Childhood Memories of Vevay

By CORINNE SCHENCK DAHMAN

My first recollection of my grandfather, Ulysses Philip Schenck, was as a very little girl sitting on his knee braiding and unbraiding his soft white hair, which fell, with the promise of a curl to the nape of his neck. He was tall and of massive frame—bone and muscle sparsley covered with flesh. His head was large, forehead broad and face clean shaven, with nothing to conceal the firmness of his chin and the remarkable thinness of his lips.

My grandmother, Justine Thiebauld Schenck, who in her way was as big a personality as my grandfather in his, was of medium height and comfortably broad. Although two years his senior, her fair hair, parted in middle and drawn down over her ears, was but slightly sprinkled with grey under the black lace-cap which partly covered it.

The large, stately, colonial red-brick house with its white pillars and green shutters furnished a proper setting for these two. Built by my grandfather in the early forties on the hillside over-looking the river at Vevay, it had a dining-room and kitchen in the basement with a wide hall through the center from North to South, and partitions from East to West that divided each floor into four big, corner rooms with windows in two directions. This was the simple architecture of the house, but its glory lay in two features: the three-story white-pillared porches facing the river; and the stairway, extending in one long spiral from the first floor to the attic where it looked into a skylight.

When my grandfather was having this building constructed, the architect, Mr. Francis Costigan, was designing some remarkable buildings in Madison and other parts of the state, so grandfather sent to Madison and contracted with him to build his stairway for $1500. The house itself was probably built by the Vevay architect, Kyle, though his name, as has been erroneously stated, is not to be found on the newel post of the stairway.

The yard had its own distinctive charm as well as the house. It sloped a velvety sward toward the river. A neat cobble-stone walk, made of small round boulders, kept free of weeds and bordered by long narrow flat stones led from

the wrought-iron gate to the front door where it divided into two paths, one going around each side of the house down to the grape arbor which extended the full length of the basement porch and far beyond at each end like wings.

Beneath the West end of the arbor was the deep pit where grandmother, under a glass frame, kept her flowers in Winter. On the West side of the yard was also the magnolia, where it could catch the last rays of the sun, nevertheless having to be swathed in straw and boxed during the Winter months while the oleanders, so greatly cherished, had to be carried in their tubs to the cellar.

Flowers were an important part of grandmother's life and when the voices of her children were forever stilled they filled many a lonely hour making her life fragrant with their beauty. In the summer time, her yard was full of them. Besides the oleanders and creamy magnolias of the sunny South, there were the lilacs, snowballs and syringas of the North, along with lilies, roses and geraniums of every kind. The old French ladies vied with one another in getting the rarest flowers. When grandmother went to Cincinnati, a visit to the florists was as much a matter of course as a visit to Shillitos, while the captains of grandfathers boats had orders to bring up from the South any shrub or plant that could withstand the rigors of our northern climate.

On the east side of the yard was the ice house, a conical shaped brick building partly buried in the ground so that the entrance was several steps down. For years it had been grandfather's custom to have his ice cut in the winter and stored in saw dust in this building for summer use, but that was no longer necessary. A Vevay citizen found it profitable to cut and store ice to peddle to the whole community during the warm months, so grandfather closed his ice house and became a customer.

Opposite the chicken-house and yard was the kitchen garden with some fruit trees and a row of currant and gooseberry bushes. Of these same currant and gooseberry bushes, I learned a lesson in thoroughness. Grandmother always shared her fruit with her two daughters-in-law and, as the youngest in our family, it fell to my lot to pick our share. Grandmother's orders were quite explicit—"Pick each branch

clean before going to the next one"—and grandmother's orders were not easily disobeyed.

Just below the house and garden was a pasture with a running brook for the comfort of "Fannie" and the cow where they could always be watched from the sitting room windows or from behind the white columns on the porch. Thus on one small space right in the heart of the town was brought together many of the various things which supplied the needs and comforts of a family.

During my childhood, life in Vevay was quiet and uneventful, but for one who loved beauty, the hills with their fresh green foliage or autumn tints, their changing lights and shadows and soft blue haze, the winding river, the blue sky with its fleecy clouds and gorgeous sunsets, the many flowers and singing birds filled it full of charm. On Summer evenings and afternoons driving was the chief diversion, for many of the townspeople kept a horse and buggy, and those who did not, could usually afford the price of a "rig" at one of three livery stables, for a Sunday afternoon at least.

