



The Biography of a Builder of Nebraska, George F. Sawyer

(Article begins on page 2 below.)

This article is copyrighted by History Nebraska (formerly the Nebraska State Historical Society). You may download it for your personal use.

For permission to re-use materials, or for photo ordering information, see:

<https://history.nebraska.gov/publications/re-use-nshs-materials>

Learn more about *Nebraska History* (and search articles) here:

<https://history.nebraska.gov/publications/nebraska-history-magazine>

History Nebraska members receive four issues of *Nebraska History* annually:

<https://history.nebraska.gov/get-involved/membership>

Full Citation: Ann Rush Riley, "The Biography of a Builder of Nebraska, George F. Sawyer," *Nebraska History* 16 (1935): 26-35

Note: This article won third prize in the 1935 Native Sons and Daughters of Nebraska Contest

Article Summary: George F. Sawyer (1843-1933) a banker in the small town of Western, Nebraska, was known for his political independence and philanthropy. He dominated the life of his community.

Cataloging Information:

Names: George F. Sawyer, Martha Luella Kilmer, George Hastings

Nebraska Place Names: Western (Saline County)

Keywords: George F. Sawyer, slavery, Saline County Bank of Western, Nebraska Bankers Association, bank holiday

Photographs / Images: Ann Rush Riley

THE BIOGRAPHY OF A BUILDER OF NEBRASKA GEORGE F. SAWYER

Third Prize, Native Sons and Daughters of Nebraska,
1935 Contest.

By Ann Rush Riley, Dawson, Nebraska

Prologue

Bankers and romance? . . . In a world which pleases to dub the banker a grafter and a sordid money changer, few would believe that the story of banking in Nebraska unfolds many an incident of heroism, many an interlude of sheer romance that would shame both history and fiction.

In Western, a town in Saline County, George F. Sawyer stood out so splendidly heroic, so magnificently public spirited, that for forty years and more he dominated not only the life of his own community, but that of friends who went far afield from his immediate influence.

George F. Sawyer was born in Shunk County, Indiana, in 1843.* Four years later he lost his mother, whose death left in the father's care also a baby girl and a boy three years of age. The elder Sawyer, a native of Ireland, was a country doctor in the Indiana village. That he possessed the courage and resourcefulness later reflected in the son George is proven by the latter's memories of his childhood. No federal relief, no dole system came to the aid of the bereaved father in rearing and training his children through extreme poverty and hardships.

George remembered vividly his first trip "to town" his first trip away from the little domicile in which he looked after his sister and brother while the father devoted his time to making a living for his young brood. George was sixteen years old when necessity compelled

*There is no Shunk County, Indiana listed in atlases.

In a full page article on the occasion of the golden wedding anniversary of the Sawyers, the *Western Wave* of November 11, 1920, quotes Mr. Sawyer as follows:

"I was born in Ohio, August 20, 1847. * * * I came with my parents to Indiana when eleven weeks old."



Ann Rush Riley
Dawson

him to make his first shopping tour—the chore his father had heretofore assumed. When the young man reached his unfamiliar destination and the village store was pointed out to him, he timidly *knocked on the door* before venturing inside. Perhaps the village wag enjoyed

a loud guffaw, telling the incident later; but George Sawyer was destined to outgrow the village and its loafers who found amusement in the timidity of the boy from the hinterland.

In spite of crude school equipment and indifferent teachers, young Sawyer succeeded in securing a teacher's certificate and a position in the local school when he was only seventeen years of age. And with his first year's salary, he purchased his first "store" suit of clothes.

That young Sawyer possessed a highly impressionable mind is proven by the vivid pictures he drew, in his late manhood, of conditions and sentiment in the town of his birth. Slavery or anti-slavery was the keynote of every meeting, every gathering on the street corner. Feeling was so intense that the children of the Republicans (favoring emancipation) and the Democrats attended different schools in opposite ends of town. Sawyer Senior was a staunch Republican and as such aided often in the protection of slaves who had escaped from the South and were on their way to Canada. While young George was away at a private school in Bluffton, Indiana, his brother, not yet sixteen, joined the northern army. Returning home, George learned of the event and on the same night two of his favorite dogs died. The combination constituted the first major catastrophe in George's life, since the death of his mother.

