

Charles A. Beard's Recollections of Henry County, Indiana

Edited by Clifton J. Phillips

The two letters printed below were written by Charles A. Beard late in life in answer to requests for information about his early years at home and school in Henry County from residents of his two Indiana home towns, Spiceland and Knightstown. Besides giving these biographical details, the letters reveal much of the flavor and atmosphere of late nineteenth-century rural Indiana. The first, and longer, of the two preserves many colorful reminiscences of Beard's childhood which he related for the Spiceland Centennial in 1938. Unable to be present at the anniversary celebration, Beard wrote this long and interesting account of his boyhood in Spiceland during the 1880's, telling of his school days at the Friends' Academy and describing some of the amusements a modest Quaker village afforded a young boy growing up on his father's farm nearby. In it the author discloses a somewhat nostalgic attitude toward his Hoosier upbringing, as he contrasts the isolation and simplicity of that time and place with the "wars, hatred and intolerance of this age." Belittling the technological progress which he and Mrs. Beard heralded so triumphantly in the last chapter of the first edition of their *Rise of American Civilization* as well as in other writings, the famed historian stresses the lack of "gadgets" and the primitive means of transportation of his youth. Most of all, however, he tells how much he learned from his teachers in the small but excellent Spiceland Academy and from the Friends' services which his parents, who were not practicing Quakers, required him to attend. The entire letter is a noteworthy display of affection for the simple virtues of agrarian America.

The shorter Knightstown letter, written a decade later and only a few months before his death in 1948, documents Beard's earliest years in Grant City, an unincorporated community in Wayne Township, where his father had settled on a small farm before moving to Spiceland. Although detailed reminiscences are lacking, this letter relates something of his life as a high school student and a youthful editor and

publisher in Knightstown from 1891 to 1895, when he owned and operated a weekly newspaper with his older brother, Clarence H. Beard.

[August, 1938]

To my friends and the young generation of Spiceland:¹

It is a pleasure to learn that the town is celebrating its centennial and I beg the privilege of adding my tribute to the occasion. In making this little contribution, I am naturally moved to indulge in reminiscences. That, you will concede, is at least fitting in this particular occasion.

Spiceland had not passed the half-century mark when my parents moved to the town in order that their children might receive an education at the Friends' Academy and the whole family enjoy the privilege of living in a community of a rare spirit. It was, as I recall, in the year 1880.² I was then about six years old. The house in which we lived, just west of the village, now lies, perhaps appropriately, in ashes, its very foundations sinking in the earth.

My earliest memories, of course, are associated with our nearest neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Elisha Ratcliff, Mr. and Mrs. Martin Deem, and Mr. and Mrs. Jonas Hodson, all good neighbors, industrious, prudent, and helpful.³ In time of need their thoughtfulness never failed. In fact, co-operation was the chief characteristic of the community life. In season and out, the neighbors were always helping one another, in the harvest fields, at threshing, in time of sickness and

¹ Reprinted from the *Souvenir Booklet of the Spiceland Centennial* (Spiceland, Ind., 1938), 15-17. The centennial historian, Loring A. Eilar, reports that the original letter, which was dated sometime in August, 1938, was destroyed by fire. Loring A. Eilar, Spiceland, Ind., to the author, December 25, 1957.

² According to one writer, the Beards moved to Spiceland in 1881. B. F. Bowen (pub.), *Biographical Memoirs of Henry County, Indiana* (Logansport, Ind., 1902), 232.

³ The Ratcliffs, Hodsons, and Deems were families who lived on farms adjoining the Beard homestead, a short distance west of the village of Spiceland. Elisha Ratcliff was a leading figure in the local Society of Friends and a member and later president of the Academy Board. Sadie Bacon Hatcher, "A History of Spiceland Academy, 1826-1921" (*Indiana Historical Society Publications*, Vol. XI, No. 2; Indianapolis, 1934), 147.

tragedy.⁴ Life was hard, but as I recall it all through the mist of time it seems beautiful against the wars, hatred, and intolerance of this age; and the best of the old days I should like to recover, for America and for the world.

We did not then have electric lights, nor automobiles, nor refrigerators, nor telephone[s], nor airplanes. A round-trip to New Castle, ten miles away, with a work horse in the shafts was an all-day journey, laborious for man and beast. A round trip to Indianapolis on the railway from Dunreith was a positive excitement, and the hero of such an Odyssey was an object of admiration among old and young. We could then scarcely dream of any person's traveling three hundred miles an hour in an airplane, although we had borrowed Jules Verne's books from the library and read his tales with eager zest on long winter evenings by the fireplaces.

Nor am I inclined at this age to the opinion that men and women who enjoy, or suffer along with, all the new gadgets are any better than their ancestors. A fool is still a fool whether he travels four miles an hour in an ox-cart or four hundred in an airplane. Wisdom is not measured by speed. Nor is gentleness exhibited in gadgets. The virtues which do honor to human nature and hold neighbors, communities, and nations together are not born of a multitude of things. In saying this, I do not mean to celebrate the cause of poverty but rather that of moderation in all things.

