

## ***Grandfather Stories, by Samuel Hopkins Adams***

*Reviewed by Suzanne S. Barnhill*

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I have always thought that the formula for these book reviews was pretty simple: find a book I like well enough to want to share it, preferably one that is somewhat funny and seems likely to appeal to a general audience, then tell something about the author, tell something about the book, and read a few excerpts to give the flavor. This seems pretty straightforward, but I have to confess that this time I got bogged down in the “tell something about the author” stage. But let me back up a little.

Those of you who have attended these book reviews regularly for a number of years may recall that in 1994 I reviewed a book called *A Book of Country Things*. That book preserved an oral record of life in the nineteenth century, in particular the way life was lived on a farm in New England, and the way I came to acquire it was that I ran across it when I was putting out books at the Friends of the Library book sale. I couldn't figure out how to categorize it, so I bought it and took it home.

History repeated itself this year and led to this book review. As you may know, the Friends of the Library work year-round to sort, price, and box up books for the book sale in March. Each of the board members signs up for a two-week stint of sorting, and my turn came up last May. One of the books that was donated during that period was *Grandfather Stories*. From a cursory glance at the dust jacket copy, I wasn't sure whether these “stories” or “tales” were fact or fiction, but the book sounded intriguing, so I took it home for further investigation. As soon as I started reading it, I was pretty sure I'd found a “book review book.”

The copyright page makes it clear that most of the stories had been published previously, between 1947 and 1955, some in *Woman's Day* (interestingly described as “The A & P Magazine”), but most in *The New Yorker*. One of the “stories” that was written for this collection is the introductory chapter, “Two Grandfathers,” which begins:

Back in the last century grandparents were less durable than they are now. Few children got far into their teens with a full quota. That, through the years of my growing-up, I was blessed with three, plus a step-grandmother thrown in for good measure, made me an object of envy to my contemporaries. Looking back to my boyhood years of the 1870's and early 1880's, I incline to believe that the young got more out of the old than they do now.

The relationship was patriarchal and preceptorial on the one side, respectful and receptive on the other. How far it was mutually beneficial, I would not presume to estimate. There were times when grandparental authority, superimposed upon parental, seemed a little too much of a good thing. On the whole, however, the association was profitable to the young, though perhaps less pleasant than it seems in memory. Retrospect tends to be sentimental.

My two grandfathers, both typical of upstate New York character, were of different eras. Grandfather Adams, born at the tag-end of the eighteenth century, quite plainly bore its impress. He even consciously affected its archaisms. Grandfather Hopkins, of the next generation, was, by the other grandfather's standards, too much of a modernist. I have heard Grandfather Adams call himself “a plain, everyday American,” though I doubt that he fully meant it. It would never have occurred to Samuel Miles Hopkins, D.D., an erudite Professor of Church History in a Presbyterian Seminary, thus to characterize himself. He was too conscious of his ministerial

prerogative. Though there was a distance of only seventy miles between the two homes, my grandparents saw little of one another. It was probably just as well. [pp. 3–4]

Adams's description of his grandfathers goes on for several more pages, and I had frequent occasion to refer to it as I was reading the stories that followed, but what brought me up short at the outset was the phrase "born at the tag-end of the eighteenth century." This was the first inkling I had of what a treasure I held in my hands. Since *Grandfather Stories* was published in 1955, I had been thinking of it as a relatively modern book. Given that a generation is usually reckoned as 25 or 30 years, it seemed highly unlikely that just two generations back would stretch into the eighteenth century. This piqued my curiosity about the author and his grandfathers.

My first impulse was to get online and look for information on Samuel Hopkins Adams. I'd never heard of him, and you may think you haven't either, but you'll probably find, as I did, that you do know something about his work. At first I didn't have much luck, I think because I tried to use the Alabama Virtual Library. Although Adams was a popular writer in his time, he hasn't made much lasting impression on the literary scene. The journals available through AVL aren't archived far enough back to contain reviews of his work, and he wasn't an important enough author to be covered by the reference works it provides access to. But when I tried an overall Internet search, I struck paydirt; the Google search engine turns up 423 hits for "Samuel Hopkins Adams." What I learned, both initially and more recently, when I resumed work on this review, would take more than my allotted time to tell you, but most of the Web pages were devoted to a few recurring themes. I'll just hint at those by asking the following questions: Does the name Lydia Pinkham ring a bell? Have you ever heard of the detective Average Jones? Does the thought of the Roaring Twenties bring to your mind the phrase "flaming youth"? Have you seen the movie *It Happened One Night*? All of these are relevant, as you will see.

