

IX. CULTURE IN OUR TOWN

Childhood Play

In our very early childhood days Dorothy was addicted to dolls and all activities pertaining to them. I remained faithful to my teddy bear. This particular toy dated back to the time of President Theodore Roosevelt. My sister was fortunate in having three little friends who lived directly across the street: Ethelyn, Vivian, and Evelyn. They remained congenial friends for many years. In early days they were indispensable to Dorothy in her little world of make-believe. I was always welcome into their domesticities, but unfortunately I was more of an irritant than a profitable participant.

Socially there was nothing very exciting about our early lives. We had, of course, the usual birthday parties, when we tendered carefully wrapped presents to the lucky recipient, played the expected party games, and looked forward to the birthday cake with its candles.



Dorothy and Marion
with dolls and doll carriages

Children today couldn't possibly believe that Dorothy and I found great pleasures playing with our sets of building blocks, tinker toys, and paper dolls. We spread all these items out on the dining room floor, and there was no end to the imaginative number of play patterns we created.

Later on, with the other neighborhood children, we used the dining room floor for such games as Old Maid, Lotto, and Pick-Up-Sticks.

Winter days we played outside, creating our own conception of what a snow man should look like. Then there was the lovely little game of falling in new-fallen snow and forming angel-like images. If we were lucky, we might find a suitable sliding place for our sleds. If we were very lucky, some nice adult might come along and offer us a free sled or sleigh ride.

It has already been indicated that we had a narrow side yard. Some of the happiest moments of my childhood were spent playing in this area with the other neighborhood children. A modern day child would have considered our outdoor games absolutely inane. At least we were far from being bored when we energetically played at such team games as prisoners' goal, crack-the-whip, and pom-pom-pull-away. Eventually we

settled down to the more sedate game of croquet.

As children, we naturally had our sidewalk games of jumping rope, jacks, and hopscotch. We managed to cover many miles of sidewalk roller skating.

Somehow our neighborhood had a unique May Day ritual, celebrating the first day of May. Mothers decorated small boxes with colored crepe paper and the children would fill them with candy and early spring wild flowers. Since May flowers came in late in our part of Michigan, they were not all that easy to find. Our family usually managed to locate some very early ones – spring beauties, anemones, trillium, and violets in a wooded area north of Sparta. Where the other children found their flowers I have no recollection. The object of all this preparation was to present in early evening these gifts at the doorsteps of the beneficiary, and shout “May basket for -----” before she could catch up with the escaping donor.

I also have fond memories of my solo explorations along the banks of Spring Creek, which, at another place, we crossed by bridge twice a day. I especially recall the clear water rushing over the pebbly creek bottom and the never-ending unexpected creek bends which were enticingly seductive. This creek bed has now been taken over by suburbia. At another point along the stream a city park has been created and dedicated to the memory of our school superintendent Mr. Balyeat. Although he was essentially a very modest man, Mr. Balyeat somehow assumed such a quality of aloofness and dignity that he was held in absolute awe by the students over a period of at least two decades.



Supt. O. E. Balyeat

Education

In all likelihood today's children would have utter scorn for the kind of elementary education that Dorothy and I received. There were few frills. Since there was no question about good behavior, we were apparently taught the essentials, including some knowledge about geography.

So far as my high school education is concerned, I have four observations to make: (1) having had two years of home economics courses wished upon me by Mother, I managed to come out with the doubtful skill of hemming a skirt and preparing hot cocoa and baking powder biscuits from scratch; (2) both Dorothy and I learned from the Robinson and Breasted history text book that the world was created exactly five thousand years ago; (3) Dorothy and I learned later that the French we were taught was not the French spoken in Paris, France; (4) and, in our respective senior years, the intellectual world for us was considerably widened by two innovative English teachers who expanded our minds and gave us a glimmering of the glories of literature. Thank you, Fred Walcott and Bert Booth!

Our Musical World

Dorothy and I were very fortunate to have parents who could provide us with some musical training. Mother furnished the “drive” and Dad served as an “inspiration.”

Apparently Dad had formal instruction on the clarinet from a Mr. Wilkins in Grand Rapids. How teacher and student made contact I’ll never know, for it was a long way between Sparta and the big city before the automobile. However, I do remember Dad taking up the saxophone. He became so proficient on it that Dr. Bolender and his group of fine musicians included him in their small orchestra.

