

Genealogy

GEORGE GILL KNOX—PIONEER CABINETMAKER
AND MILLER

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I have always thought I'd enjoy a grandfather, but one of those I was entitled to passed off the stage of life long before I came on, and the other, when I was too young to realize what a grandfather meant. I have a vague recollection of a white-haired kindly old man, that might have been Santa Claus for all I know, bending above my cradle. But he has always been a cherished tradition with me. I have always regretted that I was not permitted to know him. From the county history, old family letters, scrapbooks, and what I've heard my father and others say of him, I know he was a fine, kindly gentleman, a good citizen, loved and respected by his family and friends.

Among some old papers yellow and tattered with age, I found a poem he had written entitled "The Christian's Spring" which shows his love of nature and religious convictions, and more culture than is usually found in non-professionals of that early time. Letters from and to his children indicate that they depended on his judgment and advice. The relationship which usually exists between children and their mother was assumed by him. I have an idea that grandmother who was of the Poindexter family, that traced its lineage back to the thirteenth century and to the counts de Granville of the Isle of Jersey where the old manor house still stands near St. Helier, was proud and of a colder nature. I have pictured her as somewhat remote and dignified in stiff, black silk and lace mitts, leaving much of the mothering of her family to her husband and unmarried sister, Louisa. In those days the only place in the universe for spinsters was that of the patient drudge in the home of her married sisters. My father always spoke of his Aunt Louisa as an angel of mercy. She risked her life crossing the Ohio River on thin ice to be with her sister Maria who lived in Ghent, Kentucky, and was expecting the stork. Louisa con-

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tracted Asiatic cholera from nursing an orphaned great nephew and ended a life of abnegation.

Amanda Ruter Dufour, a poetess of some distinction at that time, is quoted in the *History of Dearborn, Ohio and Switzerland Counties, Indiana*, as writing "We have spent many hours, that are sweet to memory now, in the pleasant home of Mr. Knox, hard by the mill. His gentle wife and sister, Miss Louise Poindexter, and Lizzie, his daughter, near my own age then, are all tenderly remembered."¹

According to my father, grandfather believed, as did most people in those good, old days, that children should obey their parents and took no foolishness from his progeny, although kind and fair in meting out justice. He was fond of children and was wont to plane off curly shavings at his carpenter shop for them to play with, as I've been told by the descendants of some of those village children.

A small photograph of grandfather, called a *carte de visite*, in those days, in the old family album shows a hardy, elderly man with a heavy head of white hair, expectant looking eyes, evidently blue, spectacled, straight nose, and firm but good-natured looking mouth, left out in the open by white whiskers, landscaped off his face, and hanging fringe-like under a square, steady chin.

George Gill Knox, who was born in Madison County, Kentucky, came to Vevay from Frankfort, Kentucky, in 1815. He was a cabinetmaker, the first in Vevay, and the evidence of his skill may be seen in some of the old homes of the county. A maple bedstead of the style of 1830 and a graceful walnut table are in the possession of Evelyn Craig of Vevay, while a tall, handsome grandfather clock, cherry chest, walnut bureau, and picturesque, old rocker are the prized property of the writer.

When cabinetmaking ceased to be remunerative, he erected a carding machine to which he afterwards attached a mill for grinding corn and wheat. This was said to have been one of the first, if not the first gristmill in the county.

Together with two or three other mechanics and John Mendenhall, he worked for some time on a perpetual motion machine. They kept this a secret at the time. Needless to say the project failed signally, but the fact of their essay-

¹ *History of Dearborn, Ohio and Switzerland Counties, Indiana* (Chicago, 1885), 1131.

ing such an experiment shows they were reaching out for scientific progress.

When there was a movement to locate the county seat at several other places, he offered to contribute fifty dollars in carpenter work or ten dollars in cash. The value of the dollar has changed greatly as is shown by the fact this offer was considered worthy of mention in the county history. Besides his no other financial contribution was noted, except those of the Dufour brothers who founded the town.²

Grandfather was one of those who established the Methodist Episcopal church in Vevay, and in 1828 as trustee, was one of a committee to attend to the erection of a suitable building for worship. He was a leader of the temperance movement, which took moral courage, for then as now, it was not popular. He was prominent in the Masonic and I.O.O.F. lodges and served as county treasurer from 1830 to 1841.

Grandfather was an enthusiastic supporter of Henry Clay for president. At an early day Clay visited the French-Swiss Colony at Vevay, the guest of Jean Francois Dufour, Louis Gex Oboussier, and Jean Daniel Morerod. He enjoyed quaffing the homemade wine of great Grandfather Morerod on the spacious lawn of what is now the home of James S. Wright and his wife. The Vevay friends of the Great Compromiser met in 1824 at the tavern of Thomas Armstrong, now the home of Russell Pickett, and organized to promote Clay's candidacy for president and of Andrew Jackson for vice-president. Jean Francois Siebenthal was appointed chairman, and Grandfather Knox, secretary. It is curious to note that at the same time another group of citizens met at the courthouse to endorse DeWitt Clinton for president and Andrew Jackson for vice-president; while a month later a larger group pledged support to Andrew Jackson as president. While there seemed some difference of opinion as to where "Old Hickory" belonged, there was a general agreement that he belonged on the ticket, as succeeding events proved.

