Bloomsburg's Grand Opera House

By W. M. Baillie

A recent accession to the Society's collections is a playbill (pages 1 and 4 shown below) for a week of dramatic presentations in Bloomsburg in 1912. It has a lot to tell us about local entertainment options in the days before radio or TV, when movies had not yet driven out of business the old tradition of live performances in small towns.

The little four-page handout also piqued my curiosity about the former Grand Opera House in Bloomsburg. The three-story brick building on Center Street is now the home of the widely-famed Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble. But what was its original usage? More of that in a moment.

Myrkle-Harding Stock Company

The playbill touts the visit to Bloomsburg of the Myrkle-Harding theatrical troupe in January, 1912. This traveling company toured American towns and cities annually for over a quarter century beginning about 1898. At each week-long stop, the hard-working company presented two performances a day for six days. On Sunday, their "day of rest," the company would pack up and travel by train to their next tour stop.

In September 1910 the company played a week in Bloomsburg's Opera House, as we learn from another playbill in the Society's collections. Featured among "COMING ATTRACTIONS" to the Opera House, the Myrkle-Harding Stock Company promised to bring to the theater 20 people and a railroad car load of scenery; the group also featured "High Class Vaudeville between acts."

In that respect the troupe was typical of the era: there were many traveling entertainment companies which presented dramas—mostly melodramas—along with vaudeville acts, circus acts, musical numbers and minstrel shows. They were "on the road" for much of the year. The typical melodrama plot is suggested by the 1908 production of "Married for Money, or The Old Wife and the New." A *Morning Press* synopsis told readers that the play is

> one of absorbing heart interest and the presenting cast, one of unusual excellence. The story deals with the life of a millionaire Iron magnate, who upon reaching a position of power and affluence, casts off the wife of his youth and early struggles, and takes on a younger and more beautiful one, who marries him for his great wealth and position. His sudden fall from power and wealth and his subsequent salvation by his forsaken wife, form the basis of a story that is said to be one of the most powerful sermons in favor of the preservation of the sanctity of the home, and the sacredness of the marriage vow, ever written.

The Myrkle-Harding company was led by Emma Myrkle, whose "strong single specialty" was the role of comic *soubrette* (a coquettish and frivolous young woman). Her partner, Will H. Harding, starred as the romantic hero. Ms. Myrkle was also a featured dancer; a signed glossy photo at the New York Public Library shows her dancing in Roma costume with a tambourine. Harding wrote a two-person comic sketch for the pair, titled "The Ballet Girl and the Bill-Poster."

The Myrkle-Harding company traveled extensively. Newspaper notices of their engagements, selected almost at random, list them in Middleboro, MA in January 1908; at Halifax, Nova Scotia in May 1906, April 1910 and March 1912; in Dover, NJ, January 1914; at Oswego, NY 1915 and 1919; and at Easton, PA in November 1924.

For their 1912 tour, the company advertised seven plays in their repertory, all of which had played on Broadway; many of these were based on popular romantic novels. The headline play was "The Barrier," derived from the best-selling novel of that same title (1908) by Rex Beach. Other repertory plays included "Brewster's Millions," "A Bachelor's Romance," and "The Burglar and the Lady."

The Society's newly-acquired 1912 playbill lists (inside) nine males and no fewer than twenty-five females in the Myrkle-Harding troupe. Probably, however, many of these "actors" are simply double stage names for individuals; most likely, the total company including stage hands was about 20 persons.

The Grand Opera House

Bloomsburg's Grand Opera House probably never staged a "grand opera." Instead, it was intended to provide popular entertainment, and that function has continued at the same location for several generations. Built in 1874 by Benjamin H. Vannatta and Edward Rawlings, the Opera House was the first structure in the town dedicated to live performances; earlier, plays and concerts had been given on the upper floors of various store or lodge buildings. The new auditorium, with about 400 seats, offered a curtained stage—also a first in the town. The few interior photos which survive show that the interior was richly decorated in elaborate Rococo sculpture (in plaster, almost certainly) and that the stage scenery was large and fancy.

The 1910-1911 seasonal program includes "Official Information" and "Theatre Rules" which suggest how different was the atmosphere during performances in comparison to today's BTE audiences. Among the items:

- Any persons found spitting on the floor, walls, or whistling, hissing, stamping feet, etc., will be ejected from the Theatre.
- If you eat peanuts, eat shells as well.
- Ladies are requested and obliged to remove their hats in accordance with an Act of the Legislature. [This was the era of gigantic hats adorned with ostrich plumes.]
- We [the management] earnestly solicit home-talent entertainments, either from churches or secret organizations [to fill the theater and provide rental between out-of-town troupes].

