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THE FOLK ART OF THE PENNSYLVANIA DUTCH

By CORNELIUS WEYGANDT, Ph.D.

Professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania.



*Address delivered before the Society on the evening of November 18,
1932, in the Bellevue-Stratford Hotel, Philadelphia*



THE FOLK ART of the Pennsylvania Dutch is rooted deep in the past. In its main features, decorative motives, methods of artisanry and uses in the household it is a thing of seventeenth and early eighteenth century transplantation from Germany to America. It adapted itself to conditions here, of course. There was little attempt to impose styles of architecture the immigrants were familiar with in Germany on the homes and churches they built here. Germans, either High or Low, were not the first comers here. Swedes and British had preceded them, only the British in sufficient numbers to affect materially the conditions of settlement, styles of houses, methods of life and forms of government. When the ancestors of the Pennsylvania Dutch came to Germantown they either built log houses such as all peoples who settled in America first constructed or, if they had the means, erected stone houses such as the British settlers had built in and about Philadelphia.

There are houses here and there in country districts, especially above the Perkiomen, whose sharply pitched roofs suggest those of southern Germany. There are expanses of red tile that have a very Suabian look. The covered wooden bridges are very like those of Aar and Rhine, and our bank barns are still called Swiss barns. There are churches, too, that have a high shouldered construction that seems to hark back to Teutonic lands. On the whole, however, our houses and churches, both in general design and in detail, are after English originals. Our land is often laid out in long strips with the houses close together on the pikes, and the farms extending back on either side, according to the German fashion.

You will find clock cases of very German feeling, and painted furniture occasionally that carries you back to the Fatherland, but our furniture is, too, on the whole, after the manner of the English masters, Sheraton and Heppelwhite and Chippendale. It is in house furnishings, in painted chests, in quilts and coverlets, in pottery and glass and painted tin, in the birth and baptismal certificates with which we adorn our walls that our German origins are made manifest.

Ultimately, many of the motives of this interior decoration go even further back, to Persia, and on to China, which was, of course, in the last analysis, the source of all the arts. Tulips and pomegranates, peacocks and deer were as loved of the Persians of the reign of Shah Abbas as they were of the Old World Germans of the seventeenth century and of the Pennsylvania Dutch of yesterday.

Rich Culture in Domestic Arts

All of you who are familiar with the many different domestic arts of the Pennsylvania Dutch will realize that I cannot go very deeply into any one of them if I wish to mention many, to drive home a realization of how rich a culture they illustrate. There is no art, however, more distinctive of the Pennsylvania Dutch and brought to a higher perfection among the Schwenkfelders than the art of *fractur*. I have here *Erläuterung für Herrn Caspar Schwenckfeld*, the second edition, printed at Sumneytown by C. Benner in 1830. On the inside of the front cover is a decoration in red and yellow and green and black, drawn for Lydia Wiegner, in 1833, three years after the printing of the book. Lydia Wiegner, I find from the *Genealogical Record of the Schwenkfelder Families*, was born in 1808, and lived a spinster all her long life. She died in 1888. This is *fractur*, as you see, of very simple design, a two-branched vine waving upward from an urn, with a ten-petalled flower, pomegranate-like, at the top of either branch of the vine. Stars, eight-pointed, seven in all, of a conventional sort, decorate the urn and the blank spaces on the page. A border of dentations and cross-hatching surrounds the whole design.

To those of you that know the collections at Pennsburg, made so largely by Dr. E. E. S. Johnson, such a book and such a decoration in it are an old story. There is rich treasure of this sort of thing at Pennsburg, such a store of them as could not be gotten together now. I have only run across one this fall, a "Kommt Kinder" or exercise for children, set by some schoolmaster of old time. It, too, is in the old colors, red and yellow, black and green, that we cannot duplicate today, colors that hold because of the

cherry gum that is in them. There are yet a few practitioners of this old art. Two that I know of are along the border of Bucks and Montgomery, an old lady past eighty and a man nearly as old. They cannot either of them get the old effects, though, for the colors are not what they were.

So, too, found a painter I know, whose grandfather decorated wooden chests, from the little fellows that served as button boxes or jewel boxes to the great ones that contained a girl's trousseau. This painter wished to paint a little box for me in the old manner. He got his friend the carpenter to make the little box, with store hinges, however, rather than the old hinges of wire loops. He painted the box over and over, but never to his satisfaction. There was a peacock on the lid, and flowers in yellow and red and white on ends and front, but it had been impossible to get the old effects in them or in the red brown background. The painter brought it to me of a Christmas morning. You may be sure, though it cannot vie with the painting his grandfather did up in the Lehigh Hills, that I cherish it as a treasure. He, and his friend and mine, the carpenter, are both good Pennsylvania Dutchmen who snort with contempt at the term Pennsylvania German. The carpenter said to me: "When I first heard the word Pennsylvania German when I came to live in Germantown, I thought, of course, they meant old country Dutchmen who were settled here, so as to distinguish them from Pennsylvania Dutchmen." To Michael even old country Germans are Dutchmen.

