

Edith Neville (1885-1936)

Edith Neville, one of Bloomington's wealthiest and most unique citizens, was born in Bloomington on August 29, 1885. She was the daughter of James and Nellie (Bent) Neville. James was born in Tazewell County, Illinois, and moved to Bloomington in 1877. He became a lawyer in 1880, was appointed Postmaster of Bloomington by President Benjamin Harrison, and later served as Mayor of Bloomington from 1905 to 1906. Edith's mother, Nellie, came from the same family that Horatio G. Bent Elementary School is named after.

As the daughter of the mayor, Edith grew up with a lot of privileges. She didn't attend school, but she was privately tutored. Her family lived in one of the nicest homes in the city. Despite his wealth, Edith's father, James, felt close to regular people and disliked showing off wealth, which influenced Edith's beliefs for the rest of her life.

When Edith was about 20 years old, her father passed away in 1906, shortly after his term as mayor ended. Her mother, Nellie, passed away in 1924. Edith never worked a regular job, choosing instead to focus on charity, travel, and studying art, especially poetry. The 1902 *Bloomington City Directory* listed her as a "student," which was a good description of her passion for literature. She knew famous poets like Edgar Lee Masters, Carl Sandburg, and Vachel Lindsay.

In 1930, Edith built a "Poetry Playhouse" behind her house at 1002 Broadway Street in Normal. According to Melba Kirkpatrick, a student from Illinois Wesleyan University who visited Edith often, the Playhouse was a small building with a stage. The audience sat in chairs with writing surfaces. Edith and other local actors performed short plays and read poetry there. Even though Edith wasn't the best at reading poetry, her love for it was so strong that it moved the audience. She also gave poetry lectures in Bloomington and nearby towns.

Although she was very wealthy, Edith lived in a modest home with her housekeeper and two dogs, a wolfhound named Libby, and a pug named Hans. She never married, likely because she didn't need a husband for financial support. However, she loved being around people and often had guests at her Playhouse. She became well-known in the community, even though she wasn't interested in hosting fancy teas like other wealthy women of her time. Edith was a larger woman who wore loose, light-colored clothes and didn't care about fashion.

Despite not wanting to be part of high society, Edith was very involved in local activities. She was a member of the Bloomington and Normal History Clubs and was active at St. Matthew's Episcopal Church. She was also part of a national church group for women, the Society of Companions for the Holy Cross, and went on their retreat every year in Massachusetts.

Edith also loved to travel. She visited Europe multiple times, and in 1934, she took an 8-month trip around the world. Melba Kirkpatrick recalled Edith leaving New York on a freighter filled with bananas. During the trip, she read, talked to the crew, and explored unusual places. In Hong Kong, she bought a Chinese dog named "Captain Silver Line" and brought it back with her. Edith planned another long trip in 1936, but she passed away suddenly on May 13, 1936, just before she was set to leave. She died the next day after being unconscious for over 30 hours.

When Edith died, her estate was worth \$125,000 (about \$1.87 million in 2008). Her relatives, aunt Mrs. Horatio G. Bent and cousin Horatio C. Bent, received a trust of \$25,000. The rest of her money went to various charities, including \$10,000 each to St. Joseph's Hospital, the Mennonite Sanatorium, the Amateur Musical Club, a personal friend, and her two servants. The rest of her estate went to St. Matthew's Episcopal Church.

Edith's funeral took place at St. Matthew's Episcopal Church. She had left instructions for a simple ceremony with no music or sermon. All the flowers and church decorations were white, and the ceremony focused on her love for poetry. Instead of being buried, Edith was cremated, and her ashes were placed next to her parents at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.