Ironically, much of what I learned is presented much more concisely and coherently in reference works found here in the library. In fact, to save time, I'm going to distribute copies of a transcript of the entry I found in the *Dictionary of American Biography*, which pretty well sums up the life of Samuel Hopkins Adams.

[Distribute copies.]

One of the first facts I learned about him was that he had been one of the "muckraking" journalists in the early twentieth century who exposed the dangers of patent medicines. In 1905, in the first of a series of 11 or 12 articles for *Collier's Weekly*, he wrote:

Gullible America will spend this year some seventy-five millions of dollars in the purchase of patent medicines. In consideration of this sum it will swallow huge quantities of alcohol, an appalling amount of opiates and narcotics, a wide assortment of varied drugs ranging from powerful and dangerous heart depressants to insidious liver stimulants; and, in excess of all other ingredients, undiluted fraud.

Among these patent medicines was Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound. An article on Lydia Pinkham's at the Vanderbilt Medical Center Web site describes it this way:

First marketed in 1875, the "female complaint" nostrum was widely advertised in the backs of newspapers and women's magazines. The ads often played on themes of the pain and suffering of being a woman, and featured glowing testimonials from women who claimed to have been healed from all manner of dysfunction and disease by the compound.

Such testimonials were encouraged by ad copy such as “Any woman...is responsible for her own suffering who will not take the trouble to write to Mrs. Pinkham for advice.” The fact that Lydia Pinkham had died in 1883 didn’t deter the company from continuing to play on her name and image.

The “write to Mrs. Pinkham” ruse was first given wide public exposure when the muckraking *Ladies’ Home Journal* published a photograph of Lydia Pinkham’s tombstone, and speculated on the quality of medical advice being dispensed by a woman who had been dead for 22 years.

The red-faced company asserted that it hadn’t meant to imply that *Lydia* Pinkham could be written to—it was her daughter-in-law, *Jennie* Pinkham, who answered the letters.

This explanation was soon exposed as a lie by journalist Samuel Hopkins Adams, who reported in *Collier’s Weekly* that the Pinkham company employed a battery of typists who answered women’s health inquiries with form letters, which usually encouraged the use of more of the Vegetable Compound.

As a result of Adams’s articles, and similar ones written by other journalists, Congress in 1906 passed the Pure Food and Drug Act, which, among other things, forced makers of patent medicines to disclose on the label the nostrum’s alcohol content.

For the first time, users of the compound—many of whom were adamant non-drinkers, and some of whom were WCTU members—discovered that the Pinkham’s was 15 percent alcohol. In fact, just before labeling was required, the formula had been changed; the old, undisclosed formula was even higher octane—closer to 20 percent alcohol.

Another thing I learned about Samuel Hopkins Adams was that he was the creator of Average Jones, a detective featured in a book of stories published in 1911. These were said to have been a by-product of his food and drug investigations and evidently involved cases of a scientific or medical nature. I don’t know whether I’ve read any of the other stories or not, but I well remember one called “The Man Who Spoke Latin,” which was anthologized in *101 Years’ Entertainment: The Great Detective Stories, 1841–1941*, a collection of short stories compiled by Ellery Queen.

Yet another fact that interested me was that the film classic *It Happened One Night* was based on one of Adams’ stories, “Night Bus.” I’d never actually seen the film, so this was a good excuse for checking the video out of the library. In 1942, Adams wrote, “Some fifteen or sixteen of my stories have been done into movies; some with a result so painful that I have been unable to sit through the presentation; one, at least, *It Happened One Night* (1934), improved in the adaptation, and was directed and acted with such artistry and verve that I should like to see it again.”

It’s unclear whether in the figure of “fifteen or sixteen” Adams was including the stories he wrote under the name of Warner Fabian. Apparently he preferred to distance himself from what have been described as “racy college novels” by writing them under a pseudonym, but they were evidently very popular in the ’20s. One of them was made into the movie *The Wild Party*, which was Clara Bow’s first talking picture. Another became *Sailors’ Wives*, starring Mary Astor. And *Flaming Youth* was the film that made Colleen Moore a star and gave its name to a generation.