One drove up the river road to the cemetery and then on to Markland, now the site of the government dam, or down the river road to Lamb, just opposite Carrollton, going a little farther, sometimes, if one were not particular about returning to the evening service. If provided with a good horse, one might take the Mt. Sterling Pike, slowly mounting by the Horseshoe Bend to the top of the hills, which formed a high ridge behind the town. The view along the way, as one slowly wound around the bend through the narrow valley fully warranted the long pull, for the town below peeping through the foliage of its many trees was picturesque, while the river and the Kentucky hills were impressive. At the top, a narrow white road stretched far into the distance, rising and falling with the rolling country, while on either side fertile fields extended to the hills rising up from Indian Creek on the one hand and the Ohio River on the other.

One other Sunday diversion that was more exciting than driving was going to the river to see the boats land. Of course, if one did not drive too far and the boats did not arrive too early one might experience both pleasures on the same afternoon. There were two boats a day, "an up boat and a down boat", carrying mail and passengers between Cin-

cinnati and Louisville. Vevay was the halfway point and sometimes the boats met at its wharf. On week days the trip was made at night but on Sundays the boats left the respective cities at nine A.M., and arrived at Vevay sometime during the afternoon, depending on the stage of water and the amount of freight to be loaded and unloaded.

These Sunday boat landings were often the only break in the week's monotony, and were especially appreciated by the young people. It was cool by the waters edge, and a pleasant meeting place for the exchange of banter, while, for some of the girls, there was the added thrill of a flirtation with the river men, among whom Vevay was noted for its pretty girls.

The landing of a boat was always an interesting sight. It glided toward the wharf, and when near gracefully swung about facing in the opposite direction. Then the engine bells rang, the engine was reversed and in the midst of a breathless silence the boat slowly nosed its way to the wharf, the roustabouts standing poised on the very edge to throw the heavy cable into the grasp of the boatman, who had already leaped from the boat to the wharf so he could make it fast. This accomplished, a sigh of relief went up from the crowd on the upper deck who once again took up their banter while on the deck below the roustabouts ran hither and yon carrying freight on and off the boat or driving bellowing cattle. The mate gave sharp commands mixed with curses while passengers were hustled off and hustled on by the second officer. Meantime the porter saw to the baggage winding in and out through the merchandise and the hurrying roustabouts. When the last piece of freight was in place and the last passenger safely landed, the gang plank swung high in the air, the engine bells rang again, and the wheels churned the water while the boatman loosened the cables which held the big boat fast to the wharf and then sprang back on the boat across the widening strip of water. The steamer glided gracefully across the river to the Ghent landing and the excitement for the week was over. The crowds then swarmed up the river bank on their return to the town.

Members of our family usually watched the boat landing from between the white pillars of grandfather's veranda in the shade of the purple wisteria which grandmother had

planted when the house was built in the forties. With its trunk now grown as thick as a man's arm, it had climbd to the high ceiling of the second story where it shaded the whole southwestern end of the porch, its blossoms hanging in purple festoons. With the coming of the Winter months, the driving and the trips to the wharf ceased and we were confined to the family circle, to the family dinner parties, where the tables fairly groaned under the quantity of food, and to the church socials.

The red-brick house with the sunshine of its past joys and the shadows of deep sorrows, which had encompassed these two old people, always had a great charm for me both summer and winter. As I grew into girlhood, the long winter Sunday afternoons spent under its friendly roof, became the red letter days of the week for me. Apparently there was nothing to attract a child—just two old people and a bachelor uncle. Nevertheless, there was a subtle charm, which I unconsciously felt. Now as I look back, I know that this charm was the perfect peace and harmony which surrounded these old people. Always sensitive to atmosphere, I felt it even in my earliest childhood when I sat on my grandfather's knee. I never heard a note of discord in that household. Grandfather was a gentle and even-tempered person and grandmother, with all her energy, was never hurried or cross, but had that calm dignity which commands respect and obedience.

On Sunday afternoons in Winter we sat by the grate fire in the living room, which was always bright and cheerful. A window on the West gave us a distant view of the Ohio and the sweep of the hills which line its course, while the many small window panes reflected the glow of the sun low on the horizon. To the South, a window, extending almost to the floor with two small doors at the bottom opening on the porch, put us in direct touch with the river and the many boats and barges passing up and down its course. In one corner of this room was a curious spiral stairway connecting with the bedroom above. It was enclosed, so when the doors at each end were shut it was quite dark. It had a great fascination for me partly made up of fear of the unknown terrors which might lurk in its dark and winding passages.

