

## THE STORY OF WILLIAM EDGAR "BILLY" ISLE

*A Biographical Sketch and Appreciation, by His Daughter,  
Mrs. Loraine Isle Dillard*

NOTE: The author is indebted to her associates, Ted W. Smith and Lee J. Fawver, and to Jocelyn Dougherty for helpful suggestions on this article.

When war in Europe broke out in 1914, none of Billy Isle's family dreamed the conflict would affect their lives. It seemed so far away . . . more than 3,000 miles . . . and at least 12 days travel time!

But the French Red Cross needed emergency help. They were frantically trying to care for hundreds of war amputees. It was decided to call Billy Isle, manager of the Kansas City branch of the J. F. Rowley Company.

He was a logical choice. Those he had helped knew him as the man who said, "you are not handicapped unless you are handicapped in your head!"

His colleagues in the prosthetic field knew he was a natural organizer. He was a born leader, and they knew he could do the job for the Red Cross. Urgently, they asked him: Would he go to Paris? He replied that he would think it over. That night, he looked at his wife, Anna, thinking of how he would hate to part with her.

He remembered their early horse-and-buggy courtship in Bucklin, Missouri. At that time he had been working as a brakeman on the Santa Fe. One 4th of July, he gently told his fiancée goodbye, and boarded the train for Marceline, Missouri, the Santa Fe division point where he lived.



WILLIAM EDGAR ISLE  
1884-1953



ANNA COEN ISLE  
1886-1953

As Billy hopped on the slowly moving freight, his brown-haired fiancée spoke to him. He stepped off to ask what she had said, and after a few minutes he started to board the train. Suddenly he slipped and fell, and, as Anna screamed, the train rolled over his left foot. The local doctor took one look at his crushed foot and said it had to be amputated. The operation was done in the doctor's office.

The next three months were dark days, but they helped Billy Isle later when he could truthfully say to an amputee, "I know it is hard but it's not what you've lost that counts; it's what you have left!" Within this time, he had been fitted with his first prosthesis. With characteristic energy, he became the newest apprentice at the Fit-Well Artificial Limb Company in Kansas City, starting a vocation he was to follow all his life. The next month an equally important event took place. He married Anna Coen, who was to help him in his chosen work.

Looking at Anna the night of their decision, he thought of what an extraordinary woman she was. Beginning at the age of 16, she had taught two years in country schools, going to Kirksville, Missouri, for further training in the teachers college during the summer months.

Later she had showed rare dash and spunk as a teenager, becoming editor and manager of the *Bucklin Herald*. He remembered how she enjoyed riding the trains on her press pass.

Throughout their marriage, he always confided in her completely, and the night he had to decide whether to go to Paris, he asked Anna what she thought. "You must do your duty," she said thoughtfully. "Your knowledge and skill are needed."

On May 8, 1915, he sailed from New York with his employer, J. F. Rowley. He already knew the urgency of his mission. The day before the *Lusitania* had been sunk by a German submarine.

Arriving in Paris, he began negotiating with French officials to make plans for the amputees. Soon a prosthetic facility was activated. Then Mr. Isle was called by the British Government. England was gravely concerned about her war amputees.

He journeyed to Roehampton House, London, where limbmakers from all over the world had been invited to attend the International Exposition of Artificial Limbs. In competition with representatives from 39 firms, Mr. Isle ran the length of the exhibit hall and performed many other agile feats. The judges, all members of the Royal College of Surgeons, awarded him the first prize for lower extremity prostheses, the only gold medal given.

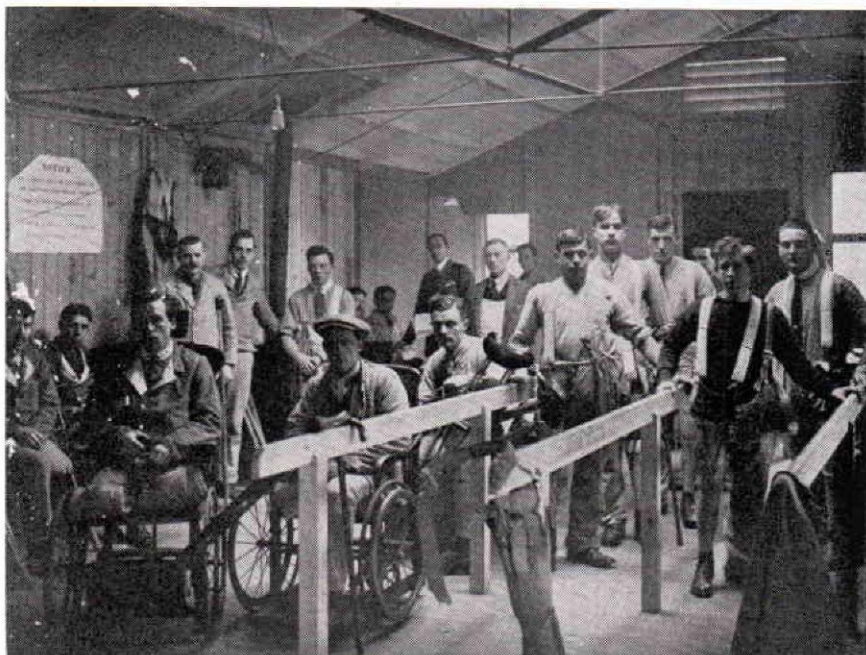
Contracts from the British Government were quickly offered to J. F. Rowley, Ltd., with Mr. Isle as general manager. Starting from the bare ground, he proceeded to lay out a plant that could produce hundreds of prostheses each month. The plant was built on the grounds of Roehampton House, a convalescent hospital and rehabilitation center for amputees.

