

Julia L. Dumont of Vevay

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and

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On January 2, 1857, in Vevay, Julia Louisa Cory Dumont, wife of John L. Dumont, died and thus ended a profound influence exercised for more than forty years in the town and the surrounding countryside.¹

Julia Louisa Cory was born late in 1794 in Marietta, Ohio, a few months after her father was found killed, presumably by Indians. The following spring, her mother returned to New York, carrying the baby daughter with her in a saddle-bag on the arduous journey over the mountains and through the wilderness. Mrs. Cory contrived to support herself and the baby by doing tailoring. Later she married again, this time, a man with six children. After the death of her second husband, she was again compelled to turn to her old occupation of tailoring. It is said that in this she was an expert.

Of far greater importance to the future of the little Julia, was the fact that the mother was an exceptionally well-educated woman, for that time, and the author of at least one book called, *Lucinda*, or the *Mountain Mourner*. Consequently, Mrs. Cory, or Mrs. Mandville, as her name was then, saw to it that her daughter received the best possible education and developed in her a love of books and learning that lasted through her life. One result of this was that, at what we now consider high school age, Julia Cory was teaching school, and at the age of seventeen, we have a record of a poem, presumably written by her in Saratoga, New York, on the fourth of July, 1812, when news about the war with Great Britain was daily expected. It was while teaching that she met and married John Dumont, in Greenfield, New York, in August of 1812. It is told that they first became acquainted through the medium of a poem of hers which so intrigued the young man that he entered into a correspondence with the writer, later meeting and marrying the young woman whose verse had so impressed him. In the spring of 1813, this young couple came to Cin-

¹ This article was first published in the *Reveille-Enterprise of Vevay, Indiana*, where it appeared as a longer article in two installments in the issues of Feb. 10, 17, 1938. Mrs. Lucille Detraz Skelcher is a great-great-granddaughter of Mrs. Dumont. Miss Jane Lucille Skelcher is a daughter of Mrs. Skelcher.

cinnati, where John Dumont became a land agent for General William Henry Harrison. A year later the Dumonts came to Vevay, then a town just beginning to take shape in the center of the Swiss settlement on the Ohio. The village must have looked crude and unfinished to the eyes of this nineteen year old wife and her slightly older husband, used as they were to the more settled portions of the empire state, but they lost little time in becoming an integral part of the community and so remained.

Beginning about 1820 and continuing most of the time for the next thirty-five years or so, Mrs. Dumont taught school. One of her first schools was held in the upstairs room of the older part of the house now occupied by Mr. and Mrs. J. K. Danglade. At this time, the house, not yet plastered, was too cool for comfort, so Mrs. Dumont suggested to some of the older boys that if they would do the work, she would procure the necessary lumber for ceiling the room. This was done and the room was consequently much more comfortable. Among the pupils who helped was "Uncle" Aime Morerod, still remembered in Vevay. At another time, she taught in a building on the lot where the present James Sieglitz residence stands. Perret Dufour, Switzerland County's historian, was also an early pupil of hers.

Tradition has it that Mrs. Dumont, in her earlier days of teaching, often had her baby in its cradle in one corner of the room so that she could watch the child while pursuing her pedagogical duties. At the same time, it was not unusual for her to have, besides the baby, a primer class in one corner and an advanced algebra or geometry class in another corner, keeping a very competent eye on all three. This was the more remarkable when we remember that at the time she began teaching, it was indeed out of the ordinary for any woman to be proficient in any branch of higher mathematics. Many women in that day, having received an education equivalent to that of finishing the fourth grade, were considered well educated.

In that earlier period, the usual accompaniments of teaching were the free use of the rod, the dunce cap, and allied devices. The teacher, usually a man, would sometimes wear out five or six stout switches in the course of a daily session, punishments being swift and sure for the most trivial offences. For a really serious offence, a delinquent was often given a beating severe enough to tear his shirt and

stain it with blood. As for giving the pupil any commendation for work well performed, the very suggestion was too ridiculous to be considered.