Already in 1910 the Opera House was touting its usual Saturday Evening "Picture Show" of "4000 feet of Motion Pictures." Admission was just 5¢ (as contrasted to 25 to 50 cents for live professional productions). At the time, there were several other motion-picture houses in Town, most of them small storefront operations such as the Bijou on West Main Street and the Lyric at 5 East Main. Soon to be opened also were the Arcade in a former furniture store (near the 1950s Moose Lodge), the Starr in a back alley, and the grand Victoria seating 1200 (the later Capitol, its marquee still prominent on Main Street).

At various times, lots of towns in and near Columbia County had an Opera House; the one still surviving by that name in Catawissa is now the best known, but among other towns with an Opera House were Benton, Berwick, Iola, Millville, and Ringtown. All of them presented local talent, touring entertainers, the occasional boxing match and, after 1900, increasingly popular moving pictures.

Bloomsburg's Opera House was valued as a community resource. The hall was hired for amateur theatricals, concerts, political rallies, etc. In 1890 a Democratic rally there produced a near-riot when a guest speaker announced proudly that he had been a soldier in the Union troop sent to Columbia County during the Civil War to quell the so-called Fishingcreek Confederacy. Not to be outdone, the next year the Republicans rented the Opera House to present a series of tableaux from Gen. Lew Wallace's popular novel *Ben Hur*. The Bloomsburg Orchestra gave a concert there in 1893 and Bloomsburg High School's first commencement was held in the building in 1892.

In its long run as Bloomsburg's premier entertainment center, the Opera House has had many owners and some rough times. Local industrialist I. W. McKelvy, who bought the building in 1876 from its original owners, ran the house successfully for twenty years but then fell into bankruptcy and gave up the building to his creditors along with all his other properties. Dr. J. S. John, who came into a half-interest through his wife's inheritance, bought the other half-ownership, enlarged the stage and built a gallery, and changed the name to Columbia Theatre (but the old name of "Bloomsburg Opera House" continued current for decades).

In 1940, with vaudeville and small-town live theater all but dead, the building was refashioned as a movie palace and renamed the New Columbia. It was decorated in the then-popular Art Deco style. The building continued as a movie house into the 1970s, though increasingly shabby and unfrequented, and finally closed for good.

In 1980, however, the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble bought the premises, raised money to gut it and rebuild it, and opened it as their new home in 1983. They retained some of the Art Deco fixtures of the building and reinstalled these to highlight the building's history. The Ensemble happily has celebrated its 25th year at what it has renamed the **Alvina Krause Theatre** in honor of BTE's founding mentor.

The Bloomsburg Opera House building, then, has returned to its original primary function of presenting live drama to regional audiences. It has been a focal point of theatrical experience in the region for 135 years.

[First printed in CCHGS *Newsletter*, December 2008, pages 7-10]

The Centennial of the Columbia County
Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument

Robert Dunkelberger

November 19, 2008 marked the centennial of the dedication ceremony for the Civil War monument on Market Square in Bloomsburg, erected to commemorate the veterans of Columbia County who fought in that terrible conflict. Its dedication also ended a very long process to obtain permission to erect the monument and especially to decide its location—not unlike the current controversy in Bloomsburg over the location and design of the proposed veterans' memorial. What follows is the brief story of the efforts to build the Civil War monument and the story of the son of a prominent Bloomsburg family who wrote a poem 100 years ago about those efforts.

As early as the 1870s there was a movement in Columbia County to erect a monument in honor of the men who had fought for the Union during the Civil War, but it was not until February, 1898 that a petition was first presented to the court asking that a monument be erected. For nearly a decade efforts continued in order to obtain final approval and the authorization of funds, and most contentiously decide exactly where the monument should be located. Although disagreements still continued about the location, in 1907 two successive grand juries finally approved the petition as was required by law; in February of 1908 the design of the monument by Worden Brothers of Batavia, NY was approved by the County Commissioners, and J. U. Kurtz of Berwick won the right to erect it with a bid of just under $7800.

With Market Square at last decided upon as the site, and after delays in getting the carved granite from quarries in Vermont, the monument went up in October and was dedicated in a grand ceremony on November 19, 1908. Following a large parade that began at Town Hall and wound through the town's streets, a crowd of thousands filled Market Square to hear a number of speakers, led by President Judge Charles C. Evans and Congressman John G. McHenry, and music supplied by five brass bands.

To commemorate all of the trials and tribulations the monument proponents endured, George Edward Elwell, Jr. wrote the poem that follows (page 4) in the summer between his junior and senior years at Trinity College. Elwell was the grandson of William Elwell, President Judge in Columbia County from 1862 to 1888, and son of George Elwell, a lawyer and longtime newspaper publisher. He was born in Bloomsburg on April 19, 1886, graduated from the Bloomsburg State Normal School in 1905, and four years later completed studies at Trinity College in Connecticut with a B.A. degree.