In due course of time I followed Dad’s example and had both saxophone and clarinet lessons from the same Mr. Wilkins. Inevitably the same instructor also gave lessons to Dorothy and several neighborhood children. Our back room was put to very active use. Dorothy first took over my saxophone, but late in high school she turned to the violin under the supervision of Dr. Bolender.

Mother’s piano must have been a gift from her parents. It was always with us. I have no recollection of her actually playing it. I had piano lessons from the age of nine until my senior year in high school. Dorothy certainly had the same opportunity, but somehow I can’t imagine her spending countless hours practicing on the piano during childhood. I suspect that she became devoted to the piano only after graduating from high school.



Sparta high school orchestra in 1927, with Dorothy at the lower left holding saxophone and Marion second from left in the middle row holding clarinet. Adult at upper left appears to be Fred Walcott.

Participating in school and church orchestras was very important socially for both Dorothy and me. Our principal, Fred Walcott, conducted the school orchestra in our later school years. Because of his general musicianship and his excellent performance on the violin, he managed to turn us amateurs into a creditable music group.

Then there was dear self-effacing Mr. Amidon who attempted to create an ensemble for church performances. He not only provided

leadership but generously provided musical scores and the hospitality of his home. I can't imagine how poor Mrs. Amidon, who remained behind the scenes, could endure the frequent blatant sounds emanating from the small living room where we rehearsed.

Somehow Dad persuaded Dr. Bolender to admit me into his select orchestra. To this day I feel guilty about my participation. There were several good musicians, including Fred Walcott in the group, and I was definitely not up to their high standard of musicianship. Dorothy, however, began to show real talent by the end of her high school years, and was able to embark upon a musical course in college.

Social Organizations

When I was very young, Mother was a perfectionist in initiating and returning social calls. She was always attired in her best, including hat and gloves, and carried along her individual calling cards. This formal age was soon taken over by the era of organized society.

Naturally there were the usual business organizations. For many years, and until the time of his death, Dad was an active member of his beloved Rotary Club. There were also the usual fraternal organizations, such as the Masons and Odd Fellows. Not to be left out, Dad helped to organize a lodge called the Knights of Pythias. The symbolic concept behind this organization was the friendship of two shadowy figures called Damon and Pythias, supposedly out of Greek mythology.

On a much higher cultural plane was Mother's Ladies' Literary Society. Meetings were monthly and were held in rotation at the homes of the respective members. Election to the club was highly selective and I remember the term "blackball" being bandied about. The purpose of the club was to widen the cultural horizons of the members by the preparation and reading of "papers" based on subjects of general interest. Topics were probably assigned at the close of each club year. The source material came from the state library at Lansing. The catch came, however, when the potential writer was actually faced with a vast amount of unknown books, magazines, and pamphlets and had to do something with them. So far as I personally ever heard, all members, in the long haul, successfully came through and were suitably congratulated by their peers.

The reader will also be happy to know that at the close of each club meeting the social atmosphere was considerably lightened by the serving of appropriate refreshments.

My family always dreaded the time when it was Mother's turn to entertain, for a thorough-going housecleaning was in order! Fortunately Mother had the help of a Mrs. Youngblood. Every window pane had to be taken down, washed by hand, and stretched



Marion's mother Lillian in her later years

on the lawn to dry. Walls and woodwork had to go through the cleaning process in some effective manner. Every rug had to be taken up and beaten over the clothes line. (Mother knew her ladies!) Only after she was satisfied that her house had reached the ultimate in cleanliness, could Mother turn her thoughts to the selection of a surprise dessert.

Many years later I made a short visit to Sparta and was invited to attend a meeting of the still existent Ladies' Literary Society. To my surprise and gratification I was given a standing ovation in honor of Mother.

No social approach to our town is possible without including the activities of the Ku Klux Klan.

