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RECOLLECTIONS AND MEMENTOS OF G. A. PFEIFFER

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This is a personal reminiscence about my early family association with "Uncle Gus" Pfeiffer, and a list of the mementos of it which still survive. The Pfeiffer Foundation presumably has already a large collection of Gus Pfeiffer mementos. However, in view of my present age (68) and since none of my surviving relatives and acquaintances would understand what they mean, I would be glad to donate any of mine that it wants to the Pfeiffer Foundation, which can give them a better future home than I can.

NINETEENTH CENTURY BACKGROUND

The story starts with my grandfather, Tom Ferguson, born in the early 1860's. His parents had emigrated from Scotland to Toronto, but he lived most of his life as a realtor in the small town of Parkersburg, Iowa. Gustavus Adolphus Pfeiffer, slightly younger, was born of German immigrant parents in Cedar Falls, Iowa in 1872, and he also moved to Parkersburg where he operated a drug store in the 1890's and married Louise Foote of Parkersburg. [Forty years later, as a child growing up in Parkersburg, I knew the Foote house well because it was on main street diagonally across from the schoolhouse.]

In the 1890's, Tom Ferguson and his family lived next door to Gus and Paul Pfeiffer and they became lifelong friends. My mother, Ethel Ferguson, was born there in 1890, and as a young girl she would baby–sit for Pauline Pfeiffer (who later married Ernest Hemingway). My only surviving memento of that period is the "New Franklin Second Reader" that my mother used at age six. It is marked 1896 and has a rubber stamp impression on the inside front cover reading:

From
G. A. PFEIFFER & CO.
DRUGGISTS AND BOOKSELLERS,
Parkersburg, Iowa.

Considering that it was intended for young children it is a surprisingly handsome book, with many high quality steel engravings (some of which a small hand had tried to color).

Soon thereafter the Gus Pfeiffers moved to St. Louis where Gus and Henry Pfeiffer went into the drug manufacturing business. My mother, at age 14, attended the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair as a guest of the Paul Pfeiffers; she has told me about it many times, but no actual mementos of it have survived.

THE 1920's AND 1930's

I too was born very near Cedar Falls, just fifty years after Gus Pfeiffer, and due to family circumstances moved to Parkersburg. My Father was a surgeon in practice in Waterloo, Iowa (except for a short period as Captain in the Army Medical Corps in WW1). However, he died suddenly and unexpectedly when I was an infant and my mother, my older brother and two sisters and I, moved back to her parental home in Parkersburg where I grew up.

There we lived in conditions that would be regarded today as desperate poverty amid genteel surroundings. We had finer furniture, linen, silverware, etc. from my father's home, than anybody else in town; in particular a Knabe grand piano, classical music collection, and a large library, including the Harvard Classics, housed in elegant glass–front mahogany bookcases (far better than any I have today). We could grow much of our food in the backyard garden, but just didn't have any money except from renting half of the house (the same double house that Gus and Paul Pfeiffer had lived in forty years earlier), and I am sure that my grandfather had to help out many times in addition to having procured the house for us.

All during that period I heard about Gus Pfeiffer constantly and met him occasionally. He returned to visit old friends surprisingly often, considering all the other things he had to do, and it was always a great occasion when he dropped in on my grandparents. I was too young to understand exactly who he was, but I was always dressed up for the occasion and it was impressed on me that he was a very great man, and it was a privilege to be able to shake his hand and answer his kind questions (but he never gave us much advance notice of his visits and sometimes would show up completely unexpectedly, because he did not want others to make great preparations in his behalf).

But what a child remembers most is the Christmas present that he sent us every year. This was a carton of about 20 pounds of pecans (which I believe grew on a Pfeiffer–owned farm in Georgia), with a very fancy nutcracker. Needless to say, the nuts disappeared quickly, but over the years a great collection of nutcrackers accumulated (I still have one of them, and still use it; nothing of like quality can be bought today).

Also, Uncle Gus always sent my grandparents his fancy Christmas cards, with custom–made views of his country home at Aspetuck, near Westport, Conn. Unfortunately, only two of these have survived. One is undated, but is a sketch marked, "Aspetuck Mill, The Homestead" and signed "Philip Kappel". The other is imprinted "Christmas, 1933" on the inside and is a water color of the main house at The Homestead signed, "Bruce Mitchell, '33".

But the Easter cards that Uncle Gus sent us were even fancier than the Christmas cards. They are fronted with floral scenes hand–painted on parchment, of a quality suitable for framing. I still have three of them, undated but presumably all of the 1930's.

This period ended in 1938 when I left Parkersburg (permanently except for short visits to my mother and grandmother) to enter Cornell College at the age of sixteen. But this only increased my connection with and indebtedness to the Pfeiffers; for I lived in Merner Hall, dated a girl who lived in Pfeiffer Hall, and was supported by working part time in a print shop and by a loan from the Louise Foote Foundation (which I repaid later on schedule). My entire college education cost my mother only $25; one Winter she bought me an overcoat.

THE 1940's AND 1950's

Somehow (probably from inquiring of my grandmother) Uncle Gus kept himself informed of my progress at Cornell, and he invited me to come to New York, to work with Drs. Gustav Martin and Marvin R. Thompson at the Warner Institute, in the Summer of 1941, between my Junior and Senior years. This is when I finally got to know Uncle Gus and Aunt Louise quite well, and met most of the rest of the Pfeiffer clan.

