



## Tributes to Addison E. Sheldon

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C A Sorenson, "The Liberal"

A J Weaver, "The Legislator"

J E Lawrence, "The Historian"

Raymond A McConnell, "Sheldon the Prophet"

Gerald Kennedy "Sheldon Pioneer in Spirit"

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# Tributes to Addison E. Sheldon

Delivered in Unicameral Hall

November 27, 1943

## The Liberal

I rise to pay tribute to the life of a true liberal who served his state and country with distinction.

Scholarly, idealistic, fearless, tolerant, was Addison E. Sheldon. He believed with Emerson that "The use of History is to give value to the present hour and its duty." He was a philosopher of freedom. Like Jefferson, he insisted that the worth of a nation is not in its economic princes but in the aggregate worth of its individual citizens. Being a democrat, he always argued that only a political society of equals can be free. As one whose forefathers fought in the American Revolution, he hated tyranny in all its forms and was cold to those who seek to incite hatred or contempt of fellow Americans on racial or religious grounds. To him, God's green earth was the common fatherland of all God's people.

Believing thus, it is not strange that he belonged to the Bryan-Wilson-La Follette-Norris independents who for two generations fought the domination of American life by powerful, usually tariff-protected interests which had no real concern with the maintenance of a democratic society. Steeped in history, he knew better than most of us that the Nazi-Japanese attempt at world conquest challenged every democratic concept of human integrity, freedom and culture, and it was his great hope to live long enough to see total victory for the United Nations and international gangsterism destroyed.

He belonged to the pioneers who, though poor in earthly goods, were rich in hope and vision for their state. He belonged to that group who did not want to be given happiness by the government but to be protected in the right to pursue happiness. Our farms and cities, our roads and irrigation, our State House and our power lines, are the fulfillment of the frail dreams of the Sheldons fifty years ago.

Sheldon's handiwork is seen in many of our laws and institutions. To mention merely a few:

1. As a member of the Legislature in 1897, he sponsored an act prohibiting the sale of the State's school lands.

2. It was at his suggestion that the Legislature adopted a state occupation tax for corporations.

3. He was the father of the Legislative Reference Bureau.

4. He was one of those who thirty years ago suggested the advisability of a one-house legislature which later, under the leadership of Senator Norris, became a reality.

It may surprise some to learn that Doctor Sheldon, with the assistance of his able son Philip, operated exceedingly successful irrigation farms in Scotts Bluff County. Irrigation and soil conservation were some of his hobbies. He was a lover of trees. He understood their intrinsic value to agriculture and sought to encourage their planting by tax-exemption provision. Beginning with the Populist movement, he fought the battles of the farmers for sixty years.

He was not a blind partisan. He voted as he thought, not as he was told. To him political parties, as such, were neither good nor bad; it was all in the use made of them by those at the wheel. He paid no more attention to party fences than to the shadow of telephone poles along the road. If he thought his party wrong, he up and said so in understandable English. He was not afraid to be with a minority and never abandoned a cause because it was unpopular.

Doctor Sheldon loved that old poem by Macauley:

Then none was for a party;  
     Then all were for the State.  
 Then the great man helped the poor,  
     And the poor man loved the great.  
 Then lands were fairly portioned;  
     Then lands were fairly sold;  
 The Romans were like brothers  
     In the brave days of old.

His was an adventurous spirit. So, reverently, we say to the Lord of the Planets: "Set apart a star for Addison E. Sheldon, where for the Master he can work and dream for an aeon or two and never be tired nor grow old."

— C. A. Sorenson.

## The Legislator

I am honored by the opportunity to pay tribute here today.

It has been my good fortune to know many great Nebraskans. Addison E. Sheldon was one of them. A kindly, modest, and very able Nebraskan was he. In his long and useful life he exemplified the best ideals of American citizenship. I would like to discuss those ideals at length. On this occasion, however, I will sum them up in a single sentence: The best measure of a man is his conduct and his contribution to society. We can all be appraised by such a standard—the business and professional man, the farmer, the mechanic, the humblest laborer. Each citizen, no matter in how obscure a field he labors, if respectable and honorable, if he does his best, if he lives up to his obligations, if he recognizes the inescapable obligation that every human being owes to his fellows, adds to the quality of the state which has nurtured and protected him. Such a man was Addison E. Sheldon, and throughout his long career he has always “carried the message to Garcia.”

