



George Earl Adams, Sr.: **The Beginning of a Legacy**

October 10, 1891 - September 8, 1971

PVT George E. Adams, Senior

35th Infantry Division

140th Regiment, K Company

United States Army National Guard

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Chapman Center for Rural Studies

Guess you all know the big show is over. We certainly hope so. We'll be a happy lot of Yankee Boys when homeward bound....I'm very thankful to be alive and well after all we have been through with the past six months. Sherman told the truth when he said war is hell. Expect we will spend the holidays over here without doubts. Will be glad if we get home by March. In time to put in a corn crop next year....Am glad to say I am one of the Yankee Boys and have done my part....Hopefully this finds you and Grandma well and wishing you all A Merry Xmas and A Happy New Year. As ever your soldier friend in France,

Pvt. George E. Adams¹

George Earl Adams, Sr. wrote the words above in a letter home from France not long after World War I's armistice. In this single letter, Adams demonstrated his interests and values that would continue to dictate the rest of his life and that he would later pass on to his descendants. The themes of family, farming, and patriotic pride and duty are prevalent in the letter, and serve as a way to gain a basic understanding of its author. By gathering information from family documents and personal accounts, it is clear that George Earl Adams, Sr., was a hard-working, dedicated farmer who loved his family and his country. Adams also believed in fulfilling patriotic duty, which was an obvious trait passed down through his military-decorated lineage. How values and beliefs are passed down through multiple generations is an especially interesting topic, and in the case of the Adams family, one that can now be investigated and recorded.

Every family carries its own unique history if people are willing to look. In most cases, these stories are passed down simply by word of mouth from one generation to the next. If we are lucky, the stories are illustrated through the years with pictures and memorabilia. Preserving history for future generations to learn from, with a donated family collection, is a special gift. Such collections also help future generations recognize the

¹ Pvt. George E. Adams, letter from France, November 19, 1918, box 1, folder 1, Bruce Adams Family Papers, Manhattan, Kansas, Kansas State University, Morse Department of Special Collections (hereafter cited as Adams Family Papers).

importance of adding their own history to archives. Generations of the Adams family have preserved their family history in stories, memorabilia, photographs, and documents, all relating to important moments in their lives. This detailed collection is now housed at Kansas State University in the Morse Department of Special Collections to serve as a source of research for both the family and also those interested in 20th century American history, with a specific focus on Kansas and the armed forces. The following essay will gather some of the pieces of George Earl Adams Sr.'s military and family history in order to tell his personal story. As a veteran of World War I, Adams' story is even more relevant to today thanks to the centennial anniversary of The War to End All Wars. Places all over the world are preparing for the anniversary, including the Smithsonian Institution, which has created a "Remembering the Great War" journey; according to exhibit personnel, this serves to commemorate those who fought during some of the most tragic and most heroic years in modern history.²

William John Adams

To better understand the subject of this essay and where his background and values came from, it is important to look back at two previous generations. The original patriarch of the family in America was William John Adams, who arrived in New York in 1837 from his birthplace of Somersetshire, England.³ The son of George and Rachel Thayer Adams, William was born on October 6, 1820, and immigrated to the United States at 17 years old. He resided as a farmer in Skaneateles, Onondaga County, New York, until 1856, when he

² "Remembering the Great War," *Smithsonian Journeys*, Accessed April 6, 2015, <http://www.smithsonianjourneys.org/tours/ww1-tour/#>.

³ Sheffield Ingalls, *History of Atchison County, Kansas* (Lawrence, Kansas: Standard Publishing Company, 1916), p. 584.

became an official U.S. citizen.⁴ The document recording his admission as a citizen is shown in Figure 2 below.

