

Ida Wickenden Nixon

from

Memoirs of the Thomas Rogers Wickenden Family

Looking back over more than seventy years, how does one begin the story of one's life?

I was born February 11, 1886. My first memory is of Lakeside, of walking across a plank to get to a basin in which to wash my hands. I was about three. Many happy memories of Lakeside follow across the years.

We were rich in having two grandmothers to tell us stories from their childhood. Grandmother Consaul told of the log cabin and bears in the woods, and Grandmother Wickenden of her childhood days in Canada among the Indians and of the shipwreck on the return journey to England.

I was an extremely shy child and it was painful for me to meet strangers. How I ever got up courage to ask to be baptized and join the church when I was eight, I don't know. But I was determined to do it and remember going with father to meet the deacons and sitting on his lap while they questioned me. I was immersed in the old Second Baptist Church during the evening service on the Sunday after my eighth birthday. Mother wrapped me in a big coat and hurried me home to be dried, warmed and put to bed.

I remember Saturday night baths in a wash tub by the kitchen stove before the bathroom was put in. When the bathroom was installed Mother remarked sarcastically that she had survived an outdoor toilet, but her weakling children had to have the comfort of one indoors. The winter Grandma Wickenden and Lottie were both so ill, we used the outdoor one to avoid the noise the indoor one made.

Summers at Lakeside were a great joy. When I was sixteen, Tom and I were put in charge of the younger children while Mother stayed at home. Baker's bread was not fit to eat at that time, so I made bread, struggling with the old gasoline stove, and often despaired of keeping up with the appetites for bread and "Lakeside Applesauce."

When hard times caught up with us I wonder how Mother ever managed. She told me once long afterward that she had fed a family of ten on a dollar a day during that period and always had milk for the children. She added with triumph in her voice, "And we always had pie for Sunday dinner." Suddenly I saw how the pie that I had taken for granted had meant to her a standard lived up to and that it really was an achievement.

I felt the financial pinch in the matter of clothes. For years mine were all handed down from Lottie or made over from Aunt Jennie's or Aunt Jessie's. Things must have been looking up when I graduated from high school because I had two new dresses made by a dressmaker for class day and commencement. They served as my party dresses through three years of college.

During my high school period my social life was centered in the church and our home. An occasional church social and Thursday evening prayer meeting were the extent of my diversions. I did not have any "boyfriends." I remember one boy of my age from the Church who came to call one evening. I thought he came to see me, but father assumed he had come to see him and took charge of the conversation.

I wanted to go to college but didn't dream it possible, as I could not work my way as Will had, but father managed it. When I think of that shy, socially inept girl, I don't wonder that Will tried to coach me for the experiences ahead. He overdid it in spots but on the whole, it helped. Lottie made me a new skirt and some blouses and packed my trunk for me, and I set out with my heart in my mouth. Mrs. Hunt, the matron, told me later that when she first saw me she thought I would not last two weeks because I was such a scared thing. But it never occurred to me to quit.

At the end of my junior year I was elected President of the YWCA, President of Senior Girls and Vice-President of Student Government. The girl elected President of Student Government did not return in September. I wanted to resign but the Dean, Miss Barker, made it clear she expected me to carry through, so I carried that responsibility too. Apparently I kept up my class work, for afterwards I was elected to Phi Beta Kappa.

I began to date the latter half of my freshman year and dated a variety of men. In May 1905 I had a date with one Justin Wroe Nixon. His younger sister, Esther, had told me all about him, how brilliant he was and how when he had a date it took the cooperation of the whole family to get him ready. I remember thinking "I pity the girl who marries him." He asked me to go with him to the Cicero banquet. I was rather appalled when I found I was going with the toastmaster and would be sitting at the head table, but I had a good time and have sat at many a head table with him since.

The YWCA was my chief extracurricular interest, and I was active in it from the first. I joined the Student Volunteer Band and planned to go to India as a missionary. The spring of 1906 the Student Volunteer Convention was held in Nashville and Will, understanding brother that he was, sent me the money to go. This was a high point in my college experience. I got a wider vision of Christianity and of the work it had to do. Again I met Justin Nixon, we walked home from meeting together and had a day in Mammoth Cave on our way north.

I had majored in biology under C. J. Herrick. As graduation approached, I was looking for a position to teach science or mathematics. Hearing a missionary, Mr. Sweet, on the need for a teacher in a girls' school in Hangchow, China, I offered my services. In spite of my twenty-one years, the Board gave me the appointment and late in October 1907 I sailed with Mr. and Mrs. Sweet and Mary Nourse for China. I was completely ignorant and was eager to learn.

