

Cotton Noe, the Poet-Teacher of Kentucky¹

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A distinguished-looking visitor who long ago left imprints on the minds of the people at Murray State University, as he did on other campuses, was Dr. James Thomas Cotton Noe, then the Poet Laureate of Kentucky and a professor in the University of Kentucky. This neatly-groomed, well-built, slightly-stocky individual, who on at least two occasions spent a full week at Murray State, was daily seen making his way to the auditorium, where by lecturing and reciting his poetry he captivated his audience and held its attention spellbound for an hour at a time during each appearance. And although he had other activities at which he excelled, he so greatly enjoyed writing and reciting poetry, together with his teaching, that he had expressed the wish to be remembered as the "poet-teacher of Kentucky," a title he richly deserved.

The Noe family, which is of Scotch origin, was founded in America by three brothers who located in Maryland. Later one moved to Kentucky and another to Mississippi. But according to H. Levin, in his **Lawyers and Lawmakers in Kentucky**, it was from the Kentucky branch that nearly all of the Noes in America are descended.²

According to Cotton Noe's own testimony, he first attended school in a small log structure, where his teacher, a paralytic unable to walk, slept more than half of the time in the classroom. "He was said to be a very good scholar for his day," added Dr. Noe, "but he was wholly unfit for teaching. And yet, I liked to go to school even to him. I have always loved school and books. And I still find," he said, at the age of sixty-six, "the keenest pleasure in teaching."

Cotton Noe was born May 2, 1864, in Washington Co., near Springfield, Kentucky, the son of John Washington and Margaret Ann Trowbridge Noe. A few months before Cotton's tenth birthday his father moved to the town of Springfield, where there was a fairly good private school for those years. In this academy, one of the oldest in Kentucky, there were usually only two teachers, but on occasion, three. Nevertheless, the experiences which Cotton received there made a great impact upon him and largely determined his future.

Consequently, the boy forever cherished the personal attention and the stimulation he received while in this academy; and in his later years he expressed his appreciation, in a letter to the writer, as follows:

When I was about fifteen or sixteen, a great teacher became the principal of this school. I say great; for he really was a great teacher, though only an ordinary scholar. But he had the power to arouse ambition in youth, and I received the beginnings of my intellectual yearnings from him. This man, together with a doctor who was not a teacher, and yet the great-

est of all teachers I ever had, largely shaped my aims in life. They did not do this consciously or purposely, but through stimulation and suggestion.

Dr. W. W. Ray was a man of fine appreciation of everything intellectual and esthetic. He knew a good deal of literature, and had an excellent knowledge of several of the natural sciences. He liked me very much and used to ask me to ride in his buggy when he went to the country to visit his patients. I always came back home with my head and heart on fire. I followed one of the teachers from Springfield to Perryville and studied with him two years; and it was through his encouragement, his love, and his guidance that I went to college.

The poet's Alma Mater was Franklin College, Franklin, Indiana, where he won honors in oratory and the classics. In 1887 he received his A.B. degree; and in 1890, his A.M. After teaching in academies in Kentucky and in high schools in Indiana, he went to Cornell University, 1891-92, where he studied literature under Hiram Corson. In 1899 he attended the University of Chicago, and in 1919 he was awarded the Doctorate of Literature degree by Franklin College.

Then he began his long career in his native state. In 1893 he became an instructor in Williamsburg Institute. While there, on May 2, 1894, he married Sidney Stanfill, a charming daughter of Sherrod Stanfill, who, according to H. H. Tye, "belonged to one of the most influential families of the country."

From 1894 to 1898 Dr. Noe practiced law, and during this time he was Judge of the Police Court of Springfield. Later he became the principal of Hartsville Masonic Institute, 1898-1901; and, of Theodore Harris Institute 1901-04. He was an instructor in the Lincoln Memorial University, 1904-06. The following year he became an associate professor in the Department of Education at the University of Kentucky, where in 1912 he was made the head of the department. But according to David James Harkness, in his **Literary Profiles of the Southern States**, Dr. Noe at the time of his retirement was Dean of the College of Education and Poet Laureate of Kentucky.

Before he was thirty years old, Dr. Noe wrote very little verse that he preserved. He said:

But as a child, I committed a great deal of poetry to memory, and all of my life I have been fond of quoting poetry. I have never thought of myself as a poet. Teaching is and always has been my business with the exception of four years in which I was engaged in the practice of law. It was during this time that I began to produce the poetry which I have since published. Poetry has been a passion rather than a business or a profession.