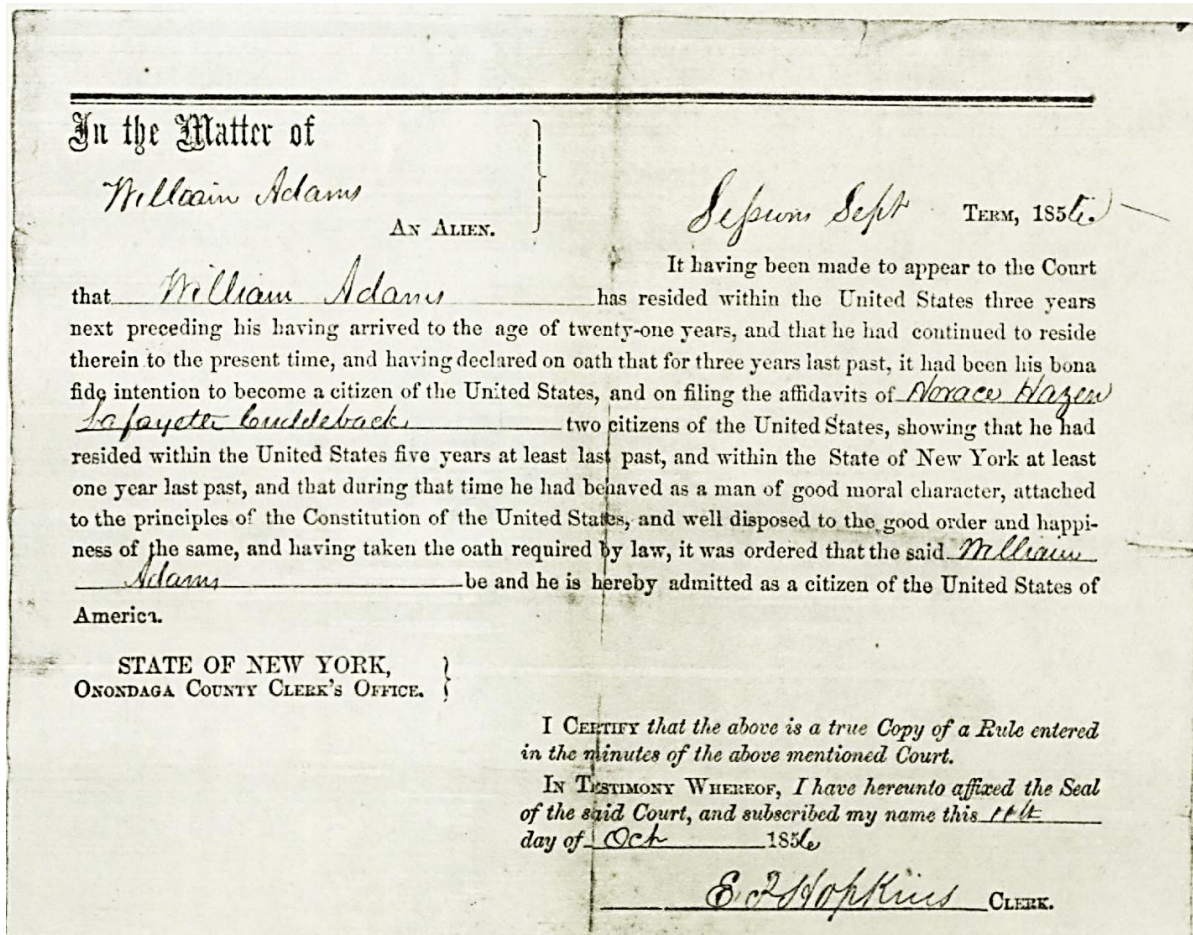


Figure 2. Scan of an original 1856 document certifying William Adams as an American citizen. SOURCE: Adams Family Papers, Kansas State University.

During his time in New York, Adams married Mary Ann Ellsbury, also of Somersetshire, on July 4, 1848.⁵ Together, they had five children, but only two survived to adulthood: Samuel Henry Adams and Julia E. Adams Boyington. In 1856, when Samuel and Julia were young children, the family moved west to the new Kansas territory with the Cayuga Colony. This colony was one of many settlements of easterners who wished to secure Kansas as a free state during its tumultuous beginnings following the Kansas-

⁴ Notes, box 1, folder 1, Adams Family Papers.

⁵ Notes, box 1, folder 1, Adams Family Papers.

Nebraska Act in 1854.⁶ When planning a site for the colony, provision was made for a public park and a young ladies' seminary.⁷ These two facts demonstrate that these New Yorkers brought with them to Kansas an appreciation for community and education. Thus, from one of the earliest accounts of the family, we learn that there was a commitment to certain principles. No doubt, William Adams knew that the situation in Kansas could lead to military action, or even random violence, but he was dedicated to do what he believed was right.

