

WILCOX

Interview with Mr. Perley S. Wilcox,
Tennessee Eastman Corp.

2 / 5 / 4 0

There are a number of reasons why Mr. Eastman was a reticent person, Mr. Wilcox believes. Shyness and self-protection played a part. His dislike of egotistical persons made him "lean backwards" to avoid being the "four-flusher type." His lack of "camaraderie", which most men possess, may have been because his devotion to his mother kept him from as wide social contacts with men as he might otherwise have had. Early efforts to help his mother, after the death of his father, gave her considerable influence in his life. The fact she was an invalid for the last ten or twelve years of her life also tied him closely to her later in his life than might otherwise have been the case.

Mr. Wilcox met Mrs. Eastman at the earlier East Avenue home known as the old ^{Sewell} Sewell house. She had fine features, and was very gracious in manner. She was a cultivated woman (Mr. Wilcox believes she had been a schoolteacher) and she spent much time in reading as she sat in her wheelchair. One trait she had in common with her son was her refusal to gossip about people.

His first contact with Mr. Eastman was in the winter of 1899, when an incident occurred that showed Mr. Eastman's interest in details and his insistence, at that time, on keeping personal control over them. Mr. Wilcox, as a mechanical engineer, was working at Kodak Park on the development of a new method of manufacturing film base, and he came to Kodak Office to show Mr. Eastman a drawing of a dope hopper. Before Mr. Wilcox came, Mr. Eastman

2

apparently had asked Mr.....Miller, superintendent of buildings at State Street, to call him. While Mr. Wilcox was there, Miller called Mr. Eastman back. He wasn't satisfied with the sprinkler pipes in a two-story addition which stood in front of the five-story building where Kodak Office now stands, and he asked Mr. Miller why they had been put in as they were. Miller, apparently, gave the excuse he thought that way was correct. Mr. Eastman said "Miller, you thought it would be all right. Why didn't you ask me about it or call it to my attention?" Miller gave another excuse, and Mr. Eastman concluded "I'm on the job here and it isn't difficult to reach me. I don't like it at all because you didn't bring that matter to my attention."

When Mr. Eastman built his new home in 1903-04 he planned to install a power plant for the lighting, for running motors, etc. He had some sort of misunderstanding with the lighting company and he wanted to be independent of it. He had Mr. Wilcox investigate various engines and installations on estates around New York State. Mr. Eastman adopted generators which were driven by oil rather than by gasoline because the oil driven generators were more economical, and safer.

Late in the summer of the same year, the "Kodaklubbers," or group of Kodak executives, held their annual picnic along the Erie Canal at a point six or eight miles from Rochester, and most of the men went by motor launch. Mr. Wilcox called at Mr. Eastman's home with regard to the oil engine installation and he said "I'm going to drive out. I'll take you along." (Mr. Eastman usually drove the car himself, except when official company was along. He drove up to the age of 65 or thereabouts.) Mr. Eastman couldn't

find the woods where the picnic was being held, as it was off the main highways, and after they had been out more than an hour and a half he decided they had better forget about the picnic and they came back to Rochester. It was after 3:30, and Mr. Eastman invited Mr. Wilcox to the Powers Hotel for a late lunch--or early dinner. When they had finished Mr. Eastman left 50¢ for the waiter and confided to Mr. Wilcox "I can write out a check for almost any amount of money, but when it comes to leave a tip of small change for a waiter I always wonder if I'm giving too much." He was never stingy, but he didn't want to pay money merely to conform to custom or beyond the point of recognizing specially good service.

Mr. Eastman, at this luncheon, reminisced of his early days in the Kodak business. He said he used to go down to the basement of the Rochester Savings Bank when he was a bookkeeper there and talk with the power plant engineer. One winter Mr. Eastman planned to go to Santo Domingo on his vacation and he told this man. The fellow said "There's a revolution down there. You ought to get some good pictures." Mr. Eastman did not go to Santo Domingo, but he bought a picture taking outfit (which weighed 65 pounds) and the next summer he took a great many pictures on a vacation on Mackinac Island. He told Mr. Wilcox that Henry Strong, who later became his partner, helped finance a photographic laboratory in Mr. Eastman's home. He told of his struggles in establishing Eastman Kodak Company. Many times he seemed at the end of his rope, he admitted. Mr. Wilcox believes Mr. Eastman had such faith in his vision of popularizing amateur photography that he couldn't think of giving up the attempt. This persistence, combined with his resourcefulness, brought him to success.

