

AYER, EDWARD EVERETT

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EDWARD EVERETT AYER,

capitalist; b. at Kenosha, Wis., Nov. 16, 1841; s. Elbridge Gerry and Mary (Titcomb) A.; m. Emma Augusta Burbank, Sept. 7, 1865. Has extensive lumber interests in South and West; dir. Ayer & Lord Tie Co. Owns one of finest pvt. libraries in the U. S. and an especially noteworthy collection of Americana. Pres. Field Columbian Mus., 1893-5; dir. Field Columbian Mus., Newberry Library, Art Inst. Life mem. Amer. Hist. Assn. Clubs: Chicago, Caxton, Commercial, Saddle and Cycle, Riverside, South Shore County (Chicago), Country (Lake Geneva, Wis.). Home: 2 Banks St. Office: Railway Exchange, Chicago .

(The above-mentioned information taken from "WHO'S WHO IN AMERICA", Vol. IX -1916-1917, edited by Albert Nelson Marquis. Published Chicago, A. N. Marquis & Company, 1916.) Page 82

EDWARD EVERETT AYER,

antiquarian, was born at Kenosha, Wis., Nov. 16, 1841, son of Elbridge Gerry and Mary Dean (Titcomb) Ayer. His earliest paternal American ancestor was John Ayer, who came from England in 1640 and settled at Salisbury, Mass., later removing to Haverhill. From him and his wife Hannah, the line is through their son Robert and his wife Elizabeth Palmer; their son Samuel and his wife Mary Johnson; their son James and his wife Mary White; their son William and his wife Sarah Little; their son Daniel and his wife Sarah Adams, and their son Samuel and his wife Polly Chase, who were the grandparents of Edward Everett Ayer. He received his education in the public schools of Kenosha and Harvard, Ill. At the age of eighteen he joined an overland expedition to California, and for a while was employed in a planing mill in San Francisco. At the outbreak of the civil war he enlisted in Co. E. 1st Calif. Vol. Cav., and served throughout that struggle with the rank of second lieutenant. At the close of the war he began his business career with his father in Harvard, Ill., and later entered the railway lumber business, acquiring extensive interests in the South and West. In 1893, in company with John Brackett Lord, he organized the Ayer & Lord Tie Co., which flourished in Chicago for many years. Mr. Ayer devoted much time and money to collecting books of history and science, antiques and art objects. He visited the countries of Europe and the Orient, searching for art specimens for Chicago museums and libraries. He was the first president of the Field Museum of Natural History (1893-99); was chairman of the first collection committee; later served as chairman of its administration committee and was one of its directors until his death. He presented the museum with his Indian antiques, which he spent twenty years collecting, and his ornithological library, consisting of 450 volumes with colored plates of birds, when it was founded, and later gave it a collection of books on ichthyology and his collection of European and Chinese pewter. During his visits to Europe he purchased the entire Egyptian collection, most of the Etruscan collection, all of the original Italian bronze, and he selected all the reproduced Pompeian bronze. He made a valuable collection of books relating to the discovery, exploration and colonization of the western continent and to the native races of North America. In 1911 this library comprising about 49,000 volumes,

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pamphlets, manuscripts, etc., probably the largest ever brought together by a private individual, was presented by Mr. Ayer to the Newberry Library, where it is known as the Edward E. Ayer collection. He was a charter trustee of the Newberry Library; trustee of the Art Institute of Chicago; director of the Chicago Historical Society, and was a member (life) of the American Historical Association; the Wisconsin Historical Society and the Missouri Historical Association. Mr. Ayer was married, Sept. 7, 1865, to Emma Augusta, daughter of Abner Burbank, of Lowell, Mass., and they had one daughter, Elizabeth, wife of Dr. Frank Seward Johnson. He died at Pasadena, Calif., May 3, 1927.

(The above-mentioned information taken from "THE NATIONAL CYCLOPEDIA OF AMERICAN BIOGRAPHY", Volume XX. Published by James T. White & Company, New York, 1929) Pages 37 and 38.