The History of Atchison County, Kansas notes that the family settled in Grasshopper Township of the county, near Horton. The book describes William Adams as having been a hardworking, successful, and politically-minded man, despite never wishing to hold a political office. Adams, a Republican, was always interested and supportive of the happenings of his party. Elections for the township were held in their family home, which was originally a log cabin built by Adams himself. Later, he would build the "Big House," as family members called it, on the same property, which survived through the Adams family for multiple generations. A photo of the home can be seen in Figure 3 on the following page.

William Adams used oxen to break the land for his original 80 acre farm, which was the most effective method at the time for the often hilly terrain of northeastern Kansas. The book mentions that his hard work helped him to increase his property to about 800 acres during his lifetime. William Adams died in 1889, and his farm and home were left to his children and his wife Mary, who later died December 15, 1895.⁸ Based on this information, it is obvious to see that the first Adams in America established strong values for himself

⁶ Ingalls, *History of Atchison County*, 585.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁸ Ingalls, *History of Atchison County*, 585.

and his lineage. Farming, hard work, family, and American duty were major components of Adams' life, and these traits continued to appear throughout future generations.



Figure 3. Undated photo of the “Big House” built by William Adams. Samuel Adams is on the far left and Julia Adams Boyington is on the far right with her husband, Frank. Others in the photo were not captioned. SOURCE: *The History of Atchison County, Kansas*.

Samuel Henry Adams

William Adams' only son to survive to adulthood was Samuel Henry Adams. Born on February 28, 1855 in Skaneateles, New York, Samuel Adams was only one year old when his family settled in the new Kansas territory.⁹ Adams grew up to marry Ida Hitchcock Townsend, originally from Scranton, Pennsylvania, on May 31, 1887. Together, they had two children: William J., born March 19, 1890, and George Earl (whom they referred to as Earl), born October 10, 1891 in Atchison County, Kansas.¹⁰ The family moved to California

⁹ Four-Generation Pedigree Chart, box 1, Gen. Family 2 folder, Adams Family Papers

¹⁰ Ingalls, *History of Atchison County*, 585.

in 1895, where Samuel and Ida Adams worked as farm laborers. Eventually, in 1913, they returned to Grasshopper Township and built a home across from the “Big House.”¹¹

Multiple documents reference Samuel and Ida Adams’ often tumultuous relationship. According to family history, the couple divorced and remarried twice.¹² Due to this, their two sons were often cared for with the help of other family members. While the accounts are somewhat confusing, it appears that William Adams was sent back to Kansas to be raised by Samuel Adams’ sister, Julia E. Adams Boyington, while George (Earl) was raised by his mother with the help of “Aunt Fannie (Hoit),” who was his half-sister from his mother’s first marriage.¹³ It is also likely that Aunt Julia often cared for him as well. By the time that Samuel, Ida, and George Adams returned to Kansas for good, William Adams was married and may have already had his daughter, June.¹⁴ Ida Adams apparently left her husband for a final time soon after.¹⁵ After returning to his home county, Samuel Adams returned to farming and remained close to his sister and sons and their families for the remainder of his life. He died on February 20, 1922.¹⁶

Samuel Adams’ sons, William and George (Earl), were obviously raised in a fairly untraditional environment. Having multiple primary caregivers throughout their childhood likely affected their appreciation of family. It is probably safe to assume that George Adams, Sr. and his brother grew up with very strong ties to their extended family and home due to their upbringing. Photos from the family collection often show the diverse family groupings of the Adams’ during this time period, usually featuring Samuel Adams and his sons; these

¹¹ George Adams, Sr. Chronology, box 1, folder 1, Adams Family Papers.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Notes, box 1, folder 1, Adams Family Papers.

¹⁵ George Adams, Sr. Chronology, box 1, Gen. Family 2 folder, Adams Family Papers.

¹⁶ Four-Generation Pedigree Chart, box 1, folder 1, Adams Family Papers.

photos also include various members of William Adams' family, along with Julia Adams Boyington and her husband, Frank. And once again, the Adams' agricultural background appears when Samuel Adams returned to the family farm. Photos that illustrate the multi-generationalism of the family, as well as the progression of farming technology of the time, can be seen in Figure 4 and Figure 5, on the next page.



Figure 4. Undated original photo captioned as “Bessie (Will’s wife), Earl (George), Little June (Bessie & Will’s), William J. Adams, Samuel Adams, Julia Boyington. SOURCE: Adams Family Papers, Kansas State University.



