

MEMORIES OF DREISER

The Famed Hoosier Writer's Niece Writes About The Real Theodore

By PAUL VANDERVOORT

AS A teen-ager, Theodore Dreiser, one of Indiana's most illustrious and also most controversial novelists, was the least employable of all the Dreisers who lived in Terre Haute.

He was caught "knocking down" \$25 from an employer who was paying him \$14 a week, which resulted in despair and shame for Dreiser.

He also botched one of his early newspaper assignments.

Assigned to review three plays to be staged in St. Louis, he used press handouts for his reviews because another assignment prevented him from actually viewing the plays. Then he learned that poor train service had prevented the companies from getting to St. Louis, so the productions never actually went on.

Ashamed, he slipped into the newspaper office, collected his pay, wrote a note of apology and went into hiding.

Theodore never was to hide from the world or himself. Millions of words in books, magazines, pamphlets, newsletters and theses have been churned out by defenders and detractors alike, in an effort to answer the question: Who was Theodore Dreiser?

Now his favorite niece, Dr. Vera Dreiser of Atlanta, Ga., hopes to put Dreiser in a truer light with a book, *My Uncle Theodore*.

Vera Dreiser is well qualified to write about her uncle. She was his confidante for many years. She knew him intimately from childhood and saw the stormy, chaotic and unconventional life of the entire Dreiser family. She writes frankly about it. As a clinical psychologist, with the opportunity to observe him in

person, her conclusions should have validity.

DR. DREISER includes many letters, memoranda, pages from her diary and family photos in the book. Included are the incidents about his job failures.

"My uncle has been maligned, mistreated and misunderstood more than any other prominent American in the 20th Century," says Dr. Dreiser. "I thought it was time to tell of the dedication and integrity he brought to his work. To examine the motivations of his actions."

Her book, like a Theodore Dreiser novel, has an unconventional cast of characters. Head of the Dreiser clan was John Paul Dreiser Sr., a highly religious, ambitious, success-oriented man whose prosperous business was destroyed by fire. In the fire he suffered an accident which left him with minimal brain dysfunction and a deaf ear. It also left him debt-ridden, full of shame and guilt.

His son, Theodore, was born a year later in 1871.

Theo's mother, Sarah Schnepf Dreiser, had "a permissive attitude toward her children as a buffer against her husband's behavior."

Sarah bore John Paul 13 children of which 10 lived. Three of her children were born within five years. Under the strain of childbirth, family problems and moving about, Sarah broke down.

She abandoned her children to her husband, temporarily, and fled from Terre Haute to her brother in northern Indiana, crying hysterically that she wanted to be free.

This cry for freedom may have been echoed in the lives of her children, especially Theodore. All sought freedom from "the



Drawing by Sara Wright Used Courtesy The Dreiser Newsletter

chaotic, hard-pressed life of the Dreiser family." From "superstition, fanaticism and ignorance."

"Of the boys, John Paul Jr., was the first rebel," Dr. Dreiser says. "He was sent to a seminary for schooling but ran away and got into 'Show Business,' by joining a medicine show, selling Hamlin's Wizard Oil."

LATER Paul changed his name to Dresser and became one of the foremost songwriters of all time. His birthplace in Terre Haute is now a state historical landmark. His song, "On The Banks of the Wabash," was made Indiana's State Song in 1913.

Alphonse Joachim, or Al, could have been creatively successful, his brother Theodore thought, but never had the chance. "Al wandered in and out of Theo's life," Dr. Dreiser says, "but eventually disappeared. No one in the family ever has been able to find out where or why."

Marcus Romanus, or Rome, literally was a roamer. Vera Dreiser described him as "the handsome, vagabond brother, whose romance with the liquor bottle prevented him from living his life with any degree of stability."

A railroad boomer, Rome was a romantic figure in Theodore's early life. He came and went, turning up at home to stay just long enough to provoke his father's anger.

Edward Minerod, Ed, was Vera Dreiser's father and had a distinguished stage career. "He was the only brother with whom Uncle Theo had a lifelong contact. Only two years apart, Theo was the oldest of the two, they were boon companions in their youth."

The Dreiser girls were Emma Wilhelmina, Em; Mary Francis, Mame; Cecilia, Sylvia; Mary Teresa, Trace; and Claire, Tillie.

