Emma Rowley and Agnes Hermane: The women behind the millionaires

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Edwin A. Rowley and Albert D. Hermane were prominent industrialists and manufacturers during the lumber era. Their joint venture, the Rowley & Hermane Co., manufactured wood-working machinery for furniture, saw and door companies worldwide. Each man had a lengthy profile in Megamans and other city directories, but I wondered, who were Rowley and Hermane?

It was not easy to find information on the two women. Agnes, by her husband’s name, the first step was to find their given names.

Mrs. Hermane was born Agnes D. Levan in 1849 in Williamsport. She was the daughter of Jane Vanderbilt Stubb and Edward M. D. Levan, a tinsmith. Agnes had two brothers, Frank and Edward, and two sisters, Mary and Rebecca.

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

Both Albert Hermane 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 1890s.

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

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Lifestyle

Agnes Hermane was an artist "of marked ability," according to her obituary. She was awarded a prize by the Pennsylvania State Agricultural Society in 1885, when she was 19. It reads, "Miss Agnes Levan, Williamsport, sec- ond 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 Rosen, with whom Agnes is said to have studied. Agnes also studied art at the former Dickinson Seminary, now Lycoming College, at her death, established an art scholarship at the college.

Agnes Levan and Albert Hermane married on Aug. 30, 1870, when she was 21 and he was 25. 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 historic home of one of our best-known families was the scene of such a gathering as delighted all who grazed upon the beauty of its surroundings. It was one of the most pleasant occa-
sions of the city’s history."

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

The third-floor ballroom was devoted to dancing to the music of the Storper 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 Herdmanes seem to have been party people. The Lycoming County Historical Society has photographs of gathering 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 1890 when she caught at 110-pound tar-

pam. 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 bequeathed 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 Olnstead

Emma Olnstead was 38 and still living in New York when she married 30-year-old Edwin Arowood Rowley on May 7, 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 long past infancy.

Emma Rowley seems to have lived a quieter life than Agnes Hermane. Unlike Agnes, she signed the anti-wage pledge of temperance crusader Jerusha Mauin 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 eld-

ered women and needy children.

She was a founding member of the Young Women’s Christian Association, established in 1890 to assure the wel-
fare of women in the community. She was also a member of the intellectually focused Clio Club, as was her daughter, Georgia.

In 1888, several years before they built their West Fourth Street home, they built a cottage in the now 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 on route to Eagles Mere on the train. He collapsed at Hall’s 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 Hermane woodworking business. He married Anne Woods, the daugh-
ter 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 Honeoye, 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 parker. Stroper and Fisk provided the music, as they had at the Hermane party. Emma, who gave away the bride, died later that same month.

The Herdmanes and the Rowleys are buried at Wildwood Cemetery. Their homes today are notable features of Millionaire’s Row, testi-
mony to the wealth of our region during the lumber era.

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