Nebraskans I Have Known: 1. William Vincent Allen

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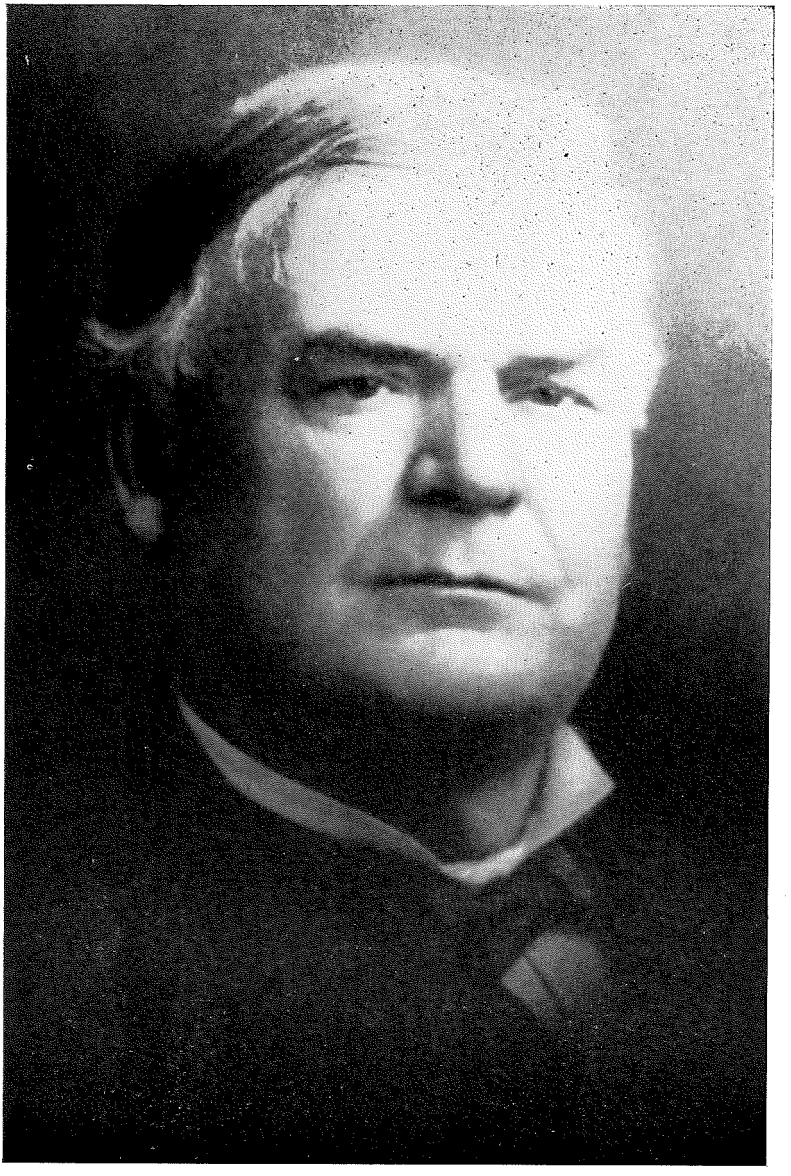

WILLIAM VINCENT ALLEN

NEBRASKANS I HAVE KNOWN

1. WILLIAM VINCENT ALLEN

By Addison E. Sheldon

Prologue

It has been my fortune, in the course of a varied and active life, to live in nine different Nebraska counties, all the way from the Missouri River to the Pine Ridge Mountains; to know by personal contact many thousand Nebraskans—men, women and children; besides a number of faithful and companionable horses, cattle, dogs, birds, wild animals, snakes and insects—and to enjoy relations with all.

Among the people whom I have known by personal contact are all the governors, from the territorial period to the present time; all the United States senators and congressmen Nebraska has had; nearly all the State officers and members of the legislature for forty years; nearly all the Nebraska editors in the same period; thousands of cornfield farmers, cow-punchers, horse wranglers, homesteaders, half-breeds, Indians, pioneers, school teachers, children, freighters, cattle rustlers, candidates, bull-whackers, bartenders, gamblers, mule skinners, stage drivers, railroad section men, railroad officials, ditch diggers, agitators, lawyers, doctors, preachers, money lenders, money borrowers, sales agents, fiddlers, and plain, ordinary, every-day hitch-hikers, tramp printers and bums.