The record on review today is one of outstanding achievement. It did not happen through chance. It is the result of the hard work, the rare genius and devotion to duty of this gifted son of Nebraska.

Doctor Sheldon began life in an humble way. He faced many discouragements; he knew the hardships of the pioneer; he knew the pinch of poverty. But he possessed the right principles, he “followed the Gleam,” he kept the faith. Each struggle prepared him for the next. He had initiative, and, as Elbert Hubbard says, “Initiative is doing the right thing without being told.” He had superb courage, and this quality is the determining factor in most battles. He had indomitable persistence in every cause he knew was just. He had the spirit of true democracy—not a pose but an upspringing from the depths of his nature, and this was felt by every man who knew him. He had a great capacity for making friends because he gave friendship from the heart. He was a man who won and held the love of other men.

With such a foundation in the years of his preparation, Doctor Sheldon played his part in the making of Nebraska history.

His record of public service may be properly outlined as follows:

1. His service as a homesteader on the northwestern frontier.
2. His service as editor and organizer of public thought and opinion.
3. His service as a legislator.
4. His service as administrator and organizer in government, and his contribution to social progress.
5. His service as historian, discoverer and translator, lecturer and author.

The pages of Nebraska history fully portray these activities and I need not discuss them here. Suffice it to say that the man who advocated many progressive and sane measures which are now the law of the state was thinking in terms of the general welfare.

He came here when Nebraska had only a fringe of population on its eastern border, when there were but few schools and churches. The first continental railroad had just crossed our state. There was no railroad south of the Platte River. Indians and wild animals were dominant features of the landscape. Today we have a great commonwealth.

What Addison Sheldon gave and what he accomplished are a part of the noble legacy of Nebraska. The record of his work is perpetuated in the historical society to which he gave twenty-seven years of his life. It is my hope that the building soon to be built for this society will be erected as a memorial to the greatest historian the West has produced.

## The Historian

One of the very vivid recollections I have of Doctor Sheldon was the occasion when he was speaking to a large group of Lincoln men. His subject was, "Trails Leading Across the Plains." He had more than a scholarly, detached knowledge of them, and more than a remote interest in them. He had traveled every foot of them. He had reconstructed in his mind the rumbling caravans headed into the West; had noted the weariness that lined the faces of pioneer mothers; had rekindled the smoldering campfires that marked each evening's "Journey's End." He closed with a poem about the campfires — lazy smoke drifting in the wind; the sun sinking below the horizon; the lengthening shadows; and then, darkness.

On a far-off hill the coyote howled; children stirred in their sleep, and a mother's hand sought to quiet them. For a brief period the old trails lived again before the eyes of the men in that room, and they knew Nebraska in her youth for a better understanding of Nebraska in her maturity.

The grave of a woman long forgotten — one of those women who dared the wilderness for a home in new country, was understood by him in all of its sheer gallantry of adventure and brave spirit.

The milestones along those trails were precious to him because each one represented something of decent human aspirations.

It is a great privilege, and a greater responsibility, to write and to interpret history.

Doctor Sheldon wrote history, not in the abstraction of dates, important though dates are; not even in the sense of episodes, but in the broader and more accurate terms of human progress. He found his place among the original settlers of Nebraska because he appreciated what a land so fair could mean to the Indian — not only for the physical security it provided, but for the affection it could inspire.

He appreciated the frontier campfire, not solely for its light and its warmth, but because it was the flame of the adventure of believing men and women in whom was imbued a love of soil and a love of home.

He watched the growth of law, not because law is something set down in books in black type, but because Law and Justice are carved out of the mistakes and the hopes of people; because law governs people, even unto property and life itself.