Bit of Fractur Framed

About a year ago I came on a beautiful bit of *fractur* framed, the taufschein of Elizabeth Föllmann, that suggests the medieval illumination from which this kind of colored quillwork developed. This, like the "book plate" of Lydia Wiegner, is of 1833. Föllmann is a name, in its variant of Fellman, I find in Dr. Brecht's genealogical record. This *fractur* is big, ten by eight, with heart-shaped designs at bottom and two birds with bills meeting in a flower at the top. Two flowering plants, rising from the two hearts at the base, bend inward and meet and cross just below the flower over which the birds bill. Flowers, nearly two inches across, and these stout green plants fill the rest of this "bild." Red and yellow and blue are dominant in all the design. The flowers are conventionalized pomegranates. The birds, doves I take it, are covered with feathers as individually reproduced as tiles on the roofs of paintings of the Düsseldorf School. The artist or penman, call him which you will, had a bold and firm hand. There is surety and

dash in the design, which is on an old sheet of paper mellowed a rich ivory in color.

Closely allied to this art of *fractur* is that of tooled and colored leather on the binding of books. I picked up such a book at a Schultz auction in Hosensack within sight of the old Schwenkfelder meeting house. This book bears a Marburg and Frankfurt imprint. Later, at a sale in Pennsburg, I picked up this same decorated hymnal or "Gesang-Book" for the Reformed Church, with the Philadelphia imprint of Ernst Ludwig Baisch, on Second Street near Race Street, 1774. Whether this is really an American printing or a hymnal printed abroad with a Philadelphia imprint for the market to be reached through Philadelphia, I am not certain. Against a background of fawn-colored calfskin a typical design of the pomegranate motive stands out in red and green. The plant stands in a very elaborate pot or urn with a pair of flowers on either side of it and a fully developed pomegranate fruit at its tip. Two six-petalled flowers, somewhat like the six-lobed symbol so common on barns, occupy the upper corners of the design.

The decorations on Easter eggs and on the eggs of that curiosity, the egg tree, are an allied form of art. Egg trees and decorated eggs are in the nature of things hard to come on. I know of very few of either. There is a decorated egg in the museum of the Lancaster County Historical Society. I have another secured near Harrisburg. It was made for a Catherine Metz in 1816, but I cannot identify this Catherine with any Catherine Metz I find in the Genealogy of the Schwenkfelder Families. This egg is stained a deep brown, with what pigment I cannot guess and then decorated with delicate brush work in white, of tulips and what look like thistles. There are eight tulips a half-inch across and three-quarters of an inch long on the egg, linked in pairs lengthways of the shell.

No items of Dutchiana are more seldom come upon or parted with at higher prices than the colored cakes of varying designs to be hung on Christmas trees. The only one I have, secured for me by another at Lebanon, is of a fawn color with decorations in red and yellow, black and green. It is four inches by two and wafer thin. It has a crinkly edge and a hole at the top through which passes the thread that once held it to the Christmas tree. Its design is of a tulip, three-petalled as you look at one side of it, cupping a tri-lobed pomegranate thickly studded with red seeds. The tulip is outlined in black and is of the red and yellow color so common among the old-fashioned varieties of the flower. A stout stem, rising from three leaves, holds tulip and pomegranate aloft.

I have known only a few such matzebäume, perhaps twenty in all. They have, however, covered a wide range of subjects. There are effigies of people, of birds and of animals in addition to my tulip-pomegranate. I have seen storks, peacocks, geese, a dog, deer, a pig, sheep, and rabbits upon these. Whether they are of American origin I cannot be sure, but since we have the American flag on some of them and the eagle on others and what seems like a likeness of Washington on still another, it looks as if they were native. Moulds for such decorative wafers are to be found in Germany, as are those for the Christmas cakes known as springli. Of the latter I have never come across one made of any American wood, and of the moulds for matzebäume not a single one of any kind that looks as if it were made in Pennsylvania.