Grandfather was a friend and associate of Jean Francois Dufour in promoting the interests of the town and at the

² Perret Dufour, *The Swiss Settlement of Switzerland County, Indiana*, in the *Indiana Historical Collections* (Indianapolis, Indiana, 1916-), XIII (1925), 365.

death of my maternal great Uncle Dufour, he served as executor of the estate.

Grandfather's commission from Governor Jonathan Jennings, as captain of a Rifle Company is in the possession of the writer. This he later resigned to accept the appointment as adjutant of the Fourteenth Regiment of Indiana Militia. In 1817 or 1818 the military companies of Jefferson, Craig, Pleasant, and part of Cotton townships of Switzerland County composed the Fourteenth Regiment of Indiana Militia, and it was one of these companies that grandfather commanded.

The first house grandfather built in Vevay is located on Pike Street. In the county history it is noted that he cut the logs and floated them down the river.³ He built well for the house still sturdily stands and greatly belies its age. Grandmother was the proud possessor of the first rag carpet in Vevay. In an old family scrapbook appears an interview with Mrs. Loraine Wilcox, a pioneer of the village, in which she tells about this carpet. She says grandmother bought forty yards of it for forty dollars from a peddler. It seems grandfather had saved up that money for some fixed purpose, and when he heard of her purchase he exclaimed, "Why, you have ruined me!" But he did not scold, which illustrates his mildness or just the opposite characteristic of her for the Poindexters were considered rather "highly strung." Everybody, however, came to see the carpet.

Mrs. Wilcox told the reporter that she had put the first clothes on Robert, the first child of my grandparents, and that every year on the thirteenth of February, his birthday, he sent her a silver dollar. When seventy-six, he jokingly used to say he came precious near being a valentine.

The residence grandfather erected about 1827 on Main and Main Cross streets, opposite the courthouse, continues as one of the quaintest and most interesting, old homesteads in the town. There are two lots, 108 and 109 of the original plat as first laid out by Jean Francois Dufour from the land purchased from Congress by his oldest brother, Jean Jacques. Dufour sold 108 to Jacob Evertson in 1823, for one hundred dollars, and Evertson sold it to grandfather in 1827 for the same price. Lot 109 was sold to Louis Gex Oboussier and Marianne, his wife, for two hundred dollars, and they in turn

³ *History of Dearborn, Ohio and Switzerland Counties, Indiana*, 1238.

sold it to grandfather for the same in 1830. These deeds are in my possession. The property belonged in the Knox family until it was purchased in 1916 by William Lamson and is now owned and occupied by his daughters, Laura, Josephine, and Mary (Mrs. Stevens).

The old dwelling continues to sit for its picture by artists and photographers. It figures in the little volume of thirteen woodcuts of the historic old places in Vevay by August Meade, a descendant of old Robert Knox, revolutionary hero, father of George G.; in neighborhood sketches made by Walter H. Kiser of New Albany and published in the *Louisville Times*; and in a series of photographs by Jack Warren Fox, in the Cincinnati *Enquirer*, a few years ago.⁴

My earliest recollections of the homestead go back only to its occupancy by my father's oldest brother and his wife to whom the place descended after my grandfather's death. Of New Orleans French architecture, it sports a narrow front terrace, guarded by an iron grille, as did the old home of Maurice Thompson in Crawfordsville, demolished some years ago. Two heavily paneled front doors open on this terrace. Scarcely two rooms in the two-story edifice are on the same level. Entire walnut trees in their natural state form the underpinning of the floors, and visitors are wont to descend to the basement to look at them. The porches on the west and north are enclosed, but the one at the east is open and leads into a spacious, pleasant room that was my father's birthchamber. From it through French doors one steps up into what was the formal parlor. A tall, walnut grandfather clock, handiwork of grandfather—now my prized possession—stood in a corner and was an object of great reverence. There were horsehair sofas and chairs and marble-topped tables. Family portraits and engravings in heavy gilt frames and a brass-framed pier glass kept each other company. The elegant, dignified apartment was held sacred for special occasions.

The other front room, large and attractive, had massive oak cupboards built in on each side of the marble-manteled fireplace. In one of these auntie kept the cookie jar, which was never empty and was the most exciting feature of the whole house to us children. There was a lovely, old bureau,

⁴ Cincinnati, Ohio, *Enquirer*, November 6, 1938.

a marble-topped washstand, a large bowl and pitcher, and accompanying slop jar at the side. In the large front window, potted blooming geraniums occupied a series of stands, like an audience at a ball game.