Upon returning to Bloomsburg Elwell assisted his father in the family commercial printing business first established in 1837, renamed George E. Elwell & Son. This included the final year of *The Columbian* newspaper which ceased publication in 1910, ending 35 years under the Elwell family. Elwell continued with the business until it was sold in 1950. In addition to publishing, among his many other pursuits were teaching French at the normal school from 1914 to 1920, serving on both the Town Council and Bloomsburg school board, being chairman of the local George Washington Bicentennial Commission, and participating as an active Freemason.

In recognition of the service to the normal school by his father (an 1867 graduate of the Bloomsburg Literary Institute, normal school instructor from 1872 to 1873, and later member of

the Board of Trustees) and grandfather (longtime member and President of the Board of Trustees), and with Elwell himself being an alumnus and former instructor, Bloomsburg State College decided to name one of their dormitories after the Elwell family, the only dormitory on the lower campus not named for a Pennsylvania county. On April 26, 1969 Elwell attended the Alumni Day ceremony dedicating the recently completed Elwell Hall. It proved to be his last public appearance, however, and less than one month later on May 20 he was dead at the age of 83.

Here is the poem by George Edward Elwell, Jr. entitled *The Monument*, which was published in *The Columbian* on July 23, 1908. (Note that the poet's prediction of dedication of the monument by September was a little too optimistic; the actual date was November.)

The Monument

Some forty weary years ago we had a Civil War.
To do the well-earned honors to the fighters, we deplore
That we have waited all this time to make arrangements for
      A monument.

The scheme was talked of many years by citizens and press,
But did not gain much headway, and it seemed to retrogress,
For some who held the pocket book seemed anxious to suppress
      That monument.

The years kept rolling quickly past, and we with fear were filled,
Because, if proper sentiment were not in them instilled
The people of our County would at last decide to build
      No monument.

They realized the fitness of the plan, and soon were moved
To sanction it, and patriotic sentiment improved.
They saw that loyal citizens quite properly behooved
      A monument.

At last Grand Juries twice approved – the Court approved it, too.
The G.A.R. encouraged all the subject to renew
Until the minds of all of us had only this in view –
      The monument.

Appropriations then were made, and soon began the race
Among contractors; then arose a problem hard to face.
'Twas this – Although we've ordered it, we don't know where to place
      The monument.

Quite varied were the spots proposed in ev'ry part of town.
Whatever one suggested new made all the others frown,
And for awhile it looked as though 't would turn things upside down –
      That monument.

Said some, "Let's dig the fountain up. It's really in the way.

What's all this long debate about, and consequent delay,
For Market Square is just the place to properly display
      The monument."

Said others, "Tear the Normal down and set the shaft up there.
The Hill will make it prominent and raise it high in air."
(Now all this time the builder's men were hustling to prepare
      The monument.)

"Let's stand it on the River Hill – that's just the place," some thought.
While recognition for the schemes of many more were sought.
It looked as though to satisfy them all there must be bought
      Ten monuments.

An end of this was brought at last, and all the schemes were wrecked,
For wiser judgment saw that Fate with steady finger becked
To Market Square, the proper place in Bloomsburg to erect
      The monument.

And now the work has been begun; a firm foundation's laid.
Committees to collect a fund have worked and not delayed.
We'll dedicate in fitting style (if cash enough is paid)
      The monument.

In mem'ry of the valiant deeds of those who fought and died
To save the honor of the land and stem rebellion's tide,
We'll, in September next, unveil, with patriotic pride,
      Our monument.

The Nescopeck Path

Andre Dominguez

Many of the early settlers of the Berwick and Bloomsburg areas of Columbia County came from the region of Northampton County along the Delaware River. What was the path they followed through the woods across the mountains? The first clue comes from an old Columbia County history book:

> In 1787, Evan Owen, the founder of Berwick, was commissioned to superintend the construction of a road by the State from Easton to the Nescopeck falls [on the Susquehanna River between Berwick and Nescopeck]. Two years later the Indian trail which was part of the route was improved sufficiently to permit the passage of wheeled vehicles. On March 19, 1804, the Susquehanna & Lehigh Turnpike & Road Company was incorporated, and in the following year graded and completed the road at an enormous expense for those times.[1]

At first glance it might seem that Evan Owen was constructing a road from Easton to Nescopeck. This is not true since a road was already well established from Easton to Bethlehem and from Bethlehem to Fort Allen at Gnadenhutten on the Lehigh River. Evidence of the actual extent of Evan Owen's road construction effort can be found in a letter reprinted in the *Pennsylvania Archives*, Series 1. In a 1789 letter to Even [sic] Owen from Executive Council Secretary Charles Biddle, Owen is requested to produce accounts accompanied with their proper vouchers for settlement connected with the opening of a road between the Susquehanna River, at the Falls of Nescopeck, and the Lehigh River.[2] The total length of the Nescopeck Road was approximately 34 miles.

