

# **The Autobiography of William Tatnal Coe**

(1944)

When Charles H. Chalmers suggested to me that I write my autobiography, I hesitated. It seemed to me that my life story was of so little value it was not worth recording. In the words of Cecil Rhodes, "So much to do; so little done." However, I changed my mind and decided to write down a brief story of my achievements.

I have read a number of the autobiographies of my classmates, and am proud of their accomplishments.

My birthplace was the Hickory Grove Farm, situated three miles east of Riverside, Washington county, Iowa, the date May 18, 1870. I was the youngest child of Slyvestor and Ann Rowlands Coe. There were three brothers and one sister. Of the four sons of my father, three of us entered the service of our country, Robert in the Civil War, William T. in the War with Spain, and Clarence S. in World War One. Clarence was Colonel of the 17th U. S. Engineers. He was also a member of the class of 1888, University of Minnesota. He was a great engineer, one of the builders of the Florida East Coast Railway. He was in charge of construction of the great docks and terminals at Bordeaux, France, in World War I. He rebuilt the railroads of the Balkans, and was assistant to the King of the Croats, and Slovenes. Brother Scott Coe has been throughout life a merchant.



Since the other members of our class have given their pedigree, I will do the same. I am a lineal descendant of Sir John Coe, a captain in Sir John Hawkwood's Regiment, known as the "White Company" immortalized by A. Conan Doyle.<sup>1</sup> He was knighted by

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<sup>1</sup> Published in 1891, Arthur Conan Doyle's *The White Company* is an adventure story set during the Hundred Years' War.

**Pope Gregory XI after the Battle of San Galo, in Italy, in 1364.**

**The next Coe in my pedigree, of renown was Roger Coe, one of the 300 Christian martyrs burned at the stake in England by Queen Mary. The progenitor of nearly all of the Coes in the United States is Robert Coe, Puritan, who settled in Massachusetts with that group of Englishmen who came right after the Pilgrims.**

**My decent is from Robert's third son, Benjamin. His family moved to Long Island, where he engaged in the milling business; thence to Morristown, New Jersey; later to Washington county, Pennsylvania; thence to Piqua, Ohio; to South Bend, Indiana, to St. Joe, Missouri, to Iowa City, Iowa; and finally my parents moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota, where Father and Mother died.**

**My father's blood lines were English, Irish and Dutch. My mother was the daughter of John Rowlands and Jane Owens Rowlands, born in Llanfyllin, Wales, and was full blooded Welsh. Grandfather Rowlands claimed descent from a Welsh giant, "Roll the Rocks," who fought the Saxons at Caelion until his king surrendered. John was granted a perpetual leasehold on a small Welsh farm, still known as Caelien, seven miles from Llanfyllin, Montgoneryshire, Wales, where his descendants lived until 1840. It is said he fought the Saxons by rolling rocks down the hill upon them until the little creek (still running) was red with the blood of the Saxon. The name "Roll the Rooks" later became "Rowlands". My grandmother, Jane Owns Rowlands always claimed that she was a Cadwallader, and a descendant of Cadwyl, King of Wales.**

Father's and Mother's family emigrated in 1854, to Riverside, Iowa, 12 miles south of Iowa City, Iowa, where Father and Mother were married. Grandfather Joseph G. Coe served as a private in the first Ohio Dragoons in the War of 1812 under General Harrison, and took part in the Battle of Lundy's Lane. He married Sally Wining, but her family's name was also spelled, "Winans", at Piqua, Ohio.

