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# Edward and Minne Allen: Iowa Citizens, World Citizens

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BOTH PHOTOS: EDWARD AND MINNE ALLEN PAPERS, RS 1374451, UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES, IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

## *Edward and Minne Allen Iowa Citizens, World Citizens*

*by Karen Lawson and Tanya Zanish-Belcher*

**E**dward and Minne Allen were citizens of the world who made their home in Iowa. They dedicated their long and active lives to education, community service, and social justice. They met in Berlin in a time of violence and lived out their lives in Ames working for peace.

Edward Switzer Allen was born in Kansas City, Missouri, in 1887. He attended a Quaker school in

Baltimore and later joined the Religious Society of Friends. At Harvard he received his A.B., A.M., and Ph.D. His specialty was geometry, the kind useful in mathematical physics, especially in relativity theory. He first taught mathematics at Dartmouth College and Brown University.

Minne (pronounced *Min-na*) Müller-Liebenwalde was born in Sondershausen, Germany, in 1887. Early

on, she demonstrated her concerns for social welfare. In Berlin, she worked with children of working-class families in poor neighborhoods, interpreted for Jane Addams and other visiting social reformers, and studied childhood education and social work at the University of Berlin, where she was one of the few women students. In the summer of 1914 she met Edward Allen. He was visiting his cousin who was also one of Minne's university professors and had told her in advance, "He is a mathematician, but he is interested in everything."

Minne and Edward discovered they had many mutual interests. As Edward wrote years later, "Our common devotion to the ideals of equality, freedom, and peace became clear during those months."

In late summer two events changed their lives. They were engaged to be married, and World War I began. Just days before Germany declared war on Russia, Minne wrote, "War! It is a terrible sounding word and yet holds a whole people in its grip. It was very quiet this morning; then the newspaper extras fluttered down like snowflakes; a common feeling shuddered through everyone."

In the fall Edward returned to the United States to teach mathematics at Brown. The next summer, he returned to Germany, and he and Minne were married. Accepting an instructorship at the University of Michigan, he brought his German bride to Ann Arbor, where he taught for four years.

**T**he transitions from Germany to America, from the cosmopolitan city of Berlin to the college town of Ann Arbor were difficult for Minne. In dozens of letters to her beloved mother in Germany between 1914 and 1920, she recorded the frustrations of adapting to a new culture—she could find no farmers' markets, rye or black bread, or cleaning supplies as effective as those in Germany. And she wrote her mother about the emotional difficulties, the loneliness and "anguishing homesickness." She felt as if she was living five "separate lives"—with Edward, her mother, "dear ones in Germany," her fatherland, and the people and conditions in Ann Arbor. In November 1915 she wrote to her mother: "I think I will bravely stay here one more year." Her great hope was to return to Germany with Edward. "You know that I feel myself as a German confined and alone here and confess with glowing pride and gratitude to German customs and to being German."

The perils of wartime travel prevented Minne from visiting Germany until 1927. Longing for the war's

end, she wrote in 1917, "Just now we are passing one of the largest radio transmitters. The motionless wires high in the heavens tell a lot, while we underneath them hear nothing. But sometime they will send to the whole world the news of peace. The world will cry for joy that they have been rescued from this eternal misery."

Gradually, Minne came to accept being an American citizen and taking on an active role in public life. A great turning point was in 1917 when she and Edward were invited to visit Jane Addams at Hull House in Chicago. There Minne felt the "wonderful spirit of simplicity, goodness, and heart's warmth." As her son wrote decades later, "Jane Addams invited them to Chicago in response to a proposal by Minne to work toward enabling leading educators and other intellectuals on both sides of the war to reach out to one another. No other event during the war cheered Minne more than this meeting with Jane Addams. And even though Minne's proposal did not succeed despite many months of intense effort during 1917, it awakened in Minne a growing sense of the importance of assuming a publicly visible role."

Her letters to her mother began to reveal a greater awareness of social ills: she decries the lynching of an African American in Omaha and the Palmer Raids on radicals in several cities. She applies her intellect to new projects: "And now I have to write about 150 letters for the collection of money and clothing for poor German children. . . . Then Siegmund-Schultze wants a critical review and help with his collection of American documents relating to peace." (Friedrich Siegmund-Schultze's work led to the international, interfaith Fellowship of Reconciliation peace movement.)

