

# An Autobiography

By GEORGE S. COTTMAN

I was born May 10, 1857, in the city of Indianapolis, within a stone's throw of the old state house—which contiguity, I have always maintained, entitled me to be classed as a thorough Hoosier. When I was still a child my father moved his family to a farm which he owned, lying in the neighborhood of the present Beech Grove, Marion County, and that was my home for more than twenty years, or until we moved to Irvington, then a suburb, politically independent of Indianapolis.

Meanwhile, I did various things other than the humdrum duties of a farmer lad, one of them being to serve for three years as a printer's apprentice in the job office of the old Indianapolis *Sentinel*. This was well worth the time spent for though I did not cleave to the trade as a life business it helped me in more ways than one. In the first place, since my formal scholastic education did not extend beyond the simple curriculum of a country district school, I found that a post-graduate course in a printing office, especially when supplemented by a good free library, played no small part in widening my mental horizon. So I rather like to regard myself as an alumnus of the *Sentinel* printing office, of the Indianapolis Public Library, and, somewhat later, of the Indiana State Library. Again, when in obedience to an inborn wanderlust I made divers excursions out into this glorious world strange places to see, the good old art preservative, the hobo's true friend, made possible peregrinations that otherwise would have been but dreams. Incidental to these sporadic travelings I treasure the memories of many tramps with haversack and staff at the invitation of mountains and lakes and of trails unknown to conventional travelers, where there were many things to be discovered. One of the first of these inquisitive expeditions was the exploration of Brown County, which at that time (the early eighties) appealed to the imagination as a region of unique isolation peopled by a primitive hill folk.

Since this tabloid chronicle is a human document, regardless of the smallness of its subject, perhaps I should weave into it all the threads that went into the making of the pattern. Be it known that from the days of the district school period when I discovered a facility in the writing of composi-

tions (done at the expense of less alluring studies), I decided to become one of that innumerable host who write books and things. Reasons: It would be a pleasant substitute for work and would allow me to give free rein to the aforementioned mania for wandering. Then there was the thing called fame and the proud delight of occupying a pinnacle where one could be seen and admired by the great world. By the time I had finished my apprenticeship at the printing cases, I felt that I was ready to spring some large literary surprise on my fellow-men. While preparing this surprise in divers forms, I avocated as a farmer. Unfortunately (for himself) the embryonic author cannot wreak himself upon the public without the intervening agency of the editorial guild, a class of questionable intelligence and undoubted malevolence chiefly notorious for the habit of returning manuscripts accompanied by "regret slips". They should know that bank checks would conduce much more to the popularity of editors. One of my souvenirs of those sad, postage consuming days is a scrap-book filled with return slips of various styles.

Eventually a new idea came my way. Evidently there was a missing factor in this long range bombardment of the literary market with its succinct and cold-blooded responses. That factor was the need of direct application of a magnetic personality to the editorial frigidity. And so it was that my first invasion of New York City was with a gripsack full of my choice manuscripts with which to beard the purveyors of literature in their dens. Which I did. Contemporaneously with this bearding I provided for my personal upkeep by setting type at twenty cents per thousand ems, and as I consumed this revenue almost as fast as I acquired it, and it was a long way back to Indiana, I did not soon see my happy home again. Fortunately there was then no income tax such as we have in these days.

Subsequently I really found a way to circumvent the autocracy of the editors. After Irvington became my place of residence, I turned to the printing trade once more, this time by investing in a one-man printery, which I installed on the home premises. Then on the side, and as the primary vocation of job printing permitted, I ventured to launch out as my own book publisher and issued a modest brochure containing a collection of nature sketches that lay near my heart.

*Hours with Nature*, I called it, and its reception among like-minded people was so cordial that I was encouraged to try three or four other booklets of similar character. Aside from the zest of the ventures, the returns were so disproportionate to the time and labor involved that I thought it best to forego further efforts.

About this time I began to have better luck with the home editors than I had ever been able to evoke from the haughty publishers of the effete East. The good old *Indiana Farmer*, under J. G. Kingsbury, took me to its bosom, and within the tomb of its now forgotten files repose not a few stories, both short and serial, contributed by me as pictures of Indiana farm life or of pioneer days; likewise miscellaneous articles galore addressed to my rural audience. Also the now defunct but still remembered *Indianapolis Journal*, one of the best journalistic friends Indiana writers ever had, bade me welcome to its columns, as did the *Indianapolis News* and the *Indianapolis Press*, which, under the proprietorship of John H. Holliday, led a lively existence for one year. I never held a staff position on any of these newspapers, unless an engagement with the *News* at one time to furnish historical articles on demand might be called a staff job. The selective freedom of a free lance writer best comported with my mental makeup, and my preserved scrapbooks will testify to that freedom, though a great many of the contributions were hooked up in some way with local history.

