TIME AND TIDE

Most of us amble through life glad to earn our daily bread and, at times, help the less fortunate. Mother was more like a bright comet disturbing, not a few, other celestial bodies in her passage. Around the turn of the century a neighbor said, "Time and Tide and Mother Axtell wait for no man."

In the beginning, June 12, 1867, Syvilla Cleveland was born to a life to be punctuated by a social revolution, four devastating wars and three depressions. Her father was a prosperous farmer. His farm was near Prophetstown, Illinois. He was a "kissing" cousin of Grover Cleveland. His neighbors often said that the Cleveland pigs lived better than they.

This setting was conducive to the rearing of robust children as well as pigs. Grandpa, however, was the no nonsense type and expected Mother to compete with her two older brothers. This plan became evident when another girl was born and could assist her mother with domestic chores on the big farm.

The two boys and mother were sent to Northwestern Preparatory School at Evanston, Illinois. Mother kept up with the boys and in due time, was ready for college. Her interests were aroused by the emerging proposals for social reform, affecting women and children in Chicago.

After this time in school the older brother, John concentrated his efforts on improving farm methods. Frederick A. Cleveland, the other boy completed his education in economics. He later held the chair of Economics at Boston University and
was advisor to President Taft. For several years prior to the
Revolution he was in China as advisor to Chiang Kai-Chek. He
returned to Boston and promoted the development of Norwood, a
sub-division.

Practical grandfather decided to test the value of
education for women. He persuaded the education authorities
to give Mother, at 18 years, a teaching job in a country school.
He was pleased to hear of her transforming some of the bully
boys, her own age, into prospects for higher education and
athletic competition. Her father rewarded her for her per-
severance by financing a year’s stay with a family in Germany.
There she studied music and wood carving with master craftsmen.

Syvilla was impatient to finish college. She completed
her Baccalaureate degree in Music and mathematics at DePauw
University with such classmates as the future famous educators,
David Starr Jordan of Stanford and Thomas Kane of the Uni-
versity of Washington.

Developments in the far west intrigued this young woman.
She was eager to give service and have independence. She ob-
tained a teaching job at the securely established North Normal
School at Lynden, Washington near Puget Sound. It was the
teacher's training school in the state. Her family had some
doubt about her future in the wild frontier. They were not too
reassured by her reports home. Among the incidents that amused
her, she wrote, she had been riding a trail when a young Indian
began chasing her. She carefully explained that this was a
playful student testing an "Eastern dude", unaware that she was
as used to horses as he and could outride him. She admitted to some apprehension at first, as to his intentions.

Syvilla's college sweetheart, William Henry Axtell, wrote when he finished medical training at the University of Cinnicanti that he was pledged to work for the doctor, who sponsored his training. He finally persuaded her he needed her in setting up his practice so, they were married.

The new challenge was mostly drudgery, keeping house and working in a busy doctor's office. This did not prevent Mother from working on her master's degree in Mathematics, uninterrupted by the knowledge of her pregnancy. These latter projects were completed almost simultaneously in 1892 when a daughter was born.

Several years passed. Father had completed his obligatory service. It was mother's time to agitate for a change. She was thwarted by contracting diphtheria. She came out of it with the loss of her luxuriant red hair and 20 pounds. This hastened the decision to move to Bellingham, Washington, a small mill town on Puget Sound, with one of the finest harbors in the world. The healthful climate entirely restored mother's hair and health.

The drudgery of establishing another practice was resumed and extended because of the demand. Father often depended on the well trained horses, from a stable, to return him and the carriage over skid-roads at night, while he slept. The loggers, shingle weavers and sawyers came to the office in droves, maimed by the lack of protective devices in their work. The lack of some appendages was the badge of their fraternal order. In one case there was the necessity for open heart surgery, little heard
of then, when a man fell on a buzzsaw. His practice gave experiences equal to that gained on a battle field.

Liquor and firearms resulted in many off work casualties. I have a vivid recollection of crouching by my bedroom window watching the torches and hearing the agonized cries of the Hindu laborers as they were herded onto boxcars for Canada. The millworkers were belligerent because their services were supplemented by these Canadian Hindus who worked for rice and a few cents a day. Father was busy all night mending bashed heads and gunshot wounds.

There were few domestic conveniences for mother up to the turn of the century. Eventually there was a "water closet" off of the kitchen. Father described this as "too damned convenient" since you could sit under it and turn pancakes in the kitchen. Another convenience I later heard of, was a little trolley car that ran from the hill to town. The conductor liked to ride me in my bassinet on his route, when an emergency arose for mother.

Activities outside were undoubtedly slowed by my arrival in the home in 1901. The medical practice was well established. We had a new spacious home. It was planned by mother with broad stairway, hall and fireplace decorated with intricate carvings she had learned abroad.

Scandinavian and German girls were begging for domestic and language training, for small wages. Soon I became their charge. Syvilla was ready to go. She helped women all over the state organize into various kinds of clubs, often starting
with purely social activities. Later they usually took on civic projects. Over the years these included literary, art clubs, nursing auxiliaries, civic studies, medical auxiliaries, veteran auxiliaries, fraternal orders, women's federated clubs and committees of unremembered numbers.