Tulips and Birds on Pottery

There are tulips and birds aplenty on pottery, too, in sgraffitto and slipware both, an art that came to an end with the death of Jacob Medinger last March at Neiffer in Montgomery County. It is not ceremonial platters, though, or common pie plates, or jugs and mixing bowls, or flower baskets and flower pots I first cite, but tiles. At this same Schultz auction near Hosensack to which I referred above, I bought a Ford load of tiles. They had been on a shop here and perhaps before they were on the shop they had been on the eighteenth century log house still standing close by. Besides the load of common tiles, I bought the most elaborately fussed up Dutch tile I ever came upon. Each of the common tiles was fifteen inches long and seven inches wide and three-quarters of an inch thick, with a cube-shaped knob on the top of the underside to catch on the heavy oaken lath on which the tiles were laid. They were laid side by side, with a three-inch lap of their beaver-tailed ends on each tier. You can look up through them and see daylight between, but they let no water through if carefully laid. A thin ridge on either edge carries the water to the center of the bottom of each tile, and it is so passed on to the center of the tile below.

The fussed up tile with two half-sunbursts on each side of it, the larger pair above, the smaller below, and one still smaller sunburst at the lowest point of the beaver tail, I was allowed to buy through the kindness of Dr. Johnson, who wanted it, I suppose, for the collection at Pennsburg. Up its center above the lowest sunburst went three "stars" of four scratched lines intersecting at their half-lengths and making the simplest sort of a decorative design. This tile and its plain fellows were all made at Palm. One of many virtues of such tiles is to shed or thaw off snow quickly. Their deep

brick red on a day when all the landscape is covered with snow is indescribably warming to the heart. The first expanse of them I ever saw, on smokehouse and corncrib and outside oven, near Bechtelsville, was, by the bye, on a Mennonite farm where there were Latin books from the old country in the attic. There is no phase of the architectural detail of our Dutch countryside more worth reviving than this.

The most unusual specimen of Pennsylvania Dutch pottery associated with a Schwenkfelder name is pictured in your *Genealogical Record*, the two-handled mug or loving-cup with tulips and peacocks, made by George Heebner, who once potted in Limerick, like Jacob Medinger, the last of the Dutch potters, but who afterwards moved west of the Schuylkill into Vincent in Chester County, according to the *Record*, in the seventeen-nineties. It was the designs of the Heebner ceremonial platters that William McAllister most delighted to follow in his decorations for the pie plates Medinger turned on his wheel at Neiffer and burned in his kiln there.

Basketry is Still Practiced

The oldest and most primitive art we still practice is basketry. These baskets, splint baskets, called almost always hickory baskets in the country stores, are really of split oak. As near as Swamp Creek in Montgomery and as Riegelsville in Bucks we may find makers of these baskets, or we may go to the Oley Valley or to the Wind Gap for them. The oldest form of them is in shape like a half-melon and they are fashioned so as to nest together in sizes from a quart to two bushels. When I first became interested in these baskets I told everyone I met to buy all they could get for a dollar or less. At the end of a week I was writing hither and yon, "Stop baskets." I was fifty dollars deep before I had the flood stopped. Basketry is another art almost spent. I know of no young man in all Dutchland making these baskets in the traditional shapes. Young foreigners are making baskets of willow withes and of plaited or wound straw but the baskets of split oak now being turned out are all by men over fifty. Interesting variants of this sort of basket are nosebags to feed horses and mules, deep narrow baskets a little wider than eel baskets but only about half the length of the latter, or ten or twelve inches long. They fastened around the horse's head originally, I am told, by a long oak splint, but now a canvas or leather strap is used to hold them on the beast.

The stone-cutter's art as revealed on date stones in gables and on bridges, and particularly as revealed on tombstones, gives certain of our countrysides a more foreign feeling than almost any other

features of our folk art. Doves, lambs, willow trees, and broken shafts, pestles and mortars for some loved country doctor, tulips, pomegranates and roses are only a few of the emblems one finds. Now and then a box bush has been planted by a grave, and certain great slabs of marble, their white bitten out against this background of dark green, strike straight to the heart.

The exquisite work done by our silversmiths, our clockmakers and our fashioners of so-called Kentucky rifles, has been so fully written up, or is so familiar to us all in our homes, I need only refer to it here.

Some Blacksmiths Still Working

Our blacksmiths and artificers in iron are still working, some of them, in the old tradition. You can buy, out Bernville way from Reading, fire-dogs with turned over ball tops of many facets, and pokers, forks and shovels, hand-hammered into the approved shapes of colonial times. In this shop the blacksmith is working where his father worked before him and back of him there is a line of blacksmiths unbroken for several generations.