This passion for poetry, of which Dr. Noe was speaking, was further revealed by a long-time friend of his, H. H. Tye, who wrote:

I have spent many delightful hours with him along the banks of the Cumberland River, supposed to be fishing, but in fact talking literature and discussing the great poets of all time. It is a rare treasure to hear him recite his poems, or any great poem for that matter; for he always puts the ictus at exactly the right place.

These statements are confirmed in Dr. Noe's sonnet entitled

Dedication (to H.H.T.)³

O soul responsive to the subtlest thought
That flashes o'er the mind's electric wire,
Or ever swept the strings of fancy's lyre
To music learned in schools where Shakespeare taught.
Oh thou who knowest the springs whence Sappho caught
Love's brimming cup that did her song inspire,
Yet dost my plain unlettered muse admire,
Who lived in better days when maidens wrought.

To thee, I dedicate my fondest rhymes
In memory of happy days of yore,
Together on the Cumberland, where Ruth
The charming rustic maid of olden times
First won our love, less for her lack of love,
Then for her sweet simplicity and truth.⁴

In addition to a previous statement, Mr. Tye added, "I know of no man better versed in general literature. He has the unique faculty of getting the juice out of what he reads. I consider him a real poet, quite apt and happy in the selection of his subject and in the choice of his words."

This passionate love for literature was carried over into his classroom; for in teaching courses in education, according to a great number of his former students, colleagues, and friends with whom the writer consulted, Dr. Noe often accompanied his lectures with his "delightful reading of verse." Yet, all agreed that he was an effective teacher. His concern, however, was to provide a program of inspiration. But this ability to inspire others won for him the greatest of respect, admiration, and appreciation. In fact, because of his ability to stimulate interest in intellectual growth and his willingness to assist his students, some of them years later termed him "the best loved man in Kentucky."

Further, Dr. Noe's supreme interest in literature is reflected by the topics he chose for his prose articles. By examining every one of them, for instance, the writer found that seventy-five percent of the total number deal with literary subjects, including discussions of Shakespearean plays, Southern writers, the teaching of literature, and the Latin classics.

In addition, this poet-teacher's interest in the field of English as a whole is revealed in his article entitled, "Is There a Nominative Phobia?" Here he insists that "it is high time we are adding some real exercises in formal grammar." And he concludes with, "Why not give

the students an opportunity to study English grammar, in order that they may become independent and self conscious enough in the use of grammatical forms to rely upon real standards rather than cheap imitations." 5

But Cotton Noe had other interests which had expanded his cultural and educational background, developed his dynamic personality, and afforded his ability to captivate his listeners. A lover of music and art, he played the cornet and the cello. And as art education was his hobby, he gave lectures on this subject and accompanied them with slides. Consequently, he spent much time in visiting the museums over the world and in exploring the various sources for slides.

Although fewer people could afford going abroad during his day, Dr. Noe had traveled in most of the European countries. Having previously toured the Mediterranean, he went to Athens. He came back by Brindisi and visited Italy, France, Switzerland, England, and Scotland. Then in 1925 he toured again England, Scotland, France, Italy, and Switzerland. Also, he spent much time in Belgium and Holland. In addition to visiting practically all of the great museums of Europe, he studied the architecture of each country. However, he felt that his journey through Greece was one of the most profitable trips he had ever made.

Coupled with his oratorical training, all of these achievements helped lead to his becoming a lecturer on the Chautauqua platform. In the **Kentucky High School Quarterly**, July 1920, during Dr. Noe's absence from the campus, George M. Baker stated:

We miss the genial presence of our gifted poet-teacher on the University campus this summer. He is with the Redpath Chautauqua lecturing on "The Great American Home." It appears that he is winning warm recognition of his life on the platform. We knew he would when the large opportunity came. Cotton Noe has a warm heart for humanity. He sings them [sic] into good humor while he skillfully reorients their philosophy of life without making them conscious of either the operation or their need therefor. His poems make the heart grow fonder of the right things—of the real values of life that we seem to be occasionally in danger of losing sight of these days . . . There is a need for philosophers of the Cotton Noe type to get into the field, and with keen analysis and clever humor, reveal the real situation . . . Perhaps Cotton Noe and his like will be able to save the day yet.

In addition to his regular teaching at Lexington, according to Dr. A. L. Crabb, of Peabody College, Dr. Noe taught extension work for the University at Newport, Kentucky, where he had teachers from all of the region known as Greater Cincinnati. Besides, he was quite active in both civic and professional organizations, and he served as editor of the **Kentucky High School Quarterly**.

Also, Dr. Noe, a Baptist, taught regularly a large Sunday School class of business men at the Calvary Baptist Church in Lexington. Here,

too, he inspired others, for he exemplified his virtues and proclaimed his principles and beliefs. All of his acquaintances, it seemed, were aware of his intolerance toward any opposition to the Eighteenth Amendment. But the people consulted for this study praised him for his stand.