He had his feet firmly implanted in the Past for all that was good, all that was wholesome, and all that was noble, to be used for the benefit of people in the Present and of the generations to come.

No one could be more scrupulously careful with historical fact. No one was willing to spend time and energy in greater measure to obtain facts. And yet, in him, the flashing spark of imagination never permitted fact to become a complete and brutal master at the sacrifice of those things which we call "the intangibles" of this life. As a historian he had a genius for those intangibles, as well as an observing eye, a faithful memory, for the things that people may see, the things that people may hear, the things that people may write down, and the things that records disclose.

I know of the love — the tender, constant love — which our friend had for this soil of Nebraska, for the people of Nebraska, for the institutions of government, and for the traditions of Nebraska. I know of the insatiable desire within him that young and old should share with him an equal reverence for its development and its culture.

And, naturally, all of that seemed to center in his hopes and his plans for a fitting building and museum for the Nebraska State Historical Society. The two of us lived that for five years, with a reality that only the two of us could understand. I know the new strength it gave to his physical being, and the amazing zest for living that it created within him. It sustained him, it gave him vigor for long hours of patient labor in the conduct of correspondence and in the contacts with his fellow men.

There I saw him put into effect a quotation from Longfellow so fittingly applied to him: "The talent of Success is nothing more than doing what you can do, well; and doing well whatever you do, without a thought of failure."

I know, as we sat there on so many occasions talking about ways and means, dreaming and planning, as his voice grew husky and his eyes became fixed upon the distant horizons, he could see

in detail the walls of that building rising to the skies. To the very end it occupied his thoughts — not, I would have you believe, in a sense of self-glory, but to perpetuate forever the struggles of all these generations of Nebraskans, in storm and sunshine, to build a beautiful civilization. He was an inspiration. He was a great comfort. He believed in people, in the decency of their purpose and the triumph of their struggle.

He gave a sincerity, a devotion, and a meaning to the work of the Nebraska State Historical Society and to history — to Nebraska history itself. He spanned the years from virgin prairie soddy and prairie chicken to the era of paved roads and airplanes overhead without fear or doubt of the ultimate destiny of his friends and neighbors. He was confident that their sturdiness, their industry, their common sense and their inherent nobility would bring them through the storms safely into port.

Just one little incident in the life of the Nebraska historian is so revealing: At the last Annual Dinner in early October he was ailing — weakened in strength, and suffering. He insisted upon attending. He read, with great difficulty, his Annual Report at the morning session. He sat throughout the long evening program. And so I said, in closing that meeting and in dedicating it to him, — “God bless you, Doctor Sheldon, and keep you.”

And now, “Dear friend and gentle heart,” be it so.

— *J. E. Lawrence.*



## Sheldon the Prophet

For twenty years Doctor Addison E. Sheldon has been a member of First-Plymouth Congregational Church. For eight of those twenty years the present pastor has known him and has come to respect him highly for the profound simplicity of his character, for the unwavering fidelity and integrity that characterized him, for his deep faith in God and in the supremacy of things spiritual. He was not greatly interested in theology, not greatly stirred by much in religious activity and conviction that moves other people deeply, — or, if he was, he did not reveal it. But he was intensely interested in the social implications of the Christian religion. He knew the value of religion and the church in stabilizing society, in advancing ideals of human worth and welfare, in aiding the weak, the injured and the broken in life's unceasing battle, and in reconstituting the social order. He was kindly in criticism and appreciation, frequently commenting on a sermon that appealed to him. He was a man who loved hard work, research, study and action. He was faithful as a friend, a church member, a citizen. His gaze was sometimes fixed far away, as if he saw beyond the horizons both of past and future and longed to share his vision with those who have eyes but cannot see.

Others have paid their tribute to Doctor Sheldon as a distinguished pioneer, legislator, poet and historian. I add my word to theirs to say that he had the qualities of the prophet. He was a social individualist, a religious idealist, a Christian realist, a lover of man.