More interesting than any reproductions or continuances of old sorts of work into today are the utensils that survive from old days. One of these that I like particularly is a fat lamp of that sort known as "Betty lamps" that was used more than a century ago in Perry County. It is of wrought iron painted black. Its base, that contained the melted fat, consists of a round two and a half inches in diameter with a trough-like extension of two inches by one to hold the wick. This container is an inch and a quarter deep and is covered by a sheet-iron lid hinged across the middle of its rounded larger part. A six-inch arm is riveted to the back of this round and is bent in over it from a height of four inches. A swivel joins this arm to the hook from which it was swung, a twisted bit of wrought iron six inches long. By one end of the hook the lamp could be swung from a shelf, or the other end of the hook could be jammed or driven into the wall. If the latter practice was followed, as it was in loghouses without inside plastering, the lamp's base was eight inches lower than the hook. If the lamp was swung from a mantelpiece by the other end of the hook, its bottom would be twelve inches below the hook. This particular lamp, a piece of good journeyman work, is without the wire wick-picker. That I have on a smaller tin lamp of kindred design, fastened to the lower end of the chain, to the upper end of which the hook its attached. A label pasted on the bottom of this *smutz-amsel* reads, "This lamp was used in by Thomas Black in his gun-maker's shop in Petersburg

(now Duncannon), Perry Co., Pa., in 1815." This Thomas Black is a gun-maker who seems to have escaped the vigilance of Captain Dillin in his monumental work, *The Kentucky Rifle*.

Another interesting lighting fixture made to jab into a log wall is a candlestick of wood with an iron point. It is turned out of a piece of curly maple. It is eight inches long, the half next the point a round of inch diameter, with a metal cap to prevent the iron point from splitting the end of the wood into which it is inserted. A circular turning two inches in diameter comes next, with a hollow pewter cylinder an inch and a half long and three-quarters of an inch in diameter let down into it. This circular turning is flat top and bottom. There succeeds to this candle-holding part, a wedge-shaped flat handle with rounded end. This is a little more than two inches long. The handle is so shaped you can get a good grip on it and easily drive its inch-long point into a log. This particular specimen was one of three I secured from an old hardware store in the heart of Philadelphia, but I have come on so many of its like in Upper Bucks County I think they must have been made somewhere in the neighborhood of Haycock Mountain.

The making of toys for children was as much a matter of concern to our Pennsylvania ancestors as it had been to their ancestors before they came from Germany to the New World. Birds of all sorts were whittled out of wood and carefully painted. They were to put under and on Christmas trees and for mantelpiece ornaments. Other creatures that went into the ark with Noah were not so generally carved out, and so far as my researches go, full-stocked Noah's arks were unknown. We were fond of deer and dogs blown in glass, and moulded out of clay, and we liked the sheep and goats, the shepherdesses and goat-herds, made of wax and set against a background of paper scenery, that were sold throughout our countryside by the first Jewish peddlers that came here in the eighteen-forties and fifties. Whether these same peddlers dispensed the plaster animals and baskets of fruit we find as mantelpiece ornaments in so many darkened parlors, I have never been able to discover. Now it is the Italians who peddle about plaster figures, but not the cats and dogs, the goats and sheep, the rabbits and squirrels, the goldfinches and doves, the parrots and owls, that one finds through all the length and breadth of Dutchland.

Though I have had my eyes open for them these many years I have never been able to come on any of the moulds in which these creatures were cast. I know such moulds are about, for I come across figures of plaster that bear evidence of recent making. It is my guess that these animals and birds and baskets of fruit are of

native origin, for the most of them bear family likenesses to birds and beasts on *fractur* and samplers and in wood and clay and glass. I have introduced this most crude work of domestic art largely for the purpose of asking the help of all here in determining its place of origin and period of production.

Joy of Collector is Supreme

I need not explain to any of you who may happen to be collectors what joy I have had in gathering together these various specimens of domestic art. I have been led to many corners of southeastern and central and southern Pennsylvania in my quests. I know valleys and groups of mountains, villages and lonely farm homes that I had not else come upon. I have run on stands of fringed gentian and wild apple so beautiful in their deep blue and soft pink that they have taken my breath away. I have discovered that we have in Pennsylvania a table-land above 2000 feet more than fifteen miles in extent. I have seen orchards and cornfields to gladden the heart. I have passed the blue gate that, perhaps, bespeaks the unmarried daughter in the Amishman's home. I have been forced to take my place in lines of horse teams so long that the low gear they entailed on my car set its radiator boiling. Stone bridges, three-arched this one, and that one seven-arched, have delighted me at a turn of the road. Groups of children, in bonnets and broadbrims, have carried me back to yesterday from some ultra-modern cement road with its policemen on motorcycles.

