

Friday, May 29, 1942

Plan Tombstone for One of County's Most Unusual Citizens

Decatur, May 29 -

A tall white tombstone is soon to be erected in the Decatur Cemetery above the grave of one of Adams County's most widely known citizens.

The tombstone is to be unusual - unusual because it is to depict the life of Eli Willard Steele, known to most people as just Willard.

Willard Steele, before he died in April 1941, gained his renown because of eccentricities, his hard-fisted rules of living economy and his zeal for hard labor and long hours, but above all his love for trees, shrubs and flowers.

These "hobbies" are to be portrayed on the stone, bearing little more than "Willard Steele, 1857-1941." Then, too, there is to be shown, hidden from all but a select few until after his death - his respect for the city's churches.

Willard Steele was not a man whom Decaturites would term a "churchgoer." There are those who had heard him say "churches are all right - they are all right," but he "just didn't have the time for them."

In his will, however, he left each of the city's 12 churches of various faiths \$2,000. In addition he made a provision of \$2,000 for the Decatur Cemetery, \$500 for the hospital and \$500 for the library. The stately church hewed from the granite tombstone above his grave is to symbolize after his death what few knew when he was alive.

According to his brother, Dayton Stelle, the man planned it all before he died. He told his brother the stone that he wanted and asked that it be erected over his grave, the brother stated.

Eugene Runyon, special administrator in the estate, was authorized by the court recently to erect the stone at a cost not to exceed \$500 and workmen at the Wemhoff Monumental Works have been working arduously in an effort to erect the stone before Memorial Day.

With all due respect, it can be truthfully said that Willard Steel was one of the county's most unusual citizens. He lived frugally and economically - yet was reported to have often given freely. Many of the community's less fortunate are said to have capitalized on his latter virtue and to have lived in his one of his houses, paying only a meager rent - or even none at all. Reputedly a man of considerable wealth, he often acted in the role of a "community bank" lending money to this person and that.

There are many legends relative to his fondness for hard work and his contempt for leisure. The story is often told that when he once incurred an infection in his finger he inquired of the attending physician who would take longer – “cure it or cut it off?” He explained that he had too much work to be idle long.

His will? That is another story. Records in the Adams Circuit Court show that it has never been probated. Before it was probated an “objection to probate” was filed, alleging that he was “of unsound mind when he executed the will,” that it was “unduly executed” and “executed under duress.” The “objection” was filed on the day of his funeral and the will filed a few hours later the same day.

Later a “complaint to resist probate” of the will was filed. The matter has never been settled. But the court has authorized the erection of the tombstone and that part of the will can be considered closed.

Willard Steele’s was a story book life. He was the builder of “Steele’s Park,” east of Decatur, which was later to become Belmont Park after he sold it to Fred Reppert. It then became the scene of the famous northeastern Indiana fair.

Wednesday, June 3, 1942

A Useful Life is Ended

The death of the Rev. Joel Lehman has taken another sturdy pioneer out of our midst. Rev. Lehman, a pastor for many years and a Sunday School teacher and worker for half a century, left his mark in the community. He was loved and respected by all who knew him and his loss will be felt for years. He received a lot of satisfaction and blessing in doing deeds for others, in administering to the sick and in visiting the shut-ins.

Like his brother, Isaac, who met sudden death when struck by an automobile, Rev. Lehman too died quite unexpectedly. He was even planting corn three days before his death, which again demonstrates how uncertain life is.

This community is better because of Rev. Lehman lived here and while his almost sudden death came as a great shock, he left behind a long life filled with usefulness and good deeds. His record speaks for itself and will be a monument to him down through the years.

Adams County Historical Museum
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Transcribed by Jim Cox