

DR. MORRILL'S PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS
[of Ralph Waldo Emerson's Visit to New Albany]

Written November 3, 1889

Some twenty years ago New Albany had each winter a course of popular lectures, supplied by men of eminent ability and world-wide fame. It will be my endeavor to recall an incident or two connected with one so justly renowned as Mr. Ralph Waldo Emerson - who was then on a lecture tour which embraced this city. As one of the committee on the lecture course, it devolved upon me to meet and entertain at my house a few of the lecturers, among whom was Mr. Emerson.

It was a cold, bleak wintry afternoon in December when Mr. Emerson alighted from the "Dinky" at Bank Street with a small satchel in his hand. He was very easily recognized from others who got off the train. He was tall, smooth-faced, clear complexion, hair slightly silvered. He was then sixty-three years old and had one of the most peculiar noses, so delicately shaped and curved and of a size one could not help but notice. But it was the personal presence of so much character, light and sweetness that then greeted me which made recognition easy.

Once domiciled before a glowing fire after tea, Mr. Emerson was a fluent, though unobtrusive talker. His was a joyous nature. He amused and entertained himself with what he saw around him. A little daughter of one or two years old was playing about when he invited her to come to him. I shall never forget the manner in which he made the invitation. It was so graceful, so tender, so kind, that the embrace was lovingly cordial. A strong believer in manual labor, his hands were large as any working man's, but when they lifted the child to his embrace, the gentle and caressing touch they had would win the admiration of all mothers. It was this unconscious simplicity, his polished manners, and the pervading sweetness of his nature that made him a ray of sunshine wherever he entered.

That night he delivered his epigrammatic lecture at the Universalist Church to a sparse but appreciative audience. We came home no wise despondent. A neighboring friend or two came in. He began talking on various topics, but chiefly on men and women who occupied a high sphere in letters or were platform orators. Of Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes he said he was amused to learn from the Doctor what an experience he had while reading before a New York audience some poems, among which was one entitled "The Old Sergeant" written by Forcythe Willson, a cordial friend of George D. Prentice, and which appeared in the Louisville Journal. Dr. Holmes did not know who wrote it, but the pathos was so touching while reciting that, desired greatly to know the real author. To bring this about he wrote letters to different persons in all directions. At last a letter came telling him that it was Mr. Forcythe Willson who lived at his next door in Cambridge, Mass. They were both meeting and passing each other daily without knowing one another. When the humorist found this out he wrote a polite note to the young poet inviting him to call upon him. Immediate introduction followed, and he was taken to the Atlantic Monthly Club Room, in Boston, where a more extensive acquaintance among that literary circle was given him. It was here that Mr. Emerson first saw him, and afterward was delighted by his acquaintance.

To me he addressed many inquiries about the poet's father, who was Mr. Hiram Wilson, at one time residing in New Albany, a man of sterling worth and integrity. He was especially interested in any bits of biography concerning the poet, of which I knew.

Wendall Phillips was a prominent character about this time, and I asked Mr. Emerson if the tone and temper of his speech did not indicate Mr. Phillips to be an ill-natured man. "Oh, no," said Mr. Emerson. "Mr. Phillips is one of the sweetest tempered men I ever saw. But he can thunder at the gates of iniquity!"

And so stole away the evening reverie with the philosopher, giving bits of insight into character and characteristic men. I was at that time addicted to the smoking of a cigar. I proffered one to my guest; I shall never forget the bashful manner and play of countenance he had on accepting it - as if a moral invasion had stolen over him were he to proceed and indulge in it. From the manner he set about it, I soon saw he was a novice and not a veteran smoker. He drew a whiff or two and then long periods would elapse. The fire going out, a fresh light would be given him and same sorry experience repeated.

The next morning was a continuation of cold weather. I thought I would start a fire early in his room, before he arose, and while bent on this mission, I found him up, partly dressed and shaving himself in cold, hard water. No entreaties would prevail to have warm water, nor would he have a fire built.

He was a man of few wants. He must have studied economy of service for we could do so little for him. He wanted no ceremonies and yet he was the highest type of an ideal gentleman, I ever saw.

Some men endowed with gifts of learning strive to make their genius eccentric by bad habits, reducing themselves to consummate bores. But Mr. Emerson was equipped differently. He was at all times and in all places the same quiet, dignified affable gentleman. Cultivation and the environment of Massachusetts had done something to the charm of his manners, but the nobler attributes of his nature were born in him. He inherited kinship beyond the confines of the mortal life. He was a seer in the sense that inhuman knowledge of divine life he peered beyond the vision of ordering students of creeds and theology into a kingdom of love, fellowship and freedom, where saints immortal reign.

Dr. W. J. Morrill

The house thus honored, is one now owned by Mr. S. V. Connor (1309 E. Main Street).