However, Mrs. Dumont did not agree with this viewpoint and gave praise where it was earned. Of this, in *The First of the Hoosiers*, George Carry Eggleston says that Julia L. Dumont was

the wisest woman, and the most successful teacher I have ever known. . . . I have called her a Dr. Arnold in petticoats, but she was more even than that. Her gift of mastery over young minds was an inspiration, her sympathy with youthful thought and feeling was a sixth sense. Indeed her gift and her practice of encouraging pupils was looked upon by many parents at that time as dangerous in tendency. To those who had been trained in the severities of an older and ruder time, praise for a pupil seemed a perilous throwing down of the bars of discipline. It was feared also that commendation might breed vanity and self-conceit of a kind to endanger the salvation of souls.²

Of her, in an article published in what was then *Scribner's Monthly* in March, 1879, Edward Eggleston wrote:

We had one teacher who was so far as natural genius for teaching goes, the best of all I have ever known. Mrs. Julia L. Dumont is like all our western writers of that day almost entirely forgotten but in the time, before railways, when the west, shut in by the Alleghanies, had an incipient literature, Mrs. Dumont occupied no mean place as a writer of poetry and prose tales. Eminent literateurs of the time from Philadelphia and Cincinnati used to come to Vevay, and see her, but they themselves—these great lights of ancient American Literature away back in the forties—are also forgotten. . . .

We thought Mrs. Dumont's poem on "The Retreat of the Ten Thousand" admirable, but we were partial judges. Her story of "Boonesborough" was highly praised by the great lights of the time. But her book of stories is out of print, and her poems are forgotten. . . .

But as a schoolmistress, Mrs. Dumont deserves immortality. She knew nothing of systems, but she went unerringly to the goal by pure force of native genius. In all her earlier life she taught because she was poor, but after her husband's increasing property relieved her from necessity, she still taught from love of it. When she was past sixty years old, a school room was built for her alongside her residence, which was one of the best in the town. It was here that I first knew her after she had already taught two generations in the place. The "graded" schools had been newly introduced and no man was found who could either in requirements or ability, take precedence of the venerable schoolmistress; so the high school was given to her.

I can see the wonderful old lady now, as she was then, with her cape pinned awry, rocking her splint bottom chair nervously while she talked. Full of all manner of knowledge, gifted with something very like elo-

² George Cary Eggleston. *The First of the Hoosiers* (Philadelphia, 1903), 145-146.

quence in speech, abounding in affection for her pupils, and enthusiasm in teaching, she moved us strangely. Being infatuated with her, we became fanatic in our pursuit of knowledge, so that the school hours were not enough, and we had a "lyceum" in the evening for reading compositions and a club for the study of history. If a recitation became very interesting, the entire school would sometimes be drawn into the discussion of the subject; all other lessons went to the wall, books of reference were brought out of her library, hours were consumed and many a time the school session was prolonged until darkness forced us reluctantly to adjourn.³

These lyceum sessions were so interesting to the participants that little or no notice was taken of the time consumed. Two of the girls who attended these lyceums boarded at the home of Mrs. Lucy Detraz. One winter evening, "Aunt Lucy," who always sat up until they came home, waited for them and as their usual hour came and passed, she waited uneasily for their appearance. Ten o'clock, eleven and still the clock ticked on to midnight and no girls. After it struck twelve, "Aunt Lucy" very indignantly put on her wraps, lighted a lantern and started for Mrs. Dumont's. Arriving there, she found the lyceum session going full blast. Interested in what they were doing, both teacher and pupils had entirely forgotten time until they heard "Aunt Lucy's" indignant exclamation: "Julia Dumont, you ought to be ashamed of yourself for keeping these children here till such an hour!"

Mrs. Dumont's library was by far the most complete of any in the community and she was thoroughly familiar with the volumes included, among which were Shakespeare's plays, the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and books on philosophy and poetry, as well as those which related to the general school subjects which she taught. This wide variety of reading matter was at the disposal of and used by the entire town.

