

Edythe Squier Draper  
From Hakadote Japan to Oswego Kansas 1882-1964

Edythe Squier was born in Hakadote Japan in 1882. Her parents, both graduates of Ohio Wesleyan University, were enthusiastic young missionaries. However, over the six years of their stay in Japan, Llewellan Squier found his liking for the mission field waning. His wife Elizabeth liked her time in Japan. She enjoyed intellectual companionship with English women in the mission community and was pleased to be freed from household chores by Japanese servants.

Edythe's earliest memories included affection for her Japanese nurse, playing with her younger sister Mabel who arrived two years after her own birth, riding in a rickshaw. Edythe spoke with emotion all her life of leaving her second little sister in a hillside cemetery in Hakadote just before the family returned to America.

The Board of Missions of the Methodist Church was not pleased with the outspoken returned missionary who did not think trying to convert Japanese people to Christianity was always the right thing to do. While visiting with his family in Ohio, Llewellan Squier got word of his first pastoral assignment in America. He was to go to Crookston, Minnesota. In those late 19th century years, going to northern Minnesota compared somewhat with going to Siberia in mid-twentieth century Russia.

As oldest of the children - nine were born and seven lived to maturity - Edythe came to know a great deal about life on the

frozen prairie. Young ministers were not exactly well paid. The Crookston minister's children were cold always in winter and often hungry too. Edythe had to go out to the pond and chop ice many a day after school, so that she could heat water and wash the day's dishes. As so often happened in those days, the oldest girl in the family became the family drudge. There were always clothes to wash, floors to scrub, younger children to care for.

In the brief summers, Edythe was responsible for all the younger children when they played outside. In later years she would say she could not remember ever having climbed a tree without handing up the current baby to someone already in the tree. All these duties cut into time for reading, a passion with Edythe. Always she had a book pulling at her to see what happened next, even if she had to hide it in her arithmetic book at school or in a basket of clothes she was folding or ironing at home. For the younger children Edythe told made-up stories, to their delight.

In an unpublished autobiographical novel, Edythe made clear the terror she felt of her father. His dark moods and frequent harsh physical punishments made a hard life completely miserable. Once the parents left Edythe in charge of the younger children for three days while they attended their church's annual conference. She was about nine years old. Her parents warned her especially not to let any of the little ones catch cold. When they returned the baby had a cold. Her father took the only doll Edythe had ever had and threw it in the stove. When Edythe told this story about 40 years later she fought back tears.

Llewellan Squier - he changed that name to Lee Welling later - was probably a frustrated musician. At least that is what Edythe would say in later years, as she searched for some explanation for his behavior. He played the organ well and improvised beautifully. He had been pushed into the ministry by his family, Edythe would explain.

After Crookston, the growing Squier family lived in two or three other small Minnesota towns. No move turned out to be an improvement. Finally one Sunday Lee announced his sermon topic to be "Why I am Leaving the Methodist Church." And he did just that.

Having no longer to feel the pressure of being "preachers' kids" may have helped the Squier children a little. But in most ways life was no easier. The family did leave Minnesota for Ohio where they were not quite so cold in the winter. Now everyone had to be quiet because Papa was writing a book. The book got published, but few people bought "A Lamb To the Slaughter", the story of an unhappy young woman missionary. The family moved again, to New Jersey and later to Pennsylvania where Lee worked in fraternal insurance. Money for shoes and rent continued to be scarce. There was no money for anything else.

Edythe and Mabel had made a game of deciding what grade they wanted to be in school each time they moved. No school records traveled with people in those days. The girls must have repeated a grade or two, for Edythe was 19 when she earned a high school diploma in Greensburg, Pennsylvania. She had reveled in English,

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four years of Latin, one of Greek, three of German. In chemistry and Math she had scraped by. The school told her parents that Edythe was "college material" but there was no money for college. When the family moved to Germantown, a suburb of Philadelphia Edythe tried for various jobs. She managed to attend Drexel Institute long enough to learn shorthand and typing. One job she loved, with a publishing company. But her father made her quit because she was paid so little. Working as a public stenographer in mountain resorts Edythe learned how affluent people lived. Given her life-long habit of drawing people out to talk about their lives, no doubt she learned also about what they thought and felt.