My father owned 365 acres of the best land in Iowa, free and clear of all incumbrance, with a large brick house which still stands. As farmers go, he was a rich man. He raised short horned cattle, Arabian horses and hogs, and of course almost everything else that an Iowa farmer grows. My first 18 years were spent as a farm boy. Father's health failed and we moved to Minneapolis November 12, 1888 and I entered the Minneapolis Academy, graduating in 1890, along with Frank M. Anderson, Frank M. Manson, and Frank Sumner. We all entered the State University of Minnesota together in 1890, I as a scientific student. I worked my way through the University. I had a natural bent for mechanical work and I followed that occupation during vacations. At twenty, I was general foreman over a crew of 65 men in charge of construction. During my senior year I was one of the three interstate debaters with the University of Iowa, and we won the only forensic honor that the University of Minnesota had that year

The Fall of 1894 found me in the Law School of the University of Minnesota, which graduated me in 1896, and I was admitted to the Bar by the Supreme Court. <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> He was admitted on June 5, 1896, as a member of the Law School's Class of 1896. 1 *Roll of Attorneys: Supreme Court, State of Minnesota, 1858-1970* 39 (State Law Library).

**In June, 1896, I received the Republican nomination for the State Legislature from the 31st Minnesota District, and was elected, and served during the Session of 1897. I promoted several excellent laws, namely, the law authorizing semi-annual payment of taxes, and the law relieving the husband from torts committed by his wife.<sup>3</sup> This law completely freed all women from the old common law restriction that a man was responsible for the conduct of his wife. I took an active part in all legislation.**

**I was a candidate for the State Senate in 1898, when the Spanish American War broke. I organized a troop of volunteer cavalry and was elected captain. Governor Clough was unable to get a cavalry unit so he commissioned me as First Lieutenant and Regimental Quartermaster of the 15th Minnesota Volunteer Infantry. My classmate, Carl Pattee, was also a lieutenant in that regiment. He was made Regimental Commissary so he and I fed, clothed, armed, and housed the regiment until the war closed. He was a very competent officer.**

**In September, 1898, I married Annabel Collins, of Iowa Falls, Iowa, whom I met upon the occasion of the debate at Iowa City, Iowa, in 1894. She is a graduate of the University of Iowa, and has since held many important positions in civic life. She was for three years National Treasurer of Kappa Kappa Gamma, vice-regent of the Daughters of the American Revolution for Minnesota for one year, and President of the Minnesota Federation of Women's**

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<sup>3</sup> 1897 Laws, c. 10, at 9-10 (“Sec. 6. Nothing in this act shall be construed to affect ante-nuptial contracts or settlements, but it is hereby provided that a husband shall not be liable for torts committed by his wife.”). Effective February 11, 1897.

**Clubs. She is still living. The best cause I ever won was when I persuaded her to be my wife. I think the beautiful blue uniform I wore at the time helped some.**

**We have two fine daughters, Isabel van C. Coe, who at the present time is at Washington, D. C., under orders to proceed overseas in Red Cross Service, and a second daughter, Ann Coe Tilson, who is married to Donald H. Tilson, and lives in St. Louis, Missouri. She has three sons, Donald H., aged 14, William Coe, aged 10, and Hugh Henna, aged 4. Mr. Tilson is Works Manager of the Aluminum Ore Refining Company at East St. Louis.**

**After returning from the Spanish American War Service, I entered actively in the practice of law, and have followed that occupation ever since.**

**In 1912, I was an elector for Theodore Roosevelt, and, later, was nominee for Congress in the 10th District, and resigned, and nominated for State Senator, and resigned.**

**In my early life my interest in politics was very great, and I served upon the Republican State Central Committee, and managed several state campaigns for the Republican Party. Of late years, my interest in politics has lagged.**

**I served as Department Commander of the United Spanish American War Veterans in 1928-29, and I am a member of the University Lodge of Masons, and of the First Unitarian Church. I**

**also served as President of the Minnesota Lawyers Association.**

**During the nearly half century of law practice, I have been engaged in many important matters of litigation. I drafted the Anti-discriminating Law and lobbied it through the State Legislature of Minnesota. The purpose of this law was to prevent the Standard Oil Company from discriminating in prices between different localities, and thus ruining competition. I was appointed a special Assistant Attorney General to carry this litigation through the Supreme Court of Minnesota, which we did and stopped this evil practice. I was for ten years attorney for the Illinois Railroad in Minnesota.**