In analyzing the varied situations which confronted this young man who was to make history, one is tempted to seek the key to the unerring judgment and unvarying courage in all his decisions, no matter how sudden the crisis might be. Those closest to him are convinced that a physical handicap—with him from birth—may have caused him to make the most of what physical and mental assets he possessed.

When the Greek Demosthenes determined to become an orator, he strove daily to overcome an impediment of speech by taking long walks into the solitude, reciting poems, with a pebble in his mouth—the pebble to aid in deeper concentration on his purpose. In all history no orator left a greater impress than did Demosthenes. England's Lord Byron, born with club feet, became one of the greatest poets of his age because he was determined to win the plaudits of a world which frowned

on deformities. In early boyhood Theodore Roosevelt seemed doomed to a life of inactivity and suffering because of a very weak body and especially weak vision. Roosevelt's courageous conquest of his disabilities is written into the story of the Rough Riders, the long dangerous treks into Africa, the achievements of statecraft which have placed him among America's Immortals.

George Sawyer, too, was born with crippled feet. In spite of this—perhaps because of this infirmity—he developed early in life a heroic will to accomplish, a keen judgment for the analysis of values and so great a capacity for sentiment and faith that he saw in the trivial incidents of every day life the stamp of Divine Origin. Notable too was his unfailing humor—the ability to see beyond the moment's irritations.

Pictures of Mr. Sawyer in his manhood reveal features that were noble in outline and a face of strength and mobility. The eyes are thoughtful, keen: the mouth is finely molded, expressing at once both sweetness and firmness. Early friends remember him as a very handsome youth.

While still in his teens young Sawyer, with his family, moved to Iowa, where he secured a position as teacher. In the cultured circles of Pella's young educators and professional men and women, he met Martha Luella Kilmer, who later became his wife and pioneer helpmate.

Miss Kilmer, of sturdy Quaker convictions and tender Quaker virtues, was the one woman in a thousand to appreciate and complement the superior qualities of young Sawyer.

Subsequent to the first meeting of this young couple, Sawyer and his prospective father-in-law came over to Nebraska to look over the land with a view to purchasing a homestead, the result being a speedy decision to settle in Saline County.

In the course of time young Sawyer must make his trip to Lincoln to have his preemption claim changed to a homestead entry. Having no means of transportation, he decided to trudge the thirty five miles on foot. To stay a youthful appetite, he carried a bag of biscuits.

After his interview at the land office, which took all his cash, the young man started a search for employment. Weary hours spent covering the paths from store to office to residence, failed to secure the coveted job. Worse still, people looked askance at the youth, as if he were an undesirable alien.

Discouraged, but unconquered, Sawyer started the homeward trek, with all but two of his biscuits eaten. On his way he stopped at a hotel in Pleasant Hill—again to ask for work of *any* kind. Preparations for the evening meal were in progress; and the tantalizing odor of frying potatoes broke down the young traveller's pride: "Would you give me some supper? I am very hungry."

As the meal was heartening the youth, a young attorney, George Hastings,* now deceased, was attracted irresistibly by the young man. Hastings, too, was in a sense an alien, having arrived just that day at Pleasant Hill. . . . Fifty years later George Hastings related this incident in the course of an address on the occasion of the golden anniversary of the wedding of George and Martha Sawyer.

Back home, prospects gradually brightened for young Sawyer, who still dreamed of Martha Luella Kilmer.

How to finance a wedding became a most absorbing problem to the young man who was sorely pressed for cash. But love laughs at locksmiths, depressions, et al. Sawyer schemed and hoped. Finally after the Croesus of the neighborhood had promised to lend him five dollars, and then cruelly rescinded the promise, George set out to visit a farmer one hundred miles away, who would surely extend the loan. The trip was never completed. On the way, George was halted by the sight of a man pulling turnips near the road side. An exchange of salutations revealed the two to be old friends from "back in Iowa." George told of his dilemma. Promptly the old neighbor took a frayed purse out of his pocket, disclosed two five dollar bills, his total worldly assets, and handed one to George.

With a fresh surge of hope and a lover's impatience, the would be Benedict returned home. With all ob-

*Noted Nebraska lawyer, attorney general, 1891-95.

stacles finally surmounted, the marriage was performed; and the Hoosier schoolmaster and his Quaker bride set up their Lares and Penates in a rude log hut which to these young lovers was a palace of dreams. And for fifty-nine years, the gold of the dreams shone through the mists of trial, doubt and hardships.