Now all this varied human and animal caravan insists, from time to time, upon marching across the landscape of my mental vision and rehearsing its deeds, its hopes, its aspirations, its failures, its follies, its achievements. Having lived so long with the members of this caravan, I am loath to part from their company and the memories which they awaken in my mind. Yet I know

that soon I shall join them, in what the writer of Thanatopsis so faithfully set down in one of the early immortal poems of American life.

> "So shalt thou rest, and what if thou withdraw
> In silence from the living, and no friend
> Take note of thy departure: All that breathe
> Will share thy destiny. The gay will laugh
> When thou art gone, the solemn brood of care
> Plod on, and each one as before will chase
> His favorite phantom; yet all these shall leave
> Their mirth and their employments, and shall come
> And make their bed with thee. As the long train
> Of ages glide away, the sons of men,
> The youth in life's green spring, and he who goes
> In the full strength of years, matron and maid,
> The speechless babe, and the gray-headed man—
> Shall one by one be gathered to thy side,
> By those, who in their turn shall follow them.
>
> "So live, that when thy summons comes to join
> The innumerable caravan, which moves
> To that mysterious realm, where each shall take
> His chamber in the silent halls of death,
> Thou go not, like the quarry-slave,
> Scourged to his dungeon, but, sustained and soothed
> By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave,
> Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
> About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams."

I have set before me the purpose of writing my recollections of Nebraskans I have known. Some of them have won national and world fame. Some are scarcely known outside their own county. I shall select my subjects from both classes, designing to do justice to the high qualities of the man, regardless of his wealth or fame.

First Person

The letter *A* begins the English alphabet, and one of the first figures in the annals of Nebraska and in my own memories is that of Allen—William Vincent Allen—first Populist United States Senator from Nebraska, conspicuous leader in our state and in the councils of

the nation. A man of tremendous physical and mental strength, of many virtues and some faults; a leader of men and a champion of the common people: their friend in the high national councils, in the casual conversations of the street corner, and in the courts established to protect human rights.

My first meeting with William V. Allen was in the Republican county convention at Battle Creek, in Madison county, in August of 1886. I was the kid editor of the *Burnett Blade* in the town which now bears the name of Tilden—re-named after the great New York Democratic lawyer who was counted out of the presidency in 1876. W. V. Allen was at the head of the delegation which came over from Madison. He was a new-comer in Nebraska—only two years in the state. The Madison delegation presented him as their candidate for chairman of the convention, and that was agreed to without contest.

Through all the years I have remembered Allen's speech when he took the chair. His six-foot-two figure, his massive frame and deep, thundering voice, commanded the attention of any group when he rose to speak. His chief theme as chairman was "The Glorious Republican Party"—"the G. O. P.," as the Democrats derisively abbreviated it. But Chairman Allen did glorify the Republican party in this first Nebraska political speech: its achievements in preserving the Union, in setting free the slaves, in holding out the free public lands for the oppressed of all the world. This was his expression of high loyalty to the party to which both of us then adhered and both of us subsequently forsook.

The chairman had a word for the Union soldiers. He was, when a boy of fifteen, flag-bearer in the Thirty-second Iowa Volunteers. It was a timely note. There were plenty of Union soldiers in the convention. In Battle Creek and in the convention hall were numerous settlers from Virginia and North Carolina who wore the gray during the Civil War, and whose descendants at

the present time constitute a part of the population of Madison County. I remember them, these ex-Confederates, for many of them were subscribers to my newspaper. I remember the shock of surprise it gave me when, in visiting their homes, I saw on their walls the portraits of Stonewall Jackson, Robert E. Lee, and—yes, Jefferson Davis—the man of all men whom I had been taught in childhood was the great traitor to the American nation.

W. V. Allen's speech ran on with its eulogy of "the Grand Old Party" and its panegyric to the Union soldiers and the pioneer homesteaders, and closed with a passionate appeal (a familiar one to the voters in those years) to "Vote the straight Republican ticket on election day, and preserve our American institutions from the contamination of democratic office-holders."

This appeal to vote the "straight Republican ticket" had a very local application in Madison County at that time, for several Democrats were holding important offices in the county, and from the Republican point of view there was danger that they might continue to hold them.