Another interesting fact is that Evan Owen ran out of money for the Nescopeck Road project and the construction was not one hundred percent completed in 1789. In a letter to Governor Mifflin, later directed to the President and Supreme Executive Council of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania on December 6, 1789, Owen announces the he has opened the Nescopeck road so that it may be travelled by wagons, etc., except the digging away of a part of Spring Mountain, and that there yet remains about three miles unopened of the said road. Owen continues that he has expended the whole amount "of your Orders" and requests that monies be appropriated by Act of Assembly to open the Nescopeck road.[3]

The course of the Nescopeck Path was identified in a Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission magazine (see Illus. 1).[4] The Nescopeck Path originally connected Nescopeck to Bethlehem, but as mentioned the improved road from Bethlehem to Fort Allen had already been established; Evan Owen improved the section between Fort Allen and Berwick. From this map, the sections of the path from Easton to Nescopeck can be identified as follows.

1. Starting at Lechauwekink (Easton), also known as The Delaware Fork.
2. The Path runs southwest to Bethlehem. This is current PA Route 22.
3. From Bethlehem the Path runs northwest to Fort Allen, located at Gnadenhütten (Weissport), a Moravian settlement. Fort Allen lies along the Blue Mountain (Kittatinny) range on the Lehigh River, ten miles above Lehigh Gap.[5] Based on the path on the map it is not clear what current highway route follows the Path from Bethlehem, but it appears that PA Route 248 parallels the Path to Weissport. The improved road from Easton to Bethlehem to Fort Allen is shown clearly on a 1770 Pennsylvania map (see Illus. 2). Note that the watercourse identified on the map as the West Branch of the Delaware River is the Lehigh River.[6]

4. Across the Lehigh River at Fort Allen to the continuation of the Nescopeck Path.
5. On the other side of the Lehigh River, current PA Route 248 merges with PA Route 93 and continues to Nescopeck and the Nescopeck Falls on the Susquehanna River.

A sketch map of the proposed road was submitted by Owen on 5 June 1787 and can be found at the Pennsylvania State Archives.[7] This map identifies the following route, creek crossings and landmarks.

1. Starting at the Lehigh River
2. Quahe Ake Creek (now Quakake Creek, near Hodsondale, Carbon County)
3. Beaver Pond Creek (now Beaver Meadows, Carbon County)
4. Big Black Creek (near West Hazelton, Luzerne County)
5. Little Black Creek
6. Little Nescopeck (near Sybertsville, Luzerne County)
7. John Balliets house (near Sybertsville, Luzerne County)
8. Nescopeck Creek
9. Susquehanna River, falls

NOTES

1. *Historical and Biographical Annals of Columbia and Montour Counties Pennsylvania* (Chicago: J.H. Beers & Co., 1915), p. 35.
2. *Pennsylvania Archives*, series 1, vol. 11, Instructions To Evan Owen – Nescopec [sic] Road, 1789, p. 585.
3. Letter to Pres. Mifflin from Evan Owen, 1789, *Pennsylvania Archives*, series 1, vol. 11, pp. 643-4.
4. Paul A.W. Wallace, "Historic Indian Paths of Pennsylvania," reprinted from The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, *Quarterly Journal of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania,* Vol. 76, No. 4, October, 1952, for the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.
5. Thomas Lynch Montgomery, editor, *Frontier Forts of Pennsylvania*, second edition (Harrisburg: Wm. Stanley Ray, State Printer, 1919), p. 184.
6. *A Map of Pennsylvania, laid down from actual surveys and chiefly from the late Map of W. Scull*, published in 1770.
7. *Draught of a Road from Union Saw Mill on Lehigh River to falls Nescopeck on Susquehanna*, Testified by Owen on 5 June 1781; Pennsylvania State Archives, Harrisburg, Record Group 12, State Roads & Turnpike Maps (1706-1873), 12.9.

Clayton and Lottie's Story

Dani Crossley

According to family lore, Clayton died in a construction accident and his wife Lottie died in childbirth about 1921. How very sad for the three little children left behind. I listened closely as Clayton's grandson Bill Hughes filled in the few details he knew. Bill's father, Harold Clayton Hughes, was probably less than 2 years old at the time of the tragedy according to the date on the birth certificate from which Bill read. Harold was the third of three children born to Clayton A. and Lottie Dye Fluker. All Bill could add was that his father Harold was put in the abusive care of foster parents Mr. and Mrs. Hughes near Pittsburgh. He ran away during high school and lived above a store. Anger and bitterness about his childhood kept him from talking about it. He died near his son Bud in Texas in 1985.