This brings me to a consideration of what small service, if any, I may have done in behalf of local history. I believe I harbor no illusions on that question. I am at best but part historian, for there are in that field areas many and extensive that are to me drearily arid; for example, that hypothetical unraveling of long-buried questions, that must always remain hypothetical, and which, if once accepted really interest nobody. The happenings of time, to my mind, may roughly be regarded as falling into two classes. One aspect is the flux and flow which crowds upon us every day, most of which must by the very plenitude of the harvest be relegated to oblivion. The other aspect is of those features of the time stream that reveal the workings of cause and effect, and that invest with significance the mutations of the world. Then there is the

picturesque element—the resurrection of the archaic and quaint and novel that casts a grace over existence.

Whether or not this historical classification will stand rigid criticism, it was the theory that originally won me to an interest in the subject, and the one to which I have ever since adhered. As a newspaper space filler ever in search of good copy, I found that few special topics offered a richer mine than does history with its veins of romance, adventure, human interest stories, or what you will. One danger in it to history itself and to the writer who respects his own honesty is the temptation to substitute loose statements or downright fiction for fact. My observation is that newspapers as a rule care only for the story, in writing of this kind, and bother little about the truth of it. The consequence is that leaden-footed truth seldom overtakes the flying feet of fancy. Rob history of its verity and Clio no longer has a message.

If the old *Journal* was a real friend of the literati of Indiana so was John H. Holliday, of blessed memory, a Godsend to those who wanted to write local history and do it creditably. Mr. Holliday himself was well grounded in Indiana history with a lively and discriminating interest in the same and he knew with professional accuracy when a good piece of history came his way. Moreover, he encouraged the subject by giving considerable pay space to it in his columns, and not a few series of articles that subsequently found a more permanent form were originally published in the *News*. Among these may be mentioned D. D. Banta's *Short History of Johnson County* and *Early School Days in Indianapolis*, the most important of the journals of John Tipton, and others I cannot recall off hand, all revealing real historical values.

The relevancy of this is that the encouragement to local history afforded by such an editor as Mr. Holliday, especially in the days when he controlled the *Indianapolis News*, was a healthy stimulus in a worth-while direction, and it may, I think be regarded as a logical forerunner of the widespread organized movement of today. In my own case the reaction was a slowly growing conviction that there should be a more permanent preservation of those things of the past which innately appeal to and affect the present. To be sure, the experiment had already been made by W. H. Smith, a well known local historian, and a Mr. B. L. Blair who launched a magazine

called *The Indianian*, only to have it go on the rocks ere long. But *The Indianian* had been somewhat ambitiously conceived, being an illustrated monthly of good size, with a cost of production out of proportion to its limited field. The promoters sought to finance it by selling stock at fifty dollars per share, as may be poignantly remembered by those stock holders still living, but that failed to turn the trick, and *The Indianian* became a reminiscence.

I argued with myself, however, that there was a place for the kind of organ in question if only the cost of its maintenance were reduced to a fine art. The only key to the problem seemed to be to make the publication a quarterly, not too bulky, and to utilize my little printing plant as far as possible in its production. Eventually (1905) I acted upon this line of reasoning and in due time led forth a small and feeble infant christened with a rather big name, *The Indiana Quarterly Magazine of History*. As the genesis of this creation has already been dealt with by the author in the pages of this *Magazine* (December, 1929), I need not say more about it here. In 1908, I relinquished the quarterly to the Indiana Historical Society, because I went to the Puget Sound region expecting to remain. On my return to Indiana, I renewed the editorship. I finally severed my editorial connection with the *Indiana Magazine of History* in 1913, because I could no longer afford the luxury.

I do not know that I need to add anything further to this subject unless it be to say by way of filling out the sketch that my writings are only in part historical, including as they do fiction, pageantry and miscellaneous essays. I have two books to my credit—*Centennial History and Handbook of Indiana* (with other matter by Max Hyman), and *Indiana, Its History, Constitution and Present Government*, now used in some of the schools. In making my own evaluation of the various veins I have worked, I would place first certain descriptive matter incorporated in the nature booklets which I printed myself, and in five other brochures descriptive of our state parks written for the Department of Conservation.

In 1900 I married Miss Vida C. Tibbott, of Irvington, and we have one son who for some years has taught science in the high school of Madison, Indiana. Since 1931 we have lived together on a hilltop overlooking Madison. How do I

pass the time? Making light as I can of my disabling ailments, dreaming of past days when I could at least make a stagger at doing things, and watching the ebbing tide of time while solving the problems of the Cosmos—for several of which I have not yet evolved answers.