Often we sat before the fire, grandfather reading the Cincinnati *Enquirer* or the Louisville *Courier-Journal* and giving especial attention to river news with an occasional comment, while I was absorbed in some story book dug out of the old bookcase in the hall. The whistles of the steamboats making their landings, the chug of their engines, and the swish of their paddle wheels were the only sounds that broke the Sabbath stillness.

It was strange that I, who had *Chatterbox, Wideawake, St. Nicholas, Youth's Companion,* Mrs. Alcott's stories and many, many other interesting things to read at home, should have cared for the books in grandfather's library. They were so very naive, they told of trivial incidents, and they ended with long moral homilies, but they were for me the bridge which spanned the space between the past and present.

This house, so still in the days of my visits, had once been peopled with children like myself—my father, of whom I had but a dim recollection, and his sisters, whom I had never known—frail children who had come and gone like a summer breeze. They had romped in the halls of the old home and the rooms had echoed with their laughter. They had sat by the grate and read the books as I was doing and perhaps they too had felt the same shivery fascination in the presence of the little spiral stairway. Their shadowy forms were all about me for they still lived in the hearts and thoughts of the two old people and their little books left behind brought them very close to me also.

Always a punctual household, five o'clock found us at the evening meal in the pleasant and neatly carpeted basement kitchen. The dining room across the hall, like the double parlors on the floor above, was used for company on state occasions only. The meal was a simple one, for Swiss ways completely characterized this home, the "hired girl", a daughter of some respectable farmer, sat at table with us. Of the food, all I remember is the ginger cake, grandmother's specialty, made by her old mother's Swiss recipe, and the weak tea, called by grandfather "Cambric Tea," which was vastly important to me for at home I was never allowed anything stronger than milk.

The meal finished, the day was all but ended for me, for it was not long until the church bells, Baptist, Methodist,

and Presbyterian, began calling their respective flocks to evening worship. Like sheep we all knew our bells and responded. With the first stroke of the Baptist bell, grandfather took up his lantern, and with a long paper lighter caught the flame from the grate and lighted it—matches were for use in summer and at night when there was no open fire. At other times, they were an extravagance. On the mantle stood a vase which grandmother always kept filled with lighters, made from narrow strips of newspaper, either twisted or folded and fringed at one end to catch the flame more easily. These lighters were a part of our daily life, one of the first things we learned to make.

When bundled up and ready to start, leaving grandmother to her thoughts by the fire, grandfather gently patted her on the cheek and with his fine smile said with his quaint french accent: "Good bye Mudder". She smiled back at him all aglow, for fifty years of these little attentions had failed to dim their freshness or cool their warmth, so enduring was the love that united these two.

Then we went out into the night, stately white haired man and little girl, hand in hand, while from his unengaged hand swung the lantern. The streets were dark and the way was rough. Street lamps were few and scattered, and, being petroleum lamps, their light did not penetrate far into the darkness. The street crossings were made of ashes with stepping stones where the mud was particularly deep. There were a few sidewalks in the town and these few were made of rough limestone slabs, just as they were brought down from the hills, so one was in danger of stumping one's toes and falling. In consequence, Sunday nights and prayer meeting nights saw the streets full of the bobbing lanterns of good church people. On other nights, only the young and frivolous ventured taking their chances without lanterns as a rule.

In Winter the lanterns were needed to keep out of mud holes, and in Summer to keep from falling over the cows lying about in the streets and lazily chewing their cuds. Few were the inhabitants not able to own a cow, but pastures were scarce. However, as the streets were wide and covered with a growth of thick blue grass, they were used by the poorer inhabitants as cow pastures.

A short walk of two squares brought us to the church, where I slipped into the front pew with my mother while Grandfather took his place in the amen-corner. At the Sunday morning service on pleasant days, this amen-corner with its group of old folks was picturesque and characterized by a quaint old world atmosphere. There was grandfather, in Prince Albert coat of finest broadcloth—a week day as well as Sunday garb. Grandmother, never much out of date, was dressed in black with perhaps some colored flowers in her bonnet. Aunt Augusteen, a first edition of grandmother, though several years her senior, was enough like her to have been her twin. Their resemblance was so striking that many little anecdotes were told about them. One was that Aunt Augustine going into grandfather's store one day passed a mirror and nodded saying, "Good morning Justine". After making her purchase she looked about in surprise asking what became of Justine, still quite unaware that she had greeted her own reflection in the mirror.