Now his other son, Bill, after many unsuccessful attempts to discover the truth himself over the past ten years had contacted me to try to find anything I could about Clayton and if at all possible, locate any of his father's living relatives. Since Bill's mother, Avis Hilliard Hughes, was an only child, Bill and his brothers had never known any aunts, uncles or cousins. The words "family reunion" had no meaning. I told Bill I was used to looking for dead people, but I'd certainly give it a try.

A daunting task with so much at stake. According to census records, the little family of five Flukers was intact in 1920 in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Clayton was working in a shipyard – certainly a plausible setting for a construction accident. Harold's two sisters were Helen, born 1911 and Irene, born 1913. Fast forward to 1930: Helen and Irene are living with their maternal aunt, Dora, and her husband, Rev. Herman Pool in S. Dayton, Cattaraugus County, NY. Harold has already been placed with his foster parents. Wouldn't you know it – female siblings! How was I ever going to find them and any descendants not knowing their married names?

I hatched a plan for a road trip to Cattaraugus and Chautauqua counties as part of a visit to our son who lives in Erie, PA. My husband could help them with household projects while I scouted out the courthouses in the county seats. I naively figured I could zip in, flip to the index in the marriage dockets and quickly capture the names of the husbands of Harold's two sisters.

I started doing a little research online as to hours, directions and holdings for each courthouse. I know New York State zealously guards the privacy of its residents. Good thing I did! The marriage records are kept in the town where the marriage took place. Just grand. I had no idea if a marriage had even taken place, much less in which town within two likely counties it might have happened. Fortunately, to accompany this bizarre record-keeping scheme, a state-wide index of all marriages exists. BUT, it is only available in the main libraries in five cities: Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, Albany and New York City. Luckily for me, my twin nephews live in Buffalo and they agreed to try to find the sisters' marriage records.

After a false start that had my nephew plodding through each individual marriage certificate, he laid his hands on the index and found what we were looking for: Irene Fluker, married May 1, 1937 in Clarence, NY. Oddly enough, the husband's name is not a part of this index. Only slightly fazed, plunged ahead and fearlessly rousted the Clarence town historian. Her first question: "What is the husband's name?" Arrgh! Reining in my frustration, I asked if she would be able to find that out with the information I had given her. She said she probably could and I should call her back in an hour. The clock was racing as we were leaving to go to Erie in a little over that time. I had already listened to the

spiel about privacy and request forms and payment and signatures and "already dead." It would be a miracle if I were able to obtain this name before setting out for southwestern New York.

I needed a backup plan. From scouring cemetery records posted online for Cattaraugus County, I had discovered that Dora Pool had died in that county in 1963. If she raised the two orphan girls, surely she would've remembered them in her will. "Hello, Cattaraugus County courthouse, would you be so kind as to check if you have the will for Mrs. Dora Pool?" "You do? Wonderful! I'll be there on Friday."

In the meanwhile, a follow-up call to Clarence, NY revealed that they did indeed have the marriage record. Could I prove that the woman was deceased? (How could I do that when I didn't know her name, I thought.) I assured her I definitely could and she offered that she was fairly certain the husband was deceased as he was born in 1899. I said I could look it up if I had his name (expectant pause)? "Oh," she said, "it's William Newcomb." Hallelujah! Irene's married name!! Now, if she only had children…

Armed with Wanda (our snappy GPS system), an extensive to-do list and my bottle of diet soda, I was off bright and early Friday morning. The Little Valley courthouse was easy to find in the center of town and I helped them unlock the doors. Since I knew I wasn't going to find any marriage records there, I concentrated on wills. While the kind assistant located Dora's will for me, I searched the indexes for any other pertinent names. Voila! There was Willis G. Fluker, father of our hero, Clayton Fluker. What a find! I already knew that Willis Fluker had died in May of 1921 from falling off a hay bale. Since Clayton didn't appear in the newspaper write-up about the tragic accident and death of Willis, that coincided with (and I thought pinned down) the story of Clayton's early demise around 1921.

Things were falling into place, or so I thought. I was saving the juicy tidbit (Dora's will) for last and quickly skimmed Willis Fluker's will. Imagine my astonishment when he leaves his ADOPTED son Clayton a dollar. Whew! My neat little timeline is blown out of the water and this family history is murkier than ever. Clayton is still alive in 1921 and there's obviously some bad blood here.

Before I leave Willis behind, jolt number two is delivered when I come to the realization that good ol' Aunt Dora was Willis' wife before she became Mrs. Herman Pool. Dora Emma Dye, Lottie's older sister, was married to Lottie's husband's adoptive father. I need an Excedrin… and a score card. I must leave those fascinating revelations and proceed with the people mentioned in Dora's will.