Em was the real-life prototype of "Sister Carrie" in

Dreiser's novel of the same name. Vera Dreiser remarks: "Her influence on Theo was tremendous and lasting. Not only with regard to the ease with which she slipped in and out of relationships but because in her later years she reconfirmed his views on the ultimate destiny of 'bad girls.'"

Though they became close friends in later life, Theo intensely disliked his sister, Mame, in his youth. "The time she came home to give birth to a child, as an unwed mother, made an indelible impression in Uncle Theo's mind," Dr. Dreiser recalls.

"The child was stillborn and it left him with a terrible fear of childbirth, a theme he wrote about many times, particularly in his book, *The Genius*."

"My grandfather, John Paul Sr., described Aunt Sylvia as 'a shameless hussy,'" Dr. Dreiser continues. "and idle, good-for-nothing cat of a girl." To Uncle Theo she was a 'brown-haired, brown-eyed, pink-cheeked creature constantly being scolded for her idleness and general inefficiency. A sensuous, nebulous girl, living in a dream world without interest in employment, preoccupied with love, pleasure and romance.'

"Aunt Trace was a real beauty. She had the innate ability to act with the grace of a queen or the lowness of a courtesan, depending on the situation at hand. Her life was a series of tragedies which Uncle Theo later used as composites in several of his novels."

Claire, or Tillie, as she was known, was the youngest sister. In their early childhood, she, Ed and Theo were a close threesome. But, she, too, finally left the fold "to take from life what she could by



Photo copyright Vera Dreiser

Theodore Dreiser reads using a magnifying glass. The photo of the Hoosier author was taken about 1918.

giving what she had to under the circumstances."

There also was Louise Dresser, a famous singer, stage and screen star. She was actually Vera Dreiser's "adopted" aunt. The name Dresser (her real name was Kerlin) was given her by Paul Dresser, whose protegee she was.

She, and the real aunts and uncles and their influence on Theodore Dreiser come and go in Vera Dreiser's book about her favorite uncle. It is not a chronological relating of Theodore Dreiser's life. It is anecdotal. It is psychological, penetratingly so, because of Dr. Dreiser's experience as a clinical psychologist. It is tender in the relationships between an uncle and a niece who were fond of each other.

"Once I asked him, point-blank, if he believed in God," Vera says. "He told me he had scientific proof of God's existence, referring me to his book, *The Bulwark*," as his 'laboratory' of spiritual affirmation. *The Bulwark* is based on Quakerism, what Dreiser felt to be one of the religions of the 'plain people.'"

WHEN Vera asked him if he was a Communist, he replied: "Only insofar as it is relevant to

the dignity of man." The appellations "pink" and "Commie" had been pinned on him because of his support of what at that time were considered radical causes.

His participation in the investigation of the bloody coal mine strike in Harlan County, Kentucky, resulted in enemies trying to get him. It was called "the Toothpick Episode."

Mine operators, learning Theodore and Marie Pergain were in a hotel room together late one night, put toothpicks against his hotel room door. When the toothpicks still were there the following morning, they accused Dreiser of adultery.

The charge brought this comment from William Lengel, Dreiser's secretary, who wired him: "I am with you to the last toothpick." Dreiser himself told the press: "Adultery was impossible because I am completely and finally impotent."

Vera Dreiser reveals that her Uncle Theodore did have sexual needs which evidently never were fully satisfied.

As a youth in St. Louis, he had sex relations with his landlady. For awhile he lived with Kirah Markham, an actress. Though he was married twice, the first time to Sarah Osborne White, known as

Jug, he lived with Helen Patjes Richardson 23 years before he married her.

They were married under the names of Herman Dreiser and Helen Richardson, in Oregon, to avoid publicity. Vera says his first note about the marriage complained about germs he had acquired in an unfumigated berth on a miserable train, adding, "I am the loneliest man in the world."

For all Theodore's image as a Don Juan, he was a prude. When he lived in New York with his brother Paul, Paul's nudity (parading around their living quarters naked) offended Theo's prudery. He moved out.

ONCE, when Vera told him a risque joke, he was shocked. "What a memory for low stuff," he told her. "You remind me of Paul."

He certainly did not approve of Paul's way of life. Especially dedication of Paul's song, *My Gal Sal*, to a madam of a house of ill repute, whom Paul had lived with and lived off.

One of the great traumas Theodore suffered was his mother dying in his arms — a mother he alternately loved and hated. The break-up of his first marriage was partly due to the fact that he transferred to Jug the hostilities which were rightfully due his mother, Dr. Dreiser believes.

