoroughly recognized in Omaha and thus gained also some national prominence. In 1909, when a centennial celebration in honor of the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln was held at the Auditorium in Omaha, Mr. Gurley delivered the principal address. In 1911 he made one of the principal addresses before the American Bar association at Boston. Returning from there, one morning he found the Taft flag being formally hoisted, and found also that J. L. Kennedy, who was scheduled for an address, could not be present. He strolled out and was pressed into service to take Kennedy's place. The ever-ready Gurley there delivered a masterly eulogy of the flag, going into its history and closing with an imposing flourish in the way of swearing allegiance again to the Stars and Stripes.

Jack Ryder a Natural Talker

J. J. Ryder, at present police commissioner of Omaha, has won spurs for his oratorical powers.

Before coming to Omaha he was in the Minnesota legislature as reading clerk. There he had a chance to develop his voice, also perhaps a chance to polish off whatever stage fright he might have had. Jack always had nerve, anyway. So it was no great matter for him to get up and say what he thought at any time. That faculty, together with some ideas and the voice he developed in Minnesota, soon brought him to the attention of Omaha people. He was state labor commissioner in Nebraska under Governor Sheldon, and as such gained some further public notice. He has been the star orator for the Elks and Eagles of Omaha at the various local, state and national conventions. Elected as police commissioner in Omaha, he soon gained a reputation as a fearless speaker on civic affairs, and has since that time been in demand as a speaker on all questions of great importance in city affairs. He has twice been elected president of the League of American Municipalities. Out at Prairie Park addition, where he lives, he is each year selected to deliver the oration at the Fourth of July celebration held there each year.

Wattles Full of Concrete Facts

G. W. Wattles, president of the Omaha & Council Bluffs Street Railway company, is one of the men of Omaha who have won some recognition as public speakers. A master mind in financial affairs, he does not waste time striving for fine phrasing. "Like Mark Antony" of old, he "only talks right on" but he says something every minute. It is facts and figures that emanate from his lips. He knows whereof he speaks and he speaks of it. A member of the legislature in days past, his voice was heard and heeded. Back in 1898 he was president of the Transmississippi and International exposition, the great world's fair that put Omaha back on the map. In that capacity he had to do more sound, hard calculating than orating, but always he filled the bill. A number of years ago, when a banquet was given in Omaha in honor of the late President McKinley, Mr. Wattles made a notable speech eulogizing the martyred president and giving vivid reminiscences drawn from his personal acquaintance with President McKinley.

voice at public gatherings has often pleased. In the United States senate his voice has commanded attention on many public questions on which he has with honor and dignity upheld the republican policies. As county attorney of Buffalo county years ago he began to attract attention as a young lawyer of promise and a speaker of no mean ability. Soon he leaped into the seat of attorney general of the state of Nebraska and in a short time he found himself in the United States senate, where he served with distinction. Ousted from the United States senate by the vicissitudes of politics, he is again back in his law office, and his voice is again lifted to juries in defense of clients.

Cowell is Thoughtful and Polished

Robert Cowell, a man who never aspired to salaried public offices, and who has been content to work on as a member of the firm of Thomas Kilpatrick & Co., has recognized abilities in the line of public speaking. Finished, forceful and dignified, his public address always commands attention. Keen in financial matters, his word is golden in gatherings where financial matters are considered. Active in politics for years, he has sought no office for salary's sake. Elected to the office of railway commissioner a number of years ago, as a member of the first commission, he resigned as soon as he found that the job was to take all his time for which he was to receive a good salary. He preferred to remain at his post in Omaha and let someone else take the salaried job and move to Lincoln. Chairman of the republican county and city committees back in 1903 and 1904, his voice guided the local republicans in the campaign for the election of Roosevelt; after that president had finished the unexpired term of the martyred McKinley. Years ago Mr. Cowell wore a flourishing mustache. Whether he shaved it in order to give his upper lip better play in his oratorical efforts he refuses to say. At any rate, the mustache is gone and he is still speaking whenever occasion calls him. When it became the sad duty of the Omaha people to organize relief work here to care for those who had suffered from the Easter tornado, Robert Cowell's financial plan was the one that was followed. He was one of the first to suggest a real constructive plan of operation in the committee meetings, and

he was on his feet repeatedly talking for his plan until it was adopted.

Kennedy is in Much Demand

John L. Kennedy is ranked among the local crop of orators. Long has his voice been raised in the cause of Nebraska's republicanism, and also of national republicanism. In the hall of congress his voice was heard, for he was a member there. He enjoyed a personal acquaintance with W. H. Taft as secretary of war before that worthy gentleman even had a dream in regard to the presidential chair. As a member of the Nebraska republican committee Mr. Kennedy's voice has been heard in Nebraska politics for years. As chairman of the republican state committee, 1911 to 1912, he was an ardent supporter of Taft and allowed his voice to be heard in his behalf. Being a polished talker, he is much sought after as a speaker for special occasions. Even the woman suffrage people have taken advantage of his prestige as a speaker and got him to deliver an address to their state convention in Omaha last winter. He made the introductory talk at the Methodist Episcopal church introducing former Vice President Fairbanks, when he spoke there a few weeks ago.

Estabrook's Failure Won Him Fame

Henry D. Estabrook, formerly of Omaha, now practicing law in New York City, gave promise of oratorical powers from his boyhood. Nor did he go back on that promise. As a young man even in high school he had an unusual vocabulary. He held a place on the Omaha High school debating team that went to Council Bluffs and trimmed up the young giants over there. In those days Estabrook carried constantly in his pocket a book of synonyms and antonyms, and he constantly referred to it in order to enrich his vocabulary. Soon after he engaged in the practice of law in Omaha, with Earl B. Coe as law partner, he was invited to deliver a Fourth of July oration at Blair, Neb. He wrote his speech the night before the Fourth in his little office in Omaha. To feed himself an inspiration he borrowed the last money in the cash drawer of the firm that night and got a bottle of champagne to stimulate the activity of his brain. He wrote on Abraham Lincoln. His partner read the speech over and pronounced it a masterpiece. Estabrook agreed. The next day he delivered it at Blair. The Blairites did not agree with the two young lawyers as to the masterliness of the address and gave him little applause. He came home sick at heart. Still he made other addresses and was well received. Twenty-five years later he was invited to deliver an address before the Marquette club in Chicago. He cocked a doubtful eye at his old Blair speech and wondered if he dared tackle it again. Surely if Blair did not think it good, Chicago would egg him out of town. But he nerved himself and set manfully to work to learn the thing by heart again. The day after the speech was delivered at Chicago the papers of the country carried long extracts from his speech and pronounced it a masterpiece. He and his champagne bottle were vindicated.

In 1906, during the McKinley campaign, Estabrook delivered some political speeches at Chicago. His speeches were the marvel of the audiences and of the politicians on account of the great wealth of statistics he poured out from memory. He left Omaha some years ago and removed to New York City, where he became general attorney for the Western Union Telegraph company. Later he engaged in general practice in New York, and during his residence in New York has made some notable