Cabinetmakers came to help from all parts of London. Other skilled woodworkers came from the provinces to join the staff. Experienced prosthetists from the United States joined the group.

The staff grew to more than 100 and the plant began to operate at maximum production. Each morning Mr. Isle received a telephone call from the hospital: "How many fittings can you do today?" Later five additional facilities were established in England, and four in Scotland.

The feverish pace was sustained throughout the war.





**WORLD WAR I FACILITY**—A group of patients and some of the employees at the British facility managed by Mr. Isle.

Frequent visitors to the facility were King George V and Queen Mary. Both showed tremendous interest in fitting and fabricating limbs. Billy Isle showed the royal couple the same courtesy he exhibited to everyone. He found them well informed and gracious to the amputee patients and the staff.

At night he wrote to his wife:

"These people do business by giving their word. They just shake hands to bind the contract. No written document is needed!" Perhaps he felt akin to the British, for his grandfather had come from England.

Finally he wrote the letter he had been aching to write since he had left Kansas City. "Come to London," he told his wife and daughters.

Mrs. Isle and their three daughters arrived in January, 1916. They moved into a comfortable, furnished flat across from Bishop's Park.

The three schoolgirls saw their father's work with amputees, and though they did not know it then, an indelible impression was being made in their minds. Much later, in Kansas City, Mrs. Loraine Isle Dillard, Mrs. Verona Isle Davis and (before moving to California, and marrying there), Billie Isle Hakman were working in their father's business.

But while the little girls were in school, Zeppelin raids were increasing in frequency and intensity. At the end of three months, Billy Isle had to make a heartbreaking decision. He sent his wife and the girls back to the United States.

Mr. Isle remained at his post in Europe, where he had just been asked to confer with officials of the Italian Government. The conference led to the establishment of another prosthetic facility in Rome, under Mr. Isle's direction.

In June, 1917, the British Red Cross organized a party to make a trip to Russia. The Russian Government needed prostheses for their war amputees. In his capacity as technical advisor on prostheses, Mr. Isle was given the honorary rank of Captain.

When the group arrived in Petrograd, they were met by a number of Russian officials under the provisional government headed by Alexander Kerensky. The Russians seemed curiously preoccupied, Mr. Isle noted at that time. From Petrograd, the party continued on to Moscow for several days of conferences.

The British Red Cross offered the Russians 500 prostheses for their war amputees. The Russian officials stalled, refusing to make an agreement, even though the prostheses were to be an outright gift.

In his hotel room that night, Mr. Isle tried to imagine the answer to the Russian lack of cooperation. Suddenly, a knock on the door startled him. It was one of the Russians. The agent entered the room and whispered that he wanted what amounted to a "kick-back" for each limb the British Red Cross proposed to give them.

Without hesitation, Mr. Isle refused. He immediately reported the matter to the Red Cross officials. They stopped negotiations, withdrew their offer, and left Russia at once.

They soon learned how fortunate they were to have left Petrograd when they did. Within 24 hours after they crossed the Russian border, the second Bolshevik Revolution was in full swing.

The return route was through Lapland, Stockholm, and Edinburgh. At Edinburgh, they took stock of their finances, knowing the trip had been more costly than they expected. To their dismay, they found they did not have enough money for train fare to London.

With his typical ability to land with his feet on the ground, Billy Isle saved the day. He had become friends with a Scotsman at the hotel after finding out they were both Masons. The Scotsman cashed a sizable check for him.

Back in London, Mr. Isle continued his work at Roehampton until 1918, when he resigned. He was urged to stay, but he was homesick for his family. One point reassured him: He knew the staff was qualified to carry on the work. When he left, the Board of Directors of the Rowley Company presented him an antique silver butter server. His staff crowded in the room to give him a silver rosebowl as a token of their esteem.

Mr. Isle returned to his family and they took a vacation together. Anna had bought a Chevrolet touring car and had been driving it for several months. She taught Billy to drive it too. Even though she was a good driver, she never had a chance when Billy was in the car, for he always took the wheel.

At this time, his company needed a plant in New York, and he was sent to establish the facility. Later in Toronto, Ontario, he established the J. E. Hanger facility.

But suddenly, in 1920, Billy Isle became homesick for Kansas City. He decided to buy the Rowley facility there.

He returned to find the successful little business he had left had suffered under a succession of managers and that he had bought "a pig in a poke." Although extremely discouraged, he started to build the company back to its original proportions.