Edward Eggleston further said of Mrs. Dumont in his article on western teachers:

Mrs. Dumont was the ideal of a teacher because she succeeded in forming character. She gave her pupils unstinted praise, not hypocritically, but because she lovingly saw the best in every one. We worked in the sunshine. A dull but industrious pupil was praised for diligence, a bright pupil for ability, a good one for general excellence. The dullards got more than their share, for, knowing how easily such a one is disheartened, Mrs. Dumont went out of her way to praise the first show of success in a slow scholar. She treated no two alike. She was

³ Edward Eggleston, "Some Western Schoolmasters," *Scribner's Monthly* (March 1879), XXVII, 750-751.

full of all sorts of knack and tact, a person of infinite resources for calling out the human spirit. She could be incredibly severe, when it was needful, and no overgrown boy whose meanness had once been analyzed by Mrs. Dumont ever forgot it.⁴

George Cary Eggleston tells how Mrs. Dumont taught him to write legibly after all his previous teachers had failed to teach him even the rudiments of writing. These teachers included in addition to the ordinary school instructor, several special writing masters. But he himself says that the result of all their efforts was nil, and that he could not read the manuscript when it was cold. He reports that his latest teacher had

made a positively desperate attempt to teach me to write. He had tied up my fingers with blue ribbons to compel me to hold my pen correctly. He had written "miserable" across each page of my copybook—emphasizing his criticism with even more elaborate flourishes than usual. He had called me "dunce," "booby," and other pet names of like sort, and finally he had dismissed me from his school, sending my mother a letter in which he assured her that it was useless to make any further effort to teach me an art which I was wholly incapable of learning.⁵

After this, George asked Mrs. Dumont to excuse him from all writing exercises and upon her surprised inquiry as to whether he had learned to write so well that he couldn't learn any more, the shame-faced boy confessed that his teacher had found him incapable of learning to write. Mrs. Dumont drew the story of his experiences from him and she promised to teach him to write a clear and legible hand so that in two weeks he could write a letter to this writing master at her dictation and thus show the man that his estimate of the boy's capabilities was far from correct. Buoyed by her faith in him, he made up his mind he would learn to write under her direction, though he had to give up all his days and nights to succeed. He was determined, even though it should involve physical torture, to justify this faith in him by becoming a good scribe. Unconventionally, she explained that flourishes were unnecessary, that a difference in width of stroking was not needed but legibility was, and that the method of holding the pen was not as important as whether or not it was comfortable and natural to the user. To George's astonishment, he could read what he had written after the very first session, and, at the end

⁴ *Ibid.*, 751.

⁵ G. C. Eggleston, *First of the Hoosiers*, 162-163.

of the appointed two weeks, he joyfully wrote as follows to the writing master who had given him up: "Dear Sir: I am writing this letter at the dictation of my teacher, Mrs. Dumont. Mrs. Dumont thinks you should be pleased to see that, after two weeks of instruction I have learned to write a legible hand, and that I am not quite so hopeless a booby as you thought me."

During these years of teaching, Mrs. Dumont's mother was at all times her constant companion and helped to run the household and care for the children while the daughter was at her school duties. In death they are still side by side.

A contributor to the success was her husband, himself a well-educated man, a fine lawyer, and always an advocate and active promoter of higher education. He filled several local offices, such as Justice of the Peace and Coroner, and, as early as October, 1814, served as inspector at the election dividing the county into townships. He was also president of the Vevay Literary Society. Upon Indiana's admission to the Union, he served as Switzerland County's first representative in the legislature. The trip to the capital, then located at Corydon, had to be made on horseback with his necessary baggage carried in saddlebags. He also served as a representative in five additional, though not always consecutive, annual sessions, and in the state senate continuously from 1831 to 1837. After his last term in the senate, he ran for Governor but was defeated. This was in the great internal improvements contest of 1837.⁶ His opponent was David Wallace, who stood for the whole program of public works adopted in 1836, while Dumont advocated a modification. Much of his work in the legislature was associated with the fight for a better educational system, and he was instrumental in helping to establish early in Indiana's history a high standard for the public education of her children.

