

June 13, 1983 Burial Service for Esther Bliss Taylor and her brother Edwin M. Bliss.
Grinnell, Iowa Service written by Edwin F. Taylor and his sister Ruth Taylor Deery.

THE REFORMER AND THE HUMORIST

Esther Bliss Taylor, born Esther Elenora Bliss, died on Thanksgiving day 1980, one month after her ninetieth birthday. She donated her body to Case Western Reserve School of Medicine. Her younger brother, Edwin Meeteer Bliss, died on August 27, 1982 in Casper Wyoming at the age of 87. So it is only now, on June 13, 1983, that we are committing the ashes of brother and sister to the ground in the Bliss plot in Grinnell, Iowa, where both grew up and attended Grinnell College.

This meditation was written by Esther's son Edwin, with material, suggestions, and comments provided by Esther's daughter Ruth Taylor Deery and Edwin Bliss' wife Lois Hall Bliss.

ONE CHEER FOR MORAL STANDARDS: Esther Elenora Bliss Taylor

What would Esther Taylor ask of us on this occasion? Probably not a particular piece of music or a beloved poem.... but a discussion! That was her greatest stimulation and pastime.

It seems to us that she would want to start with some assertion about moral standards, both personal and social. In Oberlin, Ohio her most-remembered cause was temperance, the belief that abstinence from alcohol, tobacco, and drugs would improve both public and private worlds. As part of her legacy, the town of Oberlin remains to this day dry, at least in commerce if not in practice. Yet we remember a myriad of other causes, mostly causes that were lost causes in the Oberlin setting, from school board elections to the Republican Party itself. Each cause called forth from her letters to the editor of the local paper, letters that combined humor and conviction.

In private life she believed that approval and self-respect came with hard work and moral integrity. These were not roads to success, which was not much considered, but to personal satisfaction and rightness with the moral structure of the universe.

We her children will concede one cheer for moral standards. Civilized life depends on personal, social, and commercial integrity. Yet we are suspicious that what is moral is in danger of becoming merely seemly---the expression of conventional custom. Seemliness and attention to the good opinion of others were strong strains in Esther Taylor's character. We also feel that as children we heard too little about how the (quote) upright (unquote) are to deal with a turbulent world in which moral standards are often sacrificed for some other goal. As some wag has said, when the meek inherit the earth, it will be interesting to see how long they keep it. Esther's was not the politics of compromise and this somewhat cut her off from the "lathered pack" of ordinary people. Indeed, we have evidence from the lives of both Esther and her husband of 31 years Lloyd that they themselves were perplexed about the place of an upright person in a topsy-turvy world.

What would Esther Taylor say to all this? There would be vehement discussion, pungent but not profane. When Lloyd and Esther became engaged, someone asked Esther's landlady if she was afraid that the young couple would wear out her couch. No, she replied, they sat on opposite sides of the room and discussed politics.

Although we concede only one cheer for moral standards, we give a hearty two cheers for curiosity, perhaps Esther Taylor's strongest intellectual trait. She did not show much appreciation for nature, art, music, or cooking, but she was powerfully interested in current events, intellectual issues, and causes. She told her son that whenever she met someone new she asked herself, "What does this person know that I can find out about?"

Dinner table conversation at the Taylor house ranged over all intellectual, political, and ethical topics and was carried on with a spirit just short of argument: argument would not have been seemly. This tradition of dinner conversation came from Esther's own family. Dr. Edwin Clarence Bliss, her father, would ask himself on the way home what the family would be interested in discussing

that evening at table. Once her brother Edwin took a meal with a neighbor family and, when asked how it was, replied it was OK but not nearly so interesting as at home.

In the Taylor household the encyclopedias never cooled down from heavy use. Nicholas S. Thompson has said that "curiosity, like coffee, is an acquired need. Just a titillation at the beginning, it becomes with training a raging passion." Esther Taylor had such a passion. Her varied friends, her assault on any city in which she was a tourist, and her endless reading, all fed her curiosity, which has infected us and for which we rise up and call her blessed.

E.M. Forster gave "two cheers for Democracy: one because it admits variety and two because it permits criticism." In her public life Esther Taylor took full advantage of both characteristics of democracy. Forster goes on to say, "Two cheers are quite enough: there is no occasion to give three. Only Love....deserves that." We echo three cheers for love and testify that in Esther Taylor's personal life, her children came first. This unconditional affection undergirded our growth and, through the traumas that enter every life, we have never doubted our own worth. We feel that a parent can give no greater gift.

