

The Indiana Boyhood of the Poet of the Sierras

By GLEN E. VEACH

Joaquin Miller's name has long been a distinguished name. If he had written nothing else, that grand poem "The Great Discoverer" would have assured his fame.

Who is not familiar with the lilting cadence of this, his most poignant masterpiece? It is to be found in numerous anthologies and was long a classic of the grade school readers.

With the publication of *Songs of the Sierras*, *Songs of the Sun-Lands*, *The Ship in the Desert*, and other productions, the critics immediately recognized the genius of the man from whose hand these poems came. In many instances crude, frequently unpoetic in the accepted sense, there was nevertheless a distinct individuality about all of his work that marked Joaquin Miller as a literary lion, though strangely enough, it was by England that he was so recognized first, instead of by his homeland.

Representative of the marked esteem in which his work is held by collectors, one could cite the figures in book auction records, revealing the sums which have been paid for copies of first editions of his poems and for his autographed letters.

Joaquin Miller (christened Cincinnatus Hiner Miller), was born at Liberty, Indiana, on November 10, 1841.¹ He left his home in Indiana at the age of ten or eleven, with his parents, and never returned to Indiana.

He once said that his first impression of life, his first memory, was looking out of a window at a great bon-fire which illuminated the darkness of night with its ruddy glow. In the light of the bon-fire his father and mother both toiled, replenishing the flames with brush-wood. So had they toiled many days and far into the nights, in a mutually herculean effort to wrest from the wilderness a plot of soil that would contribute to the sustenance of themselves and their three boys.²

Hulings Miller, father of Cincinnatus, was a shy man, endowed with more than average intelligence and discontented

¹ In a charming little volume, *Overland in a Covered Wagon*, the poet explains that owing to the loss of the family Bible the year of his birth was somewhat uncertain. His father gave the year as 1841, but his mother remembered it as 1842. They agreed on the day and the month.

² A fourth child, a little girl, was born while the family lived in Grant County, Indiana. James (Jimmie) Miller, the youngest of the three sons, married a grand-daughter of Marcus Whitman.

to the point of grieving at his unprosperous status, though by alternately teaching school and farming, he managed to maintain his family respectably.

One night the teacher-pioneer brought home a book on the explorations of Captain Fremont, which had been loaned to him by the government agent at the Miami Indian Reserve. Years later, the poet said that he never was so fascinated; that he never grew so fast in his life as while hearing this book read. To him the story glowed like the flames of the huge fireplace in their cabin.

Even then he felt the urge of great achievement. The lust for adventure, and battle and victory were in his blood. He felt that someday, somehow, he, too, would climb the Rocky Mountains—perhaps set his feet in the footprints of the mighty Fremont. His whole imaginative being was inflamed with a desire for action, adventure, glory and great deeds “away out yonder under the path of the setting sun.”

But as yet he was only a small boy who had never owned a pair of shoes. During the autumn, that “Joaquin” was eight, Billy Fields, the shoemaker of the pioneer settlement, went to the Miller home with a corn-cob pipe in his teeth and a little flat board under his arm. It was a memorable day for the boy who was to become a famous poet. That day he was measured for his first pair of shoes, and the Indian moccasins which he had heretofore worn were soon discarded.

Before he was old enough to be regularly enrolled in school, the father often took the boy with him, carrying him on his back through a dense woods, by way of a narrow Indian trail, to the big, hewed-log school house on the bank of Pipe Creek. There the boy listened to all the lessons with intense interest as they were read by the older children, and learned by memory much of the second and third readers before he had either of them in his possession.

“Pap,” Miller the schoolmaster, had good pay then, even big pay for those times, for the inflowing tide of civilization had touched these wilderness outskirts at last, and the school was full of children of all ages and sizes from the pioneer homes.

Soon after Christmas one year, a young man brought a beautiful, rosy-cheeked girl to Hulings Miller’s home. Besides being the school-teacher, Mr. Miller had been made justice of

the peace. The young couple announced their desire to be united as husband and wife. When the ceremony had been performed and witnessed, the young man blushed, and fumbled in his pockets. Then he looked at Mr. Miller and said: "I left my money in my other pants, Squire."

The pretty girl looked her husband hard in the eyes, and then burst into tears. Joaquin's mother led the girl away to the smokehouse to show her a setting hen. But the girl's grief outweighed her interest in setting hens. She buried her head in Mrs. Miller's matronly bosom, and sobbed: "He lied!" Her emotion became even more intense. "He ain't got any money. I'm sure he ain't. I don't think he's even got another pair of pants!"

In the meantime, the young man was confessing: "Squire, I renigged. I renigged because I had no trump, lied because I could not tell the truth. I have nothing in the world but my ax, but I know how to use it and will work it out."

"Well, then," the squire said kindly, "go get your ax. Leave your wife here to help mother take care of the baby. You had better go to school with me the rest of the winter. You're not too old to assimilate a little more schooling. You can chop mornings, and evenings and Saturdays. If you are good we will see what can be done in the Spring." They "fixed up" the smokehouse, and there the young couple lived until Spring, when Mr. Jacobs, a neighbor, gave them employment. They proved to be fine citizens, honest and industrious.

