

# I Remember My Grandmother

JULIE LECLERC KNOX

Some of my clearest childhood recollections are of my grandmother, Julie Elise LeClerc, and her home, the old "Le-Clerc House," now the "Swiss Inn" of Vevay, Indiana. Both of my grandfathers as well as my parental grandmother, passed off the stage of life before I came on, but my mother's mother quite made up to me for all the others. She was a very remarkable woman in many respects, but it was only as I grew older that I realized this.

Julie Elise was the daughter of Jean Daniel and Antoinette Dufour Morerod (pronounced Mó-ró). Antoinette was the sister of the Dufour brothers who came from Vevey, Switzerland, and founded the little town in southern Indiana which they named for their birthplace in the homeland. The large, brick house where Julie was born still stands in good repair on the western edge of Vevay. In the basement, once a wine cellar, is a mammoth cask, still intact, with a capacity of five hundred gallons, dating back to the time when these French-Swiss were famous for the quality of their wines. Jean Daniel had been a soldier of Napoleon and had helped to drag his cannon over the Alps before coming with the Dufours, the first colonists to settle in Switzerland County.

In 1832, against her parents' wishes, Julie was married before she was twenty to Robert E. LeClerc, born in Detroit of French parentage.<sup>1</sup> The marriage occurred in October, 1832, and, in the following year, the young couple opened the hostelry which was never closed until a year before my grandmother's death at the age of eighty-three. My Grandfather died in 1856 and left his widow with nine children, the youngest then but three years old. One son, Aime, when but a child, had preceded his father in death. If grandmother ever regretted the early romantic marriage that committed her to a life of hard work and heavy responsibilities, no one heard her murmur. Her sisters led sheltered lives but she never

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<sup>1</sup>It gave me quite a turn, when recently, I found in the family attic, some love letters of Robert, my grandfather, to Julie, my grandmother, and one of hers to him. It was hard to think of her as other than I knew her, a plump, matronly little, old lady—very difficult to vision her as young and the object of the passionate adoration that those tattered, old papers, yellow with age, breathed forth. Young Robert accused the girl he loved of flirting with him, by putting off the wedding day from time to time, and hinted darkly at what might become of him if she continued to listen to parental objections on account of his poverty. I suppose the consent of the obdurate father and mother was at last won, for I can not imagine Grandmother as I knew her to have been a party in an elopement.

seemed to think their lot was any happier than her own and to the end of her days, "Robert" was enshrined in her loyal heart.<sup>2</sup>

I've often wondered about Grandfather Robert and tried to picture his personality. I know that he had literary tastes. My first copies of Shakespeare and Byron were inherited from him. The first was guiltless of back, with very fine print and very thin paper. My eyes ache even now to think of it. Byron had one leather cover left and the frontispiece was a picture of the author. When one comes to think of it, does it not seem rather unusual for a young, pioneer inn-keeper to care for such books, or any books, for that matter?

Grandmother, as I knew her, had little time for reading, but when she did read it was along historical lines and I well remember her advising me to spend time on history. She believed that reading fiction was often a waste of time. The books that came down to me from her, are historical, philosophical or religious, as: *Royal Path of Life*, *Museum of Antiquity*, *History of the Bible*, *Egypt and the Holy Land*, *Queenly Women*, *Crowned and Uncrowned*. The daguerreotypes of my youthful grandfather, one in a brooch, represent him in rather handsome, dashing profile, not unlike Lord Byron. A large portrait in oil shows him older and more sedate, a stately gentleman in high stock, with long patrician nose, inherited by some of his children and grandchildren. The companion portrait of Grandmother was painted shortly after her marriage. She wears a white cap with coquettish pink bow, for, no matter how young the bride, she at once assumed a cap—symbol of wifedom. I remember seeing her without her black lace cap only when arranging her hair. Ever after my grandfather's death, she wore heavy black and when she went to church or called on her friends she donned a little bonnet with long, black crepe veil. She not only put on mourning but dressed all her children in black, even to the youngest, then just three years old. This was an old French custom, dressing in black after the death of a loved one, and was followed by all of the family until very recent years. She went calling but seldom, as she was too busy attending to her multifarious tasks and entertaining those who called on her, her social duties being very one sided.

