

Emma Rowley and Agnes Hermance

The women behind the millionaires

Williamsport
Women

by MARY SIEMINSKI

Edwin A. Rowley and Albert D. Hermance were prominent industrialists in Williamsport during the lumber era. Their joint venture, the Rowley & Hermance Co., manufactured wood-working machinery for furniture, sash and door companies worldwide. Each man has a lengthy profile in Meginness and other city histories, but I wondered, who were Rowley and Hermance?

It was not easy to find information on the two women. Since each was known by her husband's name, the first step was to find their given names.

Mrs. Hermance was born Agnes D. Levan in 1849 in Williamsport. She was the daughter of Jane Vanderbilt Stabb

and Edward M. D. Levan, a tinsmith. Agnes had two brothers, Frank and John, and two sisters, Mary and Rebecca.

Mrs. Rowley was born Emma Pamela Olmstead in 1840 in Chatham, New York. She was the daughter of Naomi Hunt and Judson Olmstead, who was involved in the manufacture of machinery used in sawmills.

Both Albert Hermance and Edwin Rowley relocated from New York state to Williamsport to take advantage of the economic opportunities — and each built a home on Millionaires' Row during the 1880s.

Albert and Agnes Hermance built their castle-like home at 405 W. Fourth St. in 1885. The grand stone house, designed by noted architect Eber Culver, is next door to the former home of Peter and Encie Herdic. It was built on the side yard that Herdic was forced to sell when he went bankrupt in 1878.

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PHOTO COURTESY OF TERRY WILD/TERRY WILD STOCK

Shown is what is now the Rowley House Museum, 707 W. Fourth St., which used to be the home of Emma and E. A. Rowley.

Lifestyle

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The Emma and Edwin Rowley home at 707 W. Fourth St., also was designed by Eber Culver. Built in 1888, it has been restored by Preservation Williamsport and is now the Rowley House Museum.

Agnes D. Levan

Agnes Levan Hermance was an artist "of marked ability," according to her obituary. She was awarded a prize by the Pennsylvania State Agricultural Society in 1865, when she was 16. It reads, "Miss Agnes Levan, Williamsport, second best pencil drawing." The prize was \$2. In the same competition, "S. Rosen" took home \$3 for the "best fruit piece in oil." That has to be Severin Roesen, with whom Agnes is said to have studied. Agnes also studied art at the former Dickinson Seminary, now Lycoming College, and, at her death, established an art scholarship at the college.

Agnes Levan and Albert Hermance were married on Aug. 30, 1870, when she was 21 and he was 23. The couple lived at various places in Williamsport before their mansion was built in 1885.

The description in the Gazette & Bulletin of the open house they hosted fills an entire column: "The handsome home of one of our best-known families was the scene of such a gathering as delighted all who gazed upon the beauty of their surroundings. It was one of the most pleasant occasions in the city's history."

Three hundred to 400 invitations had been sent out, and carriages lined the streets.

The third-floor ballroom was devoted to dancing to the music of



Shown, above left, are Agnes and Albert Hermance at their Antes Fort cottage. Shown, above right, is an architect's rendition of the home of Agnes and Albert Hermance, 405 W. Fourth St.

the Stopper and Fisk Orchestra. The first-floor parlors were filled with guests.

The newspaper reported that "the gracious manner of the hostess and the hearty welcome given by the host put everyone at ease immediately."

The Hermances seem to have been party people. The Lycoming County Historical Society has photographs of gatherings at their summer cottage in Antes Fort. They also were outdoor people. They spent time in Fort Myers, Florida, where Agnes made the newspaper in 1901 when she caught at 110-pound tarpon. Albert died in Fort Myers in 1914.

In his will, Albert established a scholarship for boys from Williamsport to attend Cornell University, a fund that continues to support students today.