John Dumont prospered and he acquired quite a little real estate around the town. He started and maintained for many years a nursery of fruit trees, raising and selling several varieties of apple trees, some of the varieties that he sold still being found in present day nursery catalogues. He was quite successful in his profession as a lawyer, having been admitted to the Indiana bar in 1818 at the March ses-

⁶ James H. Stewart, *Recollections of the Early Settlement of Carrol County* (Cincinnati, 1872), 151-154. Besides a brief account of the election of 1837, there are two letters written to Stewart by John Dumont, dated July 2 and July 22, 1837.

sion of the Switzerland Circuit Court. He continued his legal practice all his life and even in his seventies is said to have been one of the ablest lawyers in the community, equal to any of the younger ones in the use of "wise-cracks" and other repartee in the courtroom. It has been claimed of him that, as an old man, no one ever looked less like the lawyer of tradition, or was a better one.

In an article in an old *Reveille*, we find the following description of John Dumont in his later years:

He was dressed in a faded suit of butternut jeans with a cap to match, and trousers stuffed into soggy boots. The suit might have been made by his wife [dead for a few years] who was a noble teacher, but a flop as a tailoress [if she really made them] . . . John Dumont was "a helluva looking lawyer" but he was smart enough that looks didn't count.

In another article in the *Reveille* concerning early courts and lawyers, we find a description of the veteran attorney in action. At the time referred to he was in his seventies and more than somewhat frail, but according to the writer was "able to take care of his end of the case and occasionally amused the spectators with wise-cracks, but his voice was not strong." The opposition attorney in this particular case was a much younger man, but he didn't seem able to down the veteran as Mr. Dumont more than held his own in the many wordy clashes during the progress of the case. When the trial stopped for dinner, the young reporter of the proceedings says he was quite surprised to hear Mr. Dumont quickly accept the invitation of his opponent to have dinner with him. At the age of seventy-four, in 1861, he served as judge *pro tem* in the absence of the regular judge of the Switzerland County Court.

In a Vevay *Reveille* of July, 1869, quoting from the Cincinnati *Gazette*, is found some comment on Mrs. Dumont's earlier writings. It is stated that in 1827 the Cincinnati *Chronicle* offered a premium for the best story submitted, and the one accepted was "Theodore Harland", by Julia Dumont. This apparently was one of the earliest of her writings to be published in the West. It was copied by many other papers. In the issue, dated October 13, 1827, the *Rural Repository* of Hudson, New York, carried this tale as its leading story. In 1869, the Cincinnati *Gazette* received a copy of this number sent by some-one in Colorado, who told of finding the paper with the forty year old story of

Mrs. Dumont's under a sheltering rock. The *Repository*, probably put there by some lonely prospector, was still in a good state of preservation. Commenting on this, the Cincinnati writer recalled Mrs. Dumont's culture and attainments. He indicated that the story was probably one of her earlier published efforts and held it to be superior to much material published in the magazines of the year 1869.

Meredith Nicholson says:

Mrs. Dumont was the first Hoosier to become known beyond the state through imaginative writing. In the little school of story tellers and poets that flourished in the Ohio Valley in its early history, she was one of the chief figures. It had not then become the fashion to *transcribe with fidelity our American local life* and her prose sketches usually reflected nothing of pioneer days. *Her Life Sketches from Common Paths*, a Series of American tales, published at New York in 1856 is in the best manner of the day. Mrs. Dumont's technical skill was superior to that of her western contemporaries; but it is idle and ungracious to criticize the writings of one whose talents were so varied, and whose life was consecrated to good works.⁷

The book referred to was Mrs. Dumont's last published work and is a series of short stories. In her preface she says that the book was long planned, but delayed of execution as other duties intervened. She dedicated it to her two living sons, the only two remaining of the seven sons she had borne. Written in the fifties, the stories are, as might be expected, very moral in tone and expressed in flowery language. The heroes are knights in shining armor, or rather their nineteenth century equivalents, and the heroines are the proverbially delicate and shrinking damsels of romance. Stripped of some of their excess verbiage, the tales might be interesting even now, but written as they are, no one in the busy world of today is likely to take the time to find out.