If my memory serves me right, it was Miss Ella Williams⁵ who led me into the mysteries of letters. I remember her well. She was both gentle and stern. She beguiled us every day after the noon hour by reading some pages from a classic story, and she rapped my knuckles with a ruler when she caught me shooting paper wads at Isaac Pate across the room. In the Academy, Mrs. Hannah Davis reigned for a while after the death of her noble husband, Clarkson Davis.⁶

⁴ This passage describing frontier cooperation and neighborliness is echoed and amplified in Beard's article, "The Frontier in American History," *New Republic*, XCVII (February 1, 1939), 359-362.

⁵ In another place Beard has described Miss Ella Williams, his first teacher in the grades, as "'a cultivated, gentle woman who knew how to keep the peace without waging war.'" Quoted in Hatcher, "A History of Spiceland Academy," 152.

⁶ Clarkson Davis was superintendent of the Academy from 1863 until 1882, the year before his death. His widow, Mrs. Hannah Davis, whom Beard praises so highly, continued to teach in Spiceland Academy until 1890, when she undertook graduate studies and finally became professor of literature at the University of North Dakota, where she died in 1898. *Ibid.*, 149-150.

She seemed both omniscient and indefatigable. She traveled widely in Europe and brought back great news of strange lands. She loved good books. She organized lecture courses and gave us an opportunity to hear distinguished speakers from various parts of the country and from many walks of life. In her spirit and tradition, Thomas Newlin carried on.⁷ He taught me the rudiments of American history and the elements of physics, with equal proficiency in my youthful eyes. By Terrell Wilson⁸ I was introduced to the English classics. Even now I can hear his melodious voice reading *The Ancient Mariner*. Through his ministrations I became acquainted with Wordsworth, Ruskin, Carlyle, and the great men of old. John Parker⁹ taught us the Latin tongue and displayed so great a love of it that he could scarcely wait for us to learn the conjugations, so eager was he for us to read Cicero and Virgil for ourselves.

The Academy had two debating societies and I was a member of one, the name of which I have forgotten.¹⁰ In the room set aside for us we had our own library of choice books, and there of Friday nights we assembled to solve the burning problems of the hour. Shall the tariff be reduced? Is fame to be preferred to great riches? Should the Federal government regulate railway rates? Local option or prohibition? With much eloquence and gusto the fledglings displayed their wisdom and learning.

On First Day came Sabbath school and the meeting. Well I remember sitting on the hard benches, my feet far from the floor, while the elders sat in high places. No music. No song. Just the silence of meditation; unless, forsooth, the spirit moved some aged saint to deliver a discourse,

⁷ Thomas Newlin, a graduate of Spiceland Academy, succeeded Davis as superintendent, a post he held until 1892. He was later president of Whittier College in California. *Ibid.*, 150-151.

⁸ Terrell Wilson, who taught many years at the Academy, was a local resident well remembered in Spiceland for his strict school discipline, a beautiful tenor voice, and his refusal to wear an overcoat at any season of the year. Loring A. Eilar, Spiceland, Ind., to the author, November 27, 1958.

⁹ John Parker I have been unable to identify further. Mrs. Hatcher lists him among the Academy instructors after 1863. Hatcher, "A History of Spiceland Academy," 156.

¹⁰ There were actually three literary societies at the Academy: the Lucernians, for girls, and two boys' clubs, the Crescent and the Glisco. *Ibid.*, 140. A Spiceland resident recalls the young Beard's abundant use of polysyllabic words in his schoolboy oratory, especially his difficulty with the pronunciation of "hypocrite" on one occasion. Mrs. W. A. Hood, Spiceland, Ind., to the author, November 19, 1957.

usually brief, always terse, generally ending in a quotation from the Scriptures. Although my parents were not Quakers,¹¹ they thought it good for me to attend the Friends' services. Doubtless it was. At all events, there I became acquainted with the majestic dreams of the Jews, the merciful teachings of Jesus, and the sonorous roll of the King James version.

Work and meditation were broken by play according to the season. Baseball, football, skating, sleighing, and sledding were my favorites. I remember especially what we called "the battle of the walnuts." North of the Academy, across the road, beyond the graveyard, was a walnut grove, and after the autumn frosts fell the ground was covered with walnuts.

We boys made up teams, fitted shields made of barrel heads to our arms, arrayed ourselves in battle line, and let the walnuts fly. What heroic charges and frightful carnage! But nobody was hurt, although hands and faces were black with battle stains.

Among the other diversions were stage plays given by local talent, supplemented occasionally by wandering troupes, in Hoover's Hall.¹² To that hall also came the politicians, candidates for the House of Representatives, of [or?] the State Senate. Political speeches were often followed by torchlight parades, the firing of anvils, and the shooting of rockets. On Decoration Day we assembled to lay flowers on the graves of those who had fought in the cause of the Union. For fairs and circuses we had to go far away to Knightstown or New Castle. After all, Quakers were not enamored of horse racing and blaring merry-go-rounds. Yet it would be a mistake to assume that all Spicelanders were saints in those far-off times. Many were; but most of us failed to measure up to the high standards of the elders. Perhaps in their youth those elders had sowed their wild oats too.