The University of Pennsylvania was within commuter train distance from the Squier home in Germantown. Edythe went there for night courses in English literature. Eventually she completed the equivalent of about two years of college.

During the years between high school and Edythe's permanently leaving the eastern seaboard, she spent two special years at teaching. She taught at a mission school for black children in South Carolina. She would recall in later years how well she herself had been treated at that school, and how poorly the children had fared. This distressed Edythe greatly and she could not persuade herself to return for another year.

The other teaching experience away from family was in Ohio, at a high school in a small town. During that year she had contact with the brothers and sisters of her parents. She also had a

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suitter about whom she didn't say much in later years. She was urged to return to her job there, according to old letters in her files, but gave the excuse that she wanted to go for more schooling.

These young adult years were made sad for Edythe by the fate of her sister Mabel. Mabel was pretty and vivacious, Lee, now a businessman in Philadelphia, enjoyed being seen in the company of this particularly lovely young woman. He trained her to be his secretary. She went to social events with him. They rode horses together in the park. He would not introduce his constant companion as his daughter. Edythe's unpublished autobiographical novel pictured Mabel as child of friends, taken into the family as a child. The mother in that novel agonized over the relationship between Lee and Mabel but was unable to change anything.

Mabel became ill with rheumatic fever and her heart was damaged. Edythe would say in later years, "If he (meaning Lee) had only let her alone, she might have been all right. But he wouldn't leave her alone." Mabel died when she was 21. Edythe could hardly talk about this later. She blamed her father bitterly. The next younger sister, Connie, talking when she was about 90 years old, said, "Then he came after me, but I wouldn't have any of that stuff, so he got one of the younger girls." The parents separated.

In the spring of 1910, three years after Mabel's death, Edythe saw an ad in a Philadelphia paper asking for a teacher at a small

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Presbyterian college for women at Oswego, Kansas. She answered the ad and was hired to teach shorthand and typing and German language beginning in September of that year. She thought of this as an adventure, little guessing that Oswego, Kansas, population about 2000, would become her home for the rest of her long life.

About Edythe's college teaching one of her former students, speaking as an old woman, said, "She was the most interesting teacher I ever had." Edythe herself would laugh in later years as she told her children about struggling to keep a chapter ahead of the class in college botany. She had had a semester of high school botany. No one else on the small faculty would teach botany, so she did it. Her preparation in German was better, though she found it a challenge to interest German speaking farm girls in the grammar of that language. It was an interesting two years for Edythe, a pleasant time for a change.

The little college had strong ties with the local Presbyterian Church which meant that the college teachers were required to be active in the church. Edythe had always loved music and since her early teens had been an active choir soloist. Her performances as singer, and sometimes as pianist, were frequent and much admired at the Oswego church. She also began to be generally admired by the town's young men. By the second year of her teaching at Oswego College James Draper was <sup>her</sup> ~~be~~ favorite escort. The Draper house, built by John Draper, a pioneer physician, was just across the road from the college buildings. In Edythe's words, "And so I married the man across the street." Many years

later an old woman in Oswego said of Edythe and Jim, "They were so much in love that the whole town was in love with them."

In 1912, the year of Edythe's marriage to Jim, getting married meant no more teaching. Now the question was, how to become a mid-west housewife. There was reading. Oswego was a surprisingly literate town, with residents who had come from New England, New York, Tennessee, as well as from neighboring states. They had established a town library, and there was the college library. And there was music, nothing like the Philadelphia Orchestra's concerts in the park that even poor people could attend. But residents sang and played instruments and sometimes outsiders came and put on recitals at the local "Opera House."

Leisure was not a problem for long. By five years after the marriage, three children made the days exceedingly busy. After the birth of the third child Edythe had a very serious illness. Her mother came from Philadelphia to help care for the family. To bolster Edythe's natural fighting spirit, she was promised a visit home to Philadelphia when she recovered. So off she went, she and her mother, on the train with children 3 1/2, 2 1/2. and six weeks old. The two women managed well, and the trip east went well. Edythe saw her sisters and brothers and spent a month with her mother. Then came the return trip half across the country without the grandmother's help. All went reasonably well until they got to St. Louis. Then the thermos of the baby's milk, the only thing she could eat, fell from a bunk and broke. She screamed all the way to Oswego. The train was full of soldiers (it was 1917) who kept saying, "Throw that baby out the

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window."