4

Mr. Eastman had an interesting way of getting people who came to his office to leave out the discussion of irrelevant matters. His favorite greeting was "Wilcox, (or whatever the name was)"what's the worst you know?" He didn't want to waste words in the discussion of things that were going right--they could take care of themselves. He wanted to know if they were wrong and to use his time and thought to make those matters right.

He liked to see a man carry out instructions, even at inconvenience to himself. The Roll Coating department, in 1905, had some development work in process, and only a few special employees were allowed to enter its locked doors. Mr. Eastman often visited Kodak Park on Sundays, and one time he went to the door of this department and rang the bell. The man who answered didn't know him. "Just a minute", said the man, "who are you?" Upon hearing he was George Eastman, he replied to what he considered facetiousness, "Glad to meet you. I'm Mr. Rockefeller." Mr. Eastman didn't get angry, but asked the man to call the foreman who immediately straightened the matter out. The man and his foreman were chagrined, but Mr. Eastman was not at all annoyed. He was glad the man took his duty seriously, and he told him so.

Mr. Wilcox did not feel Mr. Eastman was a man to be afraid of. If one discussed a business matter with him, Mr. Eastman usually knew quite a bit about it or he found out, by pertinent questions, so quickly the person might be "floored" if he wasn't sure of his ground. Mr. Eastman didn't try to put people "on the spot"; he wanted to learn the truth about a given problem in the quickest possible time. If a person were embarrassed by his methods of getting the truth or solving a problem, it was incidental and not intentional.

Wilcox, Perley

Mr. Eastman had an interesting mannerism when discussing a problem, for he went to the window and played with ^{the} tassel on the cord of the curtain and he made slip knots in the string.

One outstanding trait of Mr. Eastman was his decisiveness. He tried to keep as few matters pending as he could. Late in George Eastman's life, a friend asked him whether he would handle his business by the same methods if he could live over again. He replied "My whole business life has been based on making decisions--not on withholding them. As I look back, I have been about 65% right, and 35% wrong. If I were doing it again, I would do it the same way." He felt that mistakes happen, no matter how long one ponders. He didn't expect infallibility of himself or of anyone. If he delayed in making a decision, more time and business might be lost than if he made a wrong decision. He was a man of action, and he liked to make decisions, not to idly meditate.

Although he was not rugged, he was almost tireless. Mr. Wilcox does not recall that Mr. Eastman, aside from minor colds, had any serious ailment until he had the shingles in 1927. When he had colds they were mostly in his head and he did not cough much; he sneezed and blew his nose. He wore his black skull-cap in the office from about the age of 60 onward to ward off colds in the head resulting from draughts. One reason for his endurance may have been his immunity to worry, and when he wanted to throw business cares aside, he did so completely and quickly. This was a part of his control over his mind and emotions.

6

Mr. Eastman was a lover of nature and he was fond of flowers, trees, and shrubbery. In the early days at Kodak Park, they never dared to move a shrub or cut down a tree without his permission. He liked them so much he didn't want them damaged or destroyed. The foreman of a labor gang once cut down a small tree at Kodak Park, and shortly afterward Mr. Eastman noticed it and he reprimanded the man for cutting it down without telling him.

The democracy of Mr. Eastman's nature was shown by his friendly affection for Henry Jones, an illiterate but good-hearted steam and refrigerating engineer, who was one of the earliest employees at Kodak Park. There was to be a dinner at Mr. Eastman's home one evening in the early '90's and the boys in the plant thought they would play a joke on Henry. One of them called him on the telephone and said Mr. Eastman wanted to have Henry call with regard to attending supper at his home that night. Henry called Mr. Eastman on the 'phone and, although he hadn't planned to invite Henry, he quickly apprehended the situation. Without a moment's hesitation, he answered "Of course, Henry, we're expecting you!" Although Henry wasn't as well dressed as some of the executives who were at the supper, he was as well treated by Mr. Eastman and the others. Mr. Eastman turned the laugh on the jokers who thought they could have a little fun at Henry's expense.