I also found a lot of interesting material on Samuel’s father, the Reverend Myron Adams, Jr., D.D. Among other things, he served as the signal officer on the U.S.S. *Lackawanna* during the Battle of Mobile Bay. After the war he studied at Hamilton College and Auburn Seminary, where his future father-in-law, Samuel Miles Hopkins, was one of his professors. Adams was “in

the vanguard of those liberals who were beginning to embrace what was called in the 1870's the New Theology." Unfortunately, he eventually ran afoul of church authorities, who charged him with heresy and "disfellowshipped" him in 1881. Although he continued to pastor his congregation, from that time his health failed, and he was compelled to take several leaves of absence. On December 29, 1895, a Sunday morning, he died at the age of 54. Of this difficult period in his father's life, Sam Adams wrote, "Presbyterianism of a liberal, even heretical, brand enveloped my childhood."

Clearly Myron Adams' life was cut short untimely since longevity seems to have been a family trait: Grandfather Adams died in 1893 at the age of 94, his grandson Samuel in 1958 at the age of 87. Myron Adams, Sr., had in fact been born "at the tag-end of the eighteenth century," in 1799. He was thus 42 years old when his son was born in 1841. Sam's father was 30 when Sam was born, and Sam himself was 84 when this book was published, which explains the long time span it covers.

The book contains 24 chapters. The first, as I have said, introduces the author's two grandfathers; the last is also not really a "story" (more on that later). Of the 22 that remain, three describe experiences associated with his Grandfather Hopkins. In "A Slave in the Family," for example, Adams writes about meeting Harriet Tubman at his Grandfather Hopkins' home in Auburn, where she was a regular visitor because Grandfather Hopkins' sister, Sarah Hopkins Bradford, had written two books about her. In "A Finger Lakes Boyhood," he describes learning to sail on Owasco Lake, and in "Treasure Hunt," he recalls a summer spent hunting for wild ginseng roots in the woods around Wide Waters (Grandfather Hopkins' summer home on Owasco Lake) and selling the roots for a fabulous amount. Three more chapters recount Sam's adventures in Rochester in the company of his Grandfather Adams. All the rest, although they may be framed by contemporary events, are tales told by Grandfather Adams. So the book really belongs to Grandfather Adams.

In his introductory chapter, Adams explains why such a disproportionate number of the stories feature Grandfather Adams:

If these ancestral reminiscences deal chiefly with my Adams forebear, it is not because of any personal preference for him. As a matter of fact, Grandfather Hopkins was far more companionable. I had an affection for him warmer than any feeling for the more austere and less approachable relation. But he had led, from boyhood, a sheltered life of predestined scholarship in library and classroom, whereas Grandfather Adams, though by no means devoid of cultivation, had, as a young man, operated a stump-puller with eight-foot wheels in the construction of that mighty engineering feat, the Grand Erie Canal, and later worked on the canal, itself. The difference in appeal to youthful imagination needs no emphasizing. [p. 6]

Adams explains that Grandfather Adams lived in "a simple cottage on unfashionable South Union Street" in Rochester because "before any of us grandchildren were born, he had sold a once prosperous farm and retired on an insufficient income" [p. 6]. He had also evidently been widowed and remarried, and Adams says, "To this day I do not know our step-grandmother's given name. Grandfather addressed her as 'Mrs. Adams' and would have been shocked at any such unwarranted familiarity as 'Myron' on her part." The third member of the household was the "meek, bespectacled, fledgling theologian to whom Grandfather always referred as 'my man, Geordis,'" although his name was Howard Holder. "He did all the heavy work of house and garden and took good care of Horace G. (for Greeley), the family horse. In recompense he

received lodgings in the barn, two meals a day in the house, and two dollars a week wage. Apparently the arrangement suited; Geordis was never heard to complain” [p. 7].

Adams had ample opportunity to become familiar with this household:

Family piety ran strong in the Adams line. At least once a week we grandchildren were required to pay our formal respects at South Union Street. There were five of us in regular attendance. The age-span from Jenny, the eldest, to Charlie, the youngest was ten years. In between were John, Sireno, and myself, all born at the beginning of the 1870’s. [p. 8]

At first this was a dreary obligation, but one day in 1881, everything changed:

It took years for us to become at all well acquainted with Grandfather. In the early days of our duty visits there was a romantic halo about his person, due to a misconception. Up to the time when I was ten years old, I cherished, in common with my cousins, the proud illusion that he was a retired horse-thief. The ground for our faith was a framed certificate, hanging in the sitting room. It was the one worldly touch on walls otherwise given over to the pious aridity of crewel-work texts and the mortuary reminders of Currier & Ives. In clear and elegant script it set forth that Mr. Myron Adams of East Bloomfield, New York, was a member in good and regular standing of the Wayne County Horse-thief Society, witness the sign and seal of the secretary, Anno Domini, 1821. There was, of course, no way of our knowing that the Society was formed for the purpose of discouraging raids on farm stock, and was also a social and festal organization comprising the young bloods or “Corinthians” of the county.

