

## A SCRAP OF AMERICANA

By ROSA SCHREURS JENNINGS\*

The chest stood ready—wide pine plank, painted black, and lettered in white, "Elizabeth Menkens, Cedar Falls, Black Hawk county, Iowa, Nord Amerika". It was beautifully made by Cord Hendrick Menkens, master cabinet maker of Enschede, province of Overyssel, Holland; and Mynheer Menkens stood at its side, restraining his tears with difficulty, for Betje had been his main stay since her mother had died ten years before, leaving two children younger and two sons older than Betje.

Not only loneliness, but fear for his daughter's future security worried Mynheer. To go to Amerika, to marry Gerrit Schreurs, who had preceded her there by two years, was very much of a risk. To begin with, Gerrit was not a craftsman; he had been a weaver, a factory hand, who bitterly hated his bondage. Gerrit spent too much time reading, was often fined when caught reading at work. How could anyone get ahead in Amerika, if he spent all his time reading? But Betje fortified by that exquisite written declaration of love now resting in her small, beaded, sterling-finished bag, had no fears; yet, it was hard to leave the comforts of her father's home, busy though she had always been—too busy ever to enjoy the playtime of childhood and youth.

Betje arrived in Cedar Falls, Black Hawk county, Iowa, North Amerika, in the blackness of night, and was conveyed by hack from the Burlington depot to George Walters' home nearby where motherly, German-born Frau Walters called out, "Is that you, Bette?" and Betje knew she was close to meeting her beloved once again. What mattered the three-weeks-long journey across the ocean, and the slow train ride from New York City? What mattered the vermin, and the strong, fishy odor of sea water in her clothes? (She had traveled second

\*Mrs. Jennings, a native Iowan, resides in Cincinnati, Ohio, and in recent years paid a visit to familiar environs in Blackhawk and Butler counties.—Editor.

class, too.) What mattered the mud and the pigs and the cows in the streets of Cedar Falls? Gerrit came in from the country ten miles out the next day.

But Gerrit wasn't Gerrit any more; his employer, also from Holland ten years before, had promptly renamed him George. "Gerrit", said he, "is no good in Amerika". "You are now George". And George he always was to the outside world, but never would Betje call him George; to us in this intimate story he remains Gerrit, too.

Betje wouldn't consent to an immediate marriage—if she was to live in Amerika she wanted to know American cooking and American house-wifery. So Bette, as Gerrit had always called her, took service with the Rev. Henry Kleinsorge, lately widowed and left with two young children. Mr. Kleinsorge was pastor of the Deutche Evangelische Kirche in Cedar Falls; and Bette and Gerrit were soon enrolled as members of that congregation. There followed a year of adjustment to American ways, yet German in outlook, for at that time services of the Evangelical church were in German only.

German had a fascination for both Bette and Gerrit—Bette's father had been born in Germany and learned his trade there. His years as journeyman were spent in wandering over Europe; then he settled in Enschede, married a girl of that town, and reared his family in the Dutch tradition. Yet in the delirium of illness his ravings were in German, as were many of the humorous adages he used to quote to meet the exigencies of shop and home. Bette and Gerrit learned to speak and love German in the Kleinsorge home.

And then Gerrit went to Butler county, Iowa, where some of his compatriots had settled. He boarded with a Horace Hovey family, and attended the New Albion district rural school for one winter. Previously he had gone to public school a short while in Cedar Falls, where Professor Arey proved an interested and helpful friend. The twenty-four-year-old young man had spent one-half day in the third grade; similarly he went through fourth

and fifth grades, and had stayed some time in the sixth grade. In the New Albion school Gerrit met the same helpfulness from the man teacher in charge there. I regret his name has been lost to us. It is interesting to look over the books Gerrit used, interspersed with his Dutch explanation and Dutch synonyms. The dictionary he had bought shortly after coming to America, out of his oh, so slender funds—four dollars on arriving in New York, with transportation paid to Cedar Falls, to be exact. Memory recalls two eager children standing at Gerrit's knee while he read in ringing tones from Saunders Fourth Reader;

It is your country's flag, my boy  
And proudly greets the light  
O'er ocean's wave, in foreign climes,  
A symbol of our might.