Uncle Gus and I worked in the same building (113 W 18'th Street) and on Friday afternoons he would take a taxi from there to Grand Central Station, for the train ride to Westport and Aspetuck. He knew the taxi driver, who had a standing order for this, and tipped him one dollar – very handsome for 1941, when 15 cents was more usual. Several times he invited me to ride along with him, and I spent a wonderful weekend at the Homestead, almost coming to regard it as my own home. In the afternoons I would browse in the library and play the piano in the "Barn", and Aunt Louise would slip in quietly to listen. In the evenings Uncle Gus and I would go for long walks through the surrounding countryside, talking over many things. He perceived that my overriding interest was in pure science, and never tried to sell me on a business career.

The greatest of these occasions was the Fourth of July party at the Homestead that year, when there were many more guests than on the other visits. I met Mrs. Henry Pfeiffer, Mr. and Mrs. Ray Foote, Garfield Merner, Helen Keller (who was a close neighbor), and many younger Pfeiffers. In particular, Robert H. Pfeiffer (Hancock Professor of Oriental Languages and Curator of the Semitic Museum at Harvard) composed poetry for these occasions, in which he signed himself: "the Poet Laureate of Aspetuck". His book *Introduction to the Old Testament* was just then in press (the preface is dated May 1941), and in due course I received a copy of it. Presumably, I had expressed to him an interest in the historical/archaeological aspect of those studies.

There were usually small children of other guests about, and I remember Uncle Gus delighting them with his "stumblebum" act; staggering about, coming perilously close to falling down over and over again, and then exhorting them not to become a stumblebum like him. He would also play Croquet, with an intensity – almost ferocity – that he never showed in anything else. He intended to WIN; and did.

There are a number of mementos of this period. The invitation to the fourth of July party is in the form of a rather long poem (presumably by RHP) engraved on red, white, and blue paper, dated June 18, 1941 and signed "Uncle Gus." He managed to get a large number of pennies dated 1841, and each guest received one, handsomely packaged, as a dinner place favor. Somehow, I have managed to keep mine, still in its original box.

More puzzling, I have carbon copies of six poems composed by Robert H. Pfeiffer for Uncle Gus's birthday parties, although after all these years I cannot recall how I came to have them. Possibly Aunt Louise slipped them to me after I had noticed the originals in the Barn and asked her about them. They are also rather long, and are labelled:

Aunt Louise and Uncle Gus, July 28, 1933, Tune: O Tannenbaum

For the Birthday of Uncle Gus July 28, 1934

July 17, 1935

The Birthday of Uncle Gus, or Ten Years at Aspetuck, July 28, 1936

To Uncle Gus on his Birthday (from Badgastein, Austria, July 7, 1938)

To Uncle Gus on his Birthday July 28, 1940.

Aunt Louise also told me an anecdote about Uncle Gus. It seems that on a visit to Germany he was inspecting a church in a small town, and could not resist the urge to give the bell rope a small tug. To his surprise, the bell rang out and the townspeople started gathering to find out what the occasion was. Equal to the occasion, he delivered a sermon, in fluent German.

At this time there was a rather tacit agreement that the next year, after getting my B. A. degree, I would return to the Warner Institute for another Summer or possibly something more permanent. But the War intervened and in May 1942 I returned to New York, to work instead on Doppler radar development at the Sperry Gyroscope Company on Long Island. However, I did pay another visit to the Homestead that Summer and this turned out to be the last time I saw Uncle Gus and Aunt Louise. Soon thereafter I became an Ensign in the Navy.

After the War I spent a year at the University of California in Berkeley, a student of J. R. Oppenheimer, and two Summers at Stanford University, and finally returned to the East Coast as a graduate student at Princeton in September 1947. I tried to inquire about Uncle Gus and Aunt Louise, but failed to make contact; a letter was returned undelivered and then I read in a newspaper of the death of Aunt Louise, at the Homestead that she loved so much (once she said to me: "I count that day lost that I do not spend at the Homestead"). I finished my Ph.D. degree at Princeton, then returned to Stanford where I spent the 1950's in the Physics Department.

THE 1960's

In 1960 I moved to Washington University in St. Louis, and by a strange coincidence this move restored my contact with the Pfeiffers. At an airport I struck up a conversation with a distinguished looking gentleman who was waiting for the same flight. His mannerisms were very familiar to me; suddenly I realized that this was Garfield Merner, whom I had met at the Homestead in 1941. There was something about him that one did not forget. This resulted in his visiting my home in St. Louis in December 1961 and meeting my mother again, whom he had not seen in over fifty years, and a great deal of reminiscing.

We stayed in contact, exchanged some books, and later I visited his office in San Francisco. I mentioned to him that we were getting a new building (The Arthur Holly Compton Laboratory) at Washington University but had not yet located funds for the planned library. Just as, 25 years earlier, Uncle Gus had told me about the Louise Foote foundation and suggested that I seek a college loan there, now Garfield Merner told me about the Pfeiffer Foundation, noted that since the Pfeiffer fortune had started in St. Louis, it seemed proper that some of it return there, and suggested that we apply to the Pfeiffer Foundation for the library funding.

The result was that when the Compton Laboratory opened at the end of 1964, its showpiece was the Gustavus A. Pfeiffer Library. Garfield Merner attended the dedication ceremonies, and I mentioned to him that, since portraits of various other distinguished persons hung on its walls, it would be very nice to have a portrait of Uncle Gus there also. He agreed at once, and arranged to have a copy made of an oil portrait, which we received about two years later. Today, I am the only living person who knew personally everyone whose portrait hangs in our library.