John, Reno and I bragged unconsciously to our envious playmates of the strain of criminality in our blood. Only Jenny was of another mind. For some reason incomprehensible to the rest of us, she pretended to regard the record as faintly discreditable. Jenny was precociously ladylike.

It was difficult to reconcile the old gentleman’s personality with the glamorous past which we attributed to him. Certainly there was nothing rakish about him as an octogenarian. My early recollection is of a patriarchally bearded and imposing figure in a Boston rocker beside a Franklin stove. From the ample expanse of beard issued a calm and preceptorial voice, dispensing admonition, instruction, exhortation to good and warning against evil conduct, sage advice and stern reproof; seldom praise and never levity. I was in my tenth year before I ever hear him laugh.

It was that occasion which broke the ice between the generations. The five of us had been bidden to breakfast at the cottage, a harsh ordeal, involving, as it did, a seven o’clock arrival, and family prayers in the heatless parlor. It was on a raw March morning that John innocently precipitated the event.

Fifteen minutes was the scanty time allotted for breakfast on our step-grandmother’s tooth-some battercakes, after which we were herded into the devastating chill of the parlor. Grandfather read from the Scriptures. We sat, shivering and stiffening. Grandfather led in prayer. We knelt on the stone-cold floor with quaking knees. Grandfather lifted up his voice in sacred song. We joined in, doing our conscientious best to control our tremulous jaws.

Broad is the p-p-path  
That leads to d-death,  
And thousands w-w-walk  
Together ther-r-r-r-re.

Then a protracted benediction, after which we were free to make for the warmth and comfort of Benjamin Franklin’s patent stove. All but one. This time John cringed in his chair, immobilized by a cramping chill. He was hustled out to the sitting room where Grandma swathed him

in a blanket, Georgis fetched a hot brick for his feet, and Grandfather reached for the ever-handy Hop Bitters bottle. [pp. 8–10]

Toward the end of the book, Adams writes this about Hop Bitters:

Early in the 1870's there appeared upon hundreds of respectable sideboards, mantelpieces and shelves in Rochester an amber-hued bottle with a blown-in design of a hop vine in full fruit. Within was a potent liquid. "Hop Bitters, the Invalid's Friend & Hope" had started a long and profitable career, enhanced by the special appeal it made to the teetotal trade.

Remember [one advertisement read], Hop Bitters is no vile, drugged, drunken nostrum, but the Purest and Best Medicine ever made, the greatest Blood Purifier, Liver Regulator, and Life and Health Restoring agent on earth, tonic and stimulating WITHOUT INTOXICATING.

The total-abstinence element, then at the height of its social influence, read, bought, partook, and were gladdened in heart, blissfully innocent of the medicine's secret content of low-grade, high-powered whiskey. Swiftly the Bitters rose to be the fifth best-seller in the patent-medicine field, and Asa T. Soule, the proprietor of the company that manufactured it, opened branches in London, Antwerp, Melbourne, and Toronto. Side lines were put out—Hop Cure for coughs, Hop Pad to comfort distressed abdomens, and an "absolute and irresistible cure" for drunkenness, narcotics and tobacco. The proprietor became a millionaire.

Mr. Soule, who composed all his own advertising, was a master of the persuasive phrase. His fellow-townsmen, my father, who was not among his admirers, used to say of his copy that it "would convince a hale man that he has an incurable disease and that Hop Bitters will cure it." Grandfather, a militant foe of the Demon Rum, was seldom without his three-a-day dosage of Mr. Soule's inspiring concoction.

As for its effect on the chilled John, Adams writes that "A tablespoonful of a forty percent alcohol solution is calculated to produce effects upon the ten-year-old human organism. John, normally the most decorous of our generation, reacted atypically to the stimulus."

Fixing the framed certificate with a glittering eye, he said loudly, "Grandpa!"

"Yes, John."

"I gotta question to ask you."