In fact, Cotton Noe, described by those who knew him as "a man of unique and pleasing personality," was widely known and deeply appreciated for his obedience to the moral laws and his adherence to all of the other "qualities of a gentleman," in the old-time sense of the word. For example, the late Dr. Gordon Wilson, who until his retirement served as head of the English Department in Western Kentucky State University, held Dr. Noe in the highest esteem and expressed his appreciation of him as follows:

Professor Noe has always been, to me, the incarnation of common sense. When students have lost their heads over fads in education, he has remained sane, highly cultured, and strong-minded. He has brought to his teaching some of the vigor of the Kentucky pioneer. He has taught more by his attitude toward education than by any course of study actually conducted . . . Fundamentally, he is a great inspirer of vigorous people, a great lecturer, a homely but forceful poet, who sees in common man the great characteristics of nobility, courage, and stolidity . . . I believe that his place in the state and its history will always be a very high one, because he represents the culture and the virtues of his own pioneer ancestors as applied to modern conditions . . . Professor Noe, like most great people, is greater than anything he has said or written; and he is regarded by his students and his friends as a genius of common sense — a sort of twentieth century Dr. Samuel Johnson.

Considering his own fine qualities, it is no surprise that Dr. Noe had a happy home life; for as previously stated, he had married the lovely Sidney Stanfill, who also possessed a broad, cultural background, accompanied with integrity. Thus, it was widely known that Dr. Noe "idolized his wife," to whom he dedicated two volumes of his poetry. And although he wrote various poems about her and their four children, Cecil, Sherrod, Rowena, and Milford, perhaps these lines best reflect the poet's deep love for his wife and his belief in immortality:

So sweet the fragrant sunshine
On that nuptial hour in May,
We tremble lest it might not last
Forever and a day.

But listening to the symphony
Of Love and Life grown gray,
We know, dear God, that both shall last
Forever and for aye.⁶

In 1926 Cotton Noe was made Poet Laureate of Kentucky by the unanimous vote of both houses of the State Legislature.⁷ At that time

he was the author of several books, including **The Loom of Life**, 1912, and the second edition, 1917; **The Blood of Rachel**, 1917; **Lincoln and Other Poems**, 1922; and **Tip Sams of Kentucky**, 1926. In addition, he had appeared in about sixteen volumes of verse. Further, he soon had six sonnets in an anthology edited by Harold Vina and published in Paris, France.

Dr. Noe considered these his two distinct contributions: first, his characterizations in a technique quite his own, such as "Thin Britches Dick," "Umbrella Jim," "John R. Kirk," "Waggoner Joe," and "Fiddling Mose"; second, his "Poetic Fasia" and "Uplift." To the first of these should be added dozens of other selections which have been highly praised by noted editors and distinguished writers.

For example, George Seymour, in a review of Cotton Noe's poetry, in the **Step Ladder**, the publication of the National Order of Book-fellows, said:

Cotton Noe's character sketches in verse, depicting American scenes and characteristics, are as fine poetry as can be found in space and time. They form a lasting contribution of great value to American literature.

In addition, Enid Daniel Jones, in **The American Bard**, in 1947, at the time of the publication of **Tip Sams Again**, wrote:

Tip Sams Again is a distinguished volume of verse . . . It contains poems which depict in spontaneous verse the characters and locals of the lowly people of Kentucky hinterland, rendered with humor, yet with insight and vast sympathy . . . **The American Bard** was proud to have published "Along a Country Road," which later was characterized as the rarest of pictures of country life . . . All of these poems should be read, and many of them learned by heart.

Among the countless numbers of other professionals who praised the works of Noe were Carl Sandburg, who pronounced "Thin Britches Dick" very fine; Helen Keller, who in a copy of **Double Blossom** (a Helen Keller Anthology) inscribed, along with two lines from Noe's sonnet to her, these words of her own: "The perfect description of what happened to me when my mind burst out of the dark"; and James Stephens, the Irish poet, who, at a dinner meeting given for him by the Scribblers of Lexington, heard Cotton Noe read "Thin Britches Dick." Then Stephens rose and said: "That is the most spontaneous verse I have ever heard."

