

Part One

GURDON WALLACE WATTLES

By Allan R. Ellenberger

*“My first ambition was to succeed in every undertaking, whether a business venture or a public service; my second desire was to do all the good to others within my power.”*¹—Gurdon Wallace Wattles.

Devotion to the public was a driving force in Gurdon Wallace Wattles’ life. A friend of presidents, a financier, philanthropist, and admitted capitalist, Wattles believed in taking an active part in the neighborhood. Through charitable gifts and many public works, to the beautiful gardens at his beloved winter home, *Jualita*, Wattles proved how important it was to make your community the best it could be.

He was born Gurdon Wattles, the third son of James and Betsy Ann (Whiting) Wattles, on May 12, 1855 in the small town of Richford, New York. The Wattles family lived on a hilly expanse of sixty-three acres that Betsy Wattles inherited from her father. Wattles’ childhood was not an easy one, and the Panic of 1857 brought hard times to everyone. The family suffered one hardship after another until finally Mr. Wattles announced that he couldn’t pay the interest on the farm’s mortgage. Compounding matters, the Union Army called Mr. Wattles into service, leaving his wife alone with the children. In order to pay the debts, Mrs. Wattles sold the livestock and moved the family to a rented house four miles away.

As the Civil War raged on, Mrs. Wattles made do with what little she could. “I cannot say that I ever actually suffered from want,” Gurdon wrote, “but the food and clothing of our family during my childhood was of the simplest kind.”²

When Mr. Wattles returned from the war in February, 1865, he decided to move the family “out West.” Wattles left immediately for Illinois

to stay with relatives until the family could join them. After a short stay, they continued on in a covered wagon, moving from farm to farm until arriving in Glidden, Iowa in March, 1868. A nearby farm, which was small and never profitable, would be their home for the next nine years.

After attending high school, Gurdon earned a certificate to teach summer school at thirty dollars a month. “When I received my salary for the first month,” he later recalled, “it seemed so wonderful that at recess I often went behind the schoolhouse and counted the bills over for sheer pleasure and to make sure that none had been lost.”³

Regardless of his success, tragedy struck in the spring of 1875, when Wattles’ older brother, Mason, died of consumption. Two years later, his sister Phoebe died of the same disease.

Despite such family tragedies, Gurdon was eager to make a life for himself. He began planning for a college education even though he was aware that his father might not have the means to help out. Indeed, shortly thereafter Mr. Wattles announced that no financial assistance would be forthcoming. Undaunted, Gurdon declared that he would not accept help from anyone under any circumstances. “I am going as far as I can in the world on my own resources,” he told his father. “When these are exhausted I will stop.”⁴

With that approach, Wattles attended Iowa Agricultural College⁵ in April, 1876, where he met students who became lifelong friends. Like many collegiates, he joined the Delta Tau Delta fraternity and the Crescent Society, a debating team. While doing various jobs during the school year, Wattles paid all of his school expenses – and had the impressive amount of twenty dollars left at the end of the year.



Gurdon Wattles and son photo from the Hollywood Heritage Archives

Wattles’ college dreams were dissipated when he, like his two siblings before him, came down with consumption.⁶ Doctors left little hope for his recovery; however, with a regimen of deep-breathing exercises he enlarged his chest and overcame the disease. As a result, he now thought of marriage and a family. While in school, he had made the acquaintance of a certain young lady, Jennie Leete, with whom he corresponded during vacations. “Not until I was thoroughly convinced, however, that we had much in common,” Wattles later wrote, “and that she possessed a happy disposition and an even temperament, did I pay court to her and secure her consent to become my wife.”⁷

They married on October 20, 1882 in Jennie’s hometown of Clarksville, Iowa, settling in Carroll, Iowa in a honeymoon cottage that Wattles had built. At first, their life was simple. Jennie helped in a solid, old-fashioned way to build his business.

After completing his legal studies and passing the bar, Wattles briefly joined a law office in Carroll. Afterward, he accepted a partnership with a local bank and was eventually made president following an internal reorganization. It was then that Wattles took the middle name of Wallace, after Sumner Wallace, a former business associate that he deeply respected.

As Wattles’ career flourished, the

young couple became the parents of a son, Frederick Leete Wattles. But despite their joy, the pregnancy had taken a physical toll on Jennie. Doctors warned her that she could have no more children.

Around this time, Wattles convinced his parents to join them in Carroll. Mrs. Wattles, a deeply religious woman and lifelong member of the Episcopal Church, had not been able to attend services for years. Even though he had at some point soured on religion, Wattles still respected his mother's beliefs. He bought a vacant lot and presented it to the few Episcopalians who lived in Carroll so they could build a church.