I have heard one of my aunts tell how as a child, she

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<sup>2</sup> Though my grandmother had several offers of marriage during her widowhood, her first and only love was never supplanted.

admired her parents when dressed for a party—Grandmother in stiff pink silk and Grandfather in broadcloth, swinging a gold-headed cane, and how she and several of her brothers and sisters, with adoring admiration, tagged along after them a block or two. But when they were kindly but firmly admonished, "Now, children, it is time you went back home," they *went* without a word of protest.

Born in 1812, when women were handicapped by circumstances and prejudices against female education, my grandmother had more than the usual opportunities of the time, though they seem quite meagre now. Besides the village school, she and her sisters had a short time at a Louisville boarding school. Yet she developed into a good business woman for any day, but especially for that early period. She did her own marketing, personally superintended the dining room and kept her own books. After the day's work was over, she sat her great desk, behind the immense anthracite stove, in the private family sitting-room and balanced her accounts. At such a time, children were warned, not by her but by one of the aunts, to be quiet as "Grandma was working on her books." She was never in debt to any one but many were in debt to her. She was always distinctly the head of her house, not in a domineering way, but in a gentle, dignified manner and she was always looked up to and consulted by her daughters, married and single, who talked "the matter over with mother first." Her sons-in-law, too, had the habit of asking her advice.

Left a widow with nine children, she bravely faced the future and not only reared all of them but when two widowed daughters returned home with five little boys between them, she helped to rear those boys to manhood. For many years only two married daughters lived out of her home, and it is safe to say that there were not many days that some of those two families did not sit down at Grandma's table. Always at Christmas and Thanksgiving, we were all there together. She would have resented any other arrangement. The great Christmas tree in the back parlor was shut off from curious children until the proper time. Then we entered *en masse*, to behold the gorgeous sight, decked out with candles, trimmings and everything, with one of the boarders dressed as Santa Claus. The fundamental gift for each of us was a little net bag filled with candy sticks, striped like barber

poles, little hard peppermint ovals, gumdrops, peanuts and an orange, the last at that time a luxury indulged in only at Yuletide. Then there were gifts from every one of the family to each other. Each one had quite a pile of gifts.

Grandma gave to each of her seven daughters, on successive Christmas days in the order of their ages handsome Swiss gold watches, with long ropes of heavy, solid-gold chains that went around the neck and hung below the waist in a loop, the watch being anchored in a fancy hip-pocket. Some of these watches were embossed with delicate, black lines and the chains had ornaments, called "charms", strung on them. One of the aunts had a tiny spy-glass on her chain, that piqued my childish curiosity and it was regarded a special privilege to get to peep through it. These watches have been handed down in the family to the second and third generation and are prized as heirlooms.

At the earnest solicitation of her family, Grandmother sat for her picture and gave one to each of her children on a certain Christmas day. This likeness, taken in her old age, by a really good photographer, is excellent. The black lace scarf about her neck was fastened by a handsome onyx brooch, now my treasured possession. The portraits were handed down to the grandchildren, like the watches and old family silver and jewelry.

I can see the little, old lady now just as she looks in the photograph, coming along the front hall, smiling at me and smoothing her black sateen apron with one hand while she reached into her capacious pocket with the other and drew out a nickel which she placed in my willing hand, saying, "Here is something for a nice, little girl," which I may have been, at that precise minute, in her eyes. She gave me my first silk dress, a warm, rich garnet color. How well I remember it! There was a peculiar fragrance about that silk, as of bees at work in honey. My first fine hat feather, in the day of ostrich plumes, was a gift from her. It was long, soft and curly and circled my hat crown in a way that thrilled me to contemplate. The dear, old soul! She loved to give happiness. I was her namesake but she played no favorites and was just as generous with her other nine grandchildren.

When epidemics broke out, we had to stop at Grandma's on the way to school and be fortified against contagion by

little asafoetida-filled flannel bags, worn around the neck like a locket, but next to the skin. The odor acted like a charm to keep companions at bay, which was probably where the real efficacy came in. We were carefully dosed with some sort of cordial, likewise supposed to guard against disease. If we got sick, in spite of all her precautions, Grandma was on hand to help us get well again.