A galvanic shock went through the rest of us. Interrogate our grandfather? Except for a polite inquiry as to his health, none of us would have dared such a thing. What alcoholic temerity was John about to perpetrate?

"Ask it." The tone was not encouraging.

"Where did you get Horace G.?"

"Hah!" Grandfather ejaculated, the memory of that equine transaction still warm within him.

"I know," John asserted with profound conviction.

"Do you, indeed!" said Grandfather ominously.

"You stole him."

Grandma uttered a faint shriek.

"Didn't you? Didn't you steal Horace G.?"

Grandfather turned to his wife. "The boy is exalted in the head. Send for Dr. Ely."

“Horse-thieves steal horses, don’t they?” his grandson insisted. “And you used to be a horse-thief, didn’t you? That paper”—he pointed a wavering finger at the wall—“says so. I read it, myself, and I got Jenny to read it after me so’s to be sure I was right. How can you be a member of a horse-thief society unless you’re a horse-thief? Wasn’t he a horse-thief, Jenny?” he appealed to his cousin.

“No, you ninkum!” she snapped.

John looked searchingly at her and then at his grandfather. He read blank denial in their faces. Confidence oozed out of him. “I told all the fellas you were,” he said brokenly. “And n-n-now...” He choked up.

We listeners sat, sunk in despondency. Our dreams of ancestral derring-do were dissolved. Gone was the vision of a young and dashing Grandpa, riding at the head of his Wayne County cohorts upon some predatory and perilous mission. What a disillusionment! The old gentleman turned his slow regard upon the stricken faces around him.

“So you all consider your grandfather a malefactor,” he said.

“I never!” cried Jenny.

“No, sir,” Reno and I said. It was a hollow disclaimer. Young Charlie simply raised a wail of disappointment.

A strange alteration took place in the aged visage before us. Something was happening to Grandpa. His face worked. His beard quivered. From it issued a rumble which presently became a roar. We were appalled. It did not at first occur to us that this convulsion in one so mirthless could be laughter. Grandma was the first to recognize it. She began to giggle. Jenny joined in. One after another, we boys, our alarms dissipated, timorously ventured participation; then, as nobody rebuked us, gave ourselves up to whole-hearted glee. The little room rang to Grandpa’s deep boom, Jenny’s soprano peals, and a pandemonium of gurgles, shrieks and whoops from us boys.

Only Georgis refrained. With an expression of pain upon his meek countenance, he went out to look after Horace G.

Things were never the same again in the South Union Street home. The solvent of shared laughter melted the glacial barriers which Grandfather had unwittingly set up between age and youth. We never became actually chummy with him, it is true, but a cautiously progressive companionship did develop, respectful on our part, condescending on his. To our gratified surprise we discovered that we and he had interests in common. His enlightenment was even more revolutionary; we were revealed to his astonished recognition as human beings.

Adams then proceeds to set the scene for the stories that will follow:

As time went on our range of communication broadened. One could never tell what the day’s visit might bring forth. It might be a scientific dissertation on snails, a horde of which invaded the cellars of South Union Street one August. It might be a reading from the almanac, with historical commentary. It might be a narrative brought out by reference to the old gentleman’s “ort-book,” a massive, leather-bound volume of heterogeneous memorabilia, kept under lock and key in his secretary-desk. This was a never-failing source.

The truly “never-failing source,” however, was Grandfather’s knowledge of “Clinton’s ditch” or the “Great Western Canal,” better known as the Erie Canal.

Why Grandfather left unmentioned for so long the most glorious (to our appreciation) phase of his career is a puzzle. He must have known that the Erie Canal, which threaded the center of

the city, was an integral part of daily life to Rochester youth. In summer we swam and fished in it. In winter we played shinny-on-your-own-side at the Wide Waters. Between seasons we extended respectful landmen's greetings to the lordly mariners on its surface, and, on rare and beatific occasions, dropped by invitation from an arched bridge to the deckhouse roof of some hospitable, grizzled captain.

Our juvenile ambitions centered upon the canal. Let others aspire to become locomotive engineers, Indian scouts, or baseball captains with whiskers; for us the grassy berm, the toiling mules and the smooth-gliding craft were the ultimate in ambition. Reno, the practical, business-minded member of the group, was for steam. He would be master of a profitable stern-propeller, make a pile of money towing, and sign on Charlie as cabin boy if that young hopeful would learn to salute and call him "sir." John and I were willing to start at the bottom as mule-drivers and work up from the dust of the towpath. Jenny had decided to become mistress of the mahogany-fitted tugboat, *Annie Laurie*, even though it involved marrying the captain, a design which would have considerably surprised him, his wife, and their five children. We had nothing but pity in our hearts for those unfortunate children who lived in canal-less regions.

