

Homer Edgar Wickenden

From

Memoirs of the Thomas Rogers Wickenden Family

My early recollections begin three or four years after my birth on December 20, 1890. I recall "speaking a piece" in my night clothes at the Christmas entertainment (?) at the Second Baptist Church.

The first school I attended, starting four months before my sixth birthday, was in a store building across the street from our home, the Franklin School being too crowded. The second grade was in that building also. One day I went to school without having picked up my clothes and Mother sent for me to come home and pick them up. On returning to my class I found that I was late, the bell having rung. I was so chagrined that I have picked up my clothes very carefully ever since.

Among my first recollections was the depression of 1896-97, during which Father lost all his business and the family had very meager resources. I recall that when I needed a new pair of shoes I asked Father for them and he put me off. I remarked to him, "We are very poor, aren't we Dad," His reply was very characteristic of him. "No, my boy, any man with eight children isn't poor." Apparently the family fortune improved, for I recall in the second grade going before the teacher's desk and announcing to her proudly that this was the first "boughten" suit I had ever had.

I was always very fond of music and at the age of eight Mother began to give me lessons on the piano. We had an upright Steinway which was given to Mother by her father upon graduation from high school. We also had a reed organ which Father had acquired. Our musical library was very limited, consisting mostly of an instruction book for the piano and a few hymn books. Shortly after starting lessons Aunt Jennie Taylor volunteered to teach me. Having no children she had plenty of time and played the piano fairly well, but I am inclined to feel that her teaching left a few things to be desired, such as discipline. She was easy going on her nephew. For a year or so I took lessons from Mother's cousin, Mrs. Martha McClure who had studied at the Boston Conservatory. Mother's chief concern was to keep me practicing and sometimes a small switch was necessary. There was, however, a basic love of music, and I could not keep away from the piano. Mother occasionally sat down at the piano to render her special piece, "Listen to the Mocking Bird." On Sunday evenings she always played hymns, and I recall our singing frequently "Softly Now the Light of Day." At Sunday evening supper we all sang grace to the tune, "Sun of My Soul", and the words were as follows:

Be present at our table, Lord,
Be here and everywhere adored.
These mercies bless and grant
That we may feast in paradise with Thee.

Nothing unusual occurred in my musical career until at the age of twelve I became greatly interested in the pipe organ. I was particularly impressed with the bass notes

and the variety of tone. Our reed organ had several stops, one of which was known as sub-bass, an octave lower than the usual bass. I conceived the idea of rigging up a set of pedals to play the sub-bass octave. The pedals consisted of playing blocks about a foot long. These were attached to the ivory notes with cotton string. I pumped the organ with one foot and played the sub-bass pedals with the other. While this invention perhaps did not rank with Tom's constructions, it attracted considerable attention and my seventh-grade teacher came to the house to see it in operation.

My interest in the organ continued, and at the age of fourteen Mother arranged to have me take a few lessons on the organ in the neighboring Lutheran Church. This gave me a great thrill. As I look back on this experience I realize how poorly prepared I was from the standpoint of technical foundation at the piano, but this did not deter me. At the age of sixteen one of our neighbors who played the organ in the Presbyterian Church nearby had to have a substitute one Sunday and asked me to take her place. Boy! Was this a thrill! It gave me more pleasure than anything that had happened musically up until that time. In the late summer of 1908 I had the pleasure of playing the organ at Will's and Marion's wedding, the first occasion of its kind in the new Second Baptist Church for which the plans had been drawn and the construction supervised by Father.

In the early part of that summer I had worked as a clerk in the Lakeside office of the Toledo Port Clinton and Lakeside Railroad for which Father had been the chief engineer and builder. In September I set forth for Denison University as was the family tradition, wearing my black derby hat and high collar, and in my pocket \$125 which I had earned carrying newspapers for nine years and mowing lawns. When I went to college I had two ambitions which were characteristic of my immaturity. One was to learn to play the pipe organ and the other was to play on the college football team. I took the usual arts course and wound up with a Ph. B. degree, majoring in Economics. I managed to get an A in college algebra, but most of my marks were B's

At Denison I took piano lessons for two years and organ for one year in addition to my regular studies. I spent considerable time at the Conservatory of Music, playing the pianola with records of McDowell's music and the Love-Death scene from Tristan and Isolde.

This was my first contact with really great music.