Yet her responsibilities to her children (Julius, born in 1916; Rosemarie, 1917; and Hermann, 1919) overrode other goals: "The educated woman with very little income who has to do all the menial work herself has to make the biggest sacrifice: giving up all creative participation in public affairs if she wants to be fair to her little children."

**E**dward was experiencing his own conflicts while teaching at the University of Michigan during the war years. He had signed a pacifist petition and refused to purchase war bonds or stamps. For this, he was deemed disloyal at the University of Michigan, was refused a salary increase, and his contract was extended for only one more year. According to Edward, at a formal hearing the university president told him that "[my] restoration to equal

standing might take place . . . if [I] would promise to support every future war of the United States in all ways—even those not demanded by law.”

Assisted by the chair of his department, Professor Alexander Ziwet, the Allens moved to Morgantown, West Virginia. Edward taught at the University of West Virginia for two years, 1919–1920. “During our two years at Morgantown I showed little active concern for freedom or equality,” Edward later stated. But near the end of that period he wrote to the editor of the *Old Dominion* in response to an invitation in the newspaper to join the Ku Klux Klan. He sent a copy of the letter to Roger Baldwin, who co-founded the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) in 1920. Looking back decades later, Edward observed that “this, then, was my preparation for that growing interest and involvement in Iowa’s civil liberties which followed my coming to this state in 1921.”

That year Edward was invited by the newly appointed chair of the mathematics department of Iowa State College to serve as an associate professor. His main areas of teaching and research concerned algebraic geometry, applications of mathematics to chemistry, enumeration, and probability. He was promoted to professor of mathematics in 1943 and served as such until 1985. In the 1960s he was also a visiting professor at Iowa’s Grinnell and Wartburg colleges and at Cottey College in Missouri.

In 1929 at Iowa State, Minne completed her M.S. thesis, “An Historical and Sociological Study of a Rural Town in Central Iowa.” An intellectual exercise, the study also reveals her heart-felt appreciation of the everyday life of ordinary people. In it she wrote: “Much of my knowledge of the early history of Cambridge and the surrounding country I owe to conversations with ‘old timers,’ men and women who never tired of sharing with me their recollections and experiences of pioneer days.” She regaled the reader with tidbits from times gone by: “Violet dinners were followed by strawberry parties . . . baskets and pails full of the delicious fruit and cakes and cream on the table . . . taffy pulls and corn suppers with popcorn balls, mush and milk, cornbread, fried mush and chains of colored popcorn. Sleigh riding and skating brought the young people together for hours of happy and healthy recreation in parties of many couples, who would end the afternoon gathering around the fireplace of a hospitable home, telling stories, guessing riddles and enjoying delicious refreshments in the form of baked apples or fruit preserve.”

Minne taught sociology at Iowa State and was promoted to assistant professor, but then became a victim

UNDATED PHOTO, EDWARD AND MINNE ALLEN PAPERS, RS 13/14/51, UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES, IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY



Edward and Minne Allen pose in their home for a holiday greeting card [year unknown].

of a since repealed rule against employment of two members of the same family. Such rules were fairly common throughout American university communities during this time period, and faculty wives with academic appointments often were the first to lose their positions.

Early in their marriage, the Allens had become keenly aware of the need for justice in all walks of life, and, in 1935, Edward co-founded the Iowa Civil Liberties Union (ICLU) and served as president for several terms as well as long-time board member. He also coordinated the work of the university’s Civil Liberties Union chapter.

Throughout the 20th century, the ICLU dealt with issues ranging from loyalty oaths to police practices; from censorship to academic freedom; from child custody to the rights of the mentally ill; from student hair styles and antiwar armbands to the protection of personal information in government data banks.

Edward Allen was active in all of these battles, as well as those against racial, religious, and sexual discrimination. In his 1977 history of the ICLU he wrote: “It is certain that we will always have civil liberties problems in Iowa—some of natures we cannot yet guess. [The ICLU] should be the best embodiment of the state’s motto: ‘Our liberties we prize [and] our rights we will maintain.’”