Thank you, thank you, thank you, Dora! There among the antique desks and painted portraits were the names of Dora's many heirs – siblings, nieces and nephews as she never had any children of her own. Jumping off the page immediately were the names of nieces Irene Newcomb and Helen McKeown and… sister Lottie Powers??!! What happened to dying in childbirth? When the will was written in the late 1940's, Lottie was not only alive, but remarried. In the list of nieces and nephews, two unfamiliar names, Margaret Meade of East Aurora, NY (suburb of Buffalo) and Nancy Thurston of Michigan, appeared. From doing extensive research on the Dye family beforehand, I could identify the others in the list, but these two I didn't know. Did Lottie have children from her second marriage? I couldn't wait to find out.

Excited about all sorts of new nuggets on which to chew, I made quick work of my stop in Mayville, Chautauqua's county seat and added nothing new to the file. The rest of Friday evening I used every shoehorn available to try to squeeze Margaret and Nancy into Lottie's new family. Nothing fit. On a hunch, I searched current directories and found an 85-year-old Margaret Meade living in East Aurora. It had to be her.

Nine o'clock Saturday morning, the earliest I could bring myself to make the call, I contacted Margaret. When I explained that I was looking for relatives of Dora Pool, she replied, "You found her." She was

very sympathetic to my quest, offering copies of Dye family pictures and whatever she could to help. Her father, Charles Dye, was Dora and Lottie's brother. I asked her if she knew Irene and Helen.

She had known them. Unfortunately, both were now deceased. Irene never had any children, but Helen had two daughters. In fact, Margaret had corresponded for a time with the one daughter and her name and address were somewhere on an old Christmas card list. With promises to send off copies of photos and look for Helen's daughter's information, she wished me good luck on my search.

I contacted Bill Hughes and told him I was making progress.

In Wednesday's mail after my Saturday morning chat with Margaret there arrived a note from her. It wasn't large enough to contain photos, so I was a little puzzled. When I opened it, she had written to let me know that Helen's daughter's name was Joan Van Dyke and she lived in Mt. Bethel, PA – not even two hours from me! At six that evening, I tracked her down via reverse address lookup and made the call. As soon as I told her who I was and why I was calling, she began crying and laughing all at once. She couldn't believe I was contacting her. Her mother and her aunt had looked their whole lives for their little brother Harold. They had even hired a private detective. Unfortunately, they had been searching for Harold Fluker and he had been given the name of his adoptive family, Harold Hughes. Joan and her husband, Chuck, were still grieving the loss of one of their beloved pets and she said my call was a blessing. When I asked if it was okay for me to pass along her name and phone number to Bill, she said she'd be waiting by her phone for his call.

I realized when I hurried to my computer that I didn't have an address or phone number for Bill. We had communicated solely by email. Since he was probably still at work on the west coast and he didn't always check email regularly, I didn't know when I'd hear from him. Five minutes after I clicked the 'Send' button, the phone rang and Bill was on the line. His excitement and eagerness for Joan's number cut our conversation short. In the emails I received from them later that evening, both claimed it would be a long time before they stopped bouncing on the ceiling.

I am so glad to have been a part of bringing this family together. It is sad that the three siblings had passed before the connection was made, but Joan is sure that they are all watching and glad that the reunion has finally happened. Ten years ago when the sisters were still living, it wouldn't have been possible because the online records that made it all come together weren't available then. Plans are in the works for an actual "family reunion" of the first cousins in Pennsylvania this summer.

Epilogue: Joan was the recipient of her Aunt Irene's treasure trove of family records. I spent an enjoyable and enlightening day in her lovely Mount Bethel home and pieced together some of the remaining pieces of the puzzle.

Through an Indenture Contract binding Clayton to his adoptive father Willis Fluker, we learn that Clayton's birth surname is Abbey – a family that arrived in the United States in the 1600's. Clayton's birth parents abandoned him at about three years of age. Through other photos and family notes, we discover that Clayton was actually the youngest of four Abbey siblings, not an only child as we previously thought. His parents not only abandoned their children, they apparently abandoned their identities as they are not found in any subsequent censuses.

Clayton did not die in a construction accident. There was such an accident at his workplace in Ohio, but an associate of his was the unfortunate victim. A mistake in the original newspaper article about the accident named Clayton as the fatality. Clayton and Lottie divorced in 1923. He moved on, married another woman and had several more children with her, living mostly in Texas. He died in 1960 in Florida. No one in the family had anything to do with Clayton after he left them.