As interesting as any of my experiences are those of stumbling on folklore as old as any of the domestic arts. The tulips and peacocks of decorated pottery take you back to medieval Persia, but a name or a local custom may take you even farther back. It is a little thing may open up a far vista through which the shadows of the Alps may fall on the uplands of Pennsylvania. It may be the rhododendron clusters of "Alpine roses" carved on some butter-mould, brought maybe from Switzerland to the valley of the Conestoga. It may be a little cabinet in which to hang your watch by night, a little cabinet of cherry and curly maple that passed year on year on the wall of an old house in eastern Bucks. It may be straw beehives, row on row, under the thatched sheds, narrow and squat, that shelter them from the northwesterners of winter on the Perkiomen hills. It may be the note of cowbells on bare slopes above the Susquehanna, clear-toned cowbells, cast from bell-metal, and not the thin affairs of sheet-iron that tinkle as if half-muted. It may be the tin horns, long and flaring of mouth, with which, a generation ago, the farmers and farmhands of York

and Adams Counties were called in to dinner. All these, butter-moulds, watch cabinets, beehives, cowbells and tin horns have originals in Switzerland, whence came so many of the ancestors of our Lancaster folks, and of not a few of those of us from the other "Dutch" counties.

None of these things, though, have taken me to old years so remote as has a chance phrase heard one day of mid-October on a hill-top above Blooming Glen. Our host was telling me of apple picking. "My wife says that it is the thirteenth of October is Galledag, but my father always says it is the seventeenth of October."

"Galledag?" I queried. "What is Galledag?"

"It is apple-picking day. It is the day all the old folks say is the day you should begin picking winter apples."

"And who is Galles?" I asked, thinking of course, of some saint of the church, not a few of whom still control our going and comings in German Pennsylvania, stout Protestants though most of us be. Neither man nor wife could tell me. I looked up the St. Gall I had heard of most often, that companion of Columban who came out of the murk of the Irish coast to Switzerland, and gave his name to monastery and town and canton. I could not find what was his day, however, in the books to hand. I appealed to my friend the last of the polymaths, and heard that the day of that Gallus who is best known as St. Gall, was October the sixteenth.

Investigation discloses no particular association of St. Gall with apples. Apple-picking day is Galledag just because it falls almost coincidentally with the Saint's Day in mid-October, when winter apples should be gathered from the trees and stored away safe from the freezing weather which may thereafter be expected. What is remarkable is that German Pennsylvania should retain, in 1932, some thirteen hundred years after his death, the name of this old notability of the late sixth and early seventh centuries who is else little known save among churchmen and scholars. It seems to me a preservation more to be wondered at than that of any urn of earthenware in Indian mounds hereabouts, and as thrilling as the discovery of a Viking battle-axe in wild earth in Minnesota.

The joy of coming on this old name for apple-picking day was with me all the golden end of October that succeeded my hearing of it. Galledag will be always associated in my mind with the deep orange and the reds of coal-like glows on massed sassafras that I drove past on my way home from Blooming Glen, with the tender green of just sprung winter grain on the rolling fields, with wheeling buzzards high in the thin blue of the sky, and with the scent of apples over rain-washed roads. And yet always, above, beyond,

afar, tower, half the world away, those snowpeaks of St. Gall by Lake Constance, casting their shadows on this rich and mellow countryside with presage of night. The lights of the purring car have a darkness out of old time in the Alps to pierce as well as the darkness of nightfall in Bucks County in October, 1932.

Festivals Survive

They tell us that there is not much picturesqueness in American life. Maybe that is so, but despite all the leveling influences of the times, of the uniformity that is being forced upon us, the standardization of everything that mass production entails, there are certain customs and institutions and festivals that survive in much of their old-time color and distinctiveness.

One of these is the New England town meeting, especially as it survives in back country places such as that of the Sandwich, New Hampshire, I know so well. Everybody seeks the Centre that day, gossip and politics fairly seethe in the many little groups that are absorbed in conversation. Every kind of costume used in the community for a generation is in evidence. You meet folks that never turn out for any other occasion, for church or grange or old-home meeting or annual fair. Tall stories are told, and capped and capped again. Laughter is loud everywhere, especially where is a keg of cider in some woodshed. You see a cross-section of Yankeeedom such as you can see on no other occasion.

Another picturesqueness of American life, to be seen in New England, as well as in Canada, is of the French Canadians on their way to some shrine on a Saint's Day, or to some spot fabled as the scene of miraculous cures. There is gaiety and color and a return to medieval mood at such moments remarkable for our time and for this all too modern America of ours.

There is picturesqueness, despite too great organization and commercialism, in our New Year's Shooters in Philadelphia. There is picturesqueness in the singing to the dulcimer, that stringed instrument lost to Scotland and Ireland and England but preserved in our Southern mountains. To hear the old ballads of "O Dear Love, Tell Me," a variant of "Edward, Edward," or "Barbara Allen" sung by some oldster who can neither read nor write is to be possessed of an unforgettable memory. Such a man will know his score of old songs from oral tradition, and Milton's *Paradise Lost* as a folktale in prose.