The Farmers' Alliance

The Farmers' Alliance revolution of 1890 was a revolt against corporation and capitalist control of the United States. In Nebraska it was a revolt against an aggravated control of the state by the principal railroad companies, aided by some of the leading banks, machine politicians, and the liquor interests. The movement, started by farmers, had a highly dramatic appeal to independent-minded citizens outside of the farming business. It caught up in its reform wave Attorney Allen of Madison and elected him district judge on the People's Independent ticket at the November election of 1891. It caught up, also, the writer of these recollections, who had begun the publication of a reform newspaper at Chadron in 1888. So, six years after the fiery Republican

speech of Senator Allen at Battle Creek in 1886, he and I met again as fellow Populists in the State Populist Convention of 1892. Both of us had bolted the "Grand Old Party" in which we were bred. Both of us were borne with a great tidal wave of popular uprising toward the achievement of a new political rule and a new economic system in America.

When the Nebraska legislature assembled in Lincoln in January, 1893, no party had a majority of its members. Its political status was as follows:

Senate:	Republicans	15
	People's Independent	13
	Democrats	5
	Total:	33
House:	Republicans	48
	People's Independent	40
	Democrats	12
	Total:	100

The People's Independent members, plus the Democrats, had a majority in both houses, if united. On joint ballot, the combined vote of these two parties was 70 against the Republicans' 63. Some of the Democrats were in sympathy with the Farmers' Alliance and had its support in the election. Five of the Democrats, however, were men of strong gold-standard and corporation sympathies. It was necessary to secure votes from at least two parties in each house in order to organize the legislature. After a struggle, this was accomplished by dividing the employes in each house between the People's Independent and Democratic groups. It then required at least 67 votes to elect a United States senator. This was very difficult, since the five corporation Democrats hated the whole Populist movement. Their votes, joined to the 63 Republicans, made 68—one more than required to elect. Their hope was to get the Re-

publican members to forsake their party and elect a Democrat. J. Sterling Morton and James E. Boyd were their preferred candidates. Grover Cleveland had just been elected president and took office March 4, 1893.

Richard L. Metcalfe was the political reporter of the *Omaha World-Herald,* winning his first spurs in the great conflict of the age. William Jennings Bryan had just been elected to a second term in Congress by a plurality of 140 votes. It was the aim of Bryan and Metcalfe to unite the Democratic members of the legislature with the Populist members in the election of a United States senator.

In this juncture William V. Allen was brought forward by the People's Independents and the Free-Silver Democrats as the one man who could unite their votes and be elected. It was one of the fiercest political fights in the history of Nebraska. A final great effort was made by the opposition to get all the Republican votes for J. Sterling Morton and, with the aid of five Democrats, elect him. But Edward Rosewater invaded the Republican caucus, held up before it the copperhead affiliations of Morton during the Civil War, and beat the effort. William V. Allen was elected on the eighteenth ballot as the first Populist senator from Nebraska. His election was the first great Nebraska victory for the new political movement.

Allen in the U. S. Senate

The next full-length picture of William V. Allen in my hall of memory is that of the three-years' battle in the United States Congress over the repeal of the Silver Purchase Act; the issue of gold bonds to maintain a "gold reserve" in the United States Treasury; the ignominious betrayal of Democratic campaign tariff reduction promises; the failure and disruption of the old Democratic Party; the loss of faith in both old parties by the mass of progressive voters. In this struggle, "Allen of Nebraska" became the popular hero. His fifteen-hour speech against silver repeal marked a high

point in physical-endurance protest against the gold standard program, and dramatized the popular revolt against Grover Cleveland and his allies. These three years of financial panic, of bank failures and crop failures, of foreclosed mortages, of labor strikes and wandering "Coxey" armies of unemployed, prophesied the rise of a new political party and marked Allen of Nebraska as its strongest candidate for president in 1896.

Events followed each other thick and fast as flying leaves in an autumn gale. Within a little more than three years from the election of Allen as United States senator, with the aid of William J. Bryan's friends, Senator Allen stood on the platform in a great hall at St. Louis, presiding over the second national convention of the Populist Party and holding within his hand control of that greatly contending tumult of delegates. The main issues in that convention were, first, whether the nomination of William J. Bryan by the Democratic Party at Chicago would be ratified by the Populists; and second, whether the Populist Party would name a Populist for vice president on the same ticket with Bryan.