An important interest for Edythe in those days of caring for small children was supplied by the old country doctor who was her father-in-law. Now in his 70's, John Draper would come to the house with his horse and buggy. With Edythe and the youngest child in front, the other two children in back, the old man would drive around the countryside he knew so well. He told many a story of people in the area, Edythe listening and remembering. The two were great friends and confidants until John's death in 1920. He had made Edythe promise that he would be buried beside his first wife whom he adored, not beside his second wife with whom he had not got along so well. But Edythe looked around at the five children of the second marriage, including her husband, and decided that the living would be served better if she didn't keep that promise. Much later in her life she would speak of this sadly, but without regretting her decision.

When at last the youngest child was in school, Edythe could begin to be serious about writing the stories she had always had floating around in her head. She would work hard and fast for the family in the very early morning, a skill she had long ago developed, then house in order, meals planned, Edythe would sit down before her old typewriter. When the children began arriving home from school after four in the afternoon, there she would be, banging away at the old Underwood. Then the far-away look in her eyes would fade and the housewife-mother would take over to fly around getting dinner, supervising homework and music practice. She would see the children off to bed, plan food and clothes for

the next day, and maybe have a bit of time for reading. She believed in using every minute of every day.

Those were the good writing days. There were days also of sick children or of church and community obligations. And someone might come and talk for several hours. Edythe was a superb listener, drawing out details of people's lives and thoughts and feelings, remembering.

The family finances were never really secure. Jim Draper worked for the biggest business in the little town, a farm loan company. This organization, owned by one family and dominated by them, never allowed much room for advancement by mere employees. It was steady work that Jim could do well, but he was always poorly paid. He worked ten to twelve hours a day, six days a week through many years.

Naturally Edythe wished she could help the family by selling the stories she had begun to write, starting about 1923. Having been a preacher's kid, she knew all about Sunday School papers with their weekly stories aimed at specific age groups of children. She began selling stories at \$10 apiece to Methodist and Baptist publications. She soon discovered the daily newspaper market too. Many papers, such as the Chicago Daily News and Kansas CityStar and Times printed a daily short-short story. Edythe sold to them at \$8 a story. In those days eight and ten dollar checks bought a good deal. She was helping.

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Those pot-boilers of Edythe's were hardly her best work or her favorites to write. Unfortunately Edythe's best stories were to find acceptance only with the small magazines that paid no money, just prestige. So Edythe was torn between the family's need for money and her own deep need to write the dark psychologically probing stories for which she came to be valued by other writers and by editors. She reached her pinnacle of recognition when one of her stories was printed in the Edward J. O'Brien collection of the best short stories of 1930. After that she would get letters from well-known publishers asking for the privilege of reading any novel she might have ready. Unfortunately that was the era of the novel, not of the story. Small, carefully crafted stories were Edythe's forte, and she never succeeded in publishing a novel.

In the 1930's Edythe came to be a valued contributor to "The Household Magazine" in Topeka, Kansas. This gave her a chance to be better paid while writing something more complex than Sunday School paper stories. But the moving stories, such as those involving the inner lives of Black people and stories that used stream-of-consciousness techniques were turned down with comments such as, "Our readers are just not ready for this yet." One editor asked if she herself were Black. She felt complimented.

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Meanwhile the family finances were not improving. Kansas was heading into the great depression along with the rest of the country. The farm loan business could hardly do well, and Jim's salary was cut and cut again. In 1927 the family moved from the small house on the edge of town - a house they might rent to someone for cash - to the big old Draper house where Jim had grown up. The college was no longer across the road. It had closed its doors and the larger of the two buildings had burned down. By now the land was occupied by a chicken ranch.

Jim and Edythe decided they should use the ten acres of the old Draper home place to raise animals in the hope of earning a little money. Although Edythe now had an aging ten-room house to look after, and part of the time a sick old aunt of Jim's to care for, she assumed the responsibility of raising chickens. Jim added the care of several cows to his long work day. In these efforts to raise money, the parents had some help from their adolescent children. Checks for milk taken to the local cheese factory did help a little, but the chicken raising was not a financial success. Edythe learned from these efforts more than she had already known about the tribulations of farm women. She had come a long way from the city woman fresh from Philadelphia in 1910.