Back of the room just described is the dining room with its mantel piece. All the rooms except two small, upper bedrooms had fireplaces. In those days a house was valued by the number of chimneys it had. The furnishings in the dining room consisted of a large sideboard with quaint, old silver and dainty fragile china with gold bands. A step down, one entered the large, cozy kitchen with built-in cupboards opposite the stove. We often ate informally at the table here, after my uncle's death, of the delicious food—hams, chicken, pickles, preserves, jellies, biscuits, salt-rising bread, etc., prepared by auntie and the faithful handmaids, a succession of Sallies. Those were the days when a good hired girl stayed on for years in a substantial, prosperous family.

In one corner of the latticed side porch, leading into the garden, stood a large earthen ice cold water jar, carefully swathed. There was a picturesque old well, now robbed of its sweep and windlass, which we children loved to operate. "The Old Oaken Bucket" might have been inspired by it. Old-fashioned flowers flourish in the large gardens, wide fern beds border the house, and rock roses used to peep between the rocks that formed the walk to the barn. Gooseberries and currants offered refreshment on the way, and we were always ready to take a chance on the persimmons, although the unpredictable fruit frequently left our mouth all a pucker.

There are four bedrooms, two narrow crisscrossing halls upstairs with queer, little closets under the roof. The two front bedrooms are dignified in size and content, with lovely, antique furniture—old settees, four posters, wardrobes, etc. The other two bedrooms are smaller and cozier with low ceilings and small-paned windows, casements swinging out doorlike.

The stairway is narrow and crooked as a corkscrew, with the perilous, triangular steps of ye olden time, as picturesque as an old fairy story book.

There was a gentle restraint in the atmosphere of the place, that we did not race through the dignified rooms as at my maternal grandmother's. We, however, always felt

welcome, but put on our best behavior and never found the cookie jar empty.

Uncle Bob was the oldest of the family and my father the youngest. There was so much difference in their ages, that Uncle Bob was generally thought of as my grandfather. He was plump and short of leg, addicted to a corncob pipe and high silk hat, then popularly called a "stove pipe" or "plug" hat. He had made his "pile" farming and flatboating, and at one time or another had done some work as clerk in the offices of the county treasurer and recorder, but from my earliest recollections, he was retired and jokingly referred to himself as "the most retired man" in the community. He was one of the founders of the Vevay Deposit Bank and its first president. His picture hangs there today. He was regarded as one of the most solid financial citizens of the community. He loved to play the violin and spin yarns and make jokes and spent much time chatting with his pals, the courthouse officials. He was a picturesque pioneer figure.

Uncle Bob's wife, Louisa Kern, was a member of a well-known family of the early times. There is a legend that one of her ancestors lived in a hollow sycamore tree until he could get his cabin built. This always appealed to me as fearless and heroic endurance. Aunt Louisa was tall and spare, moving about on slender-slipped feet with a graceful, springing step, greatly belying her age. The fact that she clung to a modified hoopskirt long after dame fashion had consigned such style to the discard may have accounted for some measure for her billowy movements. I never saw her without the beribboned lace cap that all elderly ladies wore then. Scott's lines in "Lady of the Lake" describe her—"The mistress of the mansion came, Mature of age, a graceful dame." She looked well to the ways of her household, seldom moving beyond its precincts, except to attend her church or to visit the sick. Kindly, hospitable, great-souled, she often seasoned her remarks with quaint, quiet humor. Although she lived to be almost eighty-nine, she never seemed to be old. She survived Uncle Bob some years and was ready to accept the innovations he with pioneer snobbery had frowned upon. She installed furnace, bath, and electric lights and was not above riding occasionally in her son's auto, the first in the town. A remarkable woman, she kept a perennial interest in life, but when she found it time to lay it down she did so with no re-

grets, saying she had lived so long on earth, she was eager to see what the next life was like and regarded dying as the great adventure. It seemed fitting, therefore, that during her funeral rites, her pet canary should break forth in an exhilaration of rejoicing as of a soul's release from its narrow bounds into infinite freedom.

Around the hospitable board of this delightful old homestead many distinguished guests were entertained. Among others in the time of grandfather were Governors Robert P. Letcher and Thomas Metcalfe of Kentucky, Governor William Bebb of Ohio, and Governor George Poindexter of Mississippi, grandfather's uncle. Uncle Bob continued to dispense the hospitality for which the place was known. Governor William Hendricks and Lieutenant-Governor Ira P. Chase of Indiana were also among his guests—a record of governors as guests for one village home. Ole Bull, the famous Norwegian violinist, marooned in Vevay by a steamboat accident was also entertained there.

Edward Eggleston says in his "Recollections of Vevay," that he remembers when Governors Metcalfe and Poindexter spoke from a platform at the top of the Knox mill in 1844. This old mill was afterwards moved to the rear of the yard where it now stands.

The gracious, old homestead still holds up its chin, as it were, and retains much of its original charm under the loving care of the Misses Lamson, whose kind hospitality and tasteful arrangement of antiques and flowers carry on the traditions of the place.