

The Cary Sisters In Oxford

By JESSE S. BIRCH

Few in Indiana who read the poems by the Cary sisters, Alice and Phoebe, know that these gifted writers made their home in Oxford for a time. This residence is not mentioned by historians or biographers, yet such omission does not change the facts. The comparatively brief stay of the two in Oxford, and the fact that they were not identified with the settlement or development of the county, gives little for the local historian to say about them save a few scattered references to their home life and the poems they are credited with writing while here. The townspeople recognized the ability of the sisters and were proud that they had cast their lot in the town, and when the two left, the sordid affairs of life in a new country continued uppermost in their minds, but they did not forget the Cary sisters. It is known by all the descendants of the pioneers that the Cary sisters once lived in Oxford. With no little pride the new-comer is told this and the place where they lived pointed out to them.

At the time of which I write, 1849 to 1850 and part of 1851 and 1852, the years the Cary sisters were in Oxford, live stock was purchased over a given territory and then driven to the city markets. Alexander Swift, who had married Susan Cary, an elder sister of Alice and Phoebe, was located in Oxford several years as the representative of a Cincinnati, Ohio, packing firm as purchasing agent. James Jolly Keys, then a discerning young man, drove the stock so purchased to Cincinnati. He was in the Swift home much of the time and his statements about their comings and goings, which he gave me, are unquestionably correct. My own mother, then a young girl, saw them frequently in the socials and gatherings the little village of Oxford then afforded. I am fortified in my statement that the sisters made their home in Oxford for a time by the testimony of at least a dozen of the early residents of the town, one of whom is still living. It is true the sisters went to New York in 1851 or 1852, but so long

as the Swifts lived in Oxford, it was their home—their haven while awaiting recognition in the literary world and financial success in New York.

The mother had died and a step-mother who was narrow and uncultured and saw only the work side of life for herself and all within the household, and who did not believe in wasting candles to read books or write poetry when floors needed to be scrubbed or socks mended, entered the home and made life so miserable to the spirited and ambitious young women that they left the old home of Clovernook, near Cincinnati, and came to that of their sister, Mrs. Swift, in Oxford.

The house in which the Swifts lived is still standing east of St. Patrick's church, but it has been remodeled and bears no resemblance whatever to what it was at that time, a low one-story structure. The desk on which the sisters wrote was a homemade one and consisted of a plain poplar board fastened to the wall and supported by a couple of rought strips. Mrs. Anna Benedict, a resident of Oxford and vicinity for more than sixty years, says that several years after the Swifts left Oxford, she saw the desk described by Mr. Keys at its old position by the window that looked to the south. Jonathan Broadwell and family, who came from Cincinnati and occupied the house in which the Swifts lived, and were friends of the Carys and Swifts, told Mrs. Benedict that the desk was the one on which Alice and Phoebe Cary did their writing.

Mrs. Elizabeth (Jessup) Cary, mother of Alice and Phoebe, was a cousin of Alfred J. Carnahan, Oxford's first general merchant, who came to the town in 1854. The sisters gave him an autograph copy of their poems. This book is now in possession of Mr. Carnahan's son, Joseph, who lives near Attica, Indiana. There are a few distant cousins of the Cary sisters still living in Oxford.

Alice and Phoebe Cary were sociable, plain and unassuming, in fact domestic in their tastes. Their genius made them no different from the other women of the village, nor did they attempt to impress others with an air of superiority. Both were especially fond of children. We are told they were of a dark complexion and uncommonly handsome.

Phoebe, the younger of the two, was strong and healthy in youth and saw life through a more cheerful atmosphere than did Alice. She had several offers of marriage, but did not accept rather than be separated from Alice. Once she said to Alice that she "never loved any man well enough to lie awake half an hour to be miserable about him." She was poetic but not romantic. She looked upon the humorous side of life. This is shown in her parodies on the "Psalms of Life" and "Maude Mueller." Each is a jest on the matrimonial tie, yet, judging from her poems, a subject on her mind. She was of an inquisitive nature and this got her into trouble one day. She and the Justus sisters, who with Alice, were together much of the time, were watching the men on the Justus farm setting fence posts. Before setting a post in the ground the end so placed was dipped in a barrel of tar. She asked what the black stuff in the barrel was and one of the Justus sisters told her to look in and see. She did so and in the act her foot slipped and her head struck the side of the barrel and a quantity of the tar stuck in her hair. She was unable to get it out and it was necessary to have the hair shorn.¹

Alice was a tireless worker, spurred on no doubt by the wish to forget the past, while Phoebe was inclined to take life easy. Both had ways not altogether satisfactory to the other, yet so close was the tie that bound them together there was no complaint or word of censure.

Many of their poems on rural life and nature were written while living in Oxford, or the impressions were so deep that they were incorporated in them at a later time; especially is this true in "The West Country", by Alice, and "Field Preaching", "The Lamp on the Prairie", "The Maize", and "The Prairie Fire", by Phoebe.