When talking to her brothers or sisters Grandma always spoke French, and also when speaking with the old French farmer who delivered butter and eggs at the back door. When all the great-aunts and great-uncles broke into torrents of French, which they always did when the children were present, it sounded to us like pigs under the gate. As a prelude, one of them would usually remark that "Little pitchers have big ears." When I asked my mother what kind of pitchers they were talking about, she tried not to look amused and put me off with the promise that I would understand when I grew up. All of which prejudiced me so against the French language that I never cared to learn it. It was only after a college professor came to Vevay, searching for local history, and I saw my Great-Uncle Aimie Morerod open a desk, brought from Switzerland, full of old French papers, that I felt a yen to be able to read them. But before I was sufficiently conversant with the language to do so, this old uncle passed on, the desk fell to another branch of the family, and the papers were lost sight of. My mother and aunts refused to study French, though they all spoke somewhat like foreigners. They wanted to be considered Americans and resented being called "little French girls" at school. A little lullaby with which my mother used to sing her children to sleep was all the French I ever heard from her. I doubt very much if she knew or cared what the poet's words meant.

Grandmother planned to send her two oldest daughters, the twins, Isabel Antionette and Henrietta Angelique, to Louisville to a boarding-school. Their trunks were already packed when her eldest sister, who was looked up to as the head of the family, counselled her against such a great risk in such evil times, as sending young girls so far from home among strangers. So their ambitious hopes of a broader education were destroyed, and at the same time, those of all the younger sisters, who could not expect to have what was denied the older ones. A grudge was held against grim, old

Aunt Harriet to the end of her life, by the girls who missed boarding-school, because their opportunities were no better than those of most of their associates.

Two sons were sent to a Catholic school in Cincinnati, for although Grandma was a staunch Presbyterian and brought up her family in that faith, the Catholic schools at that time were believed to be the best to be found in her section of the country. In the attic I found some sketch books of the uncles, Genie and Johnny, as they were always affectionately called, which show that they had some artistic ability. They both died before my mother was married. Uncle Genie, whose pictures show him to have been a rather handsome young man as a distinctly French type, was a civil engineer.<sup>3</sup> Uncle Johnny, when a mere lad, ran off to the Civil War, and died shortly after from the effects of hardship and exposure and a wound received. Aime, the youngest, died when nine or ten years old. And so the name Le-Clerc died with the only daughter who never married, except as preserved as a Christian name by one member in each generation of every branch of the family.

One winter Grandmother was prevailed upon to take a trip South to visit a daughter whose husband at that time kept a provision store at Luna Landing, Arkansas. The husband of her youngest daughter fitted up a house boat and took a load of provisions down the Mississippi and she went with them, a thing that was frequently done in that day. Many of the older inhabitants of Switzerland County had "made their pile" by the flat-boat trade. George Cary Eggleston's *Last of the Flatboats* portrays this industry. She brought back with her an old negro servant to look after her horse, tend her garden, do the chores, and be a general factotum. He was called "Old Henry". He attempted to give the impression that he was a "Voodoo" doctor, whatever that might mean. He had a certain dignity and wore, among other articles of raiment, a derby hat. He walked with a limp which he said he had acquired from the bite of an allegator. This converted what might have seemed an affliction, into a glamorous distinction, to our childish imaginations. Our boy-cousins brought back from the mysterious sancity of Old Henry's quarters fascinating stories of the contents. For one thing there was a human

<sup>3</sup> He married young but did not live long and died without issue.

finger in pickle. From him they learned all sorts of negro superstitions, which they relayed to us, with considerable additions and embroiderings, I am inclined to believe. With difficulty I managed to shake myself free from superstitions relating to picking up pins, making wishes, thrusting in my left shoulder, and actions that were supposed to bring or ward off trouble.

Grandmother's house was always full in summer, of non-paying guests—including distant kin who came in rafts and stayed months at a time. Dimly remembered are Great-Aunts Rose and Roxy, Cousin Victorine, and a Creole from New Orleans with three impish little boys who are more vividly recalled. There were many others whose names have wholly faded from my mind. It is a great wonder that Grandma was not eaten out of house and home, but she seemed never happier than when playing the gracious hostess. She was always too busy to return any of these visits but occasionally the more ambitious of her seven daughters did go to Gallipolis, Ohio, a hotbed of Grandfather's French kin, or take a trip "down south" to see the family of Grandmother's youngest sister, Josephine, or visit more distant relatives, for the family was very, very clannish and "great on kin."