There was also Aunt Zella Thiebauld who gave the note of piquancy and color to the group. She was small and vivacious, interspersing French with her English while talking and at the same time gesticulating with her hands and bobbing her head. She wore hooped skirts of silk in fancy stripes of black, blue and tan, around not lengthwise of the skirt, and gay flowers decorated her bonnet. Hoop skirts were long out of style but not for Aunt Zella, who had worn them when she was young, and now that she was old she still wore them, for the silk of those days did not wear out. She always carried a lantern on moonlight nights just the same as on dark nights although she lived on Main Street not two blocks from the church. The fourth wife of Uncle Charles Thiebauld, and sister of his second wife, she was aunt as well as stepmother to most of his children. After his death, she lived with his son Jimmy, who was both merry and hospitable. Thinking to give her a great pleasure, he planned a surprise party for her on one of her birthdays. Called down to meet the assembled relatives and friends, she swept the room with a glance, poured out a volley of French, turned on her heel, marched up stairs again, shut and locked her door to appear no more that day and her

birthday dinner had to be celebrated without her. Surprise parties did not go with hoop skirts and she felt that this one was an insult to her dignity. She was one of the most outstanding French characters in the town.

Three humble figures made up the remainder of the amen-corner group which really formed the most democratic part of the church. The three included an old grey-haired man, a day laborer, stooped and more or less feeble, and two maiden sisters clothed in rusty black dresses with full skirts. They wore bonnets, draped with thin shabby veils, a style left over from the forties. These old ladies were known to the community as Aunt Lovey and Aunt Betty. They lived in a shabby, little frame-house, where for years they had supported themselves by weaving rag carpets, or rather Aunt Lovey had supported them, for Aunt Betty had a particular aversion to work. She always said as she rocked to and fro in her chair: "When Aunt Lovey ain't here no more to do the work I'm goin to the Poor Farm," little dreaming that she was uttering a true prophecy. In the course of time, it came about that Aunt Lovey was called to her long home, and in bitterness of soul Aunt Betty did end her days at the Poor Farm. She did not like to work, but she loved to sing and never missed an opportunity on prayer meeting nights to start her favorite hymn in a high pitched nasal voice.

Life is such a bitter thing,
A journey to the tomb,
All that is mortal will soon
Be closed in death's cold arms.

She sang it solo for no one could get her particular key or make the song seem half so bitter. When ingrain carpets began to take the place of rag carpets, work grew scarce for Aunt Lovey, and the sisters had to have some assistance. They virtually constituted the total poor of the Church for whom the Communion Sunday offering was taken. Besides, once a year the church visited them in a body with pound party donations of staple goods of which soap always formed a prominent feature. The poor old souls were more prone to godliness than cleanliness and somehow in spite of free soap the dark creases in their wrinkled old faces never grew less noticeable.

In the body of the church, there were other interesting characters. Cousin Lou Thiebauld, a son of Uncle Charles

and a step-son of Aunt Zella, had a face that was long and narrow, its length being accentuated by a chin beard. With the nervous intensity and vivacity of the French, as he listened to the sermon, his face registered in quick succeeding flashes his approval or disapproval. Ever and again he would raise to his face to inhale its fragrance the little nosegay which he always carried from the first flower of Spring to the last blossoms or leaves of Autumn. Tall and spare, on his arm he always carried a cane which he never seemed to use, but it was always handy should it become necessary.

An unusual figure was Mrs. Hoffman, a mulatto. Her yellow wrinkled face was full of goodness and kindness. In the back of the church, under the gallery were seats reserved for the few pious negroes of the community, but Mrs. Hoffman sat in the body of the church with the quality. She had been the slave of a rich Kentucky planter, who had brought her with their children across the Ohio and settled them on a farm on Plum Creek a few miles above. The prefix "Mrs." was hers by courtesy only. How the pious church people of the community reconciled to their conventional code the habit of thinking of this old mulatto as Mrs. Hoffman cannot be explained, for she was not a penitent. She had lived her life and been happy and had not spoiled it by vain repentance afterwards. She was respected by all. On Sundays her neat buggy and well groomed mare could always be seen before the church door, while on week-days it stood at the gates of the best families. She delivered butter, eggs, and chickens to her customers and often sat down for a little chat.

