

# THE PALIMPSEST

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## Family Background

Right in the beginning let it be understood that this will not be the story of a self-made man. The amount of help I received in getting started in the world from a loving, patient, and unselfish father is almost embarrassing. And my mother was a perfect partner for him. Not only did they put me through college but twice they set me up at farming, in each case with five years use of a farm, rent free and taxes paid. Fortunately for Father, each time I wanted to go to farming was at the beginning of a land boom, so that in each case he sold out at a good profit, even after putting improvements on the farms and giving a dependent son the use of them.

To get the formal statistical facts out of the way, I was born October 8, 1880, at 105 East Third Avenue, in Indianola, the son of William H. and Alice M. (Barker) Berry. My father was a rising young lawyer. My parents had been classmates in Simpson College, class of 1872, the third class graduated from Simpson.



My father's father was Benjamin C. Berry, a farmer, captain of Co. D, 114th Illinois Infantry, in the Civil War. He was a native of Virginia. He had moved to Iowa from Cass County, Illinois, in 1867. My mother's father was M. R. Barker, a native of Ohio. He had come with his parents to Fairfield at the age of twenty-one, in 1846. In the fall of 1849, he came to Indianola on horseback looking for a location for a store. It was only a few months after the county seat had been located and county government established. His was the second store in Indianola.

On my father's side I am descended from the Berrys, the Rows, and the Carletons of Orange County, Virginia, and from the Van Eatons, Eversols, and Renshaws of North Carolina, by way of Ohio. On my mother's side I trace back to Sandisfield, Massachusetts; to the Russells of Augusta County, Virginia; and to the Ewings, Blakes, and Coxes of Maryland around the head of Chesapeake Bay, by way of Ohio and Indiana.

My father was born October 23, 1849, in Cass County, Illinois, and died March 25, 1923, in Indianola. My mother was born July 25, 1853, in Indianola at 213 West Salem Avenue (then Main Street), and died in Indianola February 28, 1928. I think no two people were ever more perfectly mated. They were interested in the same things, always things worth while.

My father had little time for vacations, but



plenty of time to serve thirty years as superintendent of the Methodist Sunday School in Indianola, as a trustee of Simpson College, and as an active Republican in political affairs. He cared for the interests of his clients in two hundred terms of court in Warren County, with the exception of one term when he was ill. He died during his 200th term of court. He was a member of the State Senate, representing Warren and Clark counties, in the 26th, 26th Extra, and 27th General Assemblies, from 1896 to 1900.

My mother was equally interested in church work, serving twenty years as treasurer of the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of the local Methodist church. She was the founder of Indianola women's clubs, having called together a group of ladies in her home to establish the Monday Club in 1886. The Monday Club was Federated in 1893 and is still active in Indianola. She received her inspiration to organize a woman's study club on a visit to her friend, Mrs. George W. Ball, of Iowa City, a member of the Nineteenth Century Club, which had been recently organized in that city.

Our home was frequently the stopping place of ministers, lecturers, bishops, presiding elders, the headquarters for returning alumni of the college; and Father often had judges of the district court come for dinner of an evening. Such people were a considerable part of my early edu-



cation. I do not recall ever having gone off to play while such characters were about. From my earliest recollection I sat in on their conversation and usually found it fascinating. Some of those fellows knew how to tell jokes, too, and I thank them for what I gathered of that technique. I was permitted to stay up beyond my regular bedtime when listening to them.

October 10, 1905, I married Bertha Sloan, a Dexter girl, whose father was M. G. Sloan, a physician, who later moved to Des Moines. Doctor Sloan had been a brakeman and baggageman on the North Western Railroad in his youth, and was baggageman on the first passenger train into Council Bluffs. Our backgrounds were very similar, deeply colored by the Methodist church. Bertha came to Simpson to study voice under Alexander Emslie. She had an unusual contralto voice, but, sad to relate, I robbed her of a singing career by making her a farmer's wife.

Her lineage, like mine, was of the westward trekking pioneers. Her paternal grandfather was at one time a sailor on the Great Lakes. Later he settled in Lyons, Iowa, as a wagon maker and blacksmith. Her ancestry runs back to the Buchanans and Moores of Baltimore and to the Hesses and the Nellisses of the Palatine Germans of the Mohawk Valley, who sniped at the Canadian Tories from behind rocks and trees, so delaying them from reaching Saratoga in time to rein-



force the British under General Burgoyne in 1777.