The regular order of business in national party conventions was the nomination of a candidate for president first, followed by vice-presidential nominations. The radical Populists presented a minority report of the Order-of-Business Committee to nominate the vice-president first. A fierce debate followed. On roll call the minority report was adopted by a vote of 785 to 615.

The writer of these recollections was a delegate in that convention. Southern Populists who had fought the Democratic machine in the South were friendly to Bryan but radically opposed to the Democratic Party. The gigantic figure and thundering voice of William V. Allen guided the convention for three stormy days, with the final compromise result of a ticket presenting Bryan for president and Tom Watson, Populist of Georgia, for vice president. This was the choice of the writer. I knew at the time that our action meant the death of the

People's Party, but I believed it meant the growing coherence of an organized body of progressive voters who would deal with the future problems of land, labor and capital.

The 1896 *Campaign*

In the great campaign of 1896 in Nebraska Senator Allen was a central figure. He was made chairman of the Populist State Convention which met on August 5 at Hastings. The problem there was to completely unite the forces which had elected Senator Allen in 1893 and Governor Holcomb in 1894 for the election of a complete state ticket. The Grover Cleveland Democrats were courted by the Republicans. It seemed important to place at least one Democrat on the Populist state ticket. C. J. Smyth of Omaha was chosen for attorney general. The word "fusion" was hated by the radical Populists. Senator Allen devised the word "union," which meant the same thing under a new name. The Bryan Republicans were rigged out in the new name "Silver Republicans." The Bryan wing of the Democratic party had secured control of the Democratic organization—both state and national. Three conventions were held to agree on one ticket, allay all prejudices, and unite all factions having a common aim—in some respects, at least. Thus was created in Nebraska the celebrated "Three-Ring Political Circus," as the opponents derided it.

The campaign of 1896 was the first complete defeat of the Republican Party in Nebraska. It lost the state ticket, the legislature, four of six congressmen. Bryan carried the state by 13,000, but lost the presidency by electoral vote of 176 to McKinley 271. A change of 21, 391 ballots in seven states would have given Bryan 227 electoral votes against 220 for McKinley. It is the writer's opinion that acceptance of Watson by the Democrats would have elected Bryan.

In 1898 the return wave of Nebraska politics gave

T. H. Tibbles—Thomas E. Watson

Populist Candidates for President and Vice President in 1904

the Republicans the state legislature, but elected W. A. Poynter, Populist, governor. The Republican legislature elected M. L. Hayward of Nebraska City, defeated candidate for governor, as United States Senator, retiring W. V. Allen. Within nine months Senator Hayward died and Governor Poynter appointed W. V. Allen to fill the vacancy—thereby greatly disappointing Gilbert M. Hitchcock, publisher of the *World-Herald*, who wished the appointment. Thus Senator Allen served out a second appointed term from December 13, 1899, to March 28, 1901.

After his retirement from the senate, Senator Allen returned to his law practice at Madison. He was the leading figure in the Populist Party, called often to preside over its conventions and to give his counsel on its course.

The Populist Party in Nebraska during this period was composed of three principal groups. The first group were the radical reformers who were for the full Populist program. They were restless under any fusion scheme. They would rather fight for their principles than hold the offices. The second group would rather hold the offices, and favored fusion whenever it could help get the offices. The third group were devoted to the fortunes of W. J. Bryan, and were ready to follow his wishes in any party program.

In order to nominate a ticket and make a campaign it was necessary to secure cooperation between these three groups. It was further necessary to arrange cooperation with the organized Democratic Party and with the rather unorganized Silver Republican faction. The division of the ticket, the platform, and the leadership in state and local campaigns, were problems requiring the highest political sagacity and tactical shrewdness.

Senator Allen's position was rather over on the conservative side of the Populist movement. He was made chairman of our state conventions in order to use his prestige and ability to quiet the outbreaks of the radicals

and secure union of discordant elements. The final goal to be attained was the election of W. J. Bryan as president and the union of all elements in a reborn and reinspired Democratic Party marching forward to the achievement of great social reforms in the interest of all the people.

Well, it didn't work out that way. After the second defeat of Mr. Bryan in 1900 it became increasingly difficult to secure cordial union of all three "rings" of the "Political Circus" in Nebraska.

1904: *Plight of the Populist Party*

By 1904 the predictions made by Old Guard Populists in 1896 had come true. Twice defeated with W. J. Bryan as leader, the Democratic Party went back to Wall Street control. It named Alton B. Parker for president, accepted his gold-standard telegram for its platform. And W. J. Bryan, as a loyal Democrat, accepted the dose.