Ah! how he loved the American flag! No outsider need urge him to take out intention-of-citizenship papers; his own inner zeal had attended to that along with the purchase of the English dictionary. Bette never mastered spoken English, though she read avidly, English, German, and Dutch. Her spoken English always remained a source of embarrassment to Gerrit who very soon spoke it influentially, without accent. Bette did well with the German; her Evangelical friends spoke German, and she wasn't deeply concerned about the English—was it a sub-conscious reaction to the different position she held from that of mistress of her father's household?

On several Saturdays Gerrit made the long across-country trek from Butler county to see Bette. Sometimes he had a chance to ride with a farmer who was selling or buying goods in Cedar Falls, at that time the nearest good trading place; at other times he went horesback, snow and zero weather notwithstanding.

The Rev. Kleinsorge remarried, and Bette took service with the Clarence Knapp family where she hoped to gain a better knowledge of American housekeeping, which she did. Mrs. Knapp had been surprised that

Bette preferred to cut the cost of a laundress from her weekly pay check of \$2.50; she had hurt Bette when Bette found a few coins left around, to test the new maid's honesty. Yet the Knapps were a delightful family—the children were respectful and obedient; Mr. Knapp, as are most American men, was helpful in the home and with the children; Mrs. Knapp was democratic and courteous in her relations with her help. At lunch when the women and children were alone, they ate together in the American "hired girl" tradition; when the father was present, the family preferred to be alone, and Bette felt no hurt at that.

#### ENTERED THEIR OWN HOME

Then Bette's health gave way; she boarded with the George Walters family for awhile, and Gerrit now insisted on marriage. Mrs. Walters provided a simple wedding, and that day, February 18, 1876, they entered their own home on Normal, now College street, not far from the beautiful Overman grounds, now the site of Sartori hospital. The evergreens clipped in many conventional designs later fascinated their children. A mile or so south on Normal street was the nucleus of the present Iowa State Teachers college, then the Iowa State Normal school, two buildings taken over from the Iowa State Soldiers' Orphans Home, when that institution was moved to Davenport, Iowa, a few years before. The new home, costing \$600, consisted of a small house and smaller barn, standing in a half-block of land; and it was mortgage free. That debt-free home was a blessing, indeed, during the hard times that followed in the late 70's.

During the winter of 1876-7 Gerrit and Abram Wild, a German veteran of the Franco-German war of 1871, neighbor now in the other half of the block, chopped wood in the Big Woods ten miles out of Cedar Falls. They walked to and from work once a week, and carried their week's supply of food with them. Goodyear had not yet discovered the art of making rubber, nor had

the ugly, but oh-so-warm felt boot been invented. Keeping their feet frost-free was their greatest problem, not entirely solved, and tender feet the rest of their lives were to remind them of their winter in th Big Woods. The wives shared their few household appliances—the one using the flat irons last one week used them first the next week.

Those must have been long days, but Bette filled them with the making of two woolen quilts with pieces supplied from some of the best homes in Cedar Falls by the same laundress who had done Mrs. Knapp's washing. This woman was not forced by necessity to wash for others, and had a sort of economic equality with her employers who shared quilting pieces with her. So Bette made two quilts, one for herself and one for her friend. I stand again, in memory, under the clothes line in house-cleaning time—the quilt was too precious to use everyday, but was annually aired and kept free of moths—and see Bette pointing out pieces, as belonging to Mrs. So-and-so, and Mrs. So-and-so, when some of those donors were sleeping under Nature's green quilt on the beautiful hillside once belonging to Daniel Wild. At one time Gerrit worked in a brick kiln which Mr. Wild operated in that pasture. Indians often came to the little house and went away satisfied if they were given food. They never frightened Bette who was generous and completely without fear. All her life she would invite a hard-looking tramp in to eat at her kitchen table. In later years when they had moved to a farm, rural Sunday school missionaries made her home their regular stopping place; a negro slated to lecture in the country school house was given entertainment, food, and bed in that home.

Came March 1877 and as a last gesture winter sent one of the biggest blizzards of the year—fields, hills, fences all under great drifts of snow. Bette's "time" came that month; Gerrit stayed home. From Tuesday until Saturday, Bette was in labor. There was no way to help her, said her doctor; nature must take its course.

Her daughter was born alive. Mrs. Wild did the washing and gave such other help as was needed. Bette not long after returned the favor, and for the same reason.

