

A LETTER FROM THE PAST

Submitted by Village of Richfield Springs Historian Harriett Geywits

One of the best ways to learn the history of a community is by reading letters from those who lived during the the periods of early settlement of that area. Such a letter was written by Laura Emily Hyde Smith in June 1927 and gives us insight as to the people and activities of the area during its early years of development.

“Fifteen Years of My Early Life”: I was born December 25th, 1836 in what was then East Richfield, later renamed Richfield Springs. My parents were James and Fanny Beardsley Hyde. The house where I was born is the one now occupied by Mr. Frederick Bronner on Church Street. That same year, the Universalist Church was built. (Now Richfield Bible Church)

My earliest recollection is of sitting on my father’s knee and singing with him the campaign songs of 1840, ‘Tippecanoe and Tyler Too’ and others about ‘Hard Cider’ and ‘Log Cabins’. One of these cabins, I recall, was built on the large open field opposite the Richfield Hotel (now area of the public library and St. John’s Episcopal church parsonage) and was occupied by the parents of the late Sandy Phillips. Soon after, a caravan pitched its tent in that same field and I went with my parents, but I only remember two things. The elephant was led by his keeper around the ring, but before starting, the leader placed a small ladder beside the elephant and invited some of the people to ascend and seat themselves in the gaily decked howdah for a ride. The other attraction was a little Shetland pony ridden by a monkey in a red dress and cap. Oh, how I did wish my father would buy him as I must have thought he would be an ideal playmate.

The Village had only two streets, Main and Church, but I knew of the opening of the new road, now known as Lake Street, and remember hearing about some Indian bones and relics being unearthed very near the Lake House. The first house erected on the new road is still standing, now called Tunnicliff Lawn. Soon after, the old red school house was moved from Federal Corners and stood not far from the railroad station (former Genesee Restaurant). There being no sidewalks, the walk was long and always muddy in early spring and fall.

Another feature unknown today was the great droves of cattle daily passing on the Turnpike to Albany. Tollgates were a common sight, there being one just west of Warren, then called Little Lakes.

The old Presbyterian Church is closely associated with my early years, my father and grandfather being among its prominent members. The latter, who died in 1824, was one of the charter members. In those days, children, even babies, were carried to the services which included funerals. This recalls

the funeral of Elias Braman who lived on the farm now owned by William T Welden, Esq. Mr. Braman owned the cotton mill at Van Hornesville, so the employees came in a body to attend the funeral which was held in the Presbyterian Church. I was present when they filed in, but became a little afraid when Mr. Davis Brown, who often took charge on such occasions, called in a loud voice, ‘Make room for forty more!’ It added to my nervousness when long benches were placed among the aisles and made me feel we were barred from ever getting out.

In mentioning the old church, I must here say how little the Fatherhood of God was preached. My idea of Him was of an austere judge sitting off on a high throne ready to strike me dead if I told a lie or disobeyed my parents. I could not love Him. Sunday was religiously kept, toys must be put away, no secular songs heard. Is it to be wondered that I hated the return of the day and the hymn that was often sung - ‘Where Congregations Ne’er Break and Sabbaths Have No End’? How much happier I would have been if the loving Father had been portrayed instead of the ‘Terrors of the Law’. It is so different now. Religion is a joy and everything proves that the ways are of pleasantness and paths are of peace.

Now, I must tell of my unsuccessful attempt to convert my favorite cat, named ‘Sin’. One night I hid her under my cloak, taking her to church service. Holding her, I was quite pleased with myself. But after a little time, she began to growl so that I had to drop her and my father quietly opened the pew door for her to pass into the aisle. At the close of the service, I thought that she would go out with the people. However, in the morning, when no cat appeared, I ran to the church door and called her through the key hole. I was immediately answered by a most delightful yowl. I went to the Sexton and got the key and then she was liberated. Thus ended my mission for a cat.

In those days a dentist was unknown, so when an aching tooth appeared, I was sent to Dr. Horace Manley, who promptly ordered me on my knees and to ‘look up’ while he stood over me and with his turnkey proceeded to extract the offending tooth, an experience I can never forget.