Lottie, now single in Philadelphia, wrote several letters home. From them we understand she is caring for a sick little baby girl, Margaret Eola, who succumbs in January 1921. Lottie, the 'fun one' of the six Dye sisters, married Ray Powers and lived the rest of her life in New Jersey, where she died in 1953. Both Margaret Meade and granddaughter Joan remember her fondly. Daughter Helen mended fences and resumed a relationship with her mother Lottie. Irene never forgave her mother for giving up the children and leaving Harold to be placed in foster care and they remained estranged.

Final note: Bill's maternal grandfather Walter Hilliard worked with my grandfather Thomas Lawson at Westinghouse in Pittsburgh in the early 1930's. It's a small world.

[First Printed in CCHGS *Newsletter*, March 2009, pages 11-13]

An Escaped Slave's Story

Edited by W. M. Baillie

The Richardson Family Papers in the Society's manuscript collection include several folders relating to John Lyman Richardson, who lived at Grovania near the Columbia/Montour County line. Among these is a single sheet dated April 22nd (probably 1864) in which a onetime slave named W. C. Patterson tells briefly the extraordinary story of his life: born a free man, he traveled just before the Civil War to New Orleans and there was enslaved. He escaped, was recaptured, escaped again and eventually made his way to St. Louis, where during the War thousands of escaped southern slaves gathered under Union Army protection.

John L. Richardson probably knew Patterson and may well have taught him to write and encouraged him to write out his little autobiography. Richardson, a longtime educator, had gone from Pennsylvania to St. Louis to teach freedmen reading and writing.

Richardson's life is treated at some length in the Beers *Historical & Biographical Annals of Columbia and Montour Counties*. He was born September 15, 1816 in Jericho, Vermont to an old New England family—both his father and mother were descended from settlers who came from England in the 1630s. At the age of nineteen he began teaching, then studied for four years at Burr Seminary in Vermont. He taught in various places, including Otsego County, New York, and Luzerne County, Pennsylvania.[1]

In 1855, while he was principal of Madison Academy in Waverly, PA, Richardson was appointed superintendent of the public schools of Luzerne County, a newly-enacted position which he filled capably for several years. The idea of a county superintendent was strongly opposed by many people as interference with local control of schools, but Richardson's "enlightened attention to [his] duties" enabled him to establish the superintendent's authority and influence over public schooling.

Beers' *Annals* comments that "It seems but natural that a man of such high character and strong sense of justice should have been active in the Abolition cause and later in the betterment of conditions among the former slaves." In April 1863 Richardson accepted an appointment to organize schools for newly-freed slaves in St. Louis on behalf of the American Missionary Association; his salary was to be just $20 per month plus board—a large reduction from his previous earnings. During his first year there he was busy in organizing schools and employing teachers for them. It is in St. Louis, presumably, that he met W. C. Patterson and received the former slave's brief autobiographical sketch.[2]

There was violent opposition in St. Louis, however, against teaching African-Americans to read and write. After a few years Richardson had to leave because, as a protégé learned in a letter from him, "the Southerners was burning the school houses down and he was coming back."[3]

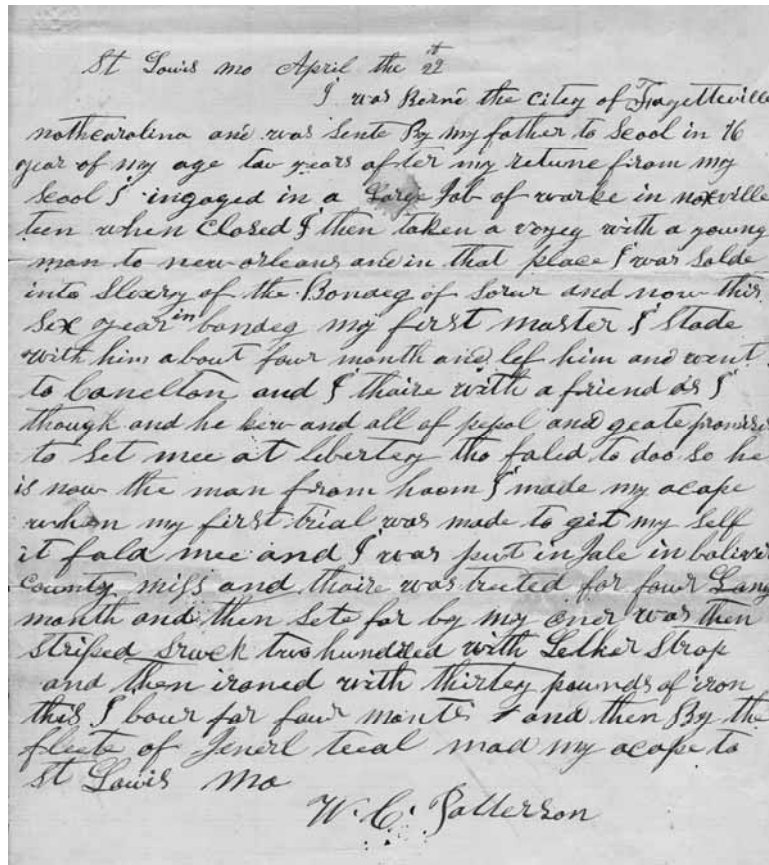He spent some time traveling to ask for contributions to help freedmen; his notebooks record amounts from 25¢ to $5 gathered from individuals in towns such as Tioga and Blossburg in Pennsylvania, Butternut, NY, and North Guilford, CT. In his "Collection Book 1867" we find a section of a speech he gave to ask for money, appealing to his audience's sense of basic fairness:

