

WILLIAM LEE RHODES - THE EARLY YEARS

William Lee Rhodes was born on 13 Jan 1879 in Ewington, Summit Twp., Effingham Co. IL, the first child of Enos and Sarah (Ramsey) Rhodes¹. William was to be known throughout his life as "Willy". His birth record states that the parents were Americans, the father being 26 years old and the mother 18. Enos' occupation was Farmer. John Lecrone M.D. was the attending Physician. The Rhodes' owned 61 acres near Ewington², so it is assumed that this was their place of residence at the time Willy was born.

The 1880 Federal Census lists Enos Rhodes as head of a household in Ewington, Effingham Co. IL, with wife Sarah J., son, William, age 1, and Nancy age 50. Nancy was Nancy (Hensley, Ramsey) Hughes, Sarah's mother, who was a widow. Sometime in mid 1880, when Willy was only about 1 1/2 years old, this family traveled to Springfield MO in a covered wagon³. While there, Nancy died in Dec 1880. She is buried in Maple Park Cemetery in Springfield MO. Then, only a couple of months later, Willy's sister, Laura Etta was born on 15 Feb 1881⁴.

The Rhodes family apparently returned to Effingham later in the year 1881. They sold their farm in February 1882⁵ and moved into Effingham. Soon afterwards Willy's father began working for the Pennsylvania railroad in the track service department. During the next five years they lived in various places in Effingham, until in 1888 they bought a one acre plot with a three room house on Virginia Avenue⁶ where the family remained for a very long time. Soon after moving to the house on Virginia Ave, Enos built three more rooms onto this house and that is the house I remember when we visited our grandparents.

At the time they moved to Virginia Ave., Willy was 9 years old, and was attending West Side School. Willy would have been in the fourth grade and Laura, being two years younger would have been in the second grade. According to conversations I recall of having with my father over the years, he was not a good student mainly because he did not like to be confined to a schoolroom. He would rather be outdoors pursuing other interests. In those days school education was not looked upon by everyone as an essential, so as a result Willy failed a couple of years and Laura began to catch up with him. This further discouraged Willy, so by the time he finished the eighth grade he would have been about 16 years old and he quit school and looked for a job⁷.

The first job Willy found was a delivery job for a grocery man named Mr. Jordan. At this job he was allowed to drive a spring wagon all over town delivering groceries, and this gave him a feeling of independence. He must have gotten this job in about 1896, and according to conversations with him he must have worked for Mr. Jordan for a considerably long time. In the 1900 Federal Census of Effingham Co. IL, when he was 21 years old, Willy is listed as a Dry Goods store clerk. However, soon after the 1900 census was taken, when he was still 21, he got a job firing a switch engine on the Pennsylvania Railroad. Sometime later he was given a fireman's job on a regular run, and I believe it was from Effingham to Peoria. Willy was not a large, muscular man, and this job proved to be too physically demanding for him and he had to quit⁸.

The 1910 Federal Census lists William Rhodes in the household of Enos Rhodes, and it gives his occupation as Laborer. During some of these early years of the 1900's Willy worked at a flour mill and at the Van Camp Milk Condensing plant in Effingham, I do not know the duration or sequence of these jobs, but I believe he worked at the Mill after he quit the railroad then later worked at Van Camps. At the time Willy and Jennie Hughes married, he was working again at the railroad, first as a freight handler on the dock, then in the freight office, as Demurrage Clerk, which was an office type job. A Demurrage Clerk keeps track of the railroad cars that are on sidings so that the companies who are using the cars can be properly billed. Willy must have returned to work at the railroad in about 1913 or 14⁹.

Although I have no definite information I believe that Willy must have taken some courses in bookkeeping and possibly other subjects, at Austin College in Effingham. As a child I can remember seeing books on Book keeping, Salesmanship, penmanship and subjects of that nature stored in drawers in our house. If this did in fact happen, it was most probably during the time he worked at Van Camps. Possibly this is the reason he was promoted to the Demurrage clerk position which is an accounting type job. This was probably the best job Wille ever had in his life. He seemed to be very proud of his Freight Office job in the conversations I had with him as a child.

Also during these early 1900's years Willy was a member of Company G of the Illinois Militia (later to be known as the National Guard). I do not know the regiment number. He talked often about his experiences at camp in Springfield when his unit would go there for training. I do not know how long he was in the militia but he spoke of being on guard duty at the Worlds Fair in St Louis in 1904, so he must have been in the militia during 1904, and possibly as much as two years before that. I believe he was in for a total of nine years, or three, 3 year hitches.¹⁰

1. Birth Certificate; William Lee Rhodes, 13 Jan 1879: Original record on file in the Effingham Co. IL County Clerk's Office.

2. Effingham Co. IL Deeds; Sarah Rhodes and Enos Rhodes to Wiley Shelton, dated 24 Feb 1882: Original record on file in the Effingham Co. IL County Clerk's Office.

3. Family tradition handed down by Enos' son, William.

4. Bible Records; Leaves from a Rhodes Bible: Original record on file in the Genealogy files of Bruce and Hazel Turner. Bruce is a first cousin of the writer.

5. op cit. Rhodes deed to Wiley Shelton.

6.6. Effingham Co. IL Deed; Samuel Hinden and Mary his wife to Sarah J. Rhodes, dated 9 Nov 1895: Original record on file in the Effingham Co. IL County Clerk's Office. Deed Books.

7. op cit. Family tradition.

8. op cit. Family Tradition.

9. op cit. Family tradition

10. op cit. Family Tradition.