The Allens demonstrated their devotion to paci-



fism and internationalism through a variety of activities and organizations. They were founding members of the Ames congregation of the Society of Friends. For the Allens, Quakerism was a “most embracing religion” that encouraged its members “to feel all the world a friend.” About their core religious beliefs, Minne stated, “We know how we wanted our life to become and how we could best help in building a world in which we would have peace.”

Both Edward and Minne rejoiced in student activism movements that worked for a better world. The couple frequently hosted international students in their home and participated in the Iowa State Cosmopolitan Club, which encouraged friendship, respect, and understanding among men and women of all nationalities. Edward was fond of quoting Einstein to the effect that “the job of the peacemaker is not to abolish national boundaries but to make them unimportant.” He frequently spoke on behalf of the Fellowship of Reconciliation on WOI Radio. “We must use peaceful means for bringing about peace among nations,” he remarked. “We must show understanding, trust and good will, so that ways for true cooperation and genuine fellowship may be opened.”

Equally dedicated, Minne was proactive in the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, United Church Women, and the YWCA’s national board, and she contributed to the founding of the Child Development Department at Iowa State. In the days of World War II she was one of a group of people at Iowa State who provided books and other items for students displaced by the war.

One must “work with serious conviction and the sense of responsibility,” Minne said. “You have to help those who are less privileged than you are.” Her friend Louise Dengler remembered: “At Church Women United [Minne] was disturbed that we were eating refreshments at the morning meeting right after breakfast and, for a number of years, we quit that because of her concern. She brought a little box and we put our offering in and the money went for the children of the world who were hungry because she said, ‘I can hear the children crying.’ And I know she could.”

In 1977, on Edward’s 90th birthday, the mathematics department dedicated the Edward S. Allen Mathematics Reading Room. In 1986 the student government funded the installation of the Edward S. Allen Free Speech Platform on campus. The platform provides a place for impromptu speeches and assemblies and serves as a reminder of the need for oral debate. His portrait hangs in Carver Hall to this day.

Besides sharing social justice goals, they both loved music (Edward was a violinist and Minne a pianist), displayed a warm sense of humor, and were avid readers. “Be careful of the Allens,” Minne had been warned when they first met. “They will read you to death.” After 60 years of marriage, she commented, “Not a moment [passes] when I am brushing my hair or do[ing] some mending, Edward asks ‘what may we read together?’ And he reads aloud.”

**A**fter a long and full life, Minne Allen died on September 9, 1980, at the age of 93. Edward died on May 8, 1985, at the age of 97. Iowa is richer for providing the fertile ground where these two remarkable people lived and flourished.

Dorcas Speer, host of the radio program *Sixty Plus*, interviewed the Allens when they were 85. Speer asked Minne the secret of their strong relationship. She responded, “We love each other and loving means sharing. We want to share something with each other that is worthwhile, and what we want to share is not restricted to this family.”

Speer also wondered, “Why do you, at the age of 85, spend your time doing these [civil rights] things?”

Edward chuckled, “Same as when we were 35, I guess. We are very interested in democracy, having equal rights, and having the freedom to use them.” ❖

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*Karen Lawson is Associate Dean for Collections & Technical Services at Iowa State University Library. She had the pleasure of knowing Edward Allen during her early years at Iowa State. Tanya Zanish-Belcher is Head of Special Collections & University Archives at Iowa State University Library.*

NOTE ON SOURCES

The Edward and Minne Allen Papers, RS 13/14/51, are housed in the University Archives, Iowa State University Library. The collection includes Dorcas Speer’s interview (c. 1972) of the Allens. Major sources are: Minne Elisabeth Allen, trans. and ed. Julius W. Allen, *Tenderness & Turmoil: Letters to a German Mother, 1914–1920* (Santa Ana, CA: Seven Locks Press, 1998); Edward S. Allen, *Freedom in Iowa: The Role of the Iowa Civil Liberties Union* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1977); Minne Elisabeth Allen, “An Historical and Sociological Study of a Rural Town in Central Iowa” (master’s thesis, Iowa State College, 1929); and the Iowa Civil Liberties Union Collection, Special Collections, University of Northern Iowa.