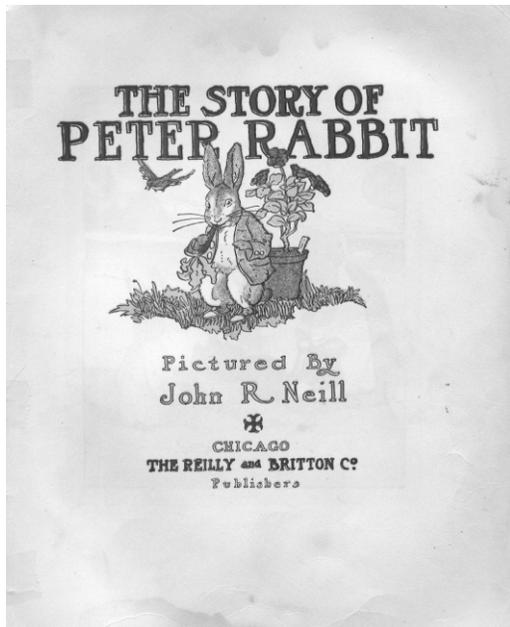
One early evening during the Christmas season I was positioned near the front window of the store. Suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, marched a group of Klansmen carrying an enormous wooden cross. They were, of course, dressed up in the required white, hooded regalia. They set up their cross directly in front of me on the vacant lot across the street. After putting on a preview by bustling about and flourishing their torches, they finally got down to their intended business. Because of the hour the flames of the burning cross were spectacular.

It was said afterwards that the Klan's goal was the elimination of blacks and Catholics from the community. Since there could be slim chance of any black living in a town this far north, the victim must, necessarily, have been Catholic in religious faith. Strangely enough, the Klan did have enough weight in the community to target and have fired our home economics teacher. My classmates and I were direct witnesses to the actual dismissal.

As Dad speculated, the members of the Klan of our town were undoubtedly ne'er-do-wells. In their participation with this special group, they not only promoted their own self-esteem, but, for once, in their lives, found themselves at the actual center of community life.

Literary Pursuits

At a relatively early age Dorothy and I were the happy recipients of various children's books which Mother had purchased in Grand Rapids. Fortunately she came across



Title page to one of Marion's Christmas presents in 1914

Thornton Burgess' charming *West Wind* series. We children were enthralled by every word. Never was there such a wicked rascal as Reddy the Fox who endlessly set out traps for Peter Rabbit and his friend Woody Woodchuck. In due time we were exposed to the Bobbsey Twin series. After enjoying some of the earlier books, we decided to go on to other authors.

It must have been about this time that our new Carnegie Library was opened. From then on, Dorothy and I literally carried home stacks of books from the library.

Not so incredibly, it was Mother who was largely responsible for the financial backing of the new library. I vividly recall her intensive canvassing among the rural areas. Somehow she persuaded reluctant farmers to

part with enough cash to help match the funds of the Carnegie Foundation.

Mother's section of our home "library" included not only the indispensable *Pollyanna*, but such light fiction as L. M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*, and Gene Stratton Porter's *A Girl of the Limberlost*. Fortunately this book has been salvaged for modern readers. Mrs. Stratton had precious background material about the wilderness of central Indiana in the late nineteenth century. Somehow this unique book should be preserved.

A large Webster's unabridged dictionary was placed on a separate stand, and Mother was, at one time, talked into buying *The Book of Knowledge*. Somehow I don't believe either the dictionary or the encyclopedic information were ever put to much use.

Although Dad wasn't addicted to imaginative reading, he was very proud of his *Robinson Crusoe* and *Stanley in Africa*. He enjoyed showing off the gory black and white illustrations contained in a large volume about the Aztecs. Much later Dad indulged himself by buying a copy of *The Strange Death of President Harding*.

Intellectual Concerns

The Monday Evening Club was undoubtedly the brain-wave of both my parents. It met once a week at our home. Its membership was open to anyone in the community who, conceivably, had some interest in world affairs. It turned out that eligible local teachers were drafted, some of them more or less willingly.

The club's program consisted of individually presented oral reports, followed by a general discussion. The assigned reports were based on the current issue of the *Literary Digest*. Of course this kind of intellectual stimulation was a very fine exercise for those members lucky enough to be vocal and self-assured; but for the shy, inexperienced teachers the evening must have been quite an ordeal.

One of the cultural props of our town was *The Sparta Sentinel-Leader*. Most readers probably scanned the front page news, but their interest must have been drawn to other features of the paper. For instance, Mother focused on the "Society" column. Dad made certain that his full-page advertisements were in order. A great many people must have given more than a glance at the want ads. The obituary column must have been of special interest to Senior Citizens.

What made me a very casual reader of this weekly was a column by Carol Holmes, the daughter of the editor. The writer's purpose was to present her "reflections on life." Having said that, I am about to embark on an account of my own childish flirtations with creative writing.

In the fourth grade our teacher, Miss Crane, in an innovative moment promoted a class essay contest based on a particular section of the geography text. I worked furiously at my little piece, assuring myself that I couldn't possibly have any competition. How wrong I was! Elmer Caine, the poor little boy across the aisle, was awarded the prize.