In the summer months between my freshman and sophomore years I sold the "Century Book of Facts" to farmers in northwestern Ohio. At the end of the first ten days, I went home to celebrate the Fourth of July weekend. I did not like the work, and I asked Father if he could get me another job for the summer. His reply, pointing his finger at me, was, "Homer, you contracted to sell books this summer. You go back and sell them whether you like it or not." I went back to the job, and at the end of the summer I had cleared \$70 above my expenses.

The summer between my sophomore and junior years I spent sweating in the American Bridge Works where I worked for ten hours a day, fifty-five hours a week, assembling

steel structures and painting them. The wages amounted to \$16.50 per week. During the summer following my junior year I worked with Father on some surveys of the old Morris and Essex Canal in Newark, New Jersey.

During my last semester in college I began to look around for a position. The college had no counseling service, and I lacked any direction or guidance. The president told me that H. J. Heinz Co. was looking for promising young men who would learn the business and work their way up from the bottom in the factory. The company offered to pay my expenses to Pittsburgh for an interview. After visiting the plant for a day I decided to accept their offer of a job, although I was not over enthusiastic. Having majored in economics I thought I wanted to go into big business.

My college years had been very happy ones and somewhat carefree. I had played on the football team for three years, had sung in the glee club, had run on the track team, and for three years was a member of the Beta Theta Pi fraternity. I learned that one of the advantages of a small college is that a student has an opportunity to participate in many activities. At the close of my senior year I estimated that my college course had required an outlay in cash of \$1350.

Shortly after graduation I went to Pittsburgh to live, where I learned something about the rough ways of business and the problems of finding a pleasant place to live. For three years I lived on the north side in a rooming house about a mile and a half from the Heinz plant. This proved to be a far cry from the pleasures of Granville. I donned overalls and went to work for a ten-hour day beginning at 7 a.m. and continuing to 5:30 p.m. with a short time out for lunch. My first job was to pack bottles of ketchup in sawdust in big barrels. My wages started at \$70 a month, and when I left H. J. Heinz Company three years later I was earning \$90 a month.

Pittsburgh was a dismal city, but I found pleasure and friends at the First Baptist Church where I played on the boys' basketball team. After I became a foreman in the department where we labeled the cans of baked beans, I found myself being much more interested in the young people who worked for me than in the baked beans. At that time I read some books on efficiency and worked out a scheme for paying the workers in my department a small bonus for a substantial increase in production. The management expressed some appreciation but did not encourage me or any of the college boys working with me to make any special studies. There was no training program. and it was up to us to do what we could to find our own way. At the end of three years I was so discouraged I decided to quit.

I still did not have any sense of direction. I consulted an engineer who was building munition plants for the First World War and he advised me if I was interested in people rather than machinery to take a job that dealt, with people primarily. Just at this time (1915) I was offered a position at \$45 a month in the training class under the Associated Charities of Cleveland. I took the position and to earn enough to live on I resided in a social settlement, Lend a Hand House, where I conducted clubs and classes in the evenings.

On consulting Father about the new position, he was not very much impressed. He wondered if I would be able to support myself but felt that the new job might pay as much as the position of a minister in a church. I found myself very happy in the new job and deeply interested in the people and the social problems that confronted me. I was really enthusiastic about my work for the first time. The publicity man for the Associated Charities, in announcing my appointment, said that I had given up the job of getting pickles into people and taken up the job of getting people out of pickles.

My most successful case was with the family of an Hungarian peasant who came to this country and worked in a foundry. Life was so drab for him and his family that frequently he came home drunk and threatened the family. His wife finally had to send him to the County Work House for non-support. While there I went to see him and asked if he had his choice what kind of job he would like. He replied that if he could have a few acres of land to farm and a factory job nearby he could probably do better. After three months search I found an eleven-acre farm near a factory in Berea, Ohio. The family was pleased with the prospect and the Associated Charities agreed to pay three months' rent and to buy some farm equipment and seeds. The family moved to Berea and from a special fund I was able to buy them a car for \$75. The family was never known to be on the relief rolls after that.

One of my outside interests at this time was in taking vocal lessons. I sang as soloist in the Unitarian and later an Episcopal church, earning extra money in this way.

When the United States declared war in 1917, I and two of my coworkers went down to enroll in the Officers Training Corps. I resigned my job and went home to await orders to report. The two companions received their orders to go to Camp Harrison, but I did not receive any. So, I returned to my job for a few weeks and then signed up to work for the Home Service Division of the Red Cross in Ohio, Indiana and Kentucky. This job lasted about six months. I finally went into the army in the draft in the spring of 1918.