The results of some of these activities understandably caused enmities. For instance, it can be imagined that an owner would be dismayed when a woman from a health and sanitation committee rated his business and reported sweepings put into food products or, that under age children and women were working unreasonable hours. Another instance in point was the continuous attendance of a group of women at the city council until the councilmen ordered the big moss grown fountain in the heart of town used by men and horses, removed. Money was then raised for modern drinking fountains. Mother also prevailed on an agency to establish a register for equitable service to the needy.

All women apparently, were not enchanted with these activities. A friend told mother she heard a woman ask me how mother could keep house and have so many other activities. I had sensed criticism and loyally replied, "Don't worry we are perfectly sanitary."

In reality mother's farm training and father's generosity made our home a sensual delight. An annual supply of glistening jars of fruit, jelly and preserves lined long shelves in the basement; also cases of wine and liqueurs. The latter disappeared when Carrie Nation began smashing saloons.
(I thought it droll when a friend came to school wearing a ribbon across her front inscribed "Wet". Her father had a saloon.) Comforts other than food abounded. The furnace burned four foot logs of pine and fireplace fires reflected on highly polished cedar floors. Interior walls greeted with warm colors and at day's end rest was found on hair mattresses covered by soft comforts. In time, golden oak mission furniture and morris chairs gave way to gleaming mahogany, down stuffed chairs and electric appliances. Comfort seemed complete.

In 1910 women realized the power of combined effort and developed amazing finesse in advancing their causes. With very little help from eastern, more militant suffragettes, they waged a campaign that brought suffrage for women of Washington State, the fifth state of the country to grant it, on November 8, 1910.

Even then our natural resources were being threatened. The logging industry wanted sole control of Lake Whatcom, our water supply. The women aroused, decided this was a project for them. They wanted to send a woman to the legislature. The women of our area decided Mother, being articulate, was the one to promote. Ella Higgenson, the state poet laureate, a quiet but wily recluse, came out of seclusion to manage the campaign.

The 1913 election was won. Frances C. Axtell (her given name had been changed to a more practical one) became one of the two first women legislators in her state.

Nothing was made easy for those first women representatives. They were given no cloak or powderroom to retire to. They faced a barrage of derision, sarcasm and humiliation from
men, previously courteous. They were placed on the most obscure committees. When Mother was placed on the "Morals Committee" the members were surprised she could discuss such problems as veneral disease and prostitution objectively and with savior faire. They were unaware of her many years service in a physician's office.

The new legislator helped get the needed support to pass the "Mother's Pension" Act for families lacking a wage earning father. This was county assistance, to be given until the mother learned to earn the living. In 1936 this became "Aid to Dependent Children" a federal-state grant. It became so widespread that it lost some of the original intent of training for independence, but now seems to be reverting to this idea as most economical.

Mrs. Higginson spent everyday in the gallery of the legislature to avoid missing the event she and the women of the state were anticipating. They had staged a public debate prior to the election and introduced a government chemist to show that Lake Whatcom had such purity and depth that it could not be polluted by industry. Now it was time to prevent an innocent sounding clause in an inland water bill, from removing Lake Whatcom as a water supply for the people.

The dramatic moment arrived. Mother motioned to the gallery that the bill was to come to a vote. Mrs. Higginson notified the waiting women's clubs throughout the state. They flooded their representatives with prearranged telegrams. The bill was defeated. This was a big victory. On the other
hand, a counter-offensive from husbands, beholden to the lumber industry may have halted some of these women's political ambitions. Similar instances elsewhere may partially explain the comparative lack of women legislators nationwide, in the 60 years since then.

Their success in their new status accelerated women's club activities and demand for mother's service to them statewide. Her area had always been predominately Republican and mother had considered herself of the more liberal or "Bull Moose" faction of the party. However, she now was dissatisfied with the lack of social action and impressed by the foreign and domestic solutions proposed by Woodrow Wilson. She changed her party to Democrats and worked tirelessly for Wilson's election.

As president, Mr. Wilson wanted a capable woman on the U.S. Compensation Commission. The state Democratic bosses were asked to make an offer to the woman whom he believed had helped organize the states' women into a successful campaign forum. The offer was considered carefully with father because it would involve a drastic change for all of us, if accepted.

Father decided mother could serve the government and its civil employees well. He felt she deserved the honor of being the first woman U.S. commissioner. He, as had all doctors, been requested to give army service.

Our home was closed. Father went to Camp Funston. Mother and I and our grandfather's clock went to Washington, D.C. on April 1917. It was an exciting experience for me, a western
country girl, to live in an apartment hotel whose guests were army and navy attaches from the various allied forces and presidential aides.

One U.S. Army colonel had helped supervise building the Panama Canal.