Just past the age of three, Frederick contracted diphtheria. So did his father. Though Wattles recovered, Frederick died of the disease. The loss of his son would have been too much to bear had it not been for the strong support of his wife. "The nervous shock brought on insomnia," Wattles recalled, "and for two years I was on the verge of mental and

land at 320 South 37th Street, and contracted the respected architect, Thomas Rogers Kimball to design his home. The house, which is still standing, is perhaps the finest example of the Chateausque style in Omaha.⁹

Over the next thirty years, Wattles' public life prospered. He served as president, and chairman of the board of the United States National Bank of Omaha from 1905-1920, and in 1904 he helped to set up – and became president of – the Omaha Grain Exchange. That same year, he was instrumental in creating an exhibit of Nebraska's assets at the Louisiana-Purchase Exposition in St. Louis, suggesting the use of motion pictures to show evidence of the state's major industries. Thus, farms, ranches and other chief businesses were filmed by the Selig Company, of Chicago. "Until that time little had been done in advertising with motion pictures," Wattles wrote, "and our project was the first, so far as I know, to enter this field."¹⁰

Wattles' political life started to

candidate for the Senate. However, a potential run for the office was aborted, mainly because of his connection to the Omaha & Council Bluffs Street Railway Company. Wattles felt that he was not radical enough for most of the Republicans in Nebraska, and refused to change his philosophy to conform to accepted Republican dogma. He decided, therefore, not to become a candidate.

He did, however, continue to take an active part in public affairs. For two years, he served as president of the National Corn Exposition, and as chairman of the committee to celebrate Nebraska's 50th anniversary of its admission into the Union. As chairman of the local chapter of the Red Cross, Wattles was responsible for raising \$110,000 for the Belgian War Relief Fund.

But the project that brought Wattles national fame, however, was his participation in the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition. After the disasters of the Panic of 1893, a resolution favoring an exposition in Omaha was supported. Representatives from larger cities in the states west of the Mississippi founded the Trans-Mississippi Commercial Congress to sponsor the event.

Wattles was made president, and from the beginning, he became one of the enterprises' most active promoters. Through his leadership, over 2.6 million people viewed the 4,062 exhibits during the four months of the Exposition. When President McKinley visited, Wattles introduced him to the nearly 100,000 assembled on the plaza. "My entertainment here has been most royal," McKinley later told Wattles. "My day in Omaha will be counted the best time I have had since I became President."¹¹

In the spring of 1903, Wattles made one of his first trips to Southern California to visit Jennie's parents who had moved from Iowa to Santa Barbara. Their trip, however, was not to Wattles' liking since it rained nearly every day for two weeks. "I came home quite disgusted with Califor-



The Wattles Home in Omaha, Nebraska

photo from the Hollywood Heritage Archives

physical collapse. But through it all, forgetful of her own sufferings, her constant thought was of me, as it was all through her life."⁸

When Wattles' bank bought an interest in the Union National Bank of Omaha, he accepted a position there as vice president so he could forget his past life in Carroll. He and Jennie moved to that city in April, 1892. Within a couple years, Wattles bought

develop when, as an elected delegate to the Republican National Convention, he voted for Theodore Roosevelt for President. Later, as a member of the notification committee from Nebraska, he visited Roosevelt at his home in Oyster Bay, New York. The meeting became the foundation of a friendship between the two men that continued until Roosevelt's death.

During this time, Wattles' name had often been mentioned as a can-

nia,” Wattles wrote.¹²

Even so, the following spring, Wattles and Jennie returned to California and found the typical sunshine and fresh air. It was this weather that subsequently appealed to him. Looking ahead to the time when he would retire, Wattles determined that Southern California had all of what he was looking for.

With a friend’s help, in April 1905, he bought ninety acres in the foothills of the small community of Hollywood, just northwest of Los Angeles. The land¹³ extended northward from Prospect Avenue [now Hollywood Blvd.] between Pacific Avenue [now Sierra Bonita Avenue] and Curson Avenue, and back into a spur of the Santa Monica Mountains, including two small canyons.

The following year, Wattles retained the services of architects Myron Hunt and Elmer Grey. Together, Hunt and Grey were responsible for designing many of the city’s homes and buildings, such as the Huntington estate in San Marino, the Pasadena Playhouse, and the Beverly Hills Hotel.

Hunt and Grey’s design for the Wattles home had a distinctive touch, which the architects termed an “American adaptation of the Mexican type.”¹⁴ With a hint of Southern Spain and the Moorish architecture of northern Africa, the keynote of the architects’ design consisted of a garden, which, by a succession of terraces, followed the natural rise of the foothills.

With more than enough wealth for their needs, around this time the Wattles decided to extend their immediate family. Once the decision was made to adopt an orphan girl from Philadelphia, they received a telegram that the girl, Margaret Elizabeth, had an only sister, Mary Louise, from whom she was inseparable. “Bring them both,”¹⁵ was Wattles reply.