Always, during those years, the Miller family dreamed, and planned and worked for but one goal—Oregon, the land of promise. There six hundred forty acres of virgin soil awaited the plow of any family who would measure it off. The hardships of their present environment weighed heavily upon them and the glamor of new frontiers, new conquests and possible economic success spurred them into tireless endeavor.

Night after night the little family pored over maps which they spread out upon the rough table. *Fremont's Travels* were read many times in the light of the great log fire and the flickering tallow dip. The years passed by. The struggle for existence continued. The fever and the ague, which stalked wherever the undrained swamp lands lay, was almost continually upon them all.

Each year Hulings Miller grew more sad, silent and

thoughtful. Margaret Miller, his wife, with spinning wheel and loom made the cloth for the family's spare clothing from the flax which she grew in a corner of the little piece of new-ground which they had cleared with their own hands.

In the early years of their settlement in Grant County, when the land on which they had settled as "squatters" came into the market, Hulings Miller did not have the money to pay for it. He obtained employment at a mill three miles from his home, on the Mississinewa River. He worked for fifty cents a day. The hours were long and the work was hard, but he was glad to get the job, for it helped him to secure the tract of land on which they had settled.

One night as he was returning from work, a pack of wolves chased him. He escaped a horrible death by climbing a tree, leaving the growling, snarling wolves to nurse their bafflement beneath him. His shouts were heard by his wife half a mile away. Without hesitation, Margaret Miller lighted a hickory-bark torch and ran out into the darkness toward the sounds of the *melée*. Bravely brandishing the blazing torch, she soon caused the wolves to slink away in terror, and then she and her husband returned safely home.

One day a clock-peddler, accompanied by his young son, came to the Miller home. The man claimed to be ill, and undoubtedly he was. He related a hard-luck story in which his illness was the major point, and so won the sympathy of the kind-hearted school teacher that the peddler's horses and wagon-load of clocks were accorded the shelter of the Miller barn while the itinerant and his son were installed in the Miller home. There they stayed for several weeks, until the man regained his health and strength. Then, in some manner, and for some uncertain price, he disposed of all the clocks to Hulings Miller, and was thus enabled to return to his home in the East.

When the time came for the Millers to set forth upon their journey to the West, Mr. Miller began to look for a market for the property which he owned. Dogs or wolves attacked his sheep one night and slaughtered the flock. Here was apparent blighting of all their hopes, for the sheep had represented a sum of money that would have taken them far upon the road to Oregon and the success which they hoped awaited them somewhere toward the end of the Oregon trail.

"The wolves killed all our sheep last night, and sucked their blood," Hulings Miller announced that morning, and once again a hopeless despair settled upon the little family.

After years of work and planning, just when the fruition of their dreams seemed so near, just when a bit of happiness seemed to be creeping into their lives to replace the bitterness of mind and soul and weariness of body that they had known so long, this blow was almost too hard to bear. A trader who dealt with the natives at the Indian Village, a kindly man named McCulloch,³ having heard of the slaughter of the sheep, called at the Miller home.

"The wolves did it," Hulings Miller declared.

"I think you're wrong," McCulloch contradicted bluntly. "It's the work of the Indians' dogs. There's a lot of them and some of them are vicious. This isn't the first time they've killed sheep. By the way, how much were you asking for your sheep?"

The discouraged farmer-teacher told him, and then McCulloch mounted his horse and rode back to the Indian Village. He laid the case before Chief Meshingomesia⁴ who listened attentively, smoked his long pipe and grunted. Then McCulloch and the old chief rode to the Miller farm together.

Chief Meshingomesia counted out a quantity of gold coins and laid them on the rude table. Mr. Miller at first refused to touch any of the money, still insisting that the wolves and not the dogs of the Indians had killed his sheep.

"Heap damn foolish squaw," Meshingomesia said. "You take gold. 'Shingomesia always pay debts. Indian pooches kill ba-bas. Take pay or you make 'Shingomesia mad.'" Then he pressed the money into the white man's hands.

Hulings Miller offered to take half of it, but the proud Indian chief would not listen to him. When Meshingomesia rode away, after having gravely shaken hands with the members of the little family, the entire amount of the loss remained in the possession of the Miller family.

Not long afterwards, because there was at least one good Indian on this side of the happy hunting grounds, the members of the family loaded their portable belongings, including the stock of clocks which had been acquired from the Connecticut

³ This Indian trader who befriended Hulings Miller was Hugh McCulloch. He was already becoming a noted Indiana banker and in later life was Secretary of the Treasury under Lincoln and Johnson.

⁴ Joaquin Miller spells the name *Shingle-Ma-See*.

peddler, into a wagon, and looking for the last time upon the home which they had built in the wilderness and the land which they had cleared for cultivation, they moved slowly westward.