Figure 5. Undated photo of Samuel Adams with his horses. Note the steam-powered tractor in the background.
SOURCE: Adams Family Papers, Kansas State University.

Early Life

As noted previously, the subject of this study, George Earl Adams, Sr., was born on October 10, 1891, in Atchison County, Kansas to Samuel and Ida Adams.¹⁷ When George Sr. was about four years old, he moved with his family to South Pasadena, California. While there is no record of what life was like exactly like for the Adams family during their time in California, it is noted that the parents worked as farm laborers. Based on multiple family accounts and documents, much of George Sr.'s young life was spent between his parents' homes and those of various family members, like his aunt and half-sister, due to his parents' turbulent marriage. This unique upbringing also caused George Adams, Sr., to often be separated from his older brother, William. These factors would have played a large

¹⁷ Delayed Certificate of Birth, box 1, Gen. Family 2 folder, Adams Family Papers.

role in how much George Sr. always valued family. Figure 6 shows the mixed Adams and Boyingtons.



Figure 6. Left to Right: Frank Boyington, Julia Adams Boyington, George Earl Adams, William John Adams, Ida Mae Hitchcock Adams, Samuel Henry Adams in an undated photograph. SOURCE: Adams Family Papers, Kansas State University.

It is known that George Sr. attended school only through the eighth grade.¹⁸ As a child of a farming family, this was far from out of the ordinary; children were needed to help run the farm, and in the early twentieth century, higher education wasn't deemed necessary for rural children. Where exactly George Sr. would have gone to school is somewhat unclear since the family officially lived in California during George Sr. and William Adams' childhood. However, it is very possible that the brothers attended school during times that they were staying with other family members. The boys may have been sent home to Kansas during the school year and attended Brush Creek School, which was not far from the Adams family's "Big House." Nevertheless, George Sr. moved on to farming after his

¹⁸ Notes, box 1, Gen. Materials 1 folder, Adams Family Papers.

schooling, which like the generations of Adams' before him, became his lifelong career. His only extended time away from the farm, in fact, didn't come until just before his 26th birthday.

Military Life

When the U.S. entered WWI in April of 1917, there was no initial talk of any draft. A chapter in *Broughton Kansas: Portrait of a Lost Town* illustrates what life was like in rural Kansas communities in the early part of the war. Americans reacted with parades and patriotism, but most didn't feel the need to immediately volunteer; the initial surge of enlistments just wasn't enough to sustain the military for war. Therefore, on June 5, 1917, George Adams, Sr., and every other American man between 21 and 30 years old were required to register for the nationwide draft. Registration locations varied by town, often taking place in community meeting places, like local schools. Then, wave by wave, drafts were drawn and men reported for physical examinations. At first, many men received exemptions or deferments, especially agricultural ones, which were granted to farmers. By 1918, however, this would change and fewer exemptions would be granted.¹⁹

Like almost every other Kansas farm boy who registered for military service in WWI, it would never have occurred to George Sr. not to serve. This was a time in America of high personal patriotism and devotion to country. He was officially drafted on August 23, 1917 in Atchison, Kansas, and was inducted into service on October 2nd.²⁰ From there, he reported to Camp Funston Cantonment in Riley County for training. When leaving Horton for Camp Funston, George Sr. and his fellow servicemen most likely experienced the

¹⁹ M.J. Morgan, *Broughton Kansas: Portrait of a Lost Town 1869-1966* (Manhattan, Kansas: Chapman Center for Rural Studies at Kansas State University, 2010), p.385-393.

²⁰ George Adams, Sr. Chronology, box 1, Gen. Family 2 folder, Adams Family Papers.

fanfare that commonly occurred in communities where men were sent off to training. Everything from marching band performances to speeches by town officials occurred at the stations where draftees left on troop trains. Based on accounts from other small Kansas towns, it is almost certain that George Sr.'s family members would have been at the station to see him off, as he rode the Rock Island into Camp Funston. Camp Funston had been planned in June of 1917 and was designated to be one of the largest training camps in the country for the war.²¹ Figure 7 shows George Sr. with some of his friends during his military service.