Shortly after the death of his father,¹⁶ Wattles began construction¹⁷ on his winter home, which he christened “*Jualita*” [Wah-LEE-ta]. During construction, the Los Ange-

les Times featured an article on the Wattles home:

*“What will be one of the showplaces of Southern California is slowly developing under the hands of two Los Angeles architects at Hollywood. The California home of G. W. Wattles a wealthy Omaha banker fronting on Prospect Avenue in the beautiful foothill suburb soon will be ready for occupancy and when completed will undoubtedly be one of the most notable showplaces of the Pacific Coast.”*¹⁸

The total cost of the house and walled gardens, when completed around the beginning of 1908, was reported to be \$50,000.¹⁹ At that point, Wattles hired the services of Alexander Urquhart²⁰ to supervise the development of the estate. Arriving in America around 1903 from his native Scotland, Urquhart was a prizewinning gardener, horticulturist and landscape architect. This well-respected reputation is what brought him to Wattles attention. Urquhart’s wife also made extra money by selling colored postcards to the tourists, five for 10 cents.²¹

During the construction of the house and gardens, Wattles chose to take his wife on an extended vacation. Both he and Jennie had been outside the country before for short trips to Europe, Cuba, and Mexico, but this journey would take them around the world. With a group of twelve in their company, they sailed from San Francisco on the *Siberia* on March 10, 1908. For the next seven months, they visited a wide range of places around the globe. While in Japan, Wattles grew to love the beauty of that country’s art forms and decided to import a Japanese garden to *Jualita*.

The Wattles returned to the United States in the fall of 1908. The following spring, the house – now furnished with Stickley furniture – and the surrounding grounds were ready for occupancy. Over the next thirteen years, the Wattles family would spend a few months and a part of

each summer at *Jualita*.

The grounds of the estate became a showplace, rivaling the gardens of the famed painter Paul De Longpre, and the water lilies ponds of Edmund Sturtevant. Not only did Wattles develop the south end as an agricultural area, he also expanded the gardens north of the formal walled garden. Soon an extensive rose garden, and Italian and American gardens, began to take shape.

Every component of the Japanese garden came over from Japan by ship – trees, plantings, marbles, sculpture for the pergola, giant urns and lanterns. Wattles hired Fugio, a Japanese landscape designer, to supervise eighteen California-born Japanese gardeners over the next two years.²² A specialty of Wattles gardens were the chrysanthemums, which Alex Urquhart entered in several flower shows.²³

Jennie’s health had been poor since the birth of their son Frederick. In the autumn of 1915 her condition worsened. While on a trip to Chicago, where she was to consult with doctors, Jennie took a turn for the worse. On Thursday, May 25, 1916, shortly after being admitted to Presbyterian Hospital, Jennie Leete Wattles passed away from what was reported as heart failure.

Arabella Wattles Teal, who is Gurdon Wattles’ granddaughter, suggests that Jennie’s death may have been from other causes. “I have the feeling from reading various accounts that she died of some cancer – either breast cancer or ovarian cancer,” Arabella said. “In those days you did not talk about such matters.”²⁴

Jennie’s death had a grievous effect on Wattles and their daughters. Margaret and Mary were becoming young adults, and would miss the guidance a mother could offer. To further their education, Wattles



placed them in Dana Hall School at Wellesley, Massachusetts, where their day-to-day needs would be the responsibility of others.

Now alone, Wattles relied on the kindness of friends and relatives to help around the house. To ease the loneliness, he threw himself into his work, resuming his daily tasks at the United States National Bank. Even so, he found little pleasure in doing things alone, even spending time at *Jualita*, which used to give him much enjoyment. "I wandered through the gardens and among the flowers," he would recall, "but I could not appreciate their beauty."²⁵

With the country now enmeshed in World War I, Wattles accepted an appointment as the Federal Food Administrator for Nebraska from Herbert Hoover²⁶. He became absorbed in his duties and apparently forgot his personal problems; however he dismissed any hope of ever finding love again.

One day he spoke at a luncheon for the Rotary Club at Lincoln, where a group of professors from the University of Nebraska were in attendance. It was here that he first met Julia Vance, the director of the home economics department, who had also been appointed to the Food Administrative Committee. Working together, Julia's pleasing smile, affable manner, and intelligence at once caught his eye.

"The thoroughness of her work, the graciousness of her presence, and her independence and broad intelligence soon convinced me that in her I had found all the qualities necessary for marital happiness," Wattles wrote. "But to win her love and gain her consent to marriage was another and more difficult matter."²⁷

Julia felt that some believed she was marrying Wattles for money and position – even though she had supported herself comfortably for years. And because of his age, Julia's own friends were appalled that she even considered marrying Wattles.