The first year was spent almost completely in study. For diversion I taught the class in spherical geometry in English to the senior boys and brushed up on my music so I could play the organ in church and chapel.

The following September Mary and I took over the Girls' School in a rented building which adjoined a large lot on which the school was to be built. We continued our language study and did all the teaching except classical Chinese and Chinese writing. With twenty-five girls enrolled the work covered eight grades of primary and secondary school. We set up housekeeping with a Chinese woman cook and maid, both with bound feet. We had no time to waste.

On several occasions thieves dug through the mud wall surrounding the building and entered at night. It was no joke to calm the frightened girls and servants and to search the house, armed with a croquet mallet. There were huge empty water jars, large enough to conceal a man, standing in dark corners, and the Chinese kitchen was full of hiding places. It all makes a good tale now.

In the spring of that year we built a brick residence on the adjoining land we owned. The contract and specifications were in Chinese. The Chinese contractor knew his business and was a whiz at figures, but he could not read or write. Most of the supervision fell to me. My Chinese teacher knew the individual Chinese characters but building terms were unfamiliar to him. All that I had unconsciously absorbed from Father's construction work came to my aid. After many exasperating and amusing experiences we got a sound house built, with fireplaces that did not smoke, and in September we moved in.

Keeping house without refrigeration was easy in the winter, but during the spring, summer and fall when meat either cooked or uncooked could not be kept overnight, it was not so simple. All drinking water had to be boiled and no raw vegetables could be eaten. The school rooms were unheated and in winter we did our teaching wearing fur-lined coats and shoes. I had to wear chamois gloves while playing the organ. We were plagued with chilblains, but these were minor inconveniences and really our life was very pleasant. In our residence we had fires in a fireplace or a sheet iron stove.

The girls were so eager to learn, so appreciative of this opportunity, that our work was a joy. They loved a joke and we had fun playing with them after school hours. Their backgrounds varied. Some were daughters of our Chinese pastors, some were from official families, and some were being educated by the families of their future husbands. They gave us a good, wide look into Chinese life. We visited in the homes of all who lived in the city and came to appreciate their culture, art, literature and philosophy. In Confucianism we saw much of value, but in the Buddhist and Taoist religions as practiced we saw very little of value.

We visited the temples in the beauty spots around West Lake. One night just before dawn we attended the annual sacrifices and worship in honor of Confucius. It was a most impressive and colorful ceremony in which all the high officials of the province participated. We attended weddings, funerals and feasts.

We lived at first under the old Empress Dowager, then under the "Little Emperor", the last of the Manchus, and on through the overthrow of the Manchu dynasty and the

establishment of the Republic under Sun Yat Sen, and the making of Yuan Shih Kai, Provisional President. It was a time of great tension, of rumors and grapevine news, but there was little accurate information as to what was happening elsewhere. The folks at home had more reliable information in the American newspapers than we had. We saw Hangchow emptied of three-fourths of its population. The fact that we did not leave the city was a great comfort to people who could not flee. Actually, the transfer from Manchu to Chinese rule was accomplished there with no violence except the burning of the Governor's Yamen.

One year the rice crop failed and there was a slump in the silk market. This left the many silk workers without an income when rice was very high, so we organized relief work.

The Hangchow Union Girls School was organized in 1912, uniting two Presbyterian Schools and our Baptist School. My last year in Hangchow I was Acting Principal of the High School Department which was located in our building. I taught all the mathematics, science, music, some English and Bible. I also supervised the older girls in teaching Sunday School in one of our churches. It was a rich, busy life with not much time to get homesick. Sunday night, however, at bedtime, I used to stand on a little balcony facing East and think of Father at that same moment leading Sunday morning family prayers in the living room at 602 Starr Avenue.

Summer vacations were a necessity. I spent two summers at Mokansan, a nearby mountain resort, another summer in North China at Chefoo, and two more summers in Japan. I wanted to visit Peking, but it was too hot in the summer when I needed rest and in the cooler weather I was too busy.

In June 1913 my furlough being due, I came home across Siberia by train, a ten-day journey on a wood burning train, through endless birch forests carpeted with lilies of the valley, and over the Ural Mountains with such a gradual rise that we were not conscious of climbing. We spent two days in Moscow sightseeing. We arrived in Berlin on the 25th anniversary of Kaiser Wilhelm's accession to the throne and were in time to see the last part of the military parade, with many soldiers in gorgeous dress uniforms which were all caters of the rainbow and covered with gold lace. Then on to England where Lottie met me. We had a wonderful month of travel, visiting in England and Scotland and four memorable days in Paris.

Justin and I had corresponded while I was in China. He had spent a day with Lottie almost every summer. She would read him my letters written only for family eyes and then she would write me all about his visit. Esther Nixon also kept me well informed. He came to Lakeside in August to see me and we were engaged before he left. We were married June 12, 1914, and as Justin loved to say, "Then the war started."