Yet we might never have learned from Grandfather of our vested interest in the great waterway, had it not been for a chance encounter. On a June day of 1881 the old gentleman gave evidence of expanding fellowship by inviting us to go driving with him. Only three of us were available that day: John, Reno and I. Jenny had to do some church sewing, and Charlie had the earache. While Geordis was harnessing Horace G., Grandfather unlocked his private repository and got out from his ort-book a document which he carefully inserted in the breast pocket of his rusty Prince Albert coat. Having buttoned it in, he led the way to the rig and we were off at a reliable five-miles-per-hour.

Out through Brighton we jogged to Pittsford, where our driver turned left. A moment later, John gave apprehensive warning.

"You can't drive there, Grandpa."

"Why not?"

"That's the towpath."

"I am aware of the fact."

"But, Grandpa! Nobody's allowed on the towpath but the canallers."

Reno and I added our protests. Too many times had we been chased from that forbidden territory with horrid imprecations and whizzing rocks not to have a fearful respect for it. Grandpa, it appeared, did not share our alarms.

"Giddap, Horace," he said placidly as he turned right upon the mule's highway.

A span of mules appeared, with a hulking lout at the lines. Fifty yards back of him loomed the freighter, light and riding high. Grandfather pulled to the offside to give the team passage room. The muleteer stared hard at our rig, scowled formidably, and, as we boys shrank into the smallest possible compass, threw up his hand, grinned, and passed on. From his lofty stance at the tiller the captain, as the boat drew level, saluted. Grandfather civilly lifted his whip. We marveled.

"Grandpa," Reno said in a small voice, "do you *know* those canallers?"

"Hah!" said Grandfather noncommittally.

Several other craft passed. The phenomenon was repeated; nobody interfered with our progress. Presently we came in sight of a man fishing from the towpath. He carried a staff and wore a badge. Our companion scrutinized him.

“That must be a new bankwatcher,” he said. “I do not recognize his face.”

“What’s a bankwatcher, sir?” I asked.

“The degenerate successor to the old-time pathmaster.”

“What’s a pathmaster?” John inquired.

Before there was time for a reply, the fisherman spied us. He jumped to his feet, lumbered out into the middle of the right-of-way, and brandished the staff.

“Whoa!” he shouted loudly in Horace G.’s face.

Surprised and shocked, Horace G., who was unaccustomed to such discourtesy, stopped. The bankwatcher addressed Grandfather.

“Where do you think *you’re* goin’?”

“Down to the lock,” Grandfather said mildly.

“Not on this towpath. You’re trespassin’. Mizzle!”

With a confident smile Grandfather unbuttoned his Prince Albert, took out the document from the inner pocket, unfolded it tenderly, and presented it. The official glared at it suspiciously.

“What’s that?”

“A permit from the Honorables, the Erie Canal Commissioners, certifying my right to use the path, ad libitum, and signed by Gov. Clinton.” (Obit 1828)

“Who?”

“Governor Clinton. The Honorable De Witt Clinton.”

“Never heard of him.”

Hot color flushed the old gentleman’s cheeks. “You are a disgrace to the Grand Erie Canal which you serve, sir,” he declared.

The bankwatcher grabbed Horace G.’s bridle and attempted to swing him around.

“Drop that bridle,” said Grandfather sharply.

“Who says so?”

Grandfather half stood up and glanced east and west. Boats were coming from each direction. He put two fingers between his lips and whistled in astonishing volume. It was an accomplishment which we would never have expected in him. The bankwatcher jerked at Horace G.’s head. The wagon wheels cramped. The body tipped. There was a fair chance of our all being shunted into the water when the diversion came. Five runners on the towpath were converging upon us from the boats, which had veered in. The official hailed them.

“This old fool...”

He got no further. The first canaller to reach the spot, a burly, old steam captain, swept the official’s feet out from under him. Two others rolled him over the bank, while the remaining pair straightened out Horace G. The assaulted man beat the water bellowing for help, but there was no help. Menacing faces loomed over him. He swam across to the berm opposite, where he crawled out, spluttering and snarling threats of arrest. The steamer captain addressed him.

“Why, you crawfish-catching, turtle-chasing mudchunker, you! Do you know who this old gentleman is?”