Conflicting stories have been told as to the disposition of the land in Grant County for which the Millers had labored so long and hard. One story has it that the farm was lost because of the mortgage given in exchange for the clocks bought of the Connecticut peddler. Another story persists that the farm was sold to a German family, late immigrants from the fatherland, for a good round sum in gold. This it is held was tied up in a woolen mitten by Margaret Miller and carried westward secreted in her bodice. The records in the Grant County courthouse reveal that the United States patent for the one hundred sixty acres on which Hulings Miller settled (about 1844) was issued to him on March 23, 1848. The farm consisted of the northwest quarter of section 21, range 7, township 25. The farm is located in what is now Pleasant Township. On June 5, 1848, sixty acres were deeded to John McKee for a consideration of \$150. On November 1, 1849, a deed for the remaining hundred acres was made to Jacob L. Bechtel, the price named being \$1,000. Both deeds were signed by Hulings Miller and his wife, Margaret.

As the Miller family left the Indiana Home for the West⁵ they journeyed toward Chicago, where Hulings Miller hoped to dispose of the clocks. By that time, the clocks had lost their pristine newness; the veneer of the cases had chipped, and cracked and fallen off in many places. They were not sold but hauled westward as far as the Rocky mountains, where they went over a cliff in a storm.⁶

⁵ The family continued to live in Grant County until sometime in 1851 although the last part of the farm (100 acres) was sold late in 1849. Though they really left Grant County intending to go to Oregon by way of Chicago, early in the spring of 1851, there was a delay of a year. Hulings Miller bought a farm of 80 acres about five miles from Rochester on the Tippecanoe river. There a crop was raised and Mr. Miller taught a school near by during the winter of 1851-1852. The new farm was sold to the man from whom it was purchased and the actual start for Oregon was made on March 17, 1852. On May 15, 1852, the Oregon-bound homeseekers crossed the Missouri River above St. Joseph. See Joaquin Miller, *Overland in a Covered Wagon*, pp. 52, 54, 66, 72.

⁶ Joaquin Miller, *Overland in a Covered Wagon*, pp. 38, 75. After the wreck of the clocks they were gathered up and used as kindling-wood. The poet enjoyed their destruction. As he remembered their disappearance with satisfaction, he wrote years later: "We hauled them almost to the top of the Rocky Mountains, and then one night in a terrific snowstorm, when the wagon upset and we needed the old clocks for kindling wood, they were, brass, glass and varnish, all cremated. Peace to their sounding brass; rest to their brazen faces!" There is reason to believe that the clock-peddler took a mortgage on the sixty acres in the amount of \$150 in payment for the clocks, and that he acquired the land as a result. In short the John McKee to whom Hulings Miller deeded the sixty acres on June 5, 1848, was probably no other than the too clever clock-peddler from the East.

A few months before his death, in 1913, in what was probably his last warmly personal letter, Joaquin Miller wrote to George B. Lockwood, then editor of the *Marion Chronicle* published at Marion, Indiana:

What I want most of all things to see is the old log home which my revered parents built away back in the forties. And I want to see the beautiful river; I want to go fishing in it again. I want to go out to the old Miami Village, and see Jim Sasequas, Shinglemasee and his two bright boys. They made me a bow and arrows. The arrows had keen bright points, which they made out of an old barrell hoop, with Pap's file. And they were perfect. As proof of this, there is scarce a single buffalo left!

I want to walk down the old dusty, corduroy state road. I want to go to Lafontaine bare-headed; I want to walk in the dust, with my pants rolled to my knees, just as of old. We can take some doughnuts in our pockets.

I want to make a day of it—I want to be a boy again, back in the old place, once more before I die. Come along and bring a lot of boys and girls—and let us all be 'kids' once more,—not caring a bean whether school keeps or not. When we leave the old state road we strike through the continuous woods to Pap's place. And how dear were those huge trees to us all. But I am afraid they have cut them down. It is this fear that has kept me all these years from trying to see the sacred old home. But now I will, if you please, persuaded by your kindly letter, look over the ground once more before I die.

Is Uncle Billy Fields there yet? He made the first and only shoes I owned in Indiana. And little Thomas Sutton—did he ever grow up? I want to find him the same neat and modest little boy I used to love as tenderly as if he had been a girl. And then there was,—but never mind now,—I will ask about them when we go over on Pipe Creek.

Please write me if you will go with me. And also please see if we can get some photos of the Indians, the old village, and so on. Maybe some of the old Indians have photos of the old chief and his manly boys. I do hope they are strong and well and that I may see them when I come on in August.

But the poet did not "come on in August," and he never again saw the beautiful Mississinewa, or Pipe Creek or "Old Josina," or the Tippecanoe—the streams which he held dear in his memory, just as they are dear to many boys today, and to many men who slip back into their boyhood haunts occasionally to visit the spots where they learned to swim, or where they caught the first fish or gathered rock crystal from the eroded banks and sand-bars. Never again did the poet see any of those boyhood friends. They, together with the old Indian Village, the great forest that he knew, and the quiet little town

of Lafontaine, where recently I saw barred-rock chickens running leisurely at range in the shady streets, were irrevocably part of his past.

When August came Joaquin Miller's work and wanderings were done. He had fashioned his last song and dreamed his last dream. He had come to the end of a long journey, though a grand journey that had been spiced with adventure—a journey the hardness of which had been mitigated by love of beauty.