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Meyer, Gustav Frederick

Lucy A. Shaw Meyer

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GUSTAV FREDERICK MEYER

Dr. Gustav Frederick Meyer, born at Neustadt on Reibenberg, Germany, October 24, 1858, spent the early years of his life attending the schools of that place under the severe German teachers of his day.

His father was appointed Clerk of the Royal Court of Justice in Hanover to which city the family moved. His grandfather was a Lutheran minister and also a musician of some ability. Gustav's father was also a great lover of music. He instructed his children himself after long hours of work at the office and Beethoven, Mozart and Chopin were familiar subjects while they were quite young. Of them all, Gustav showed the most talent. Later other teachers took over.

He spent nine years in the Royal Gymnasium of Hanover studying languages, ancient and modern, also history, mathematics and sciences.

Meanwhile a tragedy had happened to the family. All the father's hard earned savings were lost through the dishonesty of a Jew whom he had unwisely trusted. The Isrealite, in whom there was much guile, escaped to America and could not be located. The experience was a hard one but the whole family rose to the occasion. Typists and stenographers

were unknown then and every night Father Meyer brought home the Court Records to be carefully copied by the children. It meant long hours far into the night, but industry and determination conquered. The elder brother was enabled to continue and finish his studies at the University. Even Mother and sisters did their bit with skillful needles.

Having finished at the Royal Gymnasium of Hanover and graduated with honors, Gustav studied theology a year at Tübingen as his father was very anxious for him to enter the ministry. He was not entirely satisfied with this course, and, much to his father's displeasure and disappointment, entered the University of Göttingen the following year, where he did advanced work in mathematics, philosophy, pedagogy and history for three years. Later he spent a year at Erlangen University and another at Leipsig. During the time he assisted himself by tutoring.

Dueling was popular in the German Universities and the fraternities vied with each other in this doubtful sport. Thirteen duels and eleven sword cuts were his record. He became expert in sword play and was often called upon to "vindicate the honor" of his fraternity. He was proud of the scars which were very noticeable when he arrived in America, although they faded with the years.

Only German University men could become officers of the Kaiser's army. Meyer offered his services three times but

was each time rejected because of injuries to his head received in dueling.

His elder brother was now the head of a Gymnasium in north Prussia and his sister who had spent some time studying in England was married and assisting her husband in a diplomatic private school. There was no immediate opening for Meyer in the scholastic world so he turned his eyes toward America, beckoning so alluringly. His plan was to secure a position in an American University. However, until he could command a more fluent use of the English language, he decided to make use of his thorough education in music.

On the way to America, he met Miss Clara Bauer, who was in charge of the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music. Through her, he learned of a vacancy in the music department of the Geneseo Collegeate Institute. After a short sojourn in Chicago, he accepted the position in Geneseo, Illinois, as director of the conservatory. There his time was soon full. His careful, able instruction met with great success. He remained in Geneseo five years and his graduates were among the best musicians of the town.

In June, 1886, he married Lucy A. Shaw, one of his pupils and a daughter of George W. Shaw, who at that time was Geneseo's most able lawyer. They went to housekeeping in her grandmother's house which was a present to the bride.

Here three children were born, George, Lucy and Agnes. His wife could not speak German, so Professor Meyer became quite proficient in the English language.

During the summer of 1890, he received a call to take charge of the music department in Agnes Scott Institute, a new school for girls in Decatur, Georgia. The salary was tempting and opportunities wider, as the school was located only six miles from Atlanta. Three years later, The Atlanta Journal, commenting on the commencement exercises at Agnes Scott, said "Professor Meyer took charge of the department with one piano, one teacher and fourteen pupils and it has developed in these three years into a school comprising five teachers, one hundred and sixty-eight pupils and twenty pianos kept constantly busy."

While here, he purchased a beautiful tract of land just north of Decatur, the site that had been chosen on which to build the capitol of the Confederacy had the South been successful. It was the highest point of the Piedmont Ridge where the rivers on the south flow to the Gulf, while on the east and north they flow to the Atlantic. Stone Mountain, six miles to the north, was plainly visible. Here he built a home and lived for two years. It was a great place for the children and in fact so attractive that some professional realtors were also attracted. They prevailed upon him to sell the forty acres, which they immediately started to survey for a village or "project".

He took his family back to Illinois where he left them with his wife's people and, after seeing the World's Fair in Chicago the summer of 1893, he sailed back to Germany to visit his people and take a much needed rest from teaching. His mother had died, but father, brothers and sisters gave him a hearty welcome.

After several months of visiting and studying conservatory methods in Europe, he returned and located in Joplin, Missouri. Here he started a conservatory of music with three assistants. Joplin was essentially a mining town with little to encourage such an enterprise. Notwithstanding, he met with considerable success and had it not been for the depression that settled down on the country in the early nineties he might have been persuaded to remain longer. His concerts were very popular.

In July, 1895, he heard that Otterbein College needed a Professor of music. Although he had tempting offers from a Texas university and also from the State University of Montana, he preferred Ohio and sold out his equipment, coming to Westerville in September, 1895, in time for the opening of college. The correspondence with Edgar L. Weinland had influenced him more than anything else in coming to Westerville. Mr. Weinland represented the committee of three, Edgar Weinland, Frank Clements and Judge Shauck, who had charge of employing teachers for the Davis Conservatory of Music.