The LeClerc House was established in 1833 on ground purchased from Nicholas Longworth of Cincinnati, forebear of the late member of the national House of that name. This hotel was operated until 1894, just a year before Grandma's death, a period of sixty-one years, a long time for the continuation of a business at the same place by the same person, and especially by a woman. From Grandfather's death in 1856, Grandmother conducted the business herself. The LeClerc House was "known to all the vagrant train," like that of the "village preacher" of Goldsmith, and beggars went away from the back door with full baskets. Several hungry youngsters, fed in Grandmother's kitchen, rising to some prominence later, returned unashamed to acknowledge their one time poverty and bless the family of their benefactress.

The original hotel building was added to until in 1851. It grew, like the "Chambered Nautilus," into the present three story brick with some forty rooms. A great cellar, divided into several immense rooms, was as awesome to me

as Mammoth Cave. I had the courage to penetrate the inky darkness but once. In those days there were no electric lights to turn on, and it was necessary to go armed only with a candle or a lantern. Above the old dining room there was once a ball-room with cotillion figures painted on the floor, I have been told. The French and Swiss were socially inclined and could swing a lightsome foot. Almost every one of all the larger houses, private or public, was equipped with a ball-room.

The old ball-room was later rented to the Odd Fellows as a meeting place and was approached by an outer stair. It became a hall sacred to that secret order, and was thus surrounded with a mysterious glamour to children, because of dark whispers that members rode a goat upon occasion. We wondered if the uncanny animal, suggestive of the powers of darkness, might not be tethered thereabouts. I remember once of having a fleeting glimpse of that room. I stealthily followed a maid ("hired girl," we dubbed such servants then) who went in to sweep and dust. Warily I trailed the maid as she went on with her work, until she let out a terrible "Ba-a-a!" which struck terror to my excited imagination and sent me scurrying down stairs (where I belonged) to relate the adventure to the rest of the youngsters. They jeered at my fears and boasted that they were not scared of any old goat, but none of them ventured up to investigate.

In those days the private part of the hotel was divided from the public part by the hall. The west entrance led into a large, square room, dubbed "the gentlemen's sitting room" a place taboo to little girls of the family but the boy-cousins had full range. Of course, the room had all of the fascination of Blue Beard's closet. Needless to say, we did steal in occasionally to look around, but there was nothing special to see. There was a tall desk with immense guest-book in which the "drummers," as the commercial travelers were called, registered; big tables to display their wares; a giant stove; and huge splint-bottomed chairs. In fact everything in that room looked Brobdingnagian to us whose heads scarcely reached the desk. There were great brass cuspidors, that old black Henry had to care for daily, and row on row of brass candlesticks that had to be scoured and replenished with tallow candles, which we had seen



made in the moulds. These were used by the transients, who came in at night on steamboats, to light themselves to bed. These candles caused the old LeClerc House to be known, up and down the river, as "The House of Candles"—not "A Thousand Candles," though there seemed to be that many to children. There was no night clerk, so each drummer learned to light his taper, climb to the third story, kept sacred to transients, and turn in at the first room whose open door showed it to be unoccupied. This custom offered a chance for a free lodging to those inclined to abuse a trust by an early and unostentatious flitting. Cincinnati and Louisville newspapers often published reminiscences of the old time drummers, appreciative of the old LeClerc House, its candles, hospitality, French cookery and presiding genius, "Aunt Julia," as she was called. But those old traveling men, having long ceased to travel, are now lodging in their long home, as are all the adults who made the old hotel a homelike place in those days.<sup>4</sup>

The old Hotel Register that seemed large enough to me for Gulliver's signature is now the property of the Switzerland County Historical Society. It bears not a few nationally known names. Among them are: Henry S. Lane, whose efforts helped to make Lincoln President; Benjamin Harrison, who stopped there when electioneering as a candidate for Governor of Indiana; Daniel Vorhees, "the tall Sycamore of the Wabash," as he was admiringly called by his followers. There were many others of the rather recent period that now seems so remote. One of my earliest recollections is of Governor James D. Williams, "Old Blue Jeans," who took me on his knee in the family sitting room, and offered me a big two-cent piece if I would kiss him. That was the day when candidates felt they had to "make over" the children to get votes. I did not want the kiss but I did want the money. I was admonished by the surrounding family, to wrap the coin in paper and never, never spend it. But, I fear that it was all too soon laid out for some tempting confection.