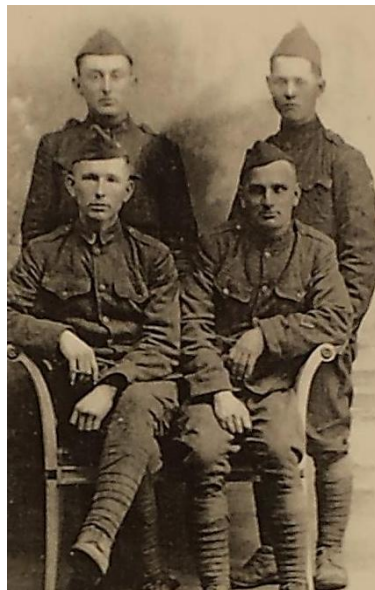


Figure 7. Undated photo of George Adams, Sr. (back left) with some of his buddies during his military tenure.
SOURCE: Adams Family Papers, Kansas State University.

Constructed next to Fort Riley, Kansas, Camp Funston trained men from states all over the Midwest, including Kansas, to become soldiers in the 89th Division.²² Kansas men like George Sr. were usually assigned to the 353rd Infantry Regiment, which came to be

²¹ *Broughton Kansas: Portrait of a Lost Town 1869-1966*, p. 394; Horton was an official hub for the Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific Railroad, and this line was built into Manhattan, Kansas, in the late 1880s.

²² Thomas Shipley, *History of the American Expeditionary Forces* (Nashville: The Battery Press, 1920), p. 110.

called the "All-Kansas Regiment."²³ Commanded by Major General Leonard Wood, Camp Funston had quickly grown to 1,401 buildings and housed about 42,000 troops at one time. The day of a trainee began at 5:45 a.m., and consisted of hours of drilling to learn how to march, dig trenches, attack with bayonets, care for uniforms, pitch tents, and care for rifles. Drills were interrupted only by meals and classes on personal hygiene and training for gas attacks. Each day ended with lights out at 10:00 p.m.²⁴ Like many other soldiers in the 353rd Infantry, George Sr. was eventually transferred to the 35th Division, which was a National Guard Division made up of men from both Kansas and Missouri.²⁵ In particular, George Sr. was placed in Company K of the 140th Regiment of the division.

Due to a fire at the National Personal Records Center in 1973, the exact military records of George Adams, Sr., can't be found. However, by piecing together family documents and general Kansas military history, it is possible to make fairly safe conjectures about what he may have done and experienced during his time overseas. Following the official war policy of spending six months in training on the home front, and upon receiving enough transfers to reach war readiness requirements, the 35th Division was ordered to France. Once they arrived, the 35th's regiments received two more months of training, this time in the Vosges Mountains. By September of 1918, George Sr. and his fellow soldiers of the 35th were officially considered ready for battle and were sent as army reserves to the St. Mihiel operation.²⁶ The drive was executed so successfully, however, that

²³ Charles F. Dienst, *History of the 353rd Infantry Regiment, 89th Division, National Army, September 1917-June 1919* (Wichita, Kansas: The 353rd Infantry Society, c. 1921), p. 1.

²⁴ Susannah Ural Bruce and Bonnie Lynn-Sherow, "'How Cola,' From Camp Funston. American Indians and the Great War," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 24, no. 2 (2001): p. 88-95.

²⁵ *History of the 353rd Infantry Regiment, 89th Division, National Army, September 1917-June 1919*, p.1.

²⁶ *History of the American Expeditionary Forces*, p. 202.

there was no need to call in any reserves and the 35th avoided direct combat for a few more days.

The men of the 35th Division, did however, eventually face their fair share on the front lines. Following the Battle of St. Mihiel, the troops who had not faced combat were moved to the Meuse-Argonne front to give those who had just finished fighting time to rest in reserves. These new reserves included George Sr.'s former division, the 89th.²⁷ While the entire Meuse-Argonne Offensive lasted for 47 days in total, George Sr.'s enlistment record lists him as having served from September 26 to October 1 in the first phase, which lasted from September 25 to October 3rd.²⁸ These dates are consistent with the rest of the 35th Division, which faced such severe loss from counterattacks and crossfire that they were eventually forced to retreat.