We have three children, Thomas S. Berry of Shawnee Mission, Kansas; Martha (Mrs. W. H.) Reiter of Sierra Madre, California; and Alice (Mrs. J. Robert) Mitchell of Bakersfield, California. Through them we have two grandsons and three great grandsons.

I was an only child, no doubt spoiled, but I didn't know it. Perhaps everybody else did. My spoilation was somewhat ameliorated by the presence in our family from my earliest recollection of two girl cousins a little older than I, whom Father and Mother had taken in after the death of their parents. After one of these girls had married and the other died, my parents again opened their home to Father's niece and nephew, younger than I, who had been left orphans. Toward these young people I think I had about the same feeling I would have had for a brother or a sister, and I still have that feeling. Looking back over the years, I know I was fortunate to have them with us as part of my family.

As I said, my father was almost too good to me in helping establish me in farming. The sale of the second farm was interesting and illustrates the extent of the land boom following World War I, as well as displays some of my father's characteristic long look ahead.

I was getting along fairly well at the close of the first World War with a small stud of pure-



bred Percheron mares and a stallion, except that a poorly designed sinus made me farm from a rocking chair one to four weeks nearly every winter. We had talked a little of selling the farm and maybe going to a warmer climate or getting into some business with less exposure.

All around us that summer of 1919 land was selling at fabulous prices in dollars still worth 100 cents. The best land in Warren County was bringing \$350 to \$400 an acre. Ours was a 240 acre medium class farm. Forty acres of timber land had been in the family since 1870 and was not for sale. The remaining 200 acres were moderately rolling to rough, with some timber. But it had been mostly well farmed through the years and was not seriously eroded, the roughest of it carrying an excellent blue grass sod.

One morning in June a real estate man drove in with a farm renter and inquired if we would sell the farm. I told him the farm belonged to my mother and father, that we talked casually of selling, but never seriously, and had never talked of price. They asked what I thought it ought to bring.

I told them it was medium grade land, but with the above-average improvements and good fences I thought it should bring \$265 an acre. The renter said he would give that. They asked me to go to town and learn whether my father would sell it at that price. After a few words about how



much the prospect had to pay down in cash, and what he had in the way of stock and equipment for handling a farm two and one half times larger than he had been renting, they departed.

After dinner (dinner on the farm was the mid-day meal then) I threw the saddle on my mare and took off to call on Father. I found him in his law office when he happened to be alone. I told him my errand. He had a heart in him as big as a bushel basket; but he could and often did ask questions so rapidly and pungently that he might scare a stranger half out of his boots. He weighed 240 to 250 pounds and threw it all into a resonant baritone voice that most of the people in Warren County could recognize without seeing him.

"Did you price it to him?" he shot at me.

I said I had told them the way other land was selling I thought it should be worth \$265 an acre.

"That's good enough. Would he give that?" in sharp staccato.

"He said he would," I replied.

"How much money has he to pay down?" crackety crack.

"He could pay down \$3,500."

"Hmp! How much stock and machinery has he?" still short and snappy.

"He would have to buy some cows and some more machinery," I said.

"Well, let's figure — 200 acres at \$265 an acre



would be \$53,000 — only \$3500 down. Hmp! In five years we would have the bare bones of the farm back on our hands with gullies in the fields, the fences down and he'd be busted. No, I'm not going to help bust him. Tell 'im we won't sell."

Three weeks later he sold the farm to one of the wealthiest men in Warren County at \$210 an acre. This buyer in turn sold it within three weeks to a farmer for \$275 an acre. The second buyer owned 320 acres of land in another county. A friend met Father on the street and said:

"Bill, don't it make you sick to see Carl make \$65 an acre on that farm and never turn a hand?"

"Not for one minute," returned Father, "I have two men on that note and either one of them is good for it. That farm is sold; I will get the money. Some of these fellows who are selling farms won't." He was right; the mortgage was paid off on the dot, after Father's death and after land values had slumped to less than half the sale price.

Perhaps that is enough on the land booms I have seen come and go. My father was always willing to see the other fellow make some money on what he sold to him. He was a strong adherent of the saying that no man ever went broke taking a profit, but many a man has gone broke trying to get all the profit.

DON L. BERRY