Once a year this privileged woman of color entertained the Ladies Aid and set before them large platters of fried chicken, with hot biscuit, jellies, preserves, and that great variety of good things that the colored people of her kind have such a knack of preparing. She busied herself with serving and would never sit at table with them. Just so, it was said, she had served her master, who, until he died, often spent weeks at a time with her. She gave liberally to the church, adding a special gift to the pastor at Christmas time. Now her children were grown and had gone away. They paid the price for the father's sin. Since they were too good for one race and not high enough for the other of the com-

munity, they were lonely and went afield to seek and find their kind in larger communities.

Grandfather was superintendent of the Sunday School. It is said that he was absent only twice in thirty years. He provided the money for the Sunday School prizes for regular attendance and the memorizing of Bible verses as well as for the candy for the Christmas treat out of his own pocket. The latter was one of his greatest pleasures. With the same pleasure that he bought the candy for the children's Christmas treat, he bought numbers of tickets which he sent to those, especially widows and orphans, whom he thought hardly able to spend their own money. He loved children and wanted to see them happy. He moved among them radiating a benign influence. He spoke sublime truths in simple language. One morning his theme was love. He admonished us to love Jesus, to love our parents, to love one another and to love our Superintendant. At this point to his delight and the great amusement of the rest of the school, a soulfull little voice from the infant class piped up with: "Why grandfather, I love you." It was the truth.

On week days, I never went home from school without first going to the store to greet him where he stood behind his high desk in his office at the back of the store. The place was often full of men—farmers, selling produce, borrowing money or asking advice—but there was always a welcome for the little girl, a kiss and a gentle pat on the head. As I sped away satisfied, I often heard him answer their queries with: "That's Ben's youngest." I could not know the pain at the old man's heart for the loss of that son who was to have been the prop of his old age, and on whose broad shoulders he was beginning to rest his large business interests. The realization came only later at grandfather's death. That was the first great sorrow to cross my path, for, at my father's going, I was too young to realize its significance.

Grandmother's interest in the Church was just as great as grandfather's, but her strength was failing and she did not take such an active a part. It was she who always thought of the little things that add so much to the daily happiness of others. When she called on the pastor's wife, and that was often, she never left without slipping a bill into her hand for some little luxury that she might crave. It was done as

secretly as possible so there could be no chance for a word of thanks or an opportunity for anyone else to notice it. She visited us in all of our childhood sicknesses and never came empty handed. In addition to other good things she was sure to bring oranges—a rare treat in those days. Her visits were rather stately affairs, which no one took lightly. For that hour grandfather laid aside all his business. Good old Fanny was ordered hitched to the broad seated rig of many years service and with grandmother seated at his side, grandfather would pick up the reins, give a cluck, and a slap on Fanny's broad back with a rein. She would start off at a brisk trot never slacking her pace until she stood at the door of the big house on the hill.

If possible mother always met them at the front door and escorted them upstairs. In those big unheated halls there could be no question of laying aside wraps, but inside one of the big bedrooms she would take grandfather's silk hat and grandmother's cloak, and after a cheery word at the bedside of the patient they would sit down comfortably by the grate fire for a short chat on family affairs. Always the talk drifted into church matters, which lay close to their hearts. Before taking leave grandmother never failed to ask the patient what delicacy she might crave and, if possible, she always procured it.

Once when my mother lay very ill in her delirium she asked for lemons and a cone of loaf sugar. The lemons were easily procured but not the sugar in that form. Grandmother had Cincinnati searched until finally in a small German shop in an outlying district a cone of sugar was found. When mother recovered, she was greatly surprised to find this cone on the table at her bedside, a form of sugar she had not seen for years. The cone was no better than the sugar which we always used, but grandmother had gone to no end of trouble to satisfy the fancy of a sick brain. It was this same kindly spirit and thought for the comfort and welfare of the families of future generations of Baptist preachers that prompted her shortly before her death to deed the brick house next to the Baptist Church to the trustees for a parsonage.

Many years have passed since these two old people sat in the "amen-corner" of the Vevay Baptist Church and so lovingly watched over its destiny. To the little town, the

years have brought many changes leaving only a memory of the man who from 1850 to 1880 was known all up and down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers as "the Hay King." The firm of U. P. Schenck & Son had the largest warehouse between Cincinnati and New Orleans and was the largest shipper of produce. The partners in this firm were the moving spirits in every business undertaking in Vevay—the First National Bank, the Furniture Factory, the Woolen Mills, and the Chair Factory. Of these, the only one left is the First National Bank.

It was a great privilege to know those fine old people—Ulysses and Justine Schenck. They were of such upright and sterling character, that they, with many others of their generation, stand out apart. The question often arises, "shall we see their like again?"