Within three years, the business began to thrive. At that time Mr. and Mrs. Isle became interested in producing stump socks. This sideline expanded rapidly. By 1925, Knit-Rite stump socks were being sold to other facilities.



They are still the most important product of The Knit-Rite Company. From this beginning the wholesale division expanded as complete lines of components for prosthetic and orthopedic appliances were added. While the wholesale part of the company was growing, the retail portion, The W. E. Isle Company, was also expanding its service to physicians and patients in the area immediately surrounding Kansas City.

As the need to promote the sale of Knit-Rite products became apparent, Mrs. Isle began traveling all over the United States by car, sometimes as much as 50,000 miles a year, calling on prosthetic and orthopedic appliance facilities.

She was caught by the Bank Holiday in Erie, Pennsylvania, without any money. She had planned to cash a check. With all banks closed, she called on a customer, telling him her predicament. "I don't have enough money to get out of town!" she told him. "Mrs. Isle," the man answered, "I have just \$10.00 myself. I know you need it, but I do too. I'll divide it with you." It was enough for the capable Mrs. Isle to drive to Cleveland, where she stayed with a member of the family while waiting for money from home.

The depression had dealt a crushing blow to the business. One year in the 30's was so slow, the business volume was less than half the *monthly* sales volume of the company today.

Determined to keep the company going, the Isles sold their home and moved into the company offices. They put in a bathtub and a range, and entertained their friends in their temporary quarters.

A loyal staff of 15 persons continued to work for the company though sometimes payday was postponed. Teamwork was the order of the day.

Mr. Isle at that time began to work for the national good of prosthetists. Long a staunch supporter of the A.L.M.A., he had always wanted a closer relationship between prosthetists, orthotists, and the prescribing physicians. He advocated a professional status for prosthetists and orthotists. He was among the first of the "old time limbmakers" to preach that to gain professional status and recognition by the medical profession, prosthetists and orthotists must earn it by improving their standards.

He was appointed to serve on a new committee made up of representatives of the American Medical Association and representatives of the A.L.M.A. He served from 1938 to 1942. The work of this joint committee culminated in the publication of a book, *Handbook on Amputations*.

The most important accomplishment of the committee, possibly, was the rapport established between the members of the A.L.M.A. and the A.M.A. This first mutual understanding of their community of interest later led to the establishment of the American Board for Certification of Prosthetists and Orthotists. Mr. Isle's dream of professional status was well on its way toward the reality it is today. It was a proud day in his life when he was certified as a Prosthetist and Orthotist and when seven of his associates and his facility were certified.

Mr. Isle traveled extensively throughout the United States and Canada. Everywhere he made friends, for he had a ready smile, and a sincere, outgoing personality. Everyone called him "Billy" and gave him a hearty welcome.

In 1945, he decided to form a partnership of the persons most closely associated with him. Mrs. Isle and two of their daughters, Mrs. Dillard and Mrs. Davis, became partners along with Lee J. Fawver and Ted W. Smith.



Billy Isle at his favorite sport.

It is said that each enterprise is the lengthened shadow of one man. That is true of The Knit-Rite and Isle Companies, where the principles and policies laid down by the founder, William E. Isle, are followed today by his chosen associates, to whom he taught the heart of his craft and his philosophy of service.

Lee J. Fawver, C.P.&O., Past President of O.A.L.M.A., began prosthetic fabrication under Mr. Isle in 1928. Ted W. Smith, C.O., Regional Director of O.A.L.M.A., began in 1935 in public relations and sales. Loraine Isle Dillard in 1926 began knitting stump socks. Each has expanded his area of interest and skill so that there is scarcely a job in the whole plant, employing 80 persons, that one of the three would not be qualified to fill. The talents and efforts of each partner complement the efforts of the others in management. Now inactive for health reasons, Verona Isle Davis had served 25 years before her retirement.

Mr. Isle would have been proud today to see the two young men, representing the third generation of company-builders like himself, active on the staff! Bill Brady, the son of Mrs. Davis, began work full time after he was graduated from the University of Kansas City in 1957. Bill Smith, son of Ted Smith, came to the company with a degree from the University of Missouri in 1958. Billy had a deep personal interest in both of these young men as he watched them grow up. Both had worked part time at the company from the time they were teen-agers and he had the highest confidence in them and their future in a profession that he loved.

Two years after the partnership was formed, Billy Isle suffered a severe stroke. Further strenuous activity was impossible. However, he recovered enough to enjoy spending several weeks each summer fishing on the lakes in Ontario and Minnesota. Mrs. Isle enjoyed fishing too, and with their house trailer, boat and motor, the couple made the most of the leisure they had earned.

In 1948, the O.A.L.M.A. gave Billy Isle an honorary life membership. He was at the top of a long and useful career. Much had happened to him, he realized, since he was born in Chariton County, Missouri, between the villages of Pat and Mike.

His own misfortune had brought him to a field where he had helped more than 20,000 persons. This was most important to him. He had appreciated every tribute he ever received, but the everyday drama of seeing an amputee come in on crutches and then walk out on two legs was the most rewarding achievement of Billy Isle's life of service.