Because space will not permit the inclusion of "Thin Britches Dick," the writer has chosen a simpler poem, "Tip Sams," to reveal Cotton Noe's blending of humor and sentiment in his character delineations:

Tip Sams had twins
And a razor-back sow,
Five dogs and a mule
And an old roan cow;

A bone-spavined filly
 And a one-room house,
 And a little wrinkled woman
 Just as meek as a mouse.
 Old Tip raised tobacco
 And he trafficked in skins.
 For he had seven sons
 In addition to the twins,
 And every mother's son,
 And the little mammy, Jude,
 Smoked a pipe all day
 And the twins both chewed.
 But Tip kept a-digging
 And he never lost heart,
 For the dogs hunted rabbits
 And they caught a right smart;
 And the bone-spavined filly
 And the mule pulled a plow,
 And they lived off the givings
 Of the old roan cow,
 And the acorn-fattened farrow
 Of the razor-back sow.
 But here the story closes
 Of my little romance,
 For the seven sons are sleeping
 On the battlefields of France;
 But their daddy grows tobacco
 And trafficks still in skins,
 And the little wrinkled mammy
 Has another pair of twins.

As to Tip Sams, Thin Britches Dick, and the other individuals characterized by Noe, it is generally known that he had no intent of ridiculing any of them. Instead, as they were lowly people whom he knew, he understood them. In fact, his friends and acquaintances, as well as his editors and the literary critics, have praised this poet because of his democratic views and his hatred of sham and bigotry. Besides, many have added, "He looked for the good in every man."

As Wilson Townsend, in 1932, then Literary Historian of Kentucky, said of Dr. Noe, "**Tip Sams of Kentucky** made him famous overnight." However, in addition to the characterizations in this volume, it, like each of his other books, contains dozens of sonnets and other poems. And according to Enid David Jones, it is in these selections, especially in the sonnets, that Dr. Noe greatly shares "the cream of his rich scholarship."

It is interesting to note that after Dr. Noe's retirement in 1934, and his move to Beverly Hills, California, in 1935, he continued to write and to increase his fame. Nevertheless, after proclaiming him to be "one of the truest poets ever born in Kentucky, or in the South," Townsend, the noted literary critic previously mentioned, had this to offer:

But he has always been too careless of his fame. After having written a lovely lilting lyric or long metrical romance, such as

The Legend of the Silver Band, he seemed to have little interest in finding a publisher. What he needs most is a manager to scatter his golden fancies through the great editorial offices of the world. His work has great and lasting beauty, genuine merit that will keep it alive for generations.

These words partly convey the reason for Cotton Noe's failure to attain the wide and lasting fame he rightly deserved. Those who knew him, according to the findings of this study, loved him for what he wrote, and for what he was. But instead of ardently seeking fame, as others of his creative ability would have done, he endeared himself to his students. Hence, he is to be remembered chiefly as the "poet-teacher of Kentucky."

In Beverly Hills, however, Cotton Noe made many literary contacts and belonged to several literary and celebrity clubs. Apparently, he enjoyed California, for he remained there until his death.

The following newspaper report, from the New York **Times**, Wednesday, November 11, 1953, tells the story:

KENTUCKY POET LAUREATE

James Thomas Noe dies at
89—Wrote Eight Volumes

Los Angeles, Nov. 10—James Thomas Cotton Noe, poet laureate of Kentucky, died last night at his home in Beverly Hills, after a heart attack. He was 89 years old.

A University of Kentucky professor for thirty years and the author of eight volumes of poetry, Dr. Noe was named poet laureate of his native state by the legislature of 1926. He had lived in Beverly Hills since his retirement from the university post in 1934.

Dr. Noe was educated at Franklin College in Indiana, Cornell University and the University of Chicago. He taught at secondary schools and colleges and practiced law before joining the Kentucky faculty in 1908. Among his books are **The Loom of Life**, **The Blood of Rachel**, **Lincoln and Twenty Other Poems**, and **The Valleys of Parnassus**.

1. The writer has based this article on her thesis, **The Life and Works of Cotton Noe**, the first and supposedly the only detailed account as yet given of this poet-teacher. The biographical facts were drawn mostly from personal letters, resulting from inquiries, from Cotton Noe and many others; and, from numerous interviews with his former students, colleagues and friends who knew him best.
2. Cotton Noe was not sure whether this reference was exactly correct concerning the migration of his family. But he added that Joe Noe, Judge William Noe of Calhoun, and A. D. Noe of Hopkinsville, father of Emma Noe, the famous contralto singer, were the three brothers. They and Mrs. Emma Noe Roberts, their sister, were cousins of Cotton Noe's father.
3. The initials are for H. H. Tye.
4. **The Loom of Life** (Boston: Richard G. Badger, the Gorham Press, 1917), p. 40.
5. **The Kentucky High School Quarterly**, October 1920, p. 40.
6. **Tip Sams of Kentucky** (Lexington, Kentucky, 1926), p. 224.
7. The New York **Times Book Review**, April 1926.