A Dream Unfolds

I.

Of one heart and one mind, George and Martha Sawyer set about immediately to establish themselves in the community and earn a livelihood—both at their profession of teaching. Mrs. Sawyer taught at home, converting one room of the little home into a school room by day, restoring its household equipment at night. George taught a few miles away. In payment for her services, Mrs. Sawyer received such commodities as flour, sorghum and meat.

Things had begun to “look up” for the young couple when, as Mr. Sawyer once recalled, “We became affluent enough to butcher our own hog.”

When indulging in reminiscences, Mr. Sawyer, a rare raconteur, withheld always the little intimacies of his family life which he deemed too sacred for public scrutiny. But eulogies written at both his and Mrs. Sawyer's deaths explain why the Sawyer family held first place in Western and surrounding territory.

The four daughters and two sons who were born to George and Martha Sawyer were bound to one another and to their parents by such family ties as one looks for only in the ideal home—the home built on Faith in God and inherent selflessness.

The Sawyer home, long since displacing the log hut, was described as a “house by the side of the road”: its inmates lauded as a family rare for its high ideals, its cultural influences and its far reaching plans for community betterment. But, lest his children ever be tempted to “high hat” their neighbors, Mr. Sawyer loved to tell that the first meal eaten in the original Sawyer menage consisted of raw turnips and walnuts. He liked to remind his children that kindness of neighbors was the most potent factor—next to God's protecting hand—in keeping up his spirits through direst extremity.

After teaching school for several years, George Sawyer served as county surveyor and later as deputy county clerk. But it was inevitable that his keen, well-trained mind and seasoned judgment should ultimately incline him to banking. In 1885 he organized the Saline County Bank of Western, functioning as its president until his death in 1933. Think of it: for forty-eight years a banker and still beloved of all the country side.

This is easily understandable to those who know small communities. Who is called upon to give advice in legal matters? The banker. Who is asked to speak a good word for young Smith about to go cityward for employment? The banker. Who alone, of all the town-folk, knows the financial status of every business man and merchant in his territory? And who, indeed, listens to more tales of woe, more intimate recitals of family grievances than the country banker? And when that banker's wife is of the Martha Kilmer type, then indeed is his role unique: then indeed are his decisions sought and his advice valued.

In summarizing the good deeds, tangible and intangible, performed by George Sawyer, it is not too much to say that he blazed a trail of integrity, efficiency and beneficence across the history of finance in Nebraska, the state he loved next to his God.

II.

In 1912 Mr. Sawyer's influence among bankers was confirmed by his election to the presidency of the Nebraska Bankers Association. In the same year, when the annual meeting of the American Bankers Association was held in Detroit, the *Detroit News* gave front page publicity to a photograph of seven outstanding members of the association, including Mr. Sawyer, whose record as a banker was of important significance, not alone in Nebraska, but also throughout the middle west.

In large measure Mr. Sawyer's influence was due to the well known fact that he never permitted his dealings, financial or social, to be controlled by political expediency. Next in importance, as a key to his popularity, was his disdain of riches—as merely a means to distinction. He repeatedly asserted that he did not want to be

wealthy. And the sincerity of his words is borne out by the fact that by 1920—thirteen years before his death—he had given of his modest means more than ten thousand dollars to charity and philanthropy. And these benefactions extended over the very lean years, the depressions brought on by crop failures, away back to where he and Martha felt affluent when killing their own hog.

Stories are rife throughout Western and surrounding towns of the Sawyer hospitality, the Sawyer humor, the Sawyer honesty. And where these virtues exist it is patent that one will look in vain for pessimism. Mr. Sawyer's optimism was second nature to him, and his faith in Nebraska an obsession.

Full years, years rich with services to his community and his fellow man, reached their climax when in 1920 Mr. and Mrs. Sawyer celebrated the golden anniversary of their wedding. Many from distant points attended Western's demonstration of pride in its leading citizens. Banking officials and other men of high places from Nebraska and other states assembled to swell the paean of praise. But none came who received a larger measure of joy than did two men from Iowa, brothers, whom Mr. Sawyer had taught fifty-five years earlier.