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EDWARD EVERETT AYER

LIBRARIES

Arizona was library-minded from a very early time. In 1862, Samuel Colt, inventor of the Colt revolver, was chief owner of the Cerro Colorado Mine at Arivaca. This was almost the only mine that had not been wrecked by the Apaches. To occupy somewhat the minds of his employees during their lonely leisure hours, Colt sent a few books to the Company quarters. Young Edward E. Ayer, trooper in the California Column, was sent by Colonel West in command of fourteen other soldiers to guard this mine during a necessary absence of the manager, in the early summer of 1862. Rummaging through the little library, Ayer came upon Prescott's History of the Conquest of Mexico, in three volumes. Up to this time Ayer had never really read a book; for there were no books in the wilderness where he grew up. He had some slight schooling in the rough log schoolhouse back in Wisconsin, but he knew nothing about the meaning and the magic of books. He read these Prescott volumes through with delight - amazed that the printed page could contain so much of color, action, and entertainment. He perused them a second time, and they seemed to open up an absolutely new world to him. As it turned out, indeed, this chance introduction to good books was to shape his entire career; for he became one of the chief book buyers in America, and left a collection of America to the Newberry Library, Chicago, valued at more than two million dollars.

So interesting is the sequel to the incident related above, and so famous his collection of books on Arizona, the Southwest, and America in general, that I pursue the story further. He declared often that the discovery of Prescott's Conquest of Mexico out in that Arizona mine was

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not only the source of a vast amount of enjoyment that came to him during his long life but was responsible, also for the creation of the Ayer Collection in Chicago. After he returned from *the* West, in 1864, with his honorable discharge from the Army, he was one day walking along Lake Street in Chicago, when, as he glanced across the street, he saw the sign COBB AND PRITCHARD'S BOOK STORE. He had read no books since his adventure with the Prescott volumes two years before. This was the first book store he had ever seen. I wonder if they have Prescott's Conquest of Mexico, he thought. He rushed across the street and into the store and asked:

"Have you Prescott's Conquest of Mexico?"

He was assured that they had, and that the price was three dollars and fifty cents a volume. His heart sank at this, for he had returned without money from his long experience on the plains. There was nothing on earth he wanted so much as these books; and the book dealer seeing this and discerning also the sterling character of Ayer, said:

"Young man, you take that whole set right home with you. You can give me three dollars and fifty cents now, and the same amount each month until they are paid for."

"I have blessed him ever since," Mr. Ayer said, in relating his Arizona experiences to me. "That was the happiest day of my life; and going home I only touched the earth in high places."

There is one more episode in this little Drama of the Books. Some twenty years before his death, being then a world figure in the book marts, Mr. Ayer took his three cherished volumes of Prescott to London with him, and carrying them to Zaehnsdorf, his favorite binder, said:

"Zaehnsdorf, I have brought you three of the most valuable books in the world to bind. I will select morocco; and as you know, I have adopted the Grolier as my pattern for binding histories. So use that pattern. I don't want you to allow any sacrilegious hands to touch these volumes. I want your best people right through; and you do the best job you ever did in your life and send me the bill."

"What are your books, Ayer?" Zaehnsdorf inquired.

"Prescott's Conquest of Mexico."

"Fudge!" said the famous binder. "I can go anywhere and buy them for two or three dollars."

Mr. Ayer related the story of these volumes as I have given it in this chapter; and then asked:

"Zaehnsdorf, if you had those books, and they had done as much for you as they have done for me, would you sell them for \$50,000?"

He replied, "Ayer, I wouldn't sell them for \$100,000."

"Neither would I," was the final rejoinder.

And so the books were bound, and they came forth in raiment more sumptuous than the apparel of a king.

Today, in exquisite binding and encased with loving care, these books *rest* in the inner vault of the Ayer Collection, at the very center of the shrine, side by side with other books far more costly, though not so precious.

(The above-mentioned information taken from "PIONEER DAYS IN ARIZONA", by Frank C. Lockwood. Published by The Macmillan Company, New York, 1932. Pages 3157-360).