The widow of an admiral was intriguing. Her broad-beamed approach, across the long drawing room emphasizing her comments with her cane, had all the majesty of her husband's ship coming into harbor. She enjoyed relating her navy experiences, especially the time she and Kaiser Wilhelm fell dancing at a ship's party.

Congressman Volstead, the idealist resident, was accompanied everywhere by his brilliant daughter. Contrary to his great hopes, his prohibition amendment may have started many perverse individuals on the way to swell our catastrophic attainment of the present total of 9 million alcoholics in this country. One of mother's favorite guideline adages seems to apply: "All Hell is paved with good intentions."

My first musical comedy "Tea for Two" was seen, as the guest of a storybook French attache. He looked like one of the dolls from the ballet "Dance of the Wooden Soldiers", with waxed moustache and rouged cheeks. Probably my invitation was on a dare from his aristocratic friends, the White Russians. Their ladies, beautifully coiffured, dressed in dainty embroidered voile, spent most of their time in the lounge chairs along the court in front of the hotel. They gossiped, smoked and watched the fireflies light up at sunset. They no doubt, considered me
bougeois or resignedly commented, "C'est le guerre" as I shuttled in or out swinging a tennis racket and shoes or swimming suit. They would have been more aghast if they had seen the clothesline in our bedroom and electric cooker in the bathroom.

Families of midwest manufacturers, "Dollar-a-Year-Men," giving war service, were friendly and shared their outings with us at Rock Creek Park.

Mother's work was demanding, at her office near the White House. She met the same defenses in the two men commissioners, she had met in the legislature. She had to insist on her turn at the rotating chairmanship. They tried without success to prevent her use of their only means of free transportation, a side car motorcycle, chauffered by a Negro. She often had to take short trips regarding claims; Muscle Shoals of "The Tea Pot Dome" scandal being one of the places. She served on labor connected committees with Frances Perkins, Secretary of Labor, Julia Lathrop, head of Children Division and Carrie Corby, an early activist. I recall her arranging a congressional hearing for a fiery woman garment worker, to present problems confronting women in that industry in New York city.

Mother's energy was so great she could work all day, often walk home from her office, bake a pie and then go to a committee meeting or on a weekend trip. She took me to the home of conservationist Gifford Pinchot. I was impressed. It was the first and last experience having a butler show me to a
waiting lounge, while the committee met elsewhere.

Recreation sources were plentiful in Washington, D.C. Frequently, we went to Kieth's vaudeville on Saturday nights. Usually the Presidential Party was in his box. To see his simple pleasure in the performances of such stars as Houdini, Check Sales, Harry Lauder, Al Jolson, Julian Eltinge made us feel that democracy was in good hands. Several times he waved to my highschool friends and me from his car as we were on our way to swim at the muddy public beach near the Washington monument.

Like other new residents of the historic city I soon learned enough about the capitol and the Smithsonian Institute to show out of town friends the sights. Hours were consumed standing to hear Wallace Reid, Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks and other movie stars sell war bonds.

The war seemed far removed most of the time but local tragedies struck home. The collapse of the balcony of our neighborhood theatre left many dead and bordered newspapers in black. The parade of the hearses with casualties of the 1918 influenza epidemic brought grief and dread to all of us. My brother-in-law, died from influenza in Bellingham so my mother went home for the Christmas season. Friends at Central Highschool were kind to me. My scout troupe helped some with soup distribution but there was a general feeling of helplessness in the epidemic.

As with most people, food was increasingly important to us with the shortages. We thought it was fun to eat in
Child's big white restaurant, where pancakes were baked in the window and a succulent roast crackled on the rotisserie. There was a good tiny cafe in mother's office building where we saw Mr. Fletcher several times masticating his food according to his then famous health proposal. He would be devastated to know that present day gourmets prefer the fizz of alka-seltzer to jaw exercise.

We were treated to the other end of the gastronomic scale by an Army colonel's family. Dinner at the Willard Hotel followed a leisurely stroll down peacock alley, where celebrities met. We were served plank steak embellished with bouquets of vegetable flowers and mushrooms followed by a picturesque molded salad and aromatic burning pudding.

We all returned to reopen our house in Bellingham in 1921.

Mother had adopted a more liberal view and was enthusiastic about Robert LaFollette's ideas. She ran for Congress on the LaFollette Progressive ticket in 1922 and was defeated by a conservative Republican corporation lawyer. In retrospect, it seems likely that the voters considered LaFollette as far out as they did McGovern, in the recent election.

The usual aftermath of a lost election, frustration and financial strain, were faced by my parents. They had provided a college education for their girls and helped them, when needed, before and after their marriage. In 1923 they decided to convert their home to apartments. Mother was rebuked by the painters and carpenters union when she tried to do some of the
work. This was particularly galling but perhaps she was inconsistent since she had spent her life espousing union causes.

Father died in 1924: without complaint. Mother obtained work. She worked for the juvenile court until she was 70 years old and operated her apartments until a few years before her death in 1953 at the age of 86. Long years of public service must have given her comfort in knowledge few can have, of fait accompli.