In later years, W. H. Venable, the Ohio historian, and James Whitcomb Riley met for the first time at the LeClerc House. I have recently found in an old family scrap-book the

<sup>4</sup> Caroline Dale Owen Snedeker, in her novel, *Seth Way*, incidentally speaks of some of the personages of New Harmony passing through Vevay and being shown hospitality by my grandmother, Mrs. Julie LeClerc.

poem by which the historian attempted to commemorate that meeting. The paper has yellowed and the lines entitled "The Greenfield Wizard," begin with the stanza:

An angel with mysterious eyes,  
Appareled in Hoosier Guise,  
I entertained him unawares  
At Vevay, in a room upstairs  
Of the old inn, yclept LeClercs.<sup>5</sup>

In yet later days Thomas R. Marshall and others were guests.

A huge, clarion-voiced bell, set in the cupalo atop of the house, rang regularly three times a day to summon regular boarders to their meals. The ringing of the bell was so regular that people could set their clocks by it. What a thrill we youngsters got out of the occasional almost sacred commissions to ring it! Visions of "Curfew shall not ring tonight!" darted through our minds as we were swung almost off the floor by the strong pull of the swinging bell. It rang out the old and in the new years for an eventful epoch. It had the distinction of being the first to sound a fire alarm. With or without the consent of the owner, it was often borrowed when there was a "shivaree" (*charivari*) on, a celebration supposed to contribute to the happiness and anxiety of newly weds. A fine Halloween prank was to take the bell for a vacation, but woe to the luckless wight responsible for its not being on the job at the proper time next morning. It finally burst its throat on some forgotten occasion, and now, like the old Register it is the property of the County Historical Society.

The spacious, double private-parlors of the LeClerc House were a social center over which my grandmother and her seven daughters presided and where they dispensed hospitality. It was a place to feel the public pulse. Every evening the black horse-hair chairs and sofas were filled with callers, all talking at once. There were family dinner parties, with great-aunts and great-uncles and cousins galore, all feasting and having a good time together. No one's birthday was passed over in silence. Each must be celebrated, especially Grandmother's. Such a party was always arranged as a surprise, and strange as it may seem the little old woman was apparently delightedly surprised every

<sup>5</sup> Many regular boarders remained for years. Once a boarder was likely to mean always a boarder. Some lived there fifteen, twenty and twenty-five years, until they all seemed like members of one large family.

time. One of the largest receptions was on the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the LeClerc House, which was also the occasion of a farewell party for a grandson, Harry L. Titus, reared in the Hotel. He was departing for California to make his fortune as a lawyer, in which he succeeded.<sup>6</sup> An item in an old scrap-book describes the affair in the flamboyant style of the period, stating that there were at least two hundred guests present. The great dining room became a ball-room with Grandmother, her daughters and grandchildren all on the floor.

Grandmother had a wonderful garden with all the old fashioned flowers. In recent years these have again "come into their own," for there are fashions in flowers just as in clothes, furniture and names. Arbors, covered with white, red and purple grapes sheltered the walks between the flower beds. Gay yellow marigolds with their clean pungent odor rioted in profusion among heavy headed dahlias. Verbenas sprawled over the ground. Giddy bright colored nasturtiums climbed fences turned sunward. There were petunias with grace and fragrance, and cockscomb, known also by the more glamorous name of Prince's Feather, and seeming to fit both titles equally well. There were bleeding-hearts that suggested valentines, and maiden-hair ferns whose threadlike fronds substantiated their name. There were dainty rock-roses that thrust their delicate blossoms between the stones in the path, often to be crushed by our ruthless coppertoed shoes. There were touch-me-nots whose seeds seem to have perished from the earth for where now may they be found? We could not understand why Grandma tore down and uprooted the morning-glories in such heartless fashion. We did not understand her when she told us that they were marauders. Larkspurs, mignonette and sweet smelling alyssum were grown, but, perhaps most charming of all, were the vanilla and strawberry shrubs which squeezed tightly in our hands, gave up such delightful fragrance. I think Owen Meredith must have had this flower in mind when he penned these lines in "Lucile":

The heart of man is like that delicate weed  
Which requires to be trampled on, sorely indeed,  
Before it gives forth the fragrance we wish to extract....

