

Remarks of James Russell Wiggins
at the 100th Anniversary of the Construction of
The Rock County Court House, at Luverne, Minnesota
on July 4, 1987

We are all indebted to the pioneers who built their court house on this site in 1887. They deserve to be remembered for that. Those of us who grew up in the very shadow of this building know how it came to stand in our minds for organized government, for law, for order, for due process in a democratic society. The generation that first settled this area is rightly remembered for having built this imposing structure, out of native stone. They are even more justly remembered for having built, at the same time, an enduring society here on the great plains that stretch across what was then an almost empty continent.

William Wordsworth rightly said in his poem Intimations of Immortality From Recollections of Early Childhood that "Heaven Lies About Us in our Infancy." What lay about me, here in Luverne and Rock County, in the years of my infancy and youth, have always been remembered as a veritable "heaven." The Old Courthouse was only 16 years old when I was born. From the time I was old enough to walk until I left Luverne, I passed by this grand old building almost every day and sometimes several times a day. To me, the world revolved about this square block.

The names in Irid Bjerck's new book on the court house were names known to me since youth. The names of the Esteys, Hawses, Darlings, Gillams, Fergusons, Webers, Olders, Joneses and others of the pioneer generation were familiar in my mouth. All the young of my generation knew the court house, but I knew it in a special way. My Uncle Frank Wiggins was the building superintendent and when I was growing up, the caretaker of the building occupied a residential apartment in the Court House. When I began to go to school in the next block, the Court House was on my route to and from school. I could always count on cookies and doughnuts in Aunt Cora's kitchen. And so, the dignified and historic building not only stood in my mind for law and order, but it stood for sugared doughnuts--and the other kinds of sugar that favorite aunts provide for favored small nephews.

The society that gathered about this building was the sort of rural society that Thomas Jefferson had his heart set on in 1776 when he dreamed of America's future -- a community of small farmers, living on farms of 160 acres or so, deriving a healthy existence from honest toil, independent, self-reliant, self governing. The authority of the state and national government was remote and far away. Most of them would have agreed with Jefferson that "the government governs best that governs least."

To be young in such a society was to enjoy as much freedom as fate has ever allowed young people anywhere.

I wandered over the countryside hereabout with small regard to property lines. The circle of my wanderings enlarged with the years. I knew the fishing holes in Blue Mound Lake, in the Big Ponds, in Rock River, and Beaver Creek. It amazes me to recall that my friends and I often walked to Magnolia and back, to Beaver Creek and back. Wherever boys went, they were among friends of their families, who sometimes gave them lifts in buggies or wagons. One of my fondest recollections is of putting up hay on then virgin prairie land northeast of Luverne.

It is sometimes said of the young that they do not know how lucky they are. It was not true, in my case. I knew I was having the best time of my life. I knew it early, and I knew it when, (to again use Wordsworth's words): "Shades of the prison house began to close about the growing boy."

I do not mean to deprecate the later years, but they had different joys. Early and late, this place made me what I became and every good thing I have ever done in the world (if any) commenced here, literally, in the sight of this old court house. So I am glad to see it being treasured, respected, and restored, and glad to have a part in these ceremonies.

The court house is astonishingly unchanged, but the county in which it stands is a very different county; the

state is a different state, and the great nation of which it is a part is a different country. The U.S. population was around 63 million in 1887. Now it is around 250 million. When the court house was built, Minnesota had a population of around one million and today it has a population of nearly five million. The nation, like this county was essentially rural, a land in which there were twice as many rural people as urban people. The farm population was 80 million in 1887. And now, of course, it is less than 5 million.

But not everything is altogether different. Citizens gathered here to lay the cornerstone of the Court House in 1887 must have gossiped still about the election of Grover Cleveland in 1884, notwithstanding Republicans who at their rallies sang "Maw, Maw, Where's Paw? Gone to the White House, Haw Haw Haw." They must have worried over the value of the dollar as we worry today. It had sunk so low that Cleveland suspended in 1885 the coinage of silver. They must have discussed the Indian Wars in the Southwest where Geronimo surrendered to General Nelson A. Miles (as we worry about Nicaragua). Some of the more informed of them might have talked about the fact that Russian troops were invading Afghanistan. A few businessmen present might have been wondering how the Interstate Commerce Act just passed in 1887 would work. I doubt that many of them had read Mark Twain's ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN, published in 1884.

Some of them may have heard the news that Otto Mergenthaler had just invented the linotype machine. (If they had heard it, they probably could not have believed it would be out of date by 1987.) A few may have heard that a man named Dewey had just invented the vacuum bottle. The year 1887 was the year that Melvin Dewey invented the decimal system of cataloging libraries. Maybe some of them had read A Study in Scarlet, the first of the Sherlock Holmes stories, by Conan Doyle, written in 1887. And maybe the Toledo Blade much read hereabout at the time, had brought the news that Queen Victoria was celebrating her Golden Jubilee. If there were literary sorts about they might have talked about Ignatious Donnelly's theory that Bacon wrote Shakespeare -- which he would present in his book "The Great Cryptogram," the next year in 1888. The Statue of Liberty had just been dedicated in New York Harbor in 1886 and the Washington Monument completed in 1885 -- all things that might have been discussed. There would be a convention of London in 1888 declaring the Suez Canal open to the merchant and war vessels of all countries -- too bad they didn't include the Persian Gulf. Life was different, but not wholly different; each age by its inventive genius and industry lays the threshold to the next. The forces that made the life Americans have lived in the hundred years since the court house was built were in the making.