Members of the 35th, like George Sr. who were lucky enough to survive, had, by the time they were finished, swept through heavy fog across the sea of trenches in the Valley of Aire, withstood machine gun crossfire at Varennes until tanks arrived, established a line at Very Hill, faced severe loss from two German counter attacks, navigated through heavy fire from the Argonne forest to clear Chaudron Farm and Bois de Montrebeau, and continued forward under more machine gun fire with diminishing food and supplies and weak communication lines all the way to Exermont, where they finally retreated only after German soldiers opened fire from three sides.²⁹ A journal kept by Corporal Donald G. McCamant, another soldier in the 35th Division, describes advancing "in a downpour of artillery and machine gun bullets," and having to dress the wounds of two injured friends

²⁷ Ibid., p. 239-241.

²⁸ Enlistment Record, Adams Family Papers.

²⁹ *History of the American Expeditionary Forces*, p. 246-256.

before having to move forward. McCamant also noted that ambulances were unable to get near the front due to mud, trenches, and artillery-craters, which meant that injured soldiers had to either walk themselves towards help, or wait for someone to be able to carry them to the rear. McCamant summed up his experience during the drive by saying, “The boys were falling all around me and it was worse than hell could ever be.”³⁰ By the time that the Armistice was signed, the remaining men of the 35th Division were preparing to take part in another Allied Attack on Metz.

George Earl Adams, Sr. was honorably discharged from the military on May 13, 1919.³¹ His enlistment record noted him as having excellent character, and having been promoted to the rank of Corporal on November 27, 1918.³² A legacy of military service is an obvious family trait when observing the Adams family, and its extensive military lineage largely began with George Sr. Following his WWI involvement, his son, George Earl Adams Jr., served in WWII, and then *his* son, Bruce A. Adams, served for over 30 years in the U.S. military, eventually rising to the rank of Brigadier General. A tribute to this direct line of three generations of committed military service is even displayed on the Kansas State University campus, on the army side of the ROTC building (General Richard B. Meyers Hall). Photos of this display, specifically of George Sr.’s photo, dog tags, and gas mask, are shown in Figure 8 on the following page.

³⁰ Corporal Donald G. McCamant, WWI Diary, April 14, 1918-May 11, 1919, Personal Collection of Spachek family.

³¹ Honorable Discharge from the United States Army, Adams Family Papers.

³² Enlistment Record, Adams Family Papers.



Figure 8. Photo of the Adams family display in General Richard B. Myers Hall on Kansas State University's campus. Featured is a photo of George Adams, Sr. at basic training, along with his dog tag and gas mask. SOURCE: Photo by author.

“Grandpa never talked about the war. Except when he talked about how the only time he smoked was in the war in the trenches,” said Bruce Adams. Which was a statement, Adams says, that was always followed up by a message to never take up the habit.³³ Family lore has been that George Adams Sr. ran messages through the trenches during his time in the war, because of his wiry frame and ability to move quickly. Due to a lack of records, and George Sr.’s unwillingness to speak much about his time in France, his exact duties during the war will likely never be confirmed. However, it is very possible that someone with George Sr.’s physical characteristics would be assigned to a job like running messages.

³³ Bruce Adams (grandson of George Adams, Sr.) in interview by Dr. Bonnie Lynn-Sherow, Kansas State University, September 13, 2012.

Family Life

In October of 1919, only a few months after being discharged from the military, George Adams, Sr. met Opal Agnes Keplar. Keplar was a graduate of St. Joseph's School of Nursing who was in charge of caring for a great number of patients because many nurses were still caring for soldiers or visiting their families following the war.³⁴ Based on two different documents, one of her patients was either George Sr.'s Aunt Julia, or a neighbor who lived nearby, which led to the two meeting.³⁵ After just five months, the couple married and moved to George Sr.'s farm in Brush Creek Township, which had previously belonged to his father. They were wed on March 7, 1920, in Opal Keplar's hometown of Pattonsburg, Missouri.³⁶ During their lifetime, the couple had four children together, including Mrs. Hilde Charlene Stanberry, Edward Blair Adams, Mrs. Robert Julia Ann Page, and George Earl Adams, Jr.

In his letter home from France, which is quoted at the beginning of this essay, George Sr. spoke about his excitement to come home to the farm, and also commented on how nice it would be to own a car after seeing so many in Europe. In the end, he was able to do both of these things. A lifelong farmer, George Sr. was noted in family records to have been "featured in the *Atchison Daily Globe* for his experimental work utilizing personal funds in terrace farming and soil conservation..." on his 320 acre farm.³⁷ George Sr.'s wife, Opal, was a successful homemaker who won multiple awards while her husband farmed. Eventually, the couple was able to purchase their very first car, which is pictured in Figure 9 below. Figure 10 shows George Sr. and his mother during one of her visits to the family.