Did he write dirty books? Vera's mother, Mai, thought so. She called them filthy, wanted to walk out during a stage production of *An American Tragedy*. She said Theo was a degenerate and she despised him.

She once wrote him an insulting letter (which Vera reproduces in her book and calls ludicrous) in which she told Theo

Continued on Next Page

DREISER

Continued from Page 43

to "go to hell. That's where you're heading for."

Dr. Dreiser has had a distinguished career of her own as clinical psychologist, author, composer, television and radio consultant.

Born and reared in New York City where she received her education, Dr. Dreiser practiced her profession there and in California where she was staff psychologist and administrator of the Psychiatric Treatment Center in the California Institution for Women at Frontera, Calif., more than 10 years.

Some of the controversy long suffered by her Uncle Theo became her portion. She roundly condemned the prison's operation, was critical of the staff, which she described as "as bad as the inmates." She once told a newsman what she considered the greatest deterrent to rehabilitation "the staff."

NEXT DAY a few of the staff carried picket signs: "Get Rid of Dreiser." This caused counteraction by the inmates who went on strike. Prison authorities finally had to ask her assistance in getting the inmates back to work.

For the time being, Dr. Dreiser is living in Atlanta, Georgia, where she is employed by Systems Development Corporation of California. Her daughter, Tedi Langdon is active in musical and stage productions. Vera's husband, Alfred E. Scott, is deceased.

Tedi's first exposure to her great uncle Theo, as a babe in arms, did not work out well. She bawled and he hurriedly handed her back to her mother, saying: "Take her, she doesn't like me."

Tedi grew up to be a singer and actress, who appeared in such plays as *West Side Story*, *Irma La Douce*, and *Time of the Cuckoo*, after studying at Juilliard School of Music.

She also played such night clubs as Harrah's, the Dunes and the Sands. In 1971, at the Dreiser Centennial in Terre Haute, she was featured soloist and sang a song by her great uncle Paul. The song was, *The People Marching By*, an unpublished song by Paul

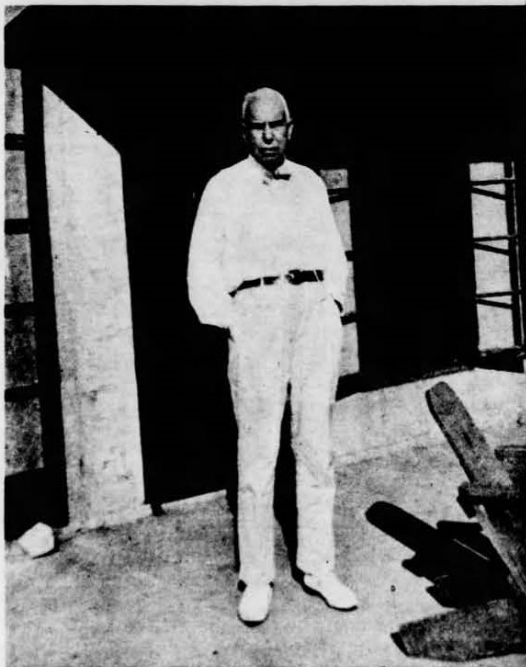


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Dreiser relaxes (left) at Iroki, his estate in New York. Vera Dreiser (above) has written a book about her uncle. Her daughter Tedi Dreiser (below) has sung in plays and clubs.

Dreiser which Vera Dreiser had found among the family memorabilia.

There can be little further argument about whether Theo or Paul wrote the lyrics to *On the Banks of the Wabash*.

"I prefer to believe my father's account of how the song was written," Dr. Dreiser says. She points out that her father and his two brothers were in Paul Dreiser's office. "My father said his brother Theo suggested to Paul that he write a song about a river," Vera recalls. "He mentioned the Wabash as a good subject."

Uncle Paul responded enthusiastically and told Uncle Theo to write out some words. So Theo wrote words for the first verse. Paul took the verse, made some changes in it to polish it, then wrote the second verse, the chorus and the music.

Actually, when Uncle Theo was given credit for writing the lyrics, he resented it, because he did not want such credit."

Though Ed Dreiser's story does settle the Wabash controversy, it is doubtful that Vera Dreiser's book about her Uncle Theodore will stop disputes between Dreiser die-hards, either pro or con. It will give them fascinating reading.

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