The features of the celebration were a welcome extended to guests by Helen Storms, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. A. J. Storms of Auburn and grandchild of the jubilarians; the tributes paid by General Hastings, a pioneer friend of the family; and Mr. Sawyer's response which, of necessity, was generous with reminiscence. General Hastings mentioned the services rendered the Government during the World War and the medal received in acknowledgement of those services. Mr. Sawyer touched with simple dignity the bond between himself and his wife—the bond which had been a bulwark of hope during all trials. When misfortune glowered and distrust frowned, George had always taken heart in the belief that "Martha understands".

III.

In 1929 a tragedy eclipsed the radiance that had continued to emanate from the home of the Sawyers. A commodious, inviting home it was; but fire razed it on the

night of May 3, and in its ashes lay the body of Martha Luella Kilmer.

A daughter tells us that Mrs. Sawyer had slept on the upper floor; and because of Mr. Sawyer's infirmity, which made it difficult for him to ascend the stairs, his bedroom had always been below.

As the fire raged, frenzied men broke into Mrs. Sawyer's room and found it unoccupied. Gratefully they assumed she had escaped to the outside and was unnoticed in the confusion. Efforts to control the fire occupied Mr. Sawyer and his neighbors for some time.

When daylight peered into the wreckage, a horrified group found Mrs. Sawyer's body. At the first alarm she had hurried down stairs to perform the nightly ritual of fifty-nine years—making certain that her crippled husband was comfortable and safe. Her body lay where she had fallen—across his bed.

"Father died that day," the daughter continues. His body continued to function normally for four years; but his heart lay in Martha's grave.

Mute, but poignant testimony to this sudden collapse of his interest in life was Mr. Sawyer's sudden abandonment of an auto-biographical sketch he had been writing for many years, from his teens to the death of his wife. No entry is found to post date the death of Martha Kilmer.

Mr. Sawyer was destined to share the racking terror which projected the financial crisis of 1932-33. After President Roosevelt had inaugurated the bank holiday, Mr. Sawyer and his two sons maintained a rigid but quiet supervision over all matters demanding attention. Daily the aged man carried his responsibilities as president of the bank he had founded and watchfully cherished.

When the government placed its stringent limitations on the closed banks before permitting them to be reopened, the Sawyer family felt that though their loans were as good as gold, the farmers of the community could not meet their obligations. Charging them off to meet governmental rulings would mean a repudiation of faith in their borrowers. While this dilemma faced them, Mr. Sawyer was called to his Final Accounting by the all-merciful Judge Who weighs as evidence only the good

intent behind a man's deeds—not the world's appraisal of those deeds.

The obituary which appeared in the local paper of March 16, 1933, was almost terse, as if the writer knew that words were too futile to convey, in full measure, the loss sustained in the death of George Sawyer. One short sentence made reference to this loss: "The entire community was shocked into silent reverence for death had called a citizen devoted to a community which loved him."

Epilogue

Mr. Sawyer's death did not ring down the final curtain on the stage of his life. A dramatic epilogue is found in the following editorial which appeared in one of Nebraska's metropolitan daily papers on November 1, 1933:

"Sometimes the stories of the immense operations of huge banking and investment firms, with results that seem only profitable to the bankers . . . make one believe that the old-fashioned characteristic of rugged honesty no longer is held in esteem.

"Then the news brings the report of such an event as that which is taking place at Western, Nebraska, where depositors in the closed Saline County Bank are being paid in full by the six children* of George F. Sawyer, the head of the bank. They owe no legal debt, but the splitting of hairs over technicalities, which is done so cleverly in some quarters, is scorned by the Sawyer family. They permit none to dictate to them the legal limit of their obligations, and for the honor of a family name, and to justify the teachings of their father, they assume a debt they could escape.

"That is rugged honesty. It is pride of self, pride of family, pride of name, adherence to old-fashioned principle, which has impelled the Sawyers to pledge all they have to redeem the faith of the depositors in the Sawyer Bank."

FINIS

*Mrs. Frank D. Eager, Lincoln; Mrs. J. M. VanAuken, Western; Mrs. A. J. Storms, Auburn; Mrs. C. L. Abbott, Genoa; James G. Sawyer, Western; Homer B. Sawyer, Moorfield.