A Welsh eisteddfod, such as you may hear at Scranton or Bangor, is picturesque; a Mardi Gras in New Orleans; a passion play at some many-belled mission of yellow adobe and red tiles in

California; or a rodeo in which are mingled so many contrasts of our cowboy west and the old Spanish civilization of the Pacific coast and Mexico. Closer at home are the picturesquenesses of Pennsylvania Dutchland, to more than one of which I have referred. Which one other than these shall I leave with you to ponder on? The march at sunrise to some Moravian cemetery at dawn of Easter Sunday, with the trombone blasts through the morning redness; a Dunkard love feast with its recalling of the most primitive Christianity; a September twenty-fourth, a Thanksgiving service and festival in Towamencin Meeting House a quarter of a century ago. Already part of the picturesqueness of the old festival was gone—I looked in vain for the great white caps and kerchiefs of the women; and wheaten loaves had taken the place of the humbler rye bread of yesterday. The white loaves, though, were the long loaves associated with out-of-door ovens, the butter sweet butter, with no savor of the creamery about it, the apple-butter, the old sort, cooked down until it was a black-brown, and flavored faintly with fennel or anise. The countryside was the countryside we all know and love, the rolling hills with fence-rows of dark cedars. Early fields of corn were shocked and early apples harvested. Gums were red in the low places, and a hickory or tulip poplar going gold on a dry ridge here and there. The sunlight had taken on its autumnal mellowness. The red church by the wood-side, the ordered beauty of God's acre, where we remembered the white tombstones bitten clear against a carpet of mountain pink, now sage grey and warm brown—how good it all was. And how good the friendliness of the people. Here in manners and bearing and talk and in the religious service was a beauty of simplicity none too common in our modern world. Here was a beauty of aloofness, of faithfulness, of loyalty. I did not see then, I was too young then, too little acquainted with the tears of things that middle age and old age bring, to see the true significance of it all. It takes long years of life to make us realize that not power over our fellow men, or leadership, or pride of place, or making a noise in the world, are the great things, but friendliness and faithfulness, simplicity and loyalty, the things our ancestors came to the new world to find freedom to pursue and cherish. "The words of wise men are heard in quiet more than the cry of him that ruleth among fools."

EARLY RELIGIOUS POETS AMONG THE SCHWENKFELDERS

By HELEN SHULTZ COOK



*Address delivered at the Spring Meeting of the Society, Palm Church,
May 14, 1932*



POETRY in its highest form is the outward expression in verse of a deep emotion. The early Schwenkfelders were endowed with a very keen spiritual sensibility, and being perpetually the victims of oppression, they had so much the greater occasion for communion with God. How perfectly natural it was, therefore, that they should pour out their hearts to Him in prayer and song! This explanation certainly accounts for the quantity, and, above all, for the character of the poetry produced by them. Then, too, let us remind ourselves of this fact, namely, that Luther, or "the nightingale of Wittenberg," as he was called, introduced the idea of congregational singing, and during the Reformation all Germany began to sing itself into Protestantism. Our ancestors, therefore, were supplying a great need in the writing of hymns.

This activity of the Schwenkfelders in the writing and collecting of hymns covered a period of more than three hundred years—from the first half of the sixteenth century to the second half of the nineteenth century. Many visitors to the Historical Library at Pennsburg are impressed by the numerous beautiful manuscript books made by the Schwenkfelders at a time when printing-machines were in use—books of hymns, of sermons, of historical matter, and of other literature. Once again necessity was the mother of invention, for prior to their migration to America, repeatedly the literature of the Schwenkfelders was proscribed and the use of the press forbidden them. Hence, it is to these painstaking and patient copyists, that we are indebted for the preservation of much of the Schwenkfelder literature. Many of their religious poets served their sect in this dual capacity: as hymn writers and as transcribers.

One of the earliest poets among the Schwenkfelders was that distinguished and ardent champion of the Middle Way, Valentine Crautwald. He was born in the ancient episcopal city of Neisse in

Silesia of a family of farmers. His exact birthdate is not known, but Schwenckfeld intimated that there was a difference of twenty years in their ages, which would make Crautwald's birth around 1470.

Proficient in Greek, Latin, Hebrew

Crautwald attained his scholarship by prolonged study, despite a struggle with poverty and distress, and became equally proficient in Greek, Latin and Hebrew. It is interesting to note that he was one of the first students of Hebrew in all of Eastern Europe. His interest lay largely in humanism, theology and canon law. Subsequently, he became the rector of the Gymnasium of St. Jacob in Neisse, his own school. Crautwald also prepared for the priesthood, receiving the appointment of Canon of the Cathedral in his home town. At this period his productivity took the form of many philosophical works and much verse. Later in 1523, through Schwenckfeld's influence, he was made lecturer and Canon of the Cathedral in Liegnitz. His lectures were marked by great eloquence and power, and had the rapt attention of his auditors.

