



GEORGE FRANCIS WILL — 1884-1955

On October 2, 1955, at Bismarck, North Dakota, death came suddenly and unexpectedly to George Francis Will. A quiet, friendly, unassuming individual, in whom business acumen was happily combined with a scholar's devotion to learning, his passing removes from the Plains scene another key figure in anthropology. Such was his ability at self-effacement that few realize the extent of his accomplishments in the service of his fellow men. He covered his tracks well — yet one who

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knew called him "one of the most important 'non-professional' archeologists we have ever had."

A life-long resident of North Dakota, and one of the state's outstanding citizens, George Will was born in Bismarck on November 8, 1884. From the Bismarck public schools, following a family tradition, he went to Harvard. Here he specialized in botany in preparation for the career he knew he would enter, but found time to study anthropology under Dixon. On graduation in 1906, he stepped immediately into the seed business established in 1881 by his father, Oscar H. Will, pioneer nurseryman of Bismarck; and in 1917 he became president and general manager of the firm. This business he headed for 38 years, serving actively until 2 days before his death. He participated widely in the business, civic, and cultural affairs of the community. A partial measure of the esteem in which he was held is the fact that he served for 30 years on the city school board, was for many years a member of the city library and zoning boards, the state park commission, and the state historical society board, and also functioned for long terms as chairman of the state corn show and as president of the historical society.

Despite the many demands of his business and civic responsibilities, Will was a keen student of the history, anthropology, and natural history of the northern great Plains. Intellectually, the ethnology and archaeology of the Upper Missouri remained his "first love." He developed an early and abiding interest in the great wealth of archaeological remains near Bismarck. As a junior at Harvard, he led an expedition in 1906 in excavations at the Burgois Double Ditch site. The report of this work, including important historical, linguistic, and ethnological data on the Mandan, still stands unique in anthropological publications for the Dakota region. His subsequent spare time investigations resulted in other papers calling attention to the antiquities of North Dakota; and he also tested the applicability of dendro-chronological methods to timbers from Missouri River village sites of varying antiquity. Will was a strong force in the state's acquisition and development of several large and representative Indian village and quarry sites; and he encouraged systematic researches by qualified outside organizations where the state agencies were unable to do the work adequately. With activa-

tion of the federal water-control program on the Missouri, he enlisted the resources of the state historical society in archaeological salvage work, and served for several years—quietly, conscientiously, and effectively—as a member of the Committee for Recovery of Archaeological Remains. He was treasurer of the Society for American Archaeology from 1951 to 1953.

The heritage that American agriculture received from the Indian is, of course, well known to all who have had formal training in American anthropology. Nowhere, perhaps, is the nature of that heritage and the mechanism of its transfer better illustrated than in the work of George Will. With the Three Affiliated Tribes at Fort Berthold, the Mandan, Arikara, and Hidatsa, Will early established an intimate and lasting friendship. From this relationship he accumulated a wealth of information on the ethnography of these groups and developed a deep respect for their philosophy of life. On the practical side, he recognized the unique features of their long-established horticultural economy. Living near or at the northern margin of corn-growing in North America, they had developed crop varieties and methods peculiarly suited to the climatic rigors of the region. He wisely saw the possibilities of utilizing their experience and know-how in solving modern agricultural problems in the region. Here was a rare opportunity to combine his botanical training with ethnologic interests, and Will made the most of it.

His father had already shown the way. A handful of seeds received from a Hidatsa, Son of Star, in the 1880's became the Great Northern bean, now one of the leading field beans of commerce. In the years that followed, experimental work was carried on with corn, melons, and other vegetables obtained from the Indians. Some of this stock was badly mixed, and had to be unscrambled; this done, the Wills found themselves with basic strains all characterized by extreme earliness, hardiness, and drought-resistance. From these, in turn, were developed a series of varieties now well established in the regional farm economy. In this work, George Will had the active and close cooperation of such well-known men as the Rev. Gilbert L. Wilson, M. L. Wilson, George Hyde, and Melvin R. Gilmore. The full story would certainly be one of absorbing interest, but Will's own writings give only glimpses of what happened. Interestingly enough, the cata-

log of the Oscar H. Will Company still carries the names of many of the corn, melon, bean, and other varieties developed here from Indian stock; and as late as 1954 it advertised Will's Pioneer Indian collection including one packet each of the following: Hidatsa beans, Arikara squash, Omaha pumpkin, Mandan squash, Nuetta sweet corn. The information on native horticulture accumulated by George Will was published in 1917 in the classic *Corn Among the Indians of the Upper Missouri*, with Hyde as coauthor.

The basic importance and lasting value of Will's contributions to Northern Plains agriculture have not gone unrecognized. In 1940, he was awarded the Doctorate of Science by North Dakota Agricultural College; and in 1954 he received the 10th John Robertson Memorial medal in horticulture from the Horticultural Societies of the Dakotas.

On the personal side, George Will has been aptly characterized as an excessively modest and unobtrusive man. Because he did his work so quietly and selflessly, those of us not in constant touch with him never really got to know him as well as we should have liked to. His lovely hilltop home was always open to visiting archaeologists, whatever the hour of their arrival, their condition, or their number. His kindly hospitality and friendly good humor never failed, and they were fortunately shared by a congenial and vivacious wife of whom he was understandably very fond. All of these things leave us with memories we shall always cherish, as we respect his achievements.

These last, incidentally, include another side about which most people outside his immediate area knew little or nothing. George Will loved camping, mountain hiking, and the outdoor life generally. For more than 30 years, he was in the habit of taking long walks, varying from 7 to 15 miles, on every possible Sunday and holiday. Some of his observations and reflections were revealed in a series of short biweekly radio talks, later published in part. These run a wide gamut — grass, trees, Indian lore, the weather, sunsets, the seasons, the many changes in the land since his boyhood; and they betoken a close and sympathetic observer of nature along with a philosophic turn of mind. Mostly, he walked north and west of Bismarck; and he once observed that, "like Walden . . . this bit of North Dakota may furnish knowledge,

pleasure, and amusement for all my years and those of generations to come."

In these rambles over the prairie bluffs and through the Missouri River woods of his beloved North Dakota, pipe in his mouth and dog at his side, George Will found a generous measure of the serenity that many seek and few find in our day.

WALDO R. WEDEL

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* Compiled by Alan R. Woolworth, with a few additions by Wedel. The list includes all anthropological titles we have been able to find under George Will's name. Nor listed are numerous short articles in *North and South Dakota Horticulture* which have nothing to do with anthropology but are interesting for what they reveal about the writer and his many interests. They may be found in the following volumes of the magazine: 2 (1930), 7 (1935), 9 to 12 (1936-39), 16 (1943), 18 (1945), 19 to 24 (1946-51). Articles on natural history also appear in *North Dakota Outdoors*, Volume 12 (1949).

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