By about sixth grade, I was entranced by a full-page advertisement in the *Grand Rapids Press*. The ad featured an essay contest, the subject of which was the importance of rubber. The sponsor of the contest was the owner of a small bicycle shop in Grand Rapids. The prize, naturally, was a brand-new bicycle. To entice possible contestants, a helpful brochure on the rubber industry was available on request.

I talked Dad into ordering the precious brochure, and on its arrival he was so fascinated by its contents that he ordered me to sit down with him at the dining room table and get down to work. Dad dictated the necessary words, and I dutifully recorded them. The rough draft was completed within a few hours. In the natural course of events, the brand



Marion's father Erastus in his later years

new bicycle was mine.

I never found much pleasure in my prize partly because no other girl in the community was fortunate enough to own a bicycle and partly because I was guilt-ridden for a considerable period of time.

Also at about the same time, the Sparta State Bank sponsored an essay contest on thrift. I happened to come up with the idea of involving a character named Sam (Uncle) with little incidents based on the aphorisms of Benjamin Franklin. All in all, I had quite a merry plot going for me, and I spent many glorious hours at Mother's desk in the dining room.

Of course the expected prize of twenty-five dollars wasn't forthcoming. I was bitterly disappointed and my parents were utterly perplexed. Years later, Mother, by chance, picked up the piece of gossip that Mrs. Bradstrum, she of the seductive bit of candy, had convinced the essay committee that only Mother and not a mere child had to be the author of the gem.

In the eighth grade the well-meaning ladies of the local branch of the Women's Christian Temperance Union sponsored an essay contest on the evils of alcoholism. I certainly had no first hand knowledge of alcoholism or alcoholics. However, with the aid of several leaflets provided by the sponsors, I managed to produce a diatribe formidable enough to please the good ladies. I probably did not appreciate the prize of five dollars. Yet such an amount must have represented a real sacrifice on the part of those earnest ladies.

Vicarious Entertainment

The Kent County Fair was located to the north of Grand Rapids and not all that too far from Sparta. It was apparently a thriving institution in my early days.

My parents must have had a certain amount of interest in the Fair, for I can recall two early visits there. Dad used a horse and buggy for the first visit. For some reason, he took only me, and I remember giving him a small problem when I was suddenly overcome with acute intestinal distress. Fortunately the chicken house was close at hand, and Dad adroitly escorted me to a “private” place behind the chickens.

A few years later Mother tried her luck at the Fair. She went by means of an uncertain automobile. Accompanied by a friend and her two children, she found herself in a traffic jam preceding her arrival at the Fair’s entrance. The day was hot. The motors became overheated, and the radiators overflowed. After all too many frequent stops and starts, Mother did finally drive her car through the entrance gates. Whether she found any pleasure viewing the numerous displays of jams and jellies, canned fruits and vegetables, and handicrafts I have no recollection.

One of our town’s most important summer time attractions was the week-long annual Chatauqua. The particular Chatauqua which came to our town was only one of a large circuit. The Chatauqua concept came out of central New York in the Finger Lake district. Its purpose was to bring culture to the hinterland. Accordingly, a succession of lecturers brought to their audiences what they considered appropriate entertainment.

Each year our town witnessed the placement of a tremendous tent on the playground to the left of the school. There was a raised platform in front of the tent. Folding chairs were available for the audience and the local undertaker thoughtfully provided fans for hand use. A morning program was available for children. As a reward for good attendance, the children were allowed to participate in a little play at the beginning of the last evening’s performance. This dramatic occasion was very important to me as a child.

I seem to be somewhat confused about the movies presented at our local theater. I do remember, however, that what we saw was in black and white, and I also definitely remember that there were no sound effects except those produced by a local lady who sat at a piano near the screen.

I don’t recall any Mary Pickford or any Norma Talmadge. We certainly never had the opportunity to observe the sophisticated acting of Charlie Chaplin.

What I do remember all too vividly is the outrageous slapstick of Laurel and Hardy, and the slightly more subtle acting of Harold Lloyd. At least the westerns had the advantage of having background scenery! While our young dates were identifying with the cowboys, the cliff jumpers, and the pie-throwers, I personally contented myself with listening to the sounds coming from the piano. In my imagination, I can still “hear” the dashing rider and his horse leaping off his precipitous cliff and the almost realistic effects of thunder and lightning which accompanied some particularly dramatic scene. How I longed to be in the pianist’s place instead of where I was currently seated.