Maybe the automobile more than any other invention transformed our lives and shrunk our geography. Sioux Falls was an all day trip by horse and buggy in 1887. (I remember in my own day going by horse and buggy to the Lyon County Fair -- another all day trip - an overnight trip, too.)

I have horrible memories of a spring automobile trip to St. Paul in the twenties over the then gravel roads of the state highway system. Frost boils presented the traveler with frequent challenge. Canny farmers were posted alongside some bad holes with teams ready to tow cars through the muck.

The century has had its years of prosperity and its years of depression. As I walked across this court yard one morning in the twenties, I saw men running toward me from down town. They had just read the notices of the closed banks and were running home to take the news to families who would have some hard years getting over the loss of savings. When I was twelve, I remember the war bulletins on the windows of the Rock County Herald. Company A went off to war with much patriotic fervor. The Armistice Day celebration in Luverne was a great day. Then came the post-war boom and bust. Farmers who thought they were the wealthy owners of farms worth \$400 an acre, mortgaged for less than half their worth, found out they were bankrupt - almost overnight. The farm crisis was followed by the great depression. Later came the years of the dust storms. Somehow

or other the people lived through these calamities although there were times when some scoffed at the brave legend beneath the flag of the Rock County Star: "Nothing was ever lost by enduring faith in Rock County."

The nation was celebrating the 100th anniversary of the United States Constitution in the year the Court house was built. It was an appropriate way to celebrate it, if any who were then here gave it a thought. And it is appropriate now to celebrate the bicentennial^a of the constitution at the same time we celebrate the centennial^a of the court house. The document adopted in far away Philadelphia in 1787 shaped the events that went on in this building in the first 100 years and it will shape the events that go on inside its walls the next 100 years. The constitution is the frame within which all the transactions of local government proceed. The District Court is the projection of the great document. The court is bound to respect its bill of rights in adjudicating the rights of all the accused persons who come before it in criminal proceedings and to defer to its doctrines in the adjudication of even the most modest civil litigation. The court that sits inside this building cannot cause you to be held without charges being preferred against you. It cannot punish you without a trial by jury. It cannot impose cruel and inhuman punishment. It cannot have you arrested in secret, accused

in secret, tried in secret or punished in secret. To Americans, these things seem to go without saying; but in most of the world to this day, these rights are not assured. Neither Congress nor the states can make any law "respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press or of the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.."

There is a court room in that old building where the rights thus assured can be invoked to protect the poorest and weakest citizen against any government trespass upon his rights. It does not seem remarkable to us; but it would seem remarkable to citizens in most of the countries of the world.

So it is a happy circumstance that finds us celebrating here the adoption of the United States Constitution and the construction of the building through which its articles are given practical local effect. The building and the document are alike, made of native stone and we can be thankful that they both endure.

It is also similarly appropriate that we meet here on the anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. The magnificent words and phrases from the pen of Thomas Jefferson gave us the other great American document. We can cheerfully respond to the assertion of John Adams who wrote to Abigail

to say that the occasion of its adoption should forever be celebrated with illuminations and celebrations.

Two hundred years ago men hoped that the great principles enunciated in these two documents would one day govern the world. It is a melancholy thing to reflect today on the number of countries in which these principles are not respected. When our court house was built we could still encourage ourselves with the thought that the world was on the threshold of a better era. Statesmen hailed the Twentieth Century as the Century of the Common Man. Then came the agony of World War I. Mankind had barely emerged from that blood bath when the age of the dictators was upon us. Communists and Fascists vied with each other in a regression back to the bestialities of the Dark Ages. An unbelieving world saw the worst atrocities of recorded history repeated with maniacal and diabolical cruelty. Slowly the world recovers from this dreadful regression, but it will be a long time before it regains the ground it lost.

It will be a time in which it will be increasingly important for those who believe in the cause of freedom to gather as you have gathered here today, to celebrate the principles in which free people believe, to rededicate themselves to the Declaration's noble assertions, to recommit themselves to the Constitution's high purposes.

The things in which Americans believe will not be preserved by expressions of enthusiasm alone. The Declaration set a revolution afoot; the Constitution was conceived as a bulwark against disaster. The authors of neither document expected the nation thus summoned into being would survive by documents alone. They knew that survival could come only through the deeds and sacrifices of citizens. It requires all citizens from time to time to exercise restraints, to curb demands upon the body politic. Americans must heed the eloquent inaugural injunction of President John Kennedy: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."

The Eighteenth Century Americans who drafted the Declaration of Independence and framed the Constitution of the United States had an almost supernatural awareness that they were building a great nation. They bequeathed to their descendants to an astonishing degree, a similar faith in the destiny of that nation. Let Americans never lose that confidence and faith. Let no transient human frailty shake their belief. American governments may make mistakes, as all human institutions make mistakes; but be assured, the influence of the United States upon the fate of all mankind, on balance, has been overwhelmingly a benign influence. Men and women throughout the world are better off tonight than

they would be if this great republic had not existed. Let us hope that this may be said with equal truth a hundred years from now, and that those who follow after us, may gather on these grounds, as we have gathered here, to voice love for and faith in the United States of America.

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