During the summer of 1878 Gerrit worked on the railroad right-of-way as section hand. The men worked in teams, and Gerrit's Dutch wasn't equal to his teammate's Irish "diplomacy". Gerrit carried the brunt of the heavy work and trudged home at night dead tired. One hot August evening he came home to find that the expense of a doctor's visit had been added to that week's cost of living, and he had been to blame. He had cut grass in the early morning for the cow they had bought at great personal sacrifice to provide an ample supply of fresh milk for the baby, and had left the sharp grass sickle lying with the cut grass in a basket. The little one had toddled out unnoticed, in bare feet, seized the grass hook, and dropped it, nearly severing a big toe.

The next season a herdsman tended the cow along with a number of others, taking her to open pasture and bringing her home. One night he brought Gerrit's cow home swelled with bloat—she had got into a clover field, said the herdsman, and he was afraid she was "caput". She was caput; the veterinarian could not save her.

#### ANOTHER CHILD IN THE HOME

In November their second child was born. Gerrit, awakened by Bette, hastily built a fire, then ran to Wild's for help. When he got back, there stood Bette before the fire holding their eleven-pound son in her arms. Well, the child was there—why call the doctor? So no doctor was called, and they congratulated themselves on the ease of the baby's birth and the saving of a doctor's bill, not knowing how dearly Bette would pay for it in years to come.

The months that followed were really hard—pork was around a dollar per hundred pounds, but they didn't have money to buy a hog to kill. Gerrit took any job avail-

able—church janitor, hod-carrier, driver for Townsend and Merrill's lumber yard; at last came steady employment as driver for G. N. Miner's flour and feed mill.

Normal street was a long way from the mill in those days of slow transportation, and Gerrit moved his family down town into one of Mr. Miner's houses on Fourth street. John Lemmer, Miner's chief miller, came to live next door. Not long after, Abram Wild established Wild's lumber yard, and his family moved into that area. On Mr. Miner's large lot Gerrit maintained a garden; there were several apple trees and currant bushes; in the rear were a barn and chicken yard where Gerrit cared for livestock belonging to his boss—the large delivery horses, chickens, several pigs, and a cow. Cobs and cockle seed from the mill, (later cockle was incorporated into the "shorts") though hard on grates, helped out for fuel. Thus with fuel, vegetables, fresh and home-canned fruit, a share of the eggs, milk and meat, three barrels of apples and a keg of sorghum put down cellar for winter, the family was well provided for, though the income in money was only about forty dollars a month.

A third child was born in 1883; they bought a hard-coal base burner, a sewing machine, an ingrain "parlor" carpet, a hand-operated washing machine to save the cost of the weekly laundress they were employing. Mr. Miner gave the daughter a "Western Cottage" reed organ, and Mr. Lemmer took time once a week out of his busy life to help her get started with her music. Later, Theodore Rude came to the house to give her lessons. And how that talented man must have suffered to hear a child with indifferent musical talent pound out those weekly music lessons. Yet his face indicated no trace of impatience; even genius has to eat! The *Chicago Daily News*, *Youth's Companion*, *Cedar Falls Gazette*, *Evangelische Botschafter* provided reading matter; also there were books from the small public library located over Rodenbach's grocery store, of which George Flackenecker was custodian and librarian. Gerrit had hated

the wooden shoes he wore as a child and his passion to keep good leather shoes on his children's feet was almost an obsession.

Came a black-bordered letter from Holland one day in 1888—Mynheer Mendens was dead; but his Betje occupied a decent place in American life.

My "simple annals of the poor" can be paralleled in thousands of mid-western families and homes. America—God bless her, and guide her that she may continue to promote the general welfare and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.

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### GOVERNOR LUCAS FLAYED SINS .

By JACOB E. REIZENSTEIN

"Wets" and "Drys" have clashed in Iowa every year, every decade, and every generation throughout the last 107 years. Territorial Iowa split as to the advisability of "total abstinence," "moderate use," "use and abuse," "licensed saloons, inns, or taverns," and actual prohibition of the manufacture or sale of liquor, as far back as 1838.

The same thing is true, in a more limited measure, as to gambling. Such speculation was condemned, of course, by vastly more people than the number that attacked alcoholic beverages as "refreshments."

Nevertheless, when Iowa City was young dicing and card playing and other forms of gambling were highly popular amusements among many pioneers. Such pastimes were not limited to the "rag, tag, and bobtail" of the community, and the "scum of society." Some of the foremost citizens of the county indulged in games of chance.

They were even penalized by the early courts, as records in the faded and stained-yellow pages of court

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