³⁴ Notes, box 1, Gen. Materials 1 folder. Adams Family Papers.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Marriage License, box 1, Gen. Family 2 folder, Adams Family Papers.

³⁷ George Adams, Sr. Chronology, box 1, Gen. Materials 1 folder, Adams Family Papers.

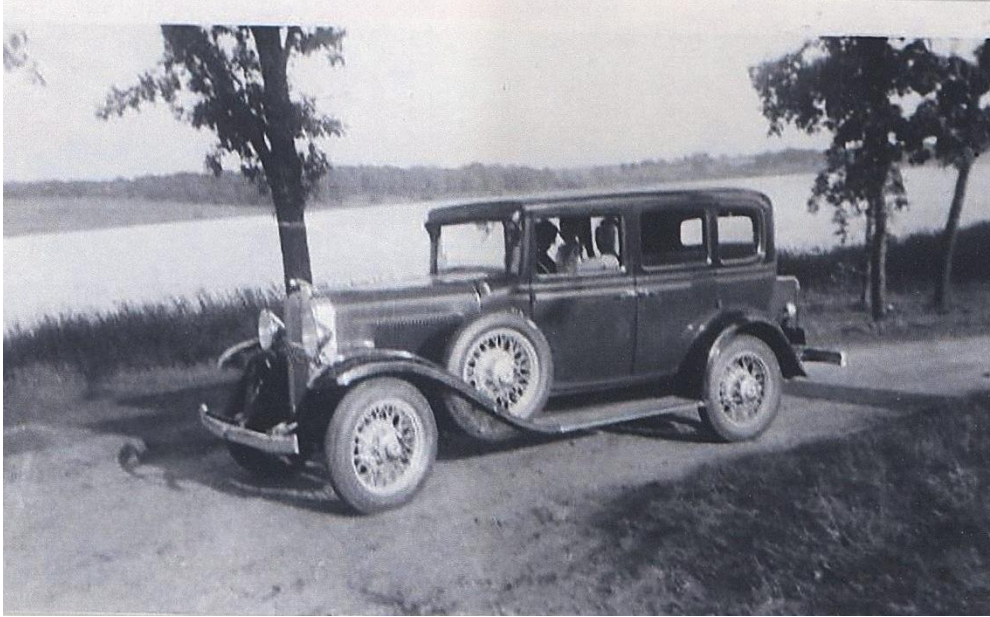


Figure 9. Undated photo of George Sr. and Opal Adams in their first car. SOURCE: Adams Family Papers, Kansas State University.



Figure 10. Undated photo of Ida Hitchcock Adams and her son, George Adams, Sr., in the yard outside of his home. Note that George Sr. is dressed in classic Kansas farmer attire. SOURCE: Adams Family Papers, Kansas State University.

At the age of nearly eighty, George Earl Adams Sr. died on September 8, 1971, of a sudden heart attack. He was survived by children and grandchildren who remember him with fondness as a kind, wonderful man who loved spending time with his family, especially his grandchildren. One of his grandsons, Bruce Adams, described memories of his grandfather pitching a softball in his backyard to his many grandchildren at family gatherings, which were all held at his farm. "My grandpa was a great guy. A silent fella, that worked and worked and worked," said Bruce Adams.³⁸ A member of Horton Presbyterian Church and American Legion, George Sr., was buried in the Brush Creek Cemetery.³⁹ In a permanent symbol of Adams family tradition and values, George Sr. was laid to rest close to his father and grandfather. Together, they represent 150 years of hard work, determination, dedication to family, and patriotic pride -- all of which have continued down the Adams lineage, and will be further outlined in future studies of the family.

³⁸ Bruce Adams (grandson of George Adams, Sr.) in interview by Dr. Bonnie Lynn-Sherow, Kansas State University, September 13, 2012.

³⁹ George Adams, Sr. Chronology, box 1, Gen. Materials 1 folder, Adams Family Papers.

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<http://www.smithsonianjourneys.org/tours/ww1-tour/#>.
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