"While my grandparents' marriage

was a love match, Grandmother was a suffragist, she was independent, and she'd worked hard to become a full professor at the college," Arabella said. "She was in her later 30s and her life was set. So suddenly she gave up everything to marry this much older man and turn herself from an academic into a social hostess."²⁸

This is a role that Julia was never comfortable with and her friends knew that. She wrote them letters apologizing: "I'll still be the same person." Wattles, for his part, continued to work on her. It took several months of persuading Julia that he needed help in his work, while also needing someone to care for him as well.

Finally, on June 26, 1918, Julia consented to marriage at a ceremony performed in the presence of friends and family under the shade of a great tree on a mountain in Estes Park, Colorado. For their honeymoon, Wattles took his new bride to *Jualita*, where they enjoyed the summer. "We shall spend two months here," he told a reporter in Los Angeles. "My wife is paying her first real visit to this state, and she is charged with Southern California."²⁹

In September they arrived back in Omaha, where Wattles returned to his duties at the bank. By all accounts, it appeared as if Wattles' Omaha friends and relatives had accepted Julia. In this instance, however, appearances were deceiving.

"I think it shocked both groups of their friends, who did not approve of their marriage," Arabella noted.

"Grandmother was an unknown quantity to the social set of the people in Omaha, who knew my grandfather well. And she was different from his first wife. They also thought that maybe she was looking to marry a rich man; so they had those apprehensions on his behalf, although they kept telling him, from the time Jenny died, that he should remarry."³⁰

The next two years brought continued success for Wattles. However, nothing amounted to his joy on

learning that Julia was expecting a baby. Hopeful that the child's birth would occur in California, the couple left for Hollywood in January, 1920. Five months later, Gurdon Wallace Wattles, Jr. was born on May 5, 1920 at *Jualita*.

"To me the whole world seemed to rejoice with us," Wattles wrote. "Letters and telegrams of congratulation poured in from friends and relatives in many parts of the world."³¹ Wattles desire for a child came at a cost; he found out that Julia had the baby against her doctor's advice, risking her life while doing so.

1. Wattles, Gurdon Wallace. "Autobiography of Gurdon Wallace Wattles," p. 138.
2. Wattles, "Autobiography of Gurdon Wallace Wattles, p. 12.
3. Wattles, "Autobiography of Gurdon Wallace Wattles, p. 32.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
5. It is now called Iowa State University.
6. Twenty-seven years later, Iowa State University would confer upon Wattles the honorary degree of Master of Philosophy.
7. Wattles, "Autobiography of Gurdon Wallace Wattles, p. 134.
8. Wattles, "Autobiography of Gurdon Wallace Wattles, p. 135.
9. The Gurdon Wattles House was designated an Omaha Landmark on April 11, 1995.
10. Wattles, "Autobiography of Gurdon Wallace Wattles, p. 78
11. Wattles, *Autobiography of Gurdon Wallace Wattles*, p. 71.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 141.
13. Wattles paid \$3,000 to William Holler and Mrs. E. A. Moore for the land.
14. "Like Dream of Old Granada, is Hollywood Show Place," *Los Angeles Times*, February 2, 1908.
15. Wattles, *Autobiography of Gurdon Wallace Wattles*, p. 139.
16. James Wattles died on June 4, 1907.
17. The Alta Plating Mill Company supervised the construction while the plumbing contract was awarded to the Newell Brothers. "Building Contracts Let," *Los Angeles Times*, July 7, 1907.
18. "Like Dream of Old Granada, is Hollywood Show Place," *Los Angeles Times*, February 2, 1908.
19. "Like Dream of Old Granada, is Hollywood Show Place," *Los Angeles Times*, February 2, 1908.
20. Alexander Urquhart (1864-1949)
21. "Tough Row to Hoe in the Restoration of a Garden," *Los Angeles Times*, November 11, 1968.
22. "Tough Row to Hoe in the Restoration of a Garden," *Los Angeles Times*, November 11, 1968.
23. "New Beauty at Flower Show," *Los Angeles Times*, October 27, 1915.
24. Telephone interview with Arabella Wattles Teal, April 29, 2006.
25. Wattles, *Autobiography of Gurdon Wallace Wattles*, p. 152.
26. Hoover was the National Food Administrator.
27. Wattles, *Autobiography of Gurdon Wallace Wattles*, p. 153.
28. Telephone interview with Arabella Wattles Teal, April 29, 2006.
29. "Meet In Federal Food Work, Fall in Love, Wed," *Los Angeles Times*, June 30, 1918.
30. Telephone interview with Arabella Wattles Teal, April 29, 2006.
31. Wattles, *Autobiography of Gurdon Wallace Wattles*, p. 156.