

J. D. WITTER ONE OF LIBRARY'S FOUNDERS

FINANCIAL DONATIONS AND WORK BUILT UP INSTITUTION AID EXTENDED BY FORMER LOCAL CITIZEN MADE LIBRARY POSSIBLE; SERVED MANY YEARS ON BOARD

(By Theo. W. Brazeau)

The celebration of Library Week would not be complete without giving to the public a life history of Jerre D. Witter, one of the Library's most sincere and valuable friends, and one of the city's greatest public benefactors. The life of Jerre D. Witter is inseparable [sic], growth and industrial progress of our city. He has left behind in the Witter Building, which he gave to our Schools System, in the Traveling Library, and the T. B. Scott Library and in his gifts to the various religious denominations, and in the city's most prominent industries, enduring monuments to his generosity, breadth, and business ability.

The following account of the life of Jerre D. Witter is taken from the Wood County Reporter of March 27, 1902, almost exactly as it appears in that issue.

Born in New York

Jerre D. Witter was born in Brooklyn, Madison County, New York, September 18th, 1835. His parents were poor and hard working farmers. His education was that in general received in close application to the work laid before him on the farm.. In 1850 he came with his parents to the Town of Dakota, Waushara County, Wisconsin. Here he again helped his father on the farm and continued until he was eighteen years of age. The boy soon began to feel that his activities needed a broader field. The same year that he left the farm he entered the law office of his brother-in-law, W. C. Webb at Wautoma, Wis. In May 1859 he came to Grand Rapids to be admitted to the bar, but returned again the same year to Wautoma.

In 1860 Mr. Witter married Emelie Phelps, in Friendship, New York. He is survived by two children, Ruth Witter Mead and Isaac P. Witter, both of this city.

Came Here in 1860

It was in December, 1860, the year of his marriage, that he came to make Grand Rapids his permanent home. He practiced law eight years in partnership with Judge Webb. He served the people successfully both as District Attorney and County Judge. His extremely logical mind would have made him prominent in the legal profession, but he saw larger fields in other directions than law. He thus gradually took up real estate, insurance, lumber and banking interests. Thru perseverance, pluck and honest dealings, he soon became interested in various enterprises in the state, until, at the time of his death, he was known as one of the wealthiest and progressive men in the Wisconsin Valley.

In 1872 he founded the First National Bank of Grand Rapids, and in 1898 re-organized the Bank of Centralia. He has always been the executive of these banks, and has at all times been found conservative and safe to trust. His lumbering interests have been extensive. He has been a stockholder in almost all the important business ventures in Grand Rapids.

Held Extensive Interests

He has been identified with almost all the paper mills in the Wisconsin Valley. He had extensive interests in three paper mills at Appleton. At home he was stockholder in the South Centralia Paper Mill and the Biron Paper Mill. He also had shares in the Johnson & Hill Co.'s store, Oberbeck Furniture Co. and the Grand Rapids Milling Co., and the Commercial National Bank of Appleton. Besides these interests in Wisconsin, Mr. Witter had interests in cattle in Texas, and rice in Louisiana and some banking interests in Dakota.

Thruout his entire career, Mr. Witter avoided political office, yet his official service to Wood county, and the City of Grand Rapids was of inestimable worth. He held that any man had a right to refuse to serve in any public office that paid a compensation, but that it was the duty of every good citizen to serve so far as he was able in those public offices that yielded no pay.

Thru his generous donations to libraries alone, thousands of souls in this and adjoining counties have daily drawn and enjoyed an inspiration to higher and nobler life.

He did not wait until death overcame him but scattered his bequests with bountiful hands while yet he might in a measure direct the course of his bounty and give it further aid until it no longer needed his help.

Mr. Witter found his true happiness in doing good to others. But he did this good in a quiet way. Most of his deeds of kindness are known to those who were the recipients of them. The poor and the friendless always found a friend in him. Those who had no money and desire an education found Mr. Witter a ready helper. The writer gratefully acknowledges his opportunities for education to the liberality of Mr. Witter who generously insisted that he should attend the University of Wisconsin after his graduation from the High School and call on Mr. Witter for any funds needed. not many years ago when our city was in distress, he gave thru the agency of the churches, twelve hundred barrels of flour to the poor. He wanted no thanks for these favors, and many are they who have heard him say, "I don't know what you want to thank me for, I have done nothing more than my duty."

Was Good Citizen

Mr. Witter loved his city. He always tried to further its interests – his whole pride was in Grand Rapids. Morally, financially, and educationally, he has done much for the community. He believed in the city's future; he saw the possibility of great industries being established here and run by water power, which is now wasted. It was one of his greatest desires before his death to see this water power developed.

Mr. Witter died at the city of Chicago, March 22, 1902, after undergoing a serious operation. Before he left for Chicago realizing the serious nature of his ailment and the danger of an operation, he carefully prepared his will in which he left to the schools of the city of Grand Rapids, \$50,000, to each church, regardless of denomination, \$1,000, and to the library the sum on \$5,000.

Behind his fortune and benevolence his firm and clear grip of facts; his courage and self-command was a pure and noble Christian belief. His religious views were liberal. His creed was simple but broad, and it was the "Sermon on the Mount." He believed that the source of honest and good living was to be found in that chapter. He once said: "The parable of the prodigal son is the most beautiful in the Bible." Mr. Witter believed that all churches had a work to do and an influence over the different classes of people. He aided all churches without references to their belief or creed. He was at one time teacher in the Sunday School of the Congregational Church. He later became identified with the Methodist.

Mr. Witter was a good friend and not a bitter foe. He never showed enmity, he rather liked to be at peace than have any misunderstanding. He always tried to judge himself as severe as any one could.

His wife was his true help mate and companion in the greatest as well as the smallest things of his career. He was socially a happy man. His home life was beautiful. He was warm hearted and loved his home.

His vivid imagination, united with his great power of reasoning out his own and other problems; his faith in the future of his city and hi fellow men; his interest in those with whom he came in contact; his high ideals; his broad-minded nature which allowed him to see things in their true relationship- all this endear his memory to us, make it sacred to everyone, and loved by those who knew him best.

Cleared County Government

At an early date in county history, when corruption was ruling our county government, Mr. Witter was one of the first who dared to enter protest against the rule of dishonesty. He was elected a member of the County Board by the better element in the community. Largely thru his influence and by the courageous stand that he and a few of his colleagues took was the county government vested from the gang that had for years misruled and looted its treasury.

Once the power of corruption was destroyed, he stepped aside and let the others benefit politically by his work. He sought no city office but at times served on its council and at one time in the capacity of mayor. His opinion was often desired on important questions of city management.

For a full quarter of century he served continually on the Board of Education. And on that Board no member's opinion carried greater weight than his. He never advocated his opinions with great ardor, but when his opinion was once formed he stated it with such clearness and dignity that it was usually accepted as correct without further question. He was always willing to accept good

suggestions from others and in passing those suggestions on he was careful to give credit to those from whom the suggestions came. Briefly stated, in public office Mr. Witter was always found standing in the position that good judgment and honesty pointed out as right.

Helped Build Library

But not alone did he serve the public in the way already mentioned. Indeed his public services in those capacities was small compared with his services in molding public character throughout the influence of our public library. From the time of the incorporation of the T. B. Scott Free Public Library on this city, in 1889 to 1901, when he stepped aside to give his son his place, he served on the Board of Directors of that corporation. From the first he entered earnestly and lovingly into the spirit of the good work. His judgment largely dictated the character of the first list of books that was purchased for the Library. We doubt whether a list of purer, more elevating and more enabling books could be made than that list contained. When it became apparent that the \$5,000 donated by Mr. Scott was not enough to supply the needs of the public library, he first saw that fact, and no sooner did he realize that the good influence of the library was limited by lack of funds, than he donated to the library a sum equal to the original donation by Mr. Scott. It was suggested at the time of that donation that his name be placed by the side of Mr. Scott's in the name of the library. He absolutely refused, however, to permit this, saying that "If the good influence of the library was increased, the sole purpose of his gift was accomplished." He also saw the great need and value of a well equipped reading room in connection with the library.

When the "Traveling Library" idea was new, Mr. Witter at once recognized the vast possibilities of good lying within the scope of that idea Without waiting for the working out of the details of the plan, he donated a thousand dollars to equip traveling libraries to circulate in this and adjoining counties. He continually encouraged its growth and usefulness until today we have forty-two of these traveling libraries going forth as messengers of good among the people.

Helped Library School

When our librarian needed instruction in library management he paid her expenses at the State School of Librarians; when the State School for Librarians needed funds for an advanced course in library practice he furnished the funds necessary to establish such a course.

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