School facilities were limited and Alice and Phoebe Cary found most of their education in the woods and fields. The habits of their girlhood were unchanged in Oxford and day after day through the long summer afternoons, the two roamed the untilled fields east of the Swift home, and at eventide re-

¹ For this incident I am indebted to a sister of the one who told Phoebe to take a look in the barrel.

turned laden with huge bouquets of wild flowers. These rambles inspired Phoebe to say:

I have been out today in field and wood,
Listening to praises sweet and counsels good
Such as a little child had understood,
That in its tender youth,
Discerns the simple elements of truth.

The modest blossoms, crowding round my way,
Though they had nothing great or grand to say
Gave out their fragrance to the wind that day;
Because His loving breath,
With soft persistence, won them back from death.

When wearied, on the meadow grass I sank;
So narrow was the rill from which I drank,
An infant might have jumped from bank to bank;
And the tall rushes near
Lapping together, hid its water clear.

The stately maize, a fair and godly sight
With seried spear points bristling sharp and bright,
Shook out his yellow tassels, for delight,
To all their tawny length,
Like Samson, glorying in his lusty strength.

The narrow rill from which she drank and one "an infant might have jumped from bank to bank", had reference to Justus branch, the little brook that still winds its way like a thread of silver along the south edge of Oxford.

The broad fields of corn and the Basil Justus cabin in the forest of oaks, a skeleton of which is still standing, a quarter of a mile south of the window by which she wrote, are touched by her magic pen in "The Maize:"

Afar in the forest the rude cabins rise,
And send up their pillows of smoke,
And the tops of these columns are lost in the skies,
O'er the heads of the cloud-kissing oak.
Near the skirt of the forest where the sturdy arms swing
The ax till the giant sways,
And echo repeats every blow as it rings,
Shoot the green and glorious maize.

Among the "cloud-kissing oaks" was the historic oak under which, July 28, 1840, the commissioners met and organized Benton county. Here also during propitious weather, the sessions of the early Benton circuit court were held.

While living in Oxford, on the authority of the late Isaac W. Lewis, who came to the county in 1832, and settled two miles south of the present site of Oxford, Phoebe penned "Nearer Home", one of the sweetest and most sublime hymns ever sung:

One sweetly solemn thought
Comes to me o'er and o'er;
I'm nearer home today
Than I have ever been before.

Nearer my father's house,
Where the many mansions be;
Nearer the great white throne,
Nearer the crystal sea.

Nearer the bound of life,
Where we lay our burdens down;
Nearer leaving the cross,
Nearer gaining the crown.

But the waves of that silent sea
Roll dark before my sight,
That brightly the other side
Break on a shore of light.

O, if my mortal feet
Have almost reached the brink,
If it be I am nearer home
Even today than I think.

Father perfect my trust;
Let my spirit feel in death
That her feet are firmly set
On the rock of a living faith.

At the funeral of Alice in New York, in April, 1870, this widely known hymn was sung by the choir after the Episcopal funeral service had been read. At the funeral of Phoebe, in August of the year following, the pastor, a Scotch Univer-

salist in charge of the service, read it. The two sisters, with their younger sister, Elmina, who also married Alexander Swift, lie side by side in Greenwood cemetery, New York, far from home and kindred.

Alice met with a disappointment in love and this gave a sadness to many of her poems. She and a man of culture and wealth had plighted their troth, but his people objected to him marrying a girl, who, to them, was uneducated, rustic and poor. She waited for him until she read of his marriage to another. He then passed out of her life—save remembrance—and she outlived the disappointment of her youth. She afterwards had several offers of marriage, but she accepted none of them. Years afterwards, when life was behind them and his wife had died and Alice was dying, the recreant lover came to beg her forgiveness. Like Lucile:

She looked down on him from the whole
Long length of a life. There were sad nights and days,
There were long months and years in that heartrendering gaze,

and—woman like—she forgave. This experience saddened, but did not embitter her life, for nowhere in all her poems is a single bitter reference to man's faithlessness. That she had not forgotten is shown in the poems "The Pitiless Fate", and "All in All".

After her death John G. Whittier, whom she and Phoebe visited at the beginning of their literary career in New York, wrote:

Timid and young, the elder had
Even then a smile too severely sad;
The crown of pain that all must wear
Too early pressed her midnight hair.

Her life was earnest work, not play;
Her tired feet climbed a weary way;
And even through her lightest strain
We heard an undertone of pain.

Alice's most noted poem, "Pictures of Memory", was either written in Oxford or an incident here prompted it. While in

Oxford the Swifts lost a child. The nurse, with the boy, was out riding one day and when about a mile east of town the horse became frightened and reared. She jumped to the ground, and in order to protect herself, let the child fall. He died a short time after this and it was believed by those who knew of the circumstances that the fall caused his death.² The loss of the nephew added to the loss of the mother and two sisters while living at the old home at Clovernook, deepened her sadness.

The Swift home stood across the road from the McConnell cemetery and surrounding the cemetery was a heavy forest of oaks. The mounds, the gray headstones and "the gnarled oaks olden" brought up sad memories. The boy was taken to Ohio for burial and might have been laid in "the lap of that dim old forest" that resembled the one in Oxford, or it might have been poetic fancy. She never lost a little brother consequently the reference was to the little nephew, the kinship of a brother meaning more in the poem than a nephew. Edgar Allen Poe once pronounced this poem "one of the most musically perfect lyrics in the English language."

² For this incident I am indebted to the man who witnessed it.