AYER, EDWARD EVERETT (Nov. 16, 1841-May 3, 1927), railway lumberman, bibliophile, collector, was born at Kenosha, Wis., the son of Elbridge Gerry and Nary (Titcomb) Ayer. The son of a pioneer of Wisconsin, as a boy he had but little schooling. At the age of eighteen he joined an overland expedition to California. He stopped in Nevada, where he found a job in a quartz mill, working twelve hours a day, but as soon as possible he went on to San Francisco, where he arrived with twenty-five cents in his pocket. Here he found work in a planing-mill, where he remained until the outbreak of the Civil War. He enlisted in the First California Cavalry, company E, and during the following three years served in Arizona and New Mexico, winning the rank of lieutenant. Mustered out in the summer of 1864, he returned to his home in Harvard, Ill., and with a gift from his father of a third interest in a general store he settled down and began his business career. on Sept. 7, 1865, he was married to Emma Augusta Burbank. Within a brief period he began buying timber, first for the use of the Chicago and Northwestern Railway, and later furnishing ties and telegraph poles for most of the western roads, including the Union Pacific, the Santa Fé, and the Mexican Central. About the year 1880 he came to Chicago, and in 1893, together with John B. Lord, formed the Ayer and Lord Tie Company.

While a soldier in Arizona he had chanced upon a copy of Prescott's *Conquest of Mexico*. The book fascinated him and opened to him a new world. He became a student of history; later, as wealth came to him, a collector of historical books and manuscripts, and still later a collector of antiquities of many kinds. He gradually built up one of the finest private libraries in the United States, particularly noteworthy for its source material on the native races of North America, the Hawaiian and the Philippine Islands. This library, containing more than 17,000 printed books, 4,000 manuscripts, and thousands of maps, prints, drawings, and photographs, he gave, in 1911, to the Newberry Library of Chicago, where it is separately housed and administered as the Edward E. Ayer Collection on the *North American Indian*.

Ayer was one of the founders of the Field Museum of Natural History of Chicago. He, probably more than any other person, aroused the enthusiasm of Marshall Field in the proposal to utilize the remarkable and choice collections left from the World's Fair in Chicago as the nucleus of a great museum, and it was he who, more than any one else, persuaded the merchant prince to give his millions for endowment and thus made the dream of a great natural-history museum in Chicago an actuality. Ayer was its first president, serving from 1893 to 1898, when he resigned, but remained a trustee to the end of his life. When the old Fine Arts Building of the World's Fair became the Field Museum he presented to it his large collection of Indian paraphernalia and his fine library of illustrated books on ornithology, besides many antiquities from Italy, Egypt, and other lands.

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Ayer was a trustee of the Newberry Library from 1892 to 1911, a trustee of the Art Institute, president of the Archaeological Society, a member of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, the *American* Historical Association, the American Anthropological Association, the Chicago Historical Society, and numerous others. During many years, with his wife, he made extensive tours abroad, one of which - a journey in Northern Africa - was narrated by Mrs. Ayer in *A Motor Flight Through Algeria and Tunisia* (1911). In the midst of his other activities he found time to serve (1912-18) on the Board of Indian Commissioners, and in 1913 made a personal investigation of the Menominee Reservation in Wisconsin. Besides his home in Chicago, he maintained a summer home on Lake Geneva, Wis., and during the last fifteen years spent much time in California, where he was particularly identified with the effort to save the redwood forests. He died in Pasadena, Cal., and was buried in Harvard, Ill.

[Who's Who in America, 1916-17; Charles Moore, Daniel H. Burnham, Architect, *Plainer of Cities* (1921), I, 123-24, 232, 236-39, II, 148; Donald Wilhelm, "A Lumberman Bibliophile," *Outlook*, Aug. 25, 1915; J. C. Bay, "Edward Ayer," *Am. Collector*, July 1927; *Chicago Tribune*, *Chicago Evening Post*, May 4, 1927; additional information from Mrs. Ayer and from George B. Utley, Librarian of the Newberry Lib., Chicago.]

From Dictionary of American Biography, Vol. I, pp. 448-9.