About this date, I attended a small select school which was kept in a building on Main Street, now one of the Cary Cottages. Among the little students were the late Bishop Henry C. Potter and his younger brother, Eliphalet, who later became President of Union College. Both boys were among my playmates and in after years, when I met the Bishop and referred to those old days, he was pleased at the recollection.



GEYWITS

Richfield Springs, March 23d, 1887.

PHOTOGRAPHER

In mentioning school days, I am reminded of my sister Mary’s bright repartee when she and her closest friend Mary Gould, mother of Mrs. John D. Cary and Mrs. Lewis A. Williams, were at the ripe age of twelve and students at a private school at which were the two elder sons of Hon. William C. Crain. They, being the ‘big boys’ thought it fun to hand Mary Gould a slate on which was written - ‘Mary Gould, Oh, what a great fool!’ My sister told her to write and say ‘There are many Crains without any brains’.

My sister Olive was always quite as ready with a witty answer. When the Mercury was about to be issued, Dr. Manley said to her, ‘We will expect you to keep the Poets Column full’. She at once replied, ‘I will, if you will keep the obituary column full.’ He threw back his head and laughed saying that he’d try to do so.

Another not to be forgotten event stands out vividly, that of the Utica Citizens Corps coming and encamping in the large field, now the site of the Walters and Ostrander houses. (The UCC was a volunteer civilian military organization. During the Civil War they became part of the 14th NY Volunteer Infantry Regiment.)

A day spent at Henderson Home, (also known as Gelston Castle, Jordanville) the residence of the late Mrs. Cruger, is another bright memory. Mrs. Cruger, knowing my father, invited him with his family to spend a day there. We found her in a most happy mood which was not always the case. When she saw our interest in her unique home, she took great pains in telling little incidents about the portraits and other objects of art. When her green velvet court dress was shown, I felt quite proud, having it put on my shoulders. Her autograph album was particularly interesting containing the signatures of Queen Victoria, Napoleon Bonaparte, Sir Walter Scott and many other which have escaped my memory. Among her treasures was a pincushion made from a piece of a silk dress of Mary Queen of Scots which came from one of her maids of honor. A boundless dinner and supper were served before we left.

It was a red-letter day for me when I could go

with my father to Cooperstown. He was Judge of the County so he went there very often. A great event was to dine at the Eagle Hotel where we were served the Otsego Bass, a fish found only in the lake for which it was named. Among my father’s friends were men of prominence, Judges Nelson and Morehouse, Kinne and Turner and last but not least, Fenimore Cooper. All have passed on leaving only a memory which is ever revered by those who knew them.

At the age of fifteen, I was sent to Cherry Valley Academy, a boarding school where life was very restricted for one who had never been under such rigid rules. It was, at first, a bit trying. Of all these school friends, I think Mrs. Charles Prentice Browning is the only one living. Her father was John H. Prentice, the editor of the Freeman’s Journal at Cooperstown.

I will here refer to my mother’s two older brothers, both men well known - Samuel Beardsley of Utica, a noted jurist and judge of the Court of Appeals whose portrait is seen on the walls of the Capital in Albany and Levi Beardsley, Senator, judge and author of ‘Reminiscences’. Both of these loved uncles were ever welcome visitors in our home. Ruben Hyde Walrath of Saratoga Springs, the last Chancellor of the State, was a relative of my father. Quite late in life he compiled the Hyde Genealogy, a colossal piece of work.

In closing my memories of old Richfield days, I have not forgotten the ‘Mercury’, then in its youth and one I welcome in its middle age. May it live long and prosper.”

Laura Hyde was the wife of James F. Smith. Her death occurred at the Park Avenue Hotel in New York City in 1935 at the age of 98 as a result of old age, aggravated by a fall which resulted in a fractured hip. She and husband had moved to NYC in the 1890s and she was probably, at the time of her death, the oldest born native of the town of Richfield and oldest member of the Presbyterian church. Her husband had died in 1902.