We spent more than forty very happy, interesting years together. The first two years we lived in Minneapolis where I learned to be a minister's wife in a small friendly church, and there John was born. Then came the move to Rochester where we made our home

for the remainder of Justin's career. Eight years were spent as a professor's wife, a less demanding job, but with its opportunities and responsibilities for entertaining and being friends to students. We had the thrill of buying our first home, and during this period Charles, Elizabeth and Alice were born.

Then came thirteen years when Justin was Pastor of Brick Church. We needed a larger home and bought our dream house on Brightford Heights with plenty of space outside for the children to play and roam. There Justin Jr. was born.

These were busy years. trying to run the home. to meet the needs of all, and to give Justin the quiet and protection he needed in his study and at the same time keep up with all the expanding interests of the children, cub scouts, boy scouts, girl scouts, etc. Entertaining for the church and being entertained, trying to meet the various demands on the wife of the minister of a large downtown church, sharing in joy and sorrow the lives of a larger and larger number of people and coping with illness both unimportant and serious used all my time and strength.

There were school problems, colleges to be chosen, problems of dating, romances, engagements and finally weddings, always something new ahead to be learned and adjusted to. There were some wonderful summers in the Adirondacks, the best of which was the one when Ruth and Leslie and their three children joined us there. One summer Justin and I left the small children at home with a nurse and the older ones in camp while we went to Europe and had six weeks wandering around England and two weeks visiting in France.

In 1937, being very tired after carrying the problems of Brick Church and its large congregation through the depression years, Justin resigned his pastorate and accepted the chair of Christian Theology and Ethics at Colgate-Rochester Divinity School. We changed our work but continued to live in the same house.

Grandmother Nixon joined our family and spent her last days with us. In 1945 Justin suffered a coronary occlusion and we were afraid to stay on our hilltop during the winter, so we sold our home and moved into the city. One by one the children left us and established their own homes.

I found time during the years to serve on the Board of the Women's City Club, and for nine years on the Board of the YWCA. I did a little work in the League of Women Voters, some work for General Hospital through my "Twig", joined a reading club, and served on various committees in church work, etc.

When Justin retired in 1954 we went abroad for eleven months. We spent five months in Vienna studying German and enjoying music, drama and people. We had four months in Istanbul, Turkey, where Justin was interim minister of the English-speaking Union Evangelical Church. In the remaining time we traveled in Greece, Italy and Switzerland and reached home in time for Justin Jr.'s wedding.

Life went on with less pressure and reduced activities but still full of interest. But Justin's heart was less and less able to carry the burden, and on July 11, 1958 he entered Eternal Life. I was left to go on alone after a rich, full, shared life. The adjustment has not been easy.

In 1961 I went to Australia for a very happy visit with Esther Nixon Dixon's daughter and her family. Now, having passed my 76th birthday, I am getting rid of house owning and housekeeping responsibilities and am entering a retirement community in Pomona, California. Being in good health I look forward to visits with all my children and brothers and sisters as long as I am able to travel, to enjoying the cultural advantages of the Claremont Colleges, and to renewing old friendships and making new ones. The new adventure promises happiness and contentment.

Children and Grandchildren

John Harmon - born April 7, 1915 in Minneapolis, Minnesota

Charles Robert - born August 19, 1917 in Rochester, N. Y. Married Margaret Carolyn McCord June 22, 1941 in Oakham, Mass. Children: John Bennett -born November 6, 1944 in Northampton, Mass. Margaret Carolyn - born June 3, 1956, in Los Angeles, Calif.

Elizabeth Wickenden - born August 15, 1919, Rochester, N. Y. Married Owen Champlin Johnson July 20, 1944, Rochester, N. Y. Children: Nicoll Harmon born July 10, 1947, Inglewood, California. Deborah Hope born July 1, 1949, Los Angeles, California.

Alice Wroe - born November 2, 1923, Rochester, N. Y.
Married David William St. Clair June 19, 1948, Rochester,
N. Y.

Children: Judith Ann - born May 5, 1950, Rochester,
N. Y. Mary Alice - born June 8, 1953, Rochester, N.
Helen Jean - born May 6, 1955, Rochester, N. Y.
Patricia Nixon - born May 11, 1957, Wilmington, Del.

Justin Wroe, Jr. - born February 23, 1929, Rochester, N. Y. Married Anne Fletcher,
June 11, 1955, Cambridge, Mass. Children: William Harmon - born December 13, 1956,
Montreal, Canada. Robert Edgerton - born February 5, 1959, Rochester, N. Y.