It is not definitely known just when Crautwald became imbued with the spirit of the Reformation, but he considered his coming to Liegnitz as the period of his emancipation, and he became such an ardent adherent, that after his change of heart he burned all his previous writings—both prose and poetry: "they were not evangelical and had not served Christ," he felt. When the Austrian persecution settled upon Silesia, the favor of the Court for a time was not withdrawn from Crautwald. He still continued his lectures, voluntarily giving up his preaching in the pulpit, but he never gave up his convictions. To the last he was one of Schwenckfeld's most loyal followers. Crautwald died in 1545.

The next poet I wish to mention is Adam Reisner, also a contemporary of Schwenckfeld's. Reisner was born in Mindelheim, Bavaria, in 1496. Part of his education was acquired at Wittenberg. As private secretary, Reisner accompanied George von Frundsberg to Italy in 1526, and after Rome was captured in 1527, Reisner returned to Germany, locating in Strassburg. Here it was that Reisner became personally acquainted with Schwenckfeld, and remained his devoted friend in spite of all opposition and affliction, acting as Schwenckfeld's assistant and amanuensis.

Reisner's hymns number hundreds and they possess unmistakable merit. Among his religious poems was a metrical version of the Psalms. Reisner also published a hymn book ("Teglichs Gesangbuch"), and he composed many of the hymns it contained. Exceptionally beautiful is his hymn based on the thirty-first Psalm:

*“In dich hab ich gehoffet, Herr, hilf, das ich nit zu schanden wer
noch ewiglich zu spotte. Des bitt ich dich, erhalte mich
in deiner trew, mein Gotte.*

*“Du bist mein sterck, mein felsz, mein hort, mein schildt, mein
krafft, sagt mir dein wort,
mein hilf, mein hayl, mein leben,*

*Mein starcker Got in aller not:
wer mag mir wider streben?” . . .*

Many English translations have been made of this hymn.

Sudermann Most Prolific

But the most prolific writer of the Schwenkfelder poets was Daniel Sudermann, in whom the cause of the Middle Way received a fresh and powerful impetus. His family was an old and honored one, and some of his ancestors had taken the veil, occupying themselves with the transcribing of religious books. Many of their manuscripts, which were beautifully executed, came into the possession of Daniel Sudermann, and one of these served as a model for his handwriting—that artistic penmanship of his numerous manuscripts, which deservedly has always received unvarying high praise for its symmetry and grace.

Sudermann's father was an artist and copper-plate engraver, numbering among his patrons Duke William of Cleves, the Duke of Weimar, Duke Frederick of Saxony, and Emperors Charles V and Maximilian II of the Holy Roman Empire.

Daniel Sudermann was born in 1550 and died in 1631. After receiving his education, he began his long career as private tutor or Hofmeister to numerous young counts and noblemen. It was Emperor Maximilian who furnished him with an introduction to the newly appointed viceroy of the Netherlands. During these years he wrote many poems in praise of his noble patrons and friends. In 1585 he took charge of instructing the sons of the nobility at the Bruderhof in Strassburg and became the vicar in 1594. Here he spent practically the remainder of his life.

The earliest of Sudermann's poems which still exist were written when he was eighteen years of age. Then followed his motto-hymns and acrostic poems. After coming to Strassburg, Sudermann apparently was occupied with the publication of Schwenckfeld's works. He also wrote lyric poetry according to the strict rules of the Meistersinger, for the sixteenth century was the great age of these burgher poets, and frequently in his Ms. collections of later years you will see this marginal note: “Disz ist ein Meister-gesang (this is a Master-song).”

Although Sudermann made reprints and new editions for Schwenckfeld after coming to Strassburg in 1585, it was not until nine years later or 1594 that he announced his acceptance of Schwenckfeld's views, or, to use his own words in translation, it was in the year 1594 that he came to a knowledge of the truth. Now we find Sudermann wholly absorbed in studying the mystics—Bernard of Clairvaux, Johann Tauler, and other believers in the directness of the soul's communion with God. From their writings he culled the choicest passages, transcribing many of them with the greatest care, and thus preserving this literature for the world. The hymns of this period in his life very naturally reflect much of the sentiment and imagery of these early Christian writers.

Author of 2500 Hymns

The last two decades of his life were also given over to literary pursuits, and even at the advanced age of eighty, he still wielded a vigorous pen. Sudermann was a voluminous transcriber of Schwenckfelder literature, and he completed at this time many of his hymn collections. He was the author of 2500 hymns and religious poems, and also wrote some theological treatises. As a hymn writer he commanded the respect of both contemporary and modern hymnologists.