We were sent to Camp Sherman in Chillicothe, Ohio. Upon arrival the first thing that happened was that we were searched for whiskey and firearms. In two weeks I was promoted to Corporal and sent to the Adjutant's office. About one month later the Adjutant was appointed editor of the camp newspaper, and he ordered me to go with him in this new undertaking as a reporter. I wrote news items and musical criticisms of the concerts held at the Red Cross Center. This was my first contact with the newspaper world.

The Adjutant announced one morning that for that week the newspaper would carry a scandal story of how the people of Chillicothe were gouging the soldiers. He assigned three or four reporters to go to town to get the information wherever they could. The facts were that the soldiers were not being gouged at all. The only place where prices were increased were for chickens in the butcher shop. I got my hands on the report of the Director of the War Camp Community Service who said a slight increase in some items such as room rents had been noted, but that there was no general increase in

prices. The Adjutant took the report and with a blue pencil changed the whole meaning to support his scandal story. He wrote big headlines and the next week the Governor, upon reading the report appointed a commission to investigate. Shortly thereafter I asked to be relieved of my reportorial duties and to return to the drill field. I was shortly appointed assistant top sergeant of the Company. In this capacity one Saturday I misread orders for the 250 men to report to the Medical Headquarters for their typhoid shots. The next day being Sunday, I ordered them out of bed an hour early, marched them to the Medical Headquarters and found the place locked. The men marched back to the barracks without complaint and got in an early hour of softball.

I was transferred after a few months to the Officers Training Camp at Camp Gordon, Georgia. After two or three months here, the armistice was signed and our company was mustered out. I was home before Christmas. Shortly thereafter, I was offered a position as Director of the Associated Charities, now the Family Service Association of Louisville, Kentucky.

A fine group of young people who were recently released from the service came to Louisville and we all had a very happy life there. Louisville people were very cordial, and it would be difficult to duplicate the pleasant atmosphere in which we all worked. We had a hand in the establishment of a School of Social Work at the University of Louisville. At this time I did graduate work at the University in sociology and labor problems and earned my Master of Arts degree.

After two and a half years in Louisville I was invited to return to Cleveland to be on the staff of the Cleveland Welfare Federation, and I accepted. In 1923 I read an advertisement on the back of a magazine of a trip around the world for \$1200 and up (mostly up!) aboard the steamship Empress of France. Some of the members of the family thought this would be a foolish expenditure of money. However, I sailed on January 22, 1923, from New York and went through the Panama Canal and up the West Coast, then to Honolulu, Japan, Canton, China, the Philippines, Java, Singapore, Burma, and thence to Calcutta. In India I had a three-week trip overland which had been arranged by my friend Waldo Heinrichs who was residing in Calcutta. India proved to be a very fascinating country with a very old culture. It showed great contrasts in riches and poverty.

From Bombay we sailed to Egypt through the Suez Canal and disembarked at Naples. From there we proceeded up through Italy, stopping at Florence, Venice and Milan and then on to Switzerland. From there we went to Paris and then flew in an old Handley-Page biplane to London. The biplane was a far cry from modern jets. After ten days in England, where I visited relatives in Rochester, we sailed back to Montreal. The trip proved to be one of the greatest educational experiences of my life, and I have concluded that the money was very well spent.

I returned to my job in Cleveland and after a year I decided that it was time for me to seek a position where I could again be my own boss. In October 1924 I went to Mount Vernon, New York to establish a Community Chest and a Council of Social Agencies. It

was just about this time that I decided that I should establish a family of my own. I had worked with Mira Bears of Boston while in Louisville where she was Director of the Public Health Nursing Association and the City School Nurses, and we became engaged. On January 10, 1925 we were married in Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick's Church on Park Avenue, New York City by Dr. a Denison friend. We went to Bermuda for our wedding trip following a send-off by Tom and Dee. Dee tried to interest the other passengers in our romance by shouting "Bride and Groom." It didn't work because most of the passengers were brides and grooms.

After four years at the Community Chest in Mount Vernon. I decided to seek a job in New York City. For about a year and a half I worked as Assistant Director of the New York Community Trust, a form of common endowment. In 1929 I was offered the position as Director of the United Hospital Fund, which raised money for some eighty voluntary hospitals in New York City.

