Ross-Ade

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The cool weather months—September through April, the months containing the letter “R”—gave George Ade, during his errand-running years in Kentland, a good reason to visit Keefe’s Grocery, because Keefe sometimes carried fresh oysters. For a quarter a boy could take home a cardboard bucket with a wire handle containing enough oysters for a family dinner. George liked ice cream, too, and rarely found enough.

Meanwhile, as a lanky teen, he was gaining respect for the spoken word. “The famous orators,” he would remember, “were those who could cause jurors to weep. The popular preachers could make the most noise while picturing hellfire. A really successful funeral could be heard a mile away. Religious convictions were vivid and concrete. Satan devoted all his time to frying those who had failed to attend church” (Kelly, Ade, 34).

And yet George lost interest in church early in life. In this choice he joined his brother Joe, who avoided sermons when he could. However, his brother Bill became an ardent churchgoer. George did at least seem to have memorized every Methodist hymn he ever heard before he backslid. He appeared to make no great effort to learn hymns, but words and music sank so deeply into his memory that they were his for life. Stories of his amazing memory for people, places, events, and song lyrics also followed him.

Along this early path George also let the theater stir his curiosity. One of his first stacks of saved pennies is said to have gone for a book of popular songs by the team of Harrigan and Hart. George
digested song hits from the American stage, especially minstrel shows.

He was a good spectator, too. Minor troupes from Indianapolis played McCullough’s Hall in Kentland, including the Graham Earle Stock Company and the Harry Hotta Players. George wrangled his way into some McCullough’s Hall events by passing out the manager’s handbills. A few times John Ade took George to Chicago to see plays and musicals.

During these formative years, George also felt exposure to Republican politics. He wrote both seriously and amusingly about them: “It was a time when one of the chief lunacies was the belief that voters could best prove the fervor of their political convictions and the high character of their patriotism by walking mile after mile carrying torches and permitting kerosene to drip on their clothing” (Kelly, Ade, 38). In Newton County, “the first lessons learned were those of political hatred. We studied our [Thomas] Nast cartoons before we tackled the primer.” George was brought up to believe that if Democrats won anything “the whole solar system would be disarranged” (ibid.).

Even as a young teen, through his father, George met political celebrities. One was Albert G. Porter, Indiana Governor and U.S. Minister to Italy. Another was Schuyler Colfax from South Bend. The U.S. Vice President at the time, Colfax once even visited the Ade home. In the autumn of 1876, George bounced across a prairie road seated in a carriage beside Benjamin Harrison. Harrison was running for Indiana Governor against Democrat James D. “Blue Jeans” Williams. Ade remembered only that Harrison wore gloves and said nothing for twenty-five miles.

As a young teen, George also took to puttering around the office of the Gazette, Kentland’s Republican weekly paper. For the Gazette George carried out menial duties “mostly for the glory of the Republican cause.” His main claim to fame was his brazen theft, from the nearby rival paper’s office, of proof sheets that alerted Republicans to last-minute attacks coming from Democrats. The victimized editor, never able to find the culprit, wrote
that the air of his sanctum must never again be contaminated by the “fumes emanating from the infamous skunk’s filthy carcass.”

The lessons continued for the growing boy: “I learned to smoke, by painful efforts, when I was a small boy, starting in on corn-silk and graduating up to the stub-tailed cheroots which came in small paper boxes and sold three for a nickel” (Tobin 13).

The law at that time required only two years of high school. During his two years, George felt trapped into honest farm work and hated it, yet found it rich in raw material for writing. “The distrust with which I regarded horses at that time has never been overcome,” he wrote later. One task involved pulling cockle-burrs out of corn. “It was pretty hard to look over a field of cockle-burrs and find the corn,” he wrote. “Sometimes the corn crop would fail and sometimes the oat crop would fail but the cockle-burr crop and the mustard crop never failed.” John Ade would shake his head sadly. What was to become of a farm son who detested farming and had no talent for anything else?

In October 1881, the answer began to take shape. George’s high school teacher assigned all the seniors to write themes. George procrastinated. In a last-minute effort, he chose his own subject and titled it “A Basket of Potatoes.”

The teacher liked it. John Ade liked it. So did the editor of the Gazette. The result was George Ade’s first published literary work at age fifteen. He spoke of it in an interview in 1902: “Did I ever write anything humorous as a kid? Yes. But I didn’t know it. My sister found the piece called ‘A Basket of Potatoes,’ that I had written when I was fifteen. I then wrote a good deal for the Kentland paper, for nothing. That article told how, when you shake a basket of potatoes, the big ones come to the top. I have no doubt it set the younger members of the community to thinking. But I never meant it for humor.” The essay concluded:
“And so it is everywhere, life is but a basket of potatoes. When the hard jolts come the big will rise and the small will fall. The true, the honest, and the brave will go to the top. The small-minded and ignorant must go to the bottom...Now is the time for you to say whether or not in the battle of life you will be a small or large potato. If you would be a large potato get education, be honest, observing and careful and you will be jolted to the top. If you would be a small potato, neglect these things and you will get to the bottom of your own accord. Break off your bad habits, keep away from rotten potatoes and you will get to the top. Be careless of these things and you will reach the bottom in due time. Everything rests with you. Prepare for the jolting.” (Kelly, Ade, 45)

The mild attention George gained from the essay inspired no less than Mr. Hershman himself, the county superintendent of schools, to come out and see John Ade. George was the sort, Hershman said, who could gain much from a college education. George’s older brothers, Will and Joe, had shrugged off college. John never saw George as college material, either. Too dreamy. Too lazy. But if George didn’t go, what could he do? Not many local boys had tried college. College might cost two hundred fifty dollars a year, a thousand for the four-year course. What college should it be? Indiana University at Bloomington was one hundred and fifty miles away. What people were calling “a little agricultural college near Lafayette” was closer, at fifty miles. In September 1882, John applied for a scholarship through the Newton County Commissioners (all Republican). Politics didn’t matter, though. No one else in the county even applied. George had the necessary “good moral character” for one.

However, Mother wished to be heard. She considered George too young, just past sixteen, to go so far from home. She pictured the temptations he might face as a farm boy on a campus across a river from Lafayette, a city of fifteen thousand. So George stayed in Kentland and took special courses in high school to prepare.
Even when the big day came in the fall of 1883, John Ade feared the worst. Only two other boys in Newton County were going off to college, and George alone was going to try Purdue.