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<sup>6</sup> Mr. Titus became a corporation lawyer for the Spreckles Company and built him a fine home on Coronada Beach, sold after his death to Madame Schumann-Heinke. He married the niece of A. E. Horton, founder of San Diego, California.

More delicate flowers were nurtured in the pits—bell shaped fuschia with long, protruding tongue and geranium slips and tender young roses. Chrysanthemums were potted and seated on tierlike supports, while bachelor-buttons were permitted to "rough it out" being left in the ground all winter which did not seem quite fair.

There was a mock-orange tree in a tub in the dining room which tempted with its deceptive fruit. There was a wonderful and lovely night-blooming cereus, that people came from far and near to admire as they filed up and down past it, by twos and threes.

On Saturdays, the flowers that lent themselves to bouquets, were gathered while the dew was yet on them, and Grandma sat on the wide back porch and arranged them in little tight bunches, tied neatly with string and placed each in its own container along the ledge of the porch, ready to be taken in the cool of the evening, to decorate the graves of her husband and three sons.<sup>7</sup> Old Billy was hitched up and one of the children drove Grandmother to the cemetery. Billy was a stubborn, hardmouthed, old fellow. He held his head on one side and in spite of curb and rein, like the wind, went where he listed. But there his likeness to the wind ended for he took his own good time. It shames me now, to think how averse I was to taking my turn in driving for the dear old lady but Billy was to blame.<sup>8</sup>

Through her long and useful career, Julie Elsie LeClerc was fortunate in preserving that somewhat sturdy health, so characteristic of the Swiss stock. After a short general decline during her last year or two, she passed on. She lived to be almost eighty-three, being spared all of the infirmities that usually accompany old age.<sup>9</sup>

At the urgent request of her family, Grandmother had about decided to retire from business at the end of her fifty-fifth year as inkeeper, but, at the last minute, she determined to continue a while longer because she liked to keep busy. Six years later the old LeClerc Hotel was for-

<sup>7</sup> Her seven daughters survived her.

<sup>8</sup> The monument in the center of a long lot, was one of the first to be erected in the cemetery and yet holds up its head proudly, acknowledging few better. Now, stretched in a long line in front are the headstones marking the last resting places of dear, old Grandma and all of her family (except three) of which in death as in life, she was center and circumference.

<sup>9</sup> Her sight and hearing remained good, she was free from rheumatism and her mental powers remained undimmed to the very end.

mally closed to the public, the several maids having been given sufficient warning to find other places. Some of them had been in my grandmother's service so long that it was with great reluctance that they left. The private part of the house continued to be occupied by the old owner with the two daughters who still made their home with her, while a few apartments were rented. Here, where she had lived so long and had done so much, she died. Aware of the approaching end, she was fully prepared to meet it. In accordance with a family custom, dating back to the coming of the Dufour family to this country, the Ninetieth Psalm was read at her funeral services.<sup>10</sup>

The old LeClerc House remains in Vevay and is now called the Swiss Inn. Keeping step with the times, so many changes have been made in the interior that I quite lose my bearings when I venture into the building. It takes a "heap of living in a house to make it home" and surely the old LeClerc House proved its right to be called a home, not only for the LeClerc family but for many persons besides who shared its hospitality.

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<sup>10</sup> When the old father of the Dufours bade his sons and daughters farewell on their departure for America, he offered up a prayer for their safety and success and adjured them to meet together for divine worship as often as possible and when it was not possible to have a preacher he requested them to read to each other Psalm ninety and to have it read at all funerals of the family which custom has been kept up, faithfully, in all branches of the family unto the fourth and fifth generations.