**I served as General Counsel for the Minnesota Retail Grocers and General Merchants Association, and for them I did the same type of work in stopping the disastrous practice of giving coupons (trading stamps) in the sale of merchandise. I drew the present law covering the subject of gasoline inspection, and the law protecting pensions of veterans from garnishment or seizure under legal process.**

**I secured the pardon of Morton S. Munn from a life sentence in the State Prison for a crime he did not commit. I freed one Helen Conney from erroneous commitment of criminal insanity after five years service in the State Hospital for the Insane at St. Peter, Minnesota. She never was insane, and is not now. Only last December I secured the discharge of a 15 year old, boy from a similar erroneous commitment to an insane asylum.**

**In the course of my lifetime I have presented fully 10,000 issues of law and fact in the various courts. It has been my proud privilege to have served a large clientele faithfully throughout life, and I still maintain an active law practice. My chief interest has been preserving the rights of my fellowmen. I will not take a cause that I deem unjust and I have defended many a just cause without pay.**

**Throughout my life I have been an enthusiastic outdoorsman, and have hunted both small and big game in all parts of the U S. A. and fished in most of the lakes in Minnesota, as well as in both oceans. I once took a muscalonge out of Leech Lake that weighed 30 pounds and was 48 inches long, and another in Lake Cordingly, in Ontario of the same size. In the Hell Holes of the Kowkash River, in Ontario, I caught three speckled brook trout each of which was 28 inches long. At Peter's brook on the Esnagami River, in Ontario, I caught ten speckled brook trout in an hour, and the ten weighed 30 pounds. Once I hunted for moose and got a large bull in Ontario.**

**I have made ten trips into the far North, in the vicinity of James Bay, with canoes and guides. I have many times run a canoe down the wild rapids of the fast flowing streams of the North, as well as an Indian could have done. My last Northern trip was in 1942 when for ten days we explored the north end of Lake Nipigon, and in the ten days we never saw a human being. On this trip I came very, near losing my life by reason of a sudden squall which blew the waves into a fury, and we were navigating only in a small 20 foot canoe. Once I came nearly going over a 30 foot waterfall in a canoe at the Falls of the Virgin on the Little Current River,**



Ontario. Upon that occasion, our party was gone so long that Charles H. Chalmers became alarmed and wanted Mrs. Coe to permit him to employ an airplane to hunt me up. Mrs. Coe said she had confidence in her brother who was with me, and in my knowledge of wood and stream, and that if we could not get out ourselves it was useless for anybody else to try. We got out all right but we had to practically carry two canoes and a thousand pounds of duffle 25 miles upstream.

I have a hobby. It is the raising of peonies. I have two beautiful peony gardens, one at my residence in Minneapolis, and another at our summer home at Beaver Bay on Lake Superior, 55 miles N. E. of Duluth, where we spend our summers. I have over 400 separate varieties of the choicest peonies in the world. I am a member of the American Peony Society and contribute to its literature.

Mrs. Coe and I have spent three winters in California, and we always spend six weeks each summer at our North Shore home. Last fall I went deer hunting and got a buck, but all of the effort proved to be too much for me, and I acquired a frozen shoulder which threatened to destroy the use of my right arm. As a result I was obliged to spend a month last winter in the great Army and Navy Hospital at Hot Springs, Arkansas, with the result that they cured me. I am glad to say that at the present time I am enjoying good health, and hope to enjoy thoroughly the 50th anniversary of my graduation in the Class of 1894, with my classmates.

While I'm now 74 years old I am still in love with life. Life owes me nothing.

May 1944

## Afterword

**The foregoing memoir by William T. Coe is one of the autobiographies of members of the Class of 1894 of the University of Minnesota written for their 50th reunion in 1944.**

**The photograph of Coe on the first page is from this collection.**

**Footnotes have been added by the MLHP.**

**William T. Coe died on January 29, 1950, at age 79. A memorial presented to him by the Hennepin County Bar Association is posted separately in the “Hennepin County” category on this website.**



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