If we bear in mind that for more than a score of years Sudermann's duties as Hofmeister claimed the major portion of his time; that he directed the publication of many of Schwenckfeld's works; that during his curacy at the Bruderhof he accumulated a collection of old manuscripts which has ever since been an object of admiration to bibliophiles; that he copied five large volumes of hymns, edited twenty publications of writings by himself and by Tauler, and that by forty years of toil as transcriber he has preserved to us a vast quantity of Schwenckfelder literature, as well as much of our information concerning Schwenckfeld and his adherents, we shall then be able to form some idea of the amazing activity of this resourceful and devoted champion of Caspar von Schwenckfeld.

There were two other Schwenckfelder poets of the pre-migration period who must not be overlooked—namely, Martin John, Jr., and Caspar Weiss. The former belonged to a family prominent in the struggle of this sect in Silesia for existence. The grandfather, Martin John, Sr., became a Schwenckfelder lay evangelist, holding public services at his house in Harpersdorf. This brought persecution upon him and his associates. His furniture was destroyed, his fields laid waste, and he himself was committed to prison. During his confinement numerous sermons were penned by him and brought

to America later by the Schwenkfelder immigrants. But disease was the result of the unsanitary condition of the prison, and after nine years of detention he died in 1594, having steadfastly refused to exchange his liberty of conscience for personal freedom. The family of his son, George John, for a time escaped the hardships of the Thirty Years' War, but finally a detachment of the imperial troops was quartered in his house with instructions to resort to torture, if necessary, in order to compel the family to embrace the Catholic faith, and a guard was placed before each exit of the house to prevent flight or rescue. But George John was equal to the situation. Much to their surprise and contrary to their accustomed treatment, the soldiers were invited to a banquet and a day of festivity was proclaimed. Picture their satisfaction after the feast is already in progress, when they see an abundance of the choicest wine appear. Yes—this ruse of the host was thoroughly successful! After the soldiers and guards were soundly intoxicated, George John under cover of the night escaped with his wife, daughter and small son, Martin, Jr. (then in his fourth year). All his life long, our hymn writer retained the memory of that flight.

Physician Writes History of Reformation

The next time we hear of Martin John, Jr., he is a physician in the town of Hockenau, Silesia. Then began, after the Treaty of Westphalia, that period of oppression which the later Schwenkfelders spoke of as "the great persecution." Martin John, Jr., wrote an account of Schwenckfeld and his doctrines, and the history of the Reformation under Schwenckfeld up to the second half of the seventeenth century. He thus rendered significant service as a chronicler, and it was his great regret that due to the persecution and the long duration of the war, so much historical matter and printed literature had been destroyed. But it was not until shortly after his death in 1707 that his hymns came to light—about one hundred in number—and subsequent hymn books of the Schwenkfelders all contained some of them.

Caspar Weiss deserves mention—not so much as an author, but as the compiler of the first Schwenkfelder hymn book in 1709. He, too, was a devoted follower of the great Reformer whose name he bore. Caspar Weiss was a linen-weaver by trade and lived in a modest home in Harpersdorf, Silesia. Besides being musically talented, he had a wide familiarity with the church hymns: he knew the Latin hymns of St. Augustine, St. Ambrosius, St. Hieronymus, and others of the church fathers, the hymns of Luther, those of the Moravians, and also those of the Schwenkfelder hymn writers of

the 16th and 17th centuries. Furthermore, Caspar Weiss possessed a wide knowledge of the various creeds of Protestantism at the opening of the 18th century. Hence he was admirably fitted to carry out the request of an old Schwenkfelder to rearrange the hymn book then in use. Weiss drew on all the above-mentioned sources for his compilation, and arranged the hymns, not according to theme, but in agreement with the ecclesiastical year. These hymns in turn were further subdivided into groups suitable for morning and for evening worship. The collection contained 216 metrical versions of the Psalms; 28 hymns based on significant events in Biblical history, most of which were written by Adam Reisner, 112 hymns based on the gospels, which had been composed by his son, George Weiss, who was then but 22 years of age; and the balance of the compilation, comprising 518 hymns, was taken from Lutheran, Reformed, Moravian and Schwenkfelder sources. The total was 874 hymns.

Caspar Weiss had his part to bear, too, in the persecution to which the Schwenkfelders of Liegnitz in particular were subjected. Tottering with age, the venerable Weiss was compelled to stand for six long hours before the notorious Pastor Neander to give an account of his faith. He died in 1712.

Basis of First Hymn Book

This same "Gesangbuch" of Caspar Weiss formed the basis for the first hymn collection used in America by our forefathers, and very naturally was the work of George Weiss, who had composed some of the hymns for his father's compilation. George Weiss completed this work just prior to the departure of the Schwenkfelders from Saxony. This collection was almost twice the size of his father's, containing also about 300 hymns of his own authorship. George Weiss added many of Sudermann's hymns