After fifteen years of sublime sacrifice, of fighting and fusion, the Populist voters were orphans. Thousands of them joined with the Roosevelt Republicans, carrying their doctrines along with their votes into Republican and, later, Progressive Party councils and platforms. Some became Democrats. Others went over to the Socialist Party. Still others forsook all party fealty and became independent voters for life.

In Nebraska, the 1904 situation and Senator Allen's part therein is told in the writer's book, *Nebraska: The Land and the People*, volume 1, pages 805-6, as follows:

> Months before convention time in 1904 it was evident that W. J. Bryan had lost control of the Democratic national organization, and that record of that result would be duly registered at the next national convention. The condition of the Populist party was bad. It was not only diminshing in numbers and morale, but it was split, having one fusion and one middle-of-the-road national organization.
>
> In Nebraska, the state where the national Populist party was born, the critical situation aroused something of the old spirit in a final effort to save the party's existence. The Nebraska Independent, owned by Frank D. Eager and edited by T. H. Tibbles

and Charles Q. DeFrance, entered upon a vigorous campaign to unite the two national factions and arouse the voters, both fusion and mid-road, for a vigorous separate national campaign. Conferences were held and a call issued signed by both the fusion and mid-road committees for a united convention at Springfield, Illinois, July 4.

The Nebraska Populist convention met at Fremont on June 21, with about 300 delegates present from forty-five counties. George W. Berge, of Lancaster, was chairman. Former Senator W. V. Allen, of Madison, the leading figure of the convention, presented the following resolution:

"Resolved, that it is the sense of this convention that the People's party ought to place in nominaton its own candidate for President and vice president of the United States, and likewise party candidates for presidential electors"

Delegate Addison E. Sheldon, of Lancaster, moved to amend by inserting the words "members of the People's party" following the words "it own candidates," to make clear that no further national fusion was admissible.

A debate of several hours followed. The Sheldon amendment lost by a vote of 138 to 197, after which the Allen resolution carried by 268 to 67. Local county politics influenced the vote. In some counties the Populists elected county tickets by going it alone, in others a fusion of Populists and Democrats was found desirable. Self-preservation is the first law of the office-holder.

When the People's Party National Convention met at Springfield, Illinois, the Democratic National Convention was meeting at St. Louis. Action of the Democrats left no course for the Populists except the nomination of an independent ticket from their own ranks. Upon the first ballot for President, Thomas E. Watson of Georgia received 333 votes, William V. Allen of Nebraska 308 votes. The nomination of Watson was made unanimous and Thomas H. Tibbles of Nebraska, veteran Populist editor, was named for vice president. Cordial good will and union of the two factions prevailed. The time-honored principles of the People's party were reasserted in the platform. But the voters of the nation who had joined with enthusiam in the conventions of 1892 and 1896 were no longer in the ranks, as the returns of the election disclosed.

Senator Allen had gone so far in fusion that he was no longer available as Populist candidate for president. The Populist Party was making the last rally for its faithful few. It had done its work. Its fighting spirit had gone out into the souls of fighting independent

voters who found fellowship in all political parties and groups.

Senator Allen, himself, shared the common spirit of independent action which followed the disbandment of the Populist Party. Though more of a Democrat than Republican in sympathy (by this time), his vote and influence were often cast with Republicans in Nebraska.

In 1916 Allen was called by men of many party affiliations to become candidate on the Non-Political ticket for district judge in his home district. He was elected over a strong Republican candidate; re-elected in 1920, and died January 12, 1924, still in the harness as a judge and with a record of leadership in great events and an accepted friend of the common people.

Closing these memoirs: I recall Senator Allen as an outstanding contribution to the people's cause in an epic period of American history. He was not an advance scout nor the leader of a forlorn hope in the attack upon vested wrong or class privilege. But he was a tower of strength in the main battle. He had breadth of vision and balanced judgment. He was a conservative leader in a radical cause. His presence upon the floor of the United States Senate gave the representatives of the selfish ruling class the greatest shock of those embattled years. He was simple and dignified in conduct, open in mind to the poorest citizen, a firm friend and a fearless champion.

