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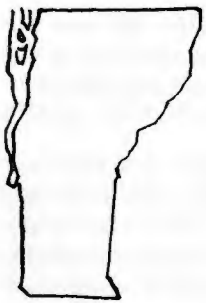

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Uncle Tom's Cabin And Vermont

By GEORGE B. BRYAN

Playgoing grandparents probably have clear recollections of the bittersweet confrontations between Vermont-bred Miss Ophelia, described by Harriet Beecher Stowe as "decidedly 'curis'," and the irrepressible Topsy, who exulted in her own wickedness. Those who witnessed the productions of the five hundred touring "Tom-shows" of 1899 and the dozen such in 1927 may have no difficulty in discerning why Uncle Tom's Cabin has been called "The World's Greatest Hit."[1]

Of the twelve dramatizations of Mrs. Stowe's novel that were published before 1900, none was more successful than that of George L. Aiken, which was produced at the Troy (N.Y.) Museum in 1852, only a few months after the novel's initial appearance. As in the novel, Miss Ophelia, a native of southern Vermont, is a central character. She has come to New Orleans to serve as housekeeper for the family of her cousin Augustine St. Clare. There she meets Topsy, Uncle Tom, Dinah, and those other unforgettable characters. It is in New Orleans that South is confronted by North in the persons of Topsy and Miss Ophelia, who admits, "I've always had a prejudice against negroes, and it's a fact."[2] As a token of her missionary zeal, Miss Ophelia agrees to undertake the training of the mischievous Topsy.

Miss Ophelia makes an appreciable effort to overcome her racist attitude, but it is not until she returns to Vermont with Topsy, now her adopted daughter, that Miss Ophelia emerges as a paragon of Green Mountain virtue. Once again in Vermont, she falls in love, exhibits archtypal Yankee shrewdness, perceives Topsy's intrinsic worth, and reaches full stature as a typical stage New Englander.[3] Topsy, too,

changes in the Vermont environment. The novelist but not the dramatist reveals that Topsy underwent a Christian conversion, assumed a life of moral rectitude, and finally sailed as a missionary to her brethren in Africa. Curiosity is thus aroused. Why should Vermont encourage such character growth?

The practical answer to such a query is simply that both the novelist and the dramatist chose to construct their plots in such a fashion, but such choices seldom are whimsical. What lay in the personal experience of Mrs. Stowe that caused her to depict Vermont as a therapeutic place? One needs simply to look at her life and to read her letters to be satisfied.

A member of an active and frenetic family, Harriet Beecher (1811-96) moved with her father in 1832 to the frontier town of Cincinnati. In 1836 she married and commenced a life confined largely to childbearing and housekeeping, which she found exceedingly onerous. This bleakness was relieved only by her writing. In 1846, when she became mentally and physically unable to cope with her domestic situation, Mrs. Stowe sought the restorative waters of Dr. Robert Wesselhoeft's spa in Brattleboro, Vermont.

Settling in Brattleboro in 1844 after emigrating from his native Weimar, Wesselhoeft introduced hydropathy (the use of water in curing ailments) in America. In Brattleboro, which he chose because of its natural resemblance to certain German locales, Wesselhoeft purchased several houses on Elliot Street and opened his establishment, where he claimed to cure multifarious diseases and physical complications by the rigid application of the water treatment, diet, and hard exercise.[4]

Mrs. Stowe submitted bravely to the "wearisome baths" and "terrible douches," but by November, 1846 she felt more sanguine about the curative process. "The daily course I go through," she wrote to her husband, "presupposes a degree of vigor beyond anything I ever had before. For this week, I have gone before breakfast to the wave-bath and let all the waves and billows roll over me till every limb ached with cold, and my hands would scarcely have feeling enough to dress me. After that I have walked till I was warm, and come home to breakfast with such an appetite! . . . I wish you could be with me in Brattleboro and coast down hill on a sled, go sliding and snowballing by moonlight."[5]

Her daily regimen commenced at 4:00 A.M., when she was swaddled in thick woolen blankets and induced to perspire freely. When the blankets were drenched by her sweat, the windows were thrown open and the cold air allowed to blow over her head, the only part of her body protruding from her wrapping. After enduring this cold and heat simultaneously for some time, she was plunged, blankets and all, into a frigid bath. She then dried, dressed, and embarked upon a moderately difficult walk before a breakfast of only cold foods.

Strenuous exercise followed this spartan repast, interspersed with frequent dunkings in neighboring streams. Thus her day was spent in subjecting her body to extreme temperatures, rigorous exercise, and copious amounts of water. In addition to the plunges, each patient consumed between twenty and thirty tumblers of water per day.[6]

The novelist adapted herself so well to the routine in Brattleboro that she remained there for eleven months. Perhaps the 109 "gay, sociable and agreeable American fashionables"[7] assembled there were more therapeutic for Mrs. Stowe than the water cure itself. Since the staff supplied all her needs for $10 per week, the frustrated housewife could devote all her energy to recuperation and recreation. Finally, feeling well and content, Mrs. Stowe returned to Cincinnati and almost immediately succumbed to the old depression. Before she could retreat again, her husband raced away to the waters of Brattleboro and remained in Vermont for fifteen months.

In the experience of the Stowes, then, Vermont was a place where health and sanity could be restored, where clear-thinking and enjoyment were to be found, where natural forces might be reinvigorated. The months spent in Brattleboro preceded those devoted to writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Is it any wonder that when the novelist wished to depict a place in which thrift, industry, mental health, and moral fitness would reign in such measure as to soften Miss Ophelia and to transform Topsy from a shiftless (Miss Ophelia's favorite epithet) girl to a committed Christian, she should choose Vermont?

NOTES

[1]Harry Birdoff, *The World's Greatest Hit* (New York, 1947).

[2]George L. Aiken, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, III, 1 in Richard Moody, *Dramas from the American Theatre, 1762-1909* (New York, 1966), p. 377.

[3]Francis Hodge, *Yankee Theatre* (Austin, 1964).

[4]*The Green Mountain Spring*, I, 1 (January, 1846), edited and published at Brattleboro, Vermont. Library of the Vermont Historical Society, Montpelier, Vermont.

[5]Annie A. Fields, ed., *Life & Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe* (Boston, 1897), pp. 113-114.

[6]*The Green Mountain Spring*, I, 2 (Feb., 1846), 28-31.

[7]*Ibid.*, II, 2 (Mar., 1847). 46.