The music department occupied a dwelling that had been given the college for the purpose by a former friend, called, from his name, Davis Conservatory of Music.

Mr. Weinland writes in the Otterbein Aegis of May, 1898;

"A few comparative figures will speak eloquently. In the year 1893-4, there was one teacher for both instrumental and vocal work. There were enrolled in these classes a total of thirty students. Three pianos constituted the entire equipment.

"During the year just closing, 1898, two teachers for the piano, one for the voice and one for the violin have been employed. There were one hundred and two pupils enrolled in these classes. The number of rooms in the Conservatory building had to be increased by partitions in order to accommodate the nine pianos needed, which are used from morning until dark. More could be used if rooms were available. The Music Department has become one of the largest and most prosperous of several branches of the College and is becoming a source of influence in spreading the name and fame of Otterbein.

"The lion's share of the honor for what has been achieved thus far falls, by common consent, upon the efficient Director, Professor Gustav Meyer. Though coming to us three years ago as an entire stranger and though a man of extreme modesty of demeanor, his scholarly attainments and personal character, his wonderful mastery of his profession, together with his great tact and unlimited enthusiasm and energy, rapidly won him the profound respect of the entire community and did more than all other influences combined to start his Department on the high road of success."

A year later at the suggestion of his friend, Dr. Sanders, at that time President of Otterbein, Professor Meyer took some post-graduate work at Wooster University, which he did at home.

I quote a few paragraphs from the Post-Graduate and Wooster Quarterly:

"This may fairly be called Dr. Meyer's number of the Post-Graduate. His thesis on 'Germanic Dialects' is a scholarly research work of which any University would be justly proud. For the merit of this thesis, Professor Meyer was granted the degree of Doctor of Philosophy cum laude. In the preparation of the thesis, Professor Meyer had access to the libraries of the State of Ohio, the Ohio State University, Otterbein University and the City of Columbus. In addition to these resources, he imported a large number of books at considerable expense from Germany. He has received much favorable notice for his thesis on Germanic Dialects. One of the most prized is an autograph letter of commendation from the great philologist, Dr. Max Mueller. It was written but a week or two before his death."

By unanimous consent of the faculty and prudential committee of Otterbein University, Dr. Meyer was granted the new chair of Comparative Philology in Otterbein, the work to be carried on in addition to his professorship in music.

About this time he purchased a house on South State Street, the original home of Mr. Stoner, who built a number of houses after the same pattern some fifty years earlier. Here the Meyer family lived for eight years, improving and adding to the property considerably.

When there was talk of removing Otterbein College to Dayton, Dr. Meyer with characteristic enthusiasm took an active part in the effort to retain the College.

When agents of the Anti-Saloon League came to Westerville to look for a location, they settled on Dr. Meyer's

residence as being the most desirable location for the Anti-Saloon League Headquarters. The large pasture and orchard behind gave ample room for their publishing plant. It was not without great reluctance that Dr. Meyer and family parted with their home.

Not long after this, he resigned from the College, having served for fourteen years. At this time the Conservatory could boast of over two hundred pupils with seven teachers and thirty-six pianos. A nearby residence had been purchased by the College and used in addition to the old Davis Conservatory building, which could not accommodate the fast growing department. Otterbein's old friend, Mr. Lambert, had donated funds with which to build a new conservatory and this was now in the process of construction. Dr. Meyer's graduates were numerous and widely scattered and for years their letters of appreciation were a pleasure to him.

His interest in Westerville was active and vital. For nine years he served on the city council and for seven years he was president of the Chamber of Commerce.

He took charge of a music department at a college in Amarillo, Texas, a short time and later directed the Columbus Conservatory of Music connected with the Wallace School, where he also taught German.

World War I was a great grief to him, torn between his love for the fatherland where his brothers and sister still

lived and his allegiance to his adopted country.

While walking in the streets of Columbus, he was stricken with a cerebral hemorrhage and was taken to St. Francis Hospital where he died October 9, 1932, at the age of seventy-four years, lacking fifteen days.

His old friend, Dr. Sanders, spoke briefly and feelingly at his funeral:

"He was my friend - a close, confidential friend - these thirty-seven years. How I shall miss him! Miss the friendly greeting, the warm handclasp, and the smile and the beaming countenance; miss those walks on the streets, arm in arm, with only the silent stars looking down upon us! Dr. Meyer was a man that would swear to his own hurt and change not; stand by a friend, to his own hurt, and change not. He was a real man - a man that stood four-square to every wind that blows; a man of convictions and motivated by those convictions; of high ideals and led on by those ideals. He was a Christian, a reverent Christian, who loved his Lord, who believed God and made the Word the lamp to his feet. He believed that over him were eternal, unchangeable, moral laws and that he must bring his life into harmony with them. His were not the ethics of expediency, so commonly held and taught these days He was a dynamic man, an enthusiastic man, and whatever he did was done with enthusiasm. He was a tireless worker, one who spared not himself in the accomplishment of his purpose Dr. Gustav Meyer is of the type of cultivated, Christian gentleman, polite, courteous, refined, a gentleman of the old school, now rarely seen. The world needs more of these."

According to his expressed wish, his body was cremated and his ashes rest in the Mausoleum in Otterbein Cemetery at Westerville, Ohio.

- Lucy A. Shaw Meyer

Written in Washington, D. C.
Spring of 1946