THE OBSERVER: Edwin Meeteer Bliss

Edwin Meeteer Bliss spent much of his life as a salesman and store manager in Chicago Illinois, Marshalltown Iowa, Princeton Illinois and finally Casper Wyoming. He liked people in small doses but detested the mob psychology of commercialism. Late in his career he became a store display manager, which allowed him to be near customers without having to deal with them directly. As display manager he relished the Christmas season as much as he had rued it as a salesman. He wrote, "After the horrors of the Christmas rush were over, the woman who was manager of Wards mail-order department quit. She said she was going to try to get a job washing dishes. I told her I knew she would be happy."

Edwin's delicious tongue-in-cheek writing style comes out in his advertising copy, which slyly undercuts the commercialism of his employer. Here is an example: "A LITTLE SERMON ON POLO SHIRTS. You too can be happy! Notice the self-satisfied smile on the face of the man in the picture. He is happy. He has just been down to the Commissary and bought a polo shirt. He is cool, he can display his muscles, and he spent only a dollar thirty-nine."

Edwin Bliss was witty, kind, courteous, retiring, conscientious, and caring. He was a voracious and discriminating reader and, like his sister, a writer of letters to the editor. He liked the out-of-doors and quiet times hiking. He hoped in vain that Casper Wyoming would stay small and unpopulated. Perhaps his best letter to the editor was on this subject. The "stagnant community" to which he refers in this letter is Grinnell Iowa.

Apron-string futile

EDITOR:

A few days ago an editorial in the Star-Tribune stated that Casper must either grow or stagnate.

I was raised in a very stagnant community. On the day I was born the town contained 5,000 people. When I left, many years later, the number was the same minus one.

We had a fine school system, a fine sewer system, a fine water system, a fine fire department, a fine one-man police department, and no sweat, no bond elections, and no sales tax. It was very stagnant.

But the apron-string philosophy (let's keep our innocent youth at home) was as futile then as it is today and when I reached Wyoming I fell in love with the then quiet mountains and lonely plains. In those days you could wander for hours on Casper Mountain without seeing a man, a house, a beer can, or a no-trespassing sign. The road was narrow and rough but it was safe.

I could never understand why more people who would be happy with more people don't go where there are more people. Why not move to Chicago, Washington D.C. or Detroit, and attain instant happiness? No waiting—and at the same time contribute to universal happiness. For then we, the shiftless, unambitious folks back home could wallow happily in our pleasant stagnation.

This letter is not to incite contention but, perhaps, to prompt contemplation in some quiet spot—if you can find one.

E. M. BLISS
204 East Third
Casper

Edwin had the combination of laughter and brooding sadness similar to that of many great humorists. He wrote to his sister Esther, "I feel a sad pity for all humans and animals when they aren't irritating me so much a can hardly stand it." In another letter he said, "....in speaking of your grandchildren, you say 'What a pity each one is not a triplet or at least a twin!' Do you really mean that? Have you looked at the population figures, at the world, at mental hospitals, at arthritis, ^{at} lupus erythematosus, at Russian slave labor camps--and at the slaves in American chain stores? People seem--some of them--to be breeding children to play with like toys, to study, to laugh at, to feel a glow over. Have they no pity?"

In spite of his love of privacy, Edwin played banjo in dance groups in the thirties and forties and, just for the fun of it, in the sixties. He continued to play banjo for himself nearly until his death. He liked good music, especially the good old melodic singable tunes. He wrote, "I don't care for Rock and Roll, nor to tell the truth, do I care for classical music, though not with the

revulsion I feel for Rock and Roll. I don't care for the less strenuous music of the 30's, 40's, and 50's...either. I'm living in the past. With tears in my eyes I play the beloved songs of the 20's on my banjo."

Edwin was four and one half years younger than his sister Esther. When Esther was afflicted with rheumatic fever as a young adult, Edwin pushed her in a wheelchair for more than a year. Many years before that, when they were quite small, Edwin, in his bashful way, once asked Esther, "When we grow up, will you marry me?" She, older and aware of social conventions, still wanted to respond to his need for assurance. So, after thinking it over a minute, she replied, "If you still want me to."

Edwin Bliss was married to Lillian North for more than 31 years until her death. They had a daughter, now Evelyn Reddin. Edwin was married to Lois Hall for more than 25 years until his death. Lois says simply, "He was the best husband I could have had and he is sorely missed."