During my eleven and a half years in this position I had the pleasure of launching several enterprises that were of great interest including a Conference on Hospital Accounting, a hospital survey for which I got \$40,000 from the Carnegie Foundation, and a Hospital Credit Exchange, an agency to collect outstanding hospital accounts. I am still a member of its Board of Directors.

In 1932 I took the first steps in the organization of the Associated Hospital Service of New York, now known as the Blue Cross. The Blue Cross was launched in 1934 after a great deal of preliminary work and was financed by a gift of \$25,000 which I secured from Edward S. Harkness. I served as Secretary of this corporation for the first five years of its operations. Since then it has grown into a vast organization giving hospital protection to millions of people in New York State.

In 1940 a reorganization took place in the United Hospital Fund and I resigned as General Director. Shortly thereafter Mrs. August Belmont asked me to become the Director of the Metropolitan Opera Guild, which she had set up to raise money and provide popular support for the Met. This brought me in touch with a great many of the new artists. One of the most intriguing assignments was to arrange for a fifteen-minute broadcast every week to preview the opera to be heard over the radio the following Saturday. The National Broadcasting Company loaned us the services of their ninety-piece symphony orchestra. These programs were very exciting and gave me great pleasure while they lasted. Unfortunately the war situation became so threatening it looked as though the opera would have to close, and at the end of the season of 1941 I resigned.

For the two years following I became the Assistant Administrator and finally Administrator of the Flower Fifth Avenue Hospital. Inasmuch as the management of the hospital came under the responsibilities of the President of the New York Medical College and lines of authority were not clearly drawn, I resigned. In this position I got some good experience in hospital administration, but the frustrations overbalanced these.

The next worthwhile job which was offered me was to organize the new National Health and Welfare Retirement Association under the leadership of my friend Ralph Blanchard and with the help and support of the Community Chests and Councils of America. This project was launched formally on January 1, 1945. Inasmuch as we had no large capital sums it was decided to reinsure the plan with the John Hancock Mutual Life Insurance Company of Boston.

By the time I reached retirement at the age of sixty-five the Association had grown from nothing to 2700 health and welfare organizations which contributed annually about \$10,000,000 for retirement purposes. After retirement I continued my service as Secretary of the Corporation for three more years. This organization of the retirement plan proved to be one of the most fascinating and rewarding jobs I had ever undertaken. I resigned completely in October 1958 but continued on a consulting basis.

Looking back over the years I have had a varied career but a very happy one. No one could ask for more interesting jobs than to organize the Blue Cross and later set up the National Health and Welfare Retirement Association.

Our married life has been cheered by the arrival and growth of our two daughters: Ann, born in New York City on November 1, 1925 at the Woman's Hospital, and Ruth, born at the Lawrence Hospital in Bronxville on May 9, 1931.

Ann finished the Bronxville High School in 1944 and at her graduation I had the pleasure of delivering the commencement address and presenting her with her diploma. After completing her undergraduate course at Denison University in 1948 she went on to the Yale University School of Nursing from which she received her master's degree in 1951.

When Ruth finished the Bronxville High School in 1949, I was Chairman of the Board of Education and in that capacity presented her with her diploma. After graduating from Denison in 1953 she went on to Radcliffe College where she took a year's course in management under the combined agencies of Radcliffe and the Harvard School of Business Administration.

Both girls are happily married. Ann married Jack Harold Walters of Paw Paw, Michigan in Bronxville on May 10, 1958. They have a daughter, Donna Lynn, born at Lawrence Hospital, Bronxville on June 13, 1960. Jack is a graduate of the University of Michigan.

Ruth married Alan Otto Abel, of Franklin, Indiana in Bronxville on June 16, 1956. They have a son Thomas Alan, born in U.C.L.A. Hospital, Los Angeles on December 1, 1957, and a daughter Gwenneth Allyn born in the same hospital on May 5, 1960. Alan is a graduate of Purdue University and the Harvard School of Business Administration.

The most outstanding event of our married life was the presentation to Mira of the Medal for Merit, she being the third woman in the history of the United States to receive

it. It was awarded by President Truman for the work which she did as a nurse in World War II. She was director of the National Nursing Council for War Service, the clearing house and coordinating agency for all nursing interests, military and civilian in the country.

We have spent all of our married life in Westchester County, New York, the first three years in Mount Vernon. We then built a home in Eastchester where we lived for eight years. After building a similar home in Bronxville we have lived there and enjoyed an exceptionally congenial community life for the last twenty-six years.