The Dumonts owned property where the county infirmary now is. There they always lived, building their first home on that site. It was the Hon. John Dumont, who, when he became more prosperous, built the original house that is now used as the principal building by the infirmary. The stone addition at the back of the house was built by him as a surprise for his wife, when, in the summer of 1856, she made a trip to New York City to complete arrangements with the Appletons for the publication of her book. He had made provision for the building materials earlier, and, after her

⁷ Meredith Nicholson, *The Hoosiers* (New York, 1915), 92-94.

departure, the work of erecting the addition began at once. It was completed and ready for use when she returned. This was the "house with the Lombardy poplars" to which "Mark Bonamy" in *Roxy* brought his bride.

Aurelius Dumont, the third and youngest of the sons of John and Julia L. (Cory) Dumont to reach maturity, was the original of "Mark Bonamy." The original of "Roxy" was Harriet Dufour, daughter of Vincent Dufour. The marriage of Aurelius and Harriet was a very brilliant affair. The story is told that the bride's dress was of heavy, white satin elaborately embroidered with pearls and almost stiff enough to stand alone. Aurelius attended Hanover College, and at the age of twenty-two was elected auditor of Switzerland County. He was a gifted young lawyer and seemingly had a bright future before him, but death claimed him at the age of twenty-six. This was only a year after his marriage, and his wife followed him to the grave soon after. No children were born to the couple, but the story of the illegitimate child so dramatically portrayed in *Roxy* was based on fact.⁸

Julia L. Dumont was the mother of eleven children, some of whom died in childhood.⁹ A few of her descendants still live in Vevay.¹⁰ Born in 1794 and living till 1857, she was but sixty-three when she died.¹¹ Most of the time from the arrival of herself and husband in Vevay, a period of forty-three years, she served the community as an unusual and inspiring teacher of the young. In all of her later years, she taught mainly for the love of the work. Edward Eggleston did not praise her too highly, it seems, when he wrote that "as a schoolmistress" Julia L. Dumont "deserves immortality."¹²

⁸ This daughter of Aurelius Dumont lived with his father and mother for some years after the death of himself and wife. She was given the name, Julia Dumont. Later she went to live with her natural mother, who had married. The daughter took the name of her stepfather, becoming Julia Dumont ———. She lived a worthy life and married well.

⁹ Two sons of John and Julia L. Dumont (John and Henry) died at about the age of ten years each. Another son (Cornelius) died at the age of nine. A fourth son (Edgar) was drowned at the upper grade on a Sunday in July, 1846. He was thirteen years of age.

¹⁰ A short article on the descendants of Mrs. Dumont will be published in the next issue. There are living in Vevay at the present time just five lineal descendants of John and Julia L. Dumont. They are: Mrs. Louisa Detraz Fox, her two sons, and the authors of this paper, Mrs. Lucille Detraz Skelcher and Jane Lucille Skelcher.

¹¹ John Dumont survived his wife by a number of years. He died in 1870.

¹² Eggleston, "Western Schoolmasters," *loc. cit.*, 751.

¹³ In addition to the sources of information cited, material was found on the gravestones in the Vevay Cemetery, in the files of the *Vevay Reveille*, in the Court Records of Switzerland County, and in Perret Dufour, *History of Switzerland County*. Others facts were obtained from clippings in scrap-books of Julie LeClere Knox, Martha Detraz, and the Switzerland County Historical Society.