The man gaped and gurgled.

“This is Squire Adams, this is. Ever hear of Adams Basin, you gillychick? Why the Adamses *built* the Erie. You’d run *him* off the towpath, would you? Skedaddle before I come over there and drown you.”

The dejected bankwatcher dribbled a trail into the underbrush and vanished. Grandfather warmly thanked the rescue squad for their “officiousness,” by which he meant—and correctly, by their old usage—helpfulness. They returned to their boats, and the old gentleman turned Horace G. around for the trip back.

Sheer awe held us passengers silent for several miles. Our grandfather was suddenly revealed as a tradition, a fellow-canaller held in honor by these tough inland mariners. And we had never suspected any such glory. Reno made the break.

“Grandpa?”

“Yes, Sireno.”

“Did you really build the canal?”

“I had a hand in it.”

“Did you help run it after it was built?”

“As a young man, I held a quasi-official position.”

“Is that why they all came running when you whistled?”

Grandfather smiled. “There’s an old saying canalside: Once an Erie man, always an Erie man.”

John now had his turn. “Is Adams Basin us Adamses?”

“You may so put it.”

“Named after you?”

“After my father, the Deacon, and his brother.”

“Is it in the geography?”

“Certes.”

John drew a long breath. “Wait till I get back to school!” he said.

This revelation about their family history goes a long way toward consoling them for their disappointment over his criminal past:

Once again Grandfather became a proud boast upon our lips. His new distinction compensated for the loss of face we had suffered when compelled to abandon our claim of having a horse-thief in our immediate ancestry. After all, that was in the past. This was in the present. There was Grandfather’s name—our name—on the map for all to see.

Needless to say, the boys took full advantage of it.

That was an unforgettable day for us when John was called upon in Number Three Geography class to answer the proposition, “Name four important communities in New York State west of Albany.”

“Utica, Syracuse, Rochester, and Adams Basin,” said John in crescendo.

Frequently Grandfather had to admonish us against snobbishness. He was not wholly free from it, himself, however. A visiting New England lady to whom he was presented at a church festival, said, “Adams? Adams? Do you claim kinship with the Boston Adamses?”

“There is a Boston branch, I believe,” he answered cautiously.

“I refer to the Presidential Adamses,” the lady said haughtily.

“Ah! I was personally acquainted with the Honorable John Quincy Adams. A very respectable gentleman. He may well have been a connection of our line, though, being no braggard, he would naturally not press the claim.... May I fetch you a glass of water, madam?”

Grandfather’s canal experience forms the basis for quite a few of the stories. He gives an exciting account of a terrible rainstorm in which the canal berm was breached and the canal threatened to overflow its banks. He draws unfavorable comparisons between railroad trains and canal boats—perhaps with some justification, since Adams writes: “The seventy-six miles between Rochester and Auburn took the train three hours and forty minutes if on time, which was improbable. It was a wearisome succession of twenty-one conscientious stops at such places as Fishers, Victor, Paddlefords, Oaks Corners, Shortsville and Aurelius.” When George Eastman visits the Rev. Myron Adams with a business proposition and Grandfather finds out it involves a camera, he recounts a cautionary tale of two confidence artists who were “cameramen.” On this basis he dissuades his son from investing:

“What name did he call the thing?” Grandfather asked.

“The name escapes me,” Father answered. “It was a rather grotesque, Eskimo-sounding word, something like ‘Kayak.’”

“Under any name you are well out of it, and your hundred dollars saved,” Grandfather said. “No Adams money for such chimeras.”

“I suppose you’re right, sir,” Father said.

Some of these stories verge on being “tall tales,” and many of them describe confidence tricks perpetrated on gullible people. But almost all of them lean heavily on Grandfather’s stock-in-trade, archaic language. You’ve already heard some of these terms—the language of the canal—and heard how he liked to puzzle his grandchildren with words pulled, as it were, out of mothballs. And this did not stop just because they were grown:

He was exceedingly proud of having attended Hamilton [College], though he did not finish his course. His name appears in the 1816 Catalogue as a member of the Sophomore class. Owing to some breach in the then rigid tenets of academic discipline (“I did a barney in Spring term” he once revealed to us), he was rusticated under the surveillance of that same East Bloomfield clergyman whose woodpile he helped to improve. Annoyed at the dereliction, his canal-contractor-father, Deacon Abner Adams, withdrew him from “those classic shades” and set him to work as a surveyor.