> In presenting the righteous claims of the freedmen of this country for your sympathy and support it is not important that we discuss the equality or inequality of the races; for if the African is superior to the Anglo-Saxon he needs present aid, if he is only equal he needs aid and if he is an inferior he needs all the more aid. Aid is what the black man now needs in this country unless we admit the assumption that his normal condition is that of slavery. If God really designed the African for this condition then we should not seek to raise him above it. If God designed him for slavery, then we should not seek his freedom. If God made him to be a

slave, then recent proclamation of Emancipation was a great sin. All efforts to educate him should be at once abandoned, and the sooner he shall be remanded back to his former condition the better.[3]

But of course, Richardson expected his hearers to conclude, Emancipation was right and hence the African deserves our support.

In 1879 Richardson retired to a farm he bought in Grovania (Cooper Township, Montour County, on the Columbia County line). He died in March, 1885 and was buried at Danville's Odd Fellows cemetery. His son John L. Richardson became the treasurer of the Richard Manufacturing Company of Bloomsburg, and it was probably through his family that the Richardson papers came to the Society's collections.

Reproduced above is the original life story written by escaped slave W. C. Patterson.[4] Following are two transcriptions, first in a literal reproduction and then regularized. The writer evidently had only very rudimentary training in writing and spelling, but he had an extraordinary story to tell. I have not been able to learn more about him than what he tells here; his last escape "by the fleet of General Teel" possibly refers to a flotilla of Union forces on the Mississippi.

St Louis mo April the 22[t]

I was Borne the citey of Fayetteville northcarolina and was Sente By my father to Scool in 16 year of my age tow years after my retune from my Scool I ingaged in a Large Job of worke in noxville teen [Knoxville, TN] when closed I then taken a voyeg with a young man to new-orleans and in that place I was Solde into Slavery of the Bondeg of Sorur and now this Six year in bondeg my first master I stade with him about four month and lef him and went to Canelton and I thaire with a friend as I though and he kew and all of pepol and geate promises to Set mee at libertey tho faled to doo so he is now

the man from hoom I made my acape when my first trial was made to get my self it fald mee and I was put in Jale in boliver County miss [Mississippi] and thaire was treeted for four Lang month and then Sete for by my oner was then striped srwek two hundred with Lether Strop and then ironed with thirtey pounds of iron this I bour for four monts and then By the fleete of Generl teeal mad my acape to St Lewis mo

      W. C. Patterson

     St. Louis, MO April 22 [?1864]

I was born in the city of Fayetteville, North Carolina and was sent by my father to school in the 16th year of my age. Two years after my return from school I engaged in a large job of work in Knoxville, Tennessee. When that closed I then took a voyage with a young man to New Orleans, and in that place I was sold into slavery, the Bondage of Sorrow, and now this six years [I spent] in bondage. My first master I stayed with him about four months and left him and went to Canelton [? Canton, MS], and I [stayed] there with a friend, as I thought, and he knew and all of people and got promises to set me at liberty though [he] failed to do so; he is now the man from whom I made my escape. When my first trial was made to get my self [free] it failed me and I was put in jail in Bolivar County, Mississippi and there was treated for four long months and then sent for by my owner. [I] was then stripped, struck two hundred [strokes] with a leather strop, and then ironed [put in irons] with thirty pounds of iron; this I bore for four months and then by the fleet of General Thiel made my escape to St. Louis, Missouri.

      W. C. Patterson

NOTES

1. Chicago: J. H. Beers & Co., 1915, vol. 1, pp. 483-88; most of the biographical information herein is from this work. Richardson was named for his mother's father, Revolutionary War veteran John Lyman (1760-1840), who descended from 1631 immigrant Richard Lyman, a founder of Hartford, CT.
2. S. L. Jocelyn (American Missionary Association, New York City) to J. L. Richardson, 26 Feb 1863; CCHGS, Richardson Papers, MS Box #8, folder #3.
3. Ann Elizabeth Green to Laura A. (Richardson) Miller, 7 Oct. 1921; Richardson Papers, folder #3.
4. Richardson Papers, folder #8.