The oldest child was nearing high school graduation and the others were not far behind. All the children knew that they would go to college because their parents were determined people who wanted this for their children. Fortunately the first to leave had taken shorthand and typing seriously in high school and was equipped to help herself. It was arranged that she would go to a Presbyterian school at Emporia, Kansas. As the train left the Oswego station that September day in 1930 with her daughter aboard, Edythe shed tears. Asked by a callous younger child if she didn't want Lucy to get to go to college, she said, "Of course. But this is the break-up of our family." The rest of the family went back to the usual struggle.

This was probably the time when Edythe felt the squeeze hardest between writing what she wanted to write and trying to earn money. Now may have been the beginning of her feelings of futility about what she felt was her best work. The next nine years (1930-1939) saw one or two Draper off-spring in college all the time. Money had to be terribly important.

One academic year (1932-33) Edythe went to Emporia with the two older children to keep house for them, hoping to cut down on expenses. Jim and the youngest child became a family of sorts with his older sister who did the housekeeping. Edythe had a harder than expected year, ending up taking care of the sick wife of a professor and looking after the children of that family in addition to her own two college students. It was a busy year, but interesting. Her note-books of that year show many stories sent to magazines, but few accepted.

Back in Oswego the next year, Edythe and Jim and the last child at home moved back to the small house, the big old house being needed by Jim's sisters. Edythe wrote as many saleable stories as possible and the struggle for money went on. When, at the end of that year, the oldest child graduated from college, the last was ready to go. Edythe now had more time to herself, but still the rejections rolled in. The last publication date of a story of hers was 1941.

When Edythe was 61 years old, she began a new kind of life. A job she felt she could do and would enjoy doing opened up: Oswego correspondent for the Parsons Sun, a newspaper published in a larger town, 20 miles from Oswego. Afraid that she would have no chance if the editor saw her and asked her age, Edythe persuaded her younger daughter to go and apply for the job for her. When the editor realized he was receiving a proxy application he laughed hard. But he hired Edythe.

Jim had quit the investment company and had opened his own insurance agency, hoping to do better financially. It did not go well, and when Edythe took the reporter's job, he said, "All right, you can earn the living for a while." Edythe looked back on her years of hard work, raising the children, raising chickens, writing as many pot-boilers as possible, always keeping house and cooking, and she was not pleased by the comment. *Nonetheless she remembered Jim's long hours through many years' working at a not particularly congenial job, and her loyalty to him remained constant.* However, she was pleased with her new job. Oswego was the seat of county government and an important center for the farm country



around it. The town's education level had remained high, even after the demise of the college. Edythe had long known most of the town's people, and now she came to know them all. Her editor soon allowed her a free hand in what she wrote. A beautiful garden, grain elevators against the after-glow in the western sky, a special day in a country school - all these became material for the Oswego news. Her columns came to be read by subscribers to the Parsons Sun who might not know any Oswego people, but who felt they knew them from Edythe's writing about their lives.

Edythe managed the Oswego paper-boys' routes and came to have influence on many growing up boys. All ages and sorts of people would go and talk to her in her office down town as if she were their counselor. She became known to all the town and a beloved figure in the community. She liked her work, loved being with people, and was grateful for a steady income. She hired a man to teach her to drive and bought herself an old car so that she could be independent of Jim's schedule. She drove to country schools, farm sales, and to all sorts of events important to farm people and to the town. What she chose to write about and how she view<sup>d</sup> things had an effect on the community.

This went on for the last 21 years of Edythe's life. In the last year or two she had begun to revise an unpublished novel. Of it she said, "Sometimes I think it is so good, and sometimes I think it is just nothing." In the family ~~the~~<sup>she</sup> loved referring to herself as "Grandma the girl reporter".

When Edythe was 82, still working every day for the Sun, she was hospitalized for surgery to remove a large but benign tumor. For three weeks after that she lay in a coma, finally dying of post-operative pneumonia. During those weeks people would come in her hospital room and, crying, say, "We can't do without Mrs. Draper." For many, life was different and less interesting without Edythe. But as one friend said when it was all over, "Edythe never had to grow old."

*Peg Varnel*