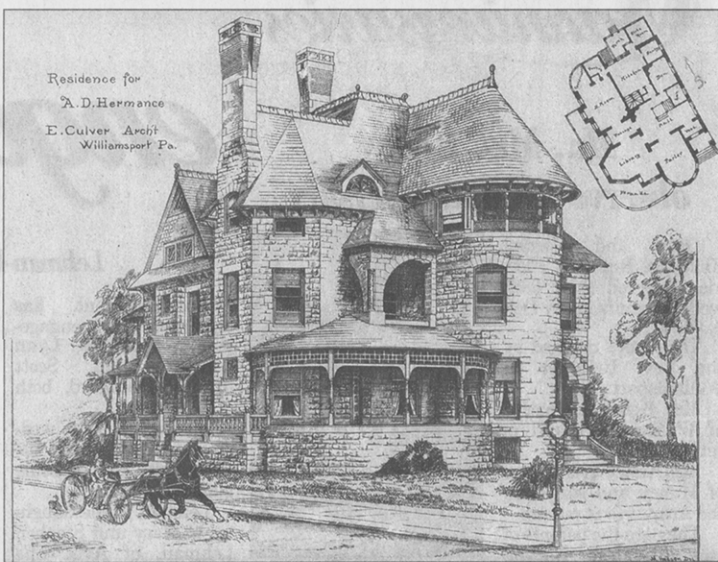
Agnes died in 1931 at age 82. She continued to live in the big house, a large part of the time

with her widowed sister, Rebecca Winslow, and Rebecca's daughter Elizabeth. Agnes's name appeared frequently in the newspaper during those years — often in connection with the adventurous trips the three ladies took, by automobile, train and trolley, across the United States and abroad.

Agnes and Albert had no children. Agnes's estate was one of the largest ever administered in Lycoming County: \$1,065,010.90. She left bequests to her family and her servants, Dickinson Seminary, the Community Chest, the Home for the Friendless, the First Presbyterian Church (where they were members) and the YWCA.

Emma Pamela Olmstead

Emma Olmstead was 26 and still living in New York when she married 30-year-old Edwin Atwood Rowley on May 7,



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE LYCOMING COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

1866, and a year later, the couple moved to Williamsport. The couple had three children, Robert Edwin, Georgia Etta and Archie. Archie did not live much past infancy.

Emma Rowley seems to have lived a quieter life than Agnes Hermance. Unlike Agnes, she signed the anti-liquor pledge of temperance crusader Jerusha Mussina in 1874.

Emma was involved in various charitable causes. She served on the board of the Home for the Friendless, founded by women in the community in 1872 as a home for elderly women and needy children.

She was a founding member of the Young Women's Christian Association, established in 1893 to assure the welfare of women in the community. She also was a member of the intellectually focused Clio Club, as was her daughter, Georgia.

In 1883, several years before they built their

West Fourth Street home, they built a cottage in the new resort town of Eagles Mere, a cottage that stands today.

Tragedy struck the family in July 1893, when E. A. Rowley, 57 at the time, died en route to Eagles Mere on the train. He collapsed at Halls Station and was taken back to Williamsport, but was dead on arrival.

Their son Robert graduated from Yale College and established himself in the Rowley and Hermance woodworking business. He married Anne Woods, the daughter of the Rev. E. A. Woods, of the First Baptist Church. Robert died of pneumonia four years later, in 1897.

Their daughter, Georgia Etta, attended Miss Masters School in Dobbs Ferry, New York. Her wedding was the occasion for a big party. The headline in the Gazette and Bulletin was "A pretty June wedding in society circles." The paper went on to say,

"Miss Georgia E. Rowley married Augustus P. Thompson, of Honesdale, at her home in this city. The wedding was held in the ballroom on the third floor of the house, which was decorated in green and white."

Guests crowded the parlor. Stopper and Fisk provided the music, as they had at the Hermance party. Emma, who gave away the bride, died later that same month.

The Hermances and the Rowleys are buried at Wildwood Cemetery.

Their homes today are notable features of Millionaires' Row, testimony to the wealth of our region during the lumber era.

Sieminski is a retired librarian and manager of the Lycoming County Women's History Collection.

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