— *Rev. Raymond A. McConnell, D. D.*

### Sheldon: Pioneer in Spirit

Not many days before the death of Doctor Sheldon, I called upon him in his home. He was very ill and greatly changed from the last time I had seen him. We sat and talked for a few minutes, and to my amazement there was not one word of reminiscence or thought of the days that were gone. His mind was entirely on the future of the State of Nebraska and of America which he loved so deeply and served so heroically. I shall never forget what he said to me that day:

“You are a young man and you will see many things develop here in the future. The State needs men who have vision and imagination. I have seen some great things happen, but you will see even greater.”

That, I think, is one of the high experiences I have had. It is a fine thing to come to the end of a long and full life with faith in the future and encouragement for others. This is truly the sign of great living and the mark of a great man.

We can ill afford to lose men like Doctor Sheldon in a time like this. Yet we should hold no mood of complaint, but rather one of thanks for his life, and a determination to serve our day and our children's day as he served his generation and ours. The world still demands — will always demand — the pioneer spirit and the qualities of courage and strength. Let us, therefore, take from Doctor Sheldon's life those great qualities which shine through it and exemplify them in our own service.

— *Rev. Gerald Kennedy, Ph. D.*  
St. Paul Methodist Church.

## In the Press

### Addison E. Sheldon, Nebraska Historian

Two characteristics marked the life of A. E. Sheldon. One was the earnestness of his pursuit of personal culture and the other the intensity of his interest in historical events, particularly those of his own state. Those who knew him personally marveled at the industry with which he applied himself to these self-set tasks. His opportunities for education were limited in his youth and it was not until changes in his personal fortunes gave him easier access to the stores of knowledge—first at Doane, then at the state university and still later at Columbia, that he was able to round out the program of self-education he had long before mapped.

The breadth of his achievements is indicated by the titles he had won in the three-score busy years of active life in Nebraska—pioneer newspaper editor, legislator, author, historian, educator lecturer, poet, economist. Doctor Sheldon possessed an intelligent curiosity that led him into these fields of research.

Publishing a newspaper in Chadron when that city was one of civilization's outposts made him an eye-witness of and a participant in dramatic events of the state's early history. As a populist member of the legislature he was led to explore the avenues of political thought. As an historian he left as his monument the Sheldon history of Nebraska, remarkable for the breadth of its coverage and the accuracy of its recordings. His school history books have long been and long will remain standard.

Doctor Sheldon did not live to see what he most desired, a building of state devoted exclusively to the storage and display of historical relics, but he did have the assurance that speedily his vision would become reality. He also had the satisfaction of having laid, in the collections he had made and the records he had gathered, a solid foundation for the historians to come to build upon.

—*Nebraska State Journal*  
Editorial, November 27, 1943

### Sheldon — Historian

Doctor Addison E. Sheldon, who did more than any other man to perpetuate the history of his beloved Nebraska, died at his home in Lincoln Wednesday night. Pioneer, editor, farmer, teacher, legislator and historian, he had been secretary and superintendent of the Nebraska State Historical Society since 1917.

To Doctor Sheldon the musty state archives to which he gave such painstaking care were more than historical lore. They were alive with the ambitions, the hopes and struggles of the men and women who wrested a living from Nebraska sod and who contributed to the state's development. . . .

Ardent Nebraskan though he was, Doctor Sheldon was not a native. He was born in Minnesota in the town that bore the name of his father, physician and Baptist minister, and came to Nebraska as a boy of eight. In the '80s he homesteaded in Cherry County near Cody, and there was nurtured his deep love of the soil. In 1888 he began a decade as editor and publisher of newspapers in Chadron. During the years of his work as farmer, teacher, editor and public official, he continued his studies at Doane College, the University of Nebraska, and Columbia University, where he was given the Ph. D. degree in 1918. In the same year he went overseas with the American forces as a war correspondent. . . .

Doctor Sheldon was deep in lore of the past, but he did not neglect the future. . . . And he was a treasure house of information. When "hot" news was lacking, a reporter could always call at his office and get a feature story. . . .

— *Omaha World-Herald*

Omaha, November 26, 1943