That he harbored no grudge is proven by his having sent two of his sons to Hamilton. When I entered, he signalized the event by giving me a dollar. On my return to Rochester for my first college vacation, he greeted me as “Fellow Alumnus.” Secretly tickled at having caught him in a slip, I pointed out that a freshman could hardly lay claim to that title. He turned a chilling eye upon me.

“Do not play the callow dawplucker with me, Samuel,” he said sternly.

I hastened to apologize.

“Consult the dictionary,” he directed, pointing to the bookshelf.

I did so and learned what I should have known from past experiences, the inadvisability of challenging the old gentleman on a point of verbal usage. Any member of a collegiate body, I found, graduate, undergraduate, or non-graduate, is an alumnus.

He obviously took pleasure not only in language but also in self-improvement. Despite his lack of a college degree, he was not uneducated, and Adams writes that

The name, Myron Adams, frequently appeared in signature to communications to the newspapers, severe in style and often richly archaic in expression. Upon invitation he would address public meetings, his favorite topics being the evil of strong drink, the degeneracy of the times, and the conspiratorial activities of the Democratic party. He also wrote papers on subjects as diverse as the influence of sunspots on the weather and the domestic tomato as a causative factor in cancer.

The last chapter of the book, as I mentioned, is something different from the rest. Titled “Canal Bride,” it is (or purports to be) a transcript of a diary found in a trunk after Grandfather Adams’ death. From internal evidence, Adams dates it either 1827 or 1828. “Who the diarist was I do not know,” he writes, “perhaps a relative.” In any case, the writer, named Dorcas, describes herself as “one who but a short month ago was well content with life in the mansion of her respectable father in Buffalo” but now finds herself “translated to the bosom of Grand Erie Canal, mistress of the spanking Durham, *Starry Flag*, sixty tons burthen, out of Black Rock, N.Y., licensed for perishable freight and four passengers.” The diary covers only a few days and concludes, “How rich, how affording, how pompous is the career of a Canal wife!” The significant feature of this diary is that it is chock-full of the very archaisms and canal argot that Adams has sprinkled throughout the rest of his stories, annotated liberally by Grandfather Adam, who, for example, translates “skimmagig” as “buttermilk.” I couldn’t help wondering whether perhaps this document, rather than his own memory, was the source of the vocabulary Adams attributes to his grandfather.

I mentioned that when I first started looking for information on Samuel Hopkins Adams, I didn’t have much luck. Then I found more. Several months later, it seems to be that I found even more, though perhaps I was just using a better search engine. But it seems that there is a resurgence of interest in Adams. For example, just last year, Syracuse University Press published a book by Samuel V. Kennedy III on *Samuel Hopkins Adams and the Business of Writing*. Very likely Kennedy used the “correspondence and typescripts” that are in the University’s own collection. One reviewer describes Adams as “a journeyman of letters, a popular writer who came of age with the twentieth-century culture industry.” Over the course of his long career, he produced more than fifty books and hundreds of magazine articles and stories. “In nearly half a century of writing,” said the 1942 edition of *Twentieth Century Authors*, “he has only two stories unsold.” With so much writing in print, it is inevitable that some of it will be less than outstanding, and Adams doubtless wrote a lot of dreck. But some of his works have now been recognized for their historical value if not for their literary merit. Syracuse University press in 1990 reissued both *Grandfather Stories* and the novel *Canal Town* in its “New York Classics” series.

One example of current use of *Grandfather Stories* as primary source material is a book I ran across on the Internet: *Transportation through the Lens of Literature: The Depiction of Transportation Systems in American Literature from 1800 to the Present in the Form of an*

*Annotated Bibliography*. The author, Donald Ross, an English professor at the University of Minnesota, summarizes what can be learned about canal and railroad travel in the 1820s from the stories “A Deal in Gems,” “The Big Breach,” “Canal Bride,” and “The Parlous Trip.” He concludes his analysis thus:

While these are framed as authentic accounts from the distant past, the literary device of having young Adams listen to his grandfather’s yarns is quite different from a traditional or academic historical account of these events.

So the question remains: Are these stories fact or fiction? How should this book be categorized? The *Library Journal* of June 1, 1955, has the answer: “Local history, biography, or any category you please; but libraries should have it.” And I’m pleased to say that our library soon will. Betty has ordered the book, so you will soon be able to satisfy the curiosity I hope I have aroused.

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