¹¹ About Charles' father, William H. Beard, an early biographer wrote: "In religion he is liberal in his views, but is not a member of any church society, and yet is liberal financially in his contributions to the support of all the local churches." Bowen, *Biographical Memoirs of Henry County*, 232.

¹² Hoover's Hall was located in a two-story brick building, still standing on the southeast corner of Pearl and Main streets in Spiceland and now occupied by the Glass Novelty Company. To reach the hall it was necessary to climb to the second story by an exterior fire escape stairway. A few years after Beard's time, the main floor was used for the Academy's first basketball contests. Loring A. Eilar, Spiceland, Ind., to the author, November 27, 1958.

Once started on this course, I could go on indefinitely, like the brook¹³ near the Academy, but your time and my time have limits. So I close with affectionate regards to my old friends among the living, with a toast to the memories of the precious dead, and a godspeed to the rising generation. May the sons and daughters be stouter and better than the fathers and mothers!

Sincerely and faithfully yours,

CHARLES A. BEARD

New Milford, Conn., July 17, 1948.

Dear Mr. Kirkpatrick:¹⁴

In replying to your kind letter of the 13th, I must depend entirely upon my memory, for our family home near Spiceland was destroyed by fire long ago and with it went all of the family records and my father's splendid library. So, as I shall indicate, in this report to you I am a bit uncertain as to a few dates and events.

I was born in Wayne township, north of Knightstown on November 27, 1874. My earliest memories are of child life in Grant City¹⁵ where my father was a contractor and builder. In or about 1880 my parents moved to a small farm near Spiceland in order that their children might have the advantages of education at the Friends' Academy. Even then Knightstown was our main "trading" center and we had relatives and friends there. I completed, as I recall, the last year of my high school work at the Knightstown Academy, from which I was graduated in 1891 or 1892. The date you

¹³ This was the Brook Bezor, which flows past the Academy and the walnut grove Beard describes in his letter.

¹⁴ Reprinted from the *Knightstown Banner*, July 23, 1948. Ed Kirkpatrick, then the assistant publisher of the *Banner*, had written to Beard asking for his recollections of Knightstown. The original letter is in the possession of Mr. R. T. Mayhill, editor and publisher of the *Knightstown Banner*. R. T. Mayhill, Knightstown, Ind., to the author, December 16, 1957.

¹⁵ Grant City, a small community in Wayne Township, five miles north of Knightstown, was founded in 1868 by Jacob Green, a Civil War veteran and an ardent admirer of his wartime commander. Bypassed by the railroad, Grant City failed to prosper, and its population soon dwindled. George Hazzard, *Hazzard's History of Henry County, Indiana, 1822-1906* (2 vols., New Castle, Ind., 1906), II, 929-930.

may be able to discover by examining the records of your Academy.¹⁶

Shortly after my graduation, my father bought the Knightstown *Sun* and presented it to my brother, Clarence, and me. For three or four years we were publishers and editors of the *Sun*. In 1895 I left Knightstown to enter De Pauw University. Subsequently my brother sold the *Sun* and bought a daily and weekly in Newcastle.¹⁷ During my summer vacations I worked on those papers, until my graduation from De Pauw in 1898. In the late summer of that year I left Indiana for England and at Oxford University began my long graduate studies in history.¹⁸ My short and simple annals since that year you can find in *Who's Who*.

Shortly before my departure for England—I think it was at the commencement exercises of 1898, the Spiceland Academy conferred upon me a diploma of graduation. Hence I take pride in being a graduate of both academies.

My life at Knightstown as a school boy, editor, and publisher I recall with pleasure. In my imagination I can see the town as it was in 1895 as clearly as if it were now spread out before me in the valley below my hillside home in Connecticut. I remember with respect and affection the people of Knightstown in my times there. To the surviving ancients who have not forgotten me please give my warm regards, and to the youngsters who know me not, my good wishes for all the years to come.

Yours sincerely,

Charles A. Beard

¹⁶ According to the records of the Knightstown High School, formerly called Knightstown Academy, Beard graduated with the class of 1891. L. E. Rogers, Superintendent of Schools, Knightstown, Ind., to the author, December 17, 1957.

¹⁷ Clarence and Charles Beard began publishing the Knightstown *Sun* on August 1, 1891, and sold it in July, 1895. At that time Clarence bought the New Castle *Press* and a weekly which he renamed the *Henry County Republican*. In 1897 he sold both papers and entered the practice of law in New Castle. Hazzard, *Hazzard's History of Henry County*, II, 1090-1093; Bowen, *Biographical Memoirs of Henry County*, 411-412. According to Beard's letter above, Hazzard is in error in ascribing purchase of the New Castle journals in 1895 to both brothers rather than to Clarence alone.

¹⁸ For Beard's own account of his experiences at Oxford, see Burleigh Taylor Wilkins (ed.), "Charles A. Beard on the Founding of Ruskin Hall," *Indiana Magazine of History*, LII (September, 1956), 277-284.