Author's Notes:

It is of interest to know the vote polled by Senator Allen in his campaigns for district judge. The following is the vote in the election of 1891:

W. V. Allen	People's Independent	3,793
Isaac Powers	Republican	2,877
G. W. Riley	Democrat	1,227
E. P. Wigton	Prohibition	250

After 1914, judges were elected on a non-political ballot with no

party designation. There were two judges to elect in the Ninth Judicial District, and the vote was as follows:

In 1916:

W. V. Allen	11,483
Andrew R. Oleson	10,422
Anson A. Welch	12,994

In 1920:

W. V. Allen	13,214
Anson A. Welch	12,807
H. F. Barnhart	4,758

Some Unprinted History

It is the writer's privilege to tell here with this article the true story of how the People's Independent and Democratic members of the 1893 legislature were united in the election of W. V. Allen:

Sixteen ballots had been taken. Several candidates had been tried. None could secure the votes required.

One day when the legislature was not in session, R. L. Metcalfe joined a little group of Democrats sitting together in the House. There were Van Housen of Colfax, John Thomson of Dodge, Ames of Douglas, and Luikart and Fleeks Hale (senator) of Madison.

"Why don't you Democrats and Pops get together on a candidate for senator?" Metcalfe asked. He was told that it was impossible to get a joint meeting.

Metcalfe replied that their mistake lay in calling too large a conference. "Get five Democrats and five Pops together and have them go over the list, and if they find one on whom they can agree, the chances are that, with the exception of those five corporation Democrats, the thing can be done!"

"But," came the objection, "we have no one with authority to call a preliminary caucus."

"Anybody can call a caucus!" reported Metcalfe. "I can call one myself."

"I believe Met would do it," said Ames.

So the caucus was called for five o'clock in Luikart's room at the Lindell and all five agreed to be there. Casper of Butler, Mullen of Holt, and three or four other Populists were invited. On reaching Luikart's room they found it locked and the group went over to Casper's room.

Meanwhile, downstairs, Metcalfe was framing the program with Mullen, Luikart and Hale. He suggested that they go over the entire list of names submitted and then, if agreement could not be reached, Mullen should propose W. V. Allen.

This was done, and both Luikart and Hale declared that if they ever voted against Judge Allen neither of them would dare go back to Madison County. The caucus reached unanimous and almost instantaneous decision.

Immediately Metcalfe wired G. M. Hitchcock at Omaha: "Important. Your editorial should be written in Lincoln tonight."

Hitchcock came, but his editorial was not strong enough to suit Metcalfe, who assured him that Allen would be chosen and the World-Herald might just as well get the credit. Next morning that paper came out for Allen. And in two caucuses Allen was nominated.

On the evening of Allen's election there was great jubilation in the Lindell corridors. Casper, who had known nothing of the origin of the preliminary caucus, drew Metcalfe into a corner.

"Met, would you like to know just how Allen was selected?"

"I would be glad to learn," replied the arch plotter gravely, and wrote down the story for the World-Herald just at it was told to him.

The evening of the next day Van Housen, Thomson, Metcalfe, Casper and others formed a little knot in the hotel corridor and Casper recited in detail the story of the interview with him in the morning paper. Fun-loving Thomson turned to the reporter:

"Met, where were you when all of this was going on?"

"I was in town," came the answer.

"Why you dirty pup, you called that conference yourself!" exclaimed Van Housen.

"Why, Met didn't know a thing about it until I told him in my interview," boasted Casper.

His enlightenment was immediate and complete.

This article was sent to Richard L. Metcalfe, at Omaha, for criticism and correction. Mr. Metcalfe made several minor corrections and added this personal word:

"This is to thank you for the privilege of reading your article on Senator Allen. Like all of your productions, it is very interesting. You have done justice to your subject. It was my privilege to deliver the address at his funeral. I knew him covering just about the same period your acquaintance covered. He may have had his faults, but I loved him so much that I could not regard any of them as at all serious. He was the most satisfactory public man I ever met in all my life. Politically, officially and personally he was a friend complete and entirely. After years of intimate acquaintance I can say of him, as was said of Ben Bolt:

'They (times) have changed from the old to the new,
But I feel in the deeps of my spirit the truth there never
was change in you.
Twelve-months twenty have passed, Ben Bolt, since first
we were friends,
Yet I hail your presence a blessing, your friendship a truth,
Ben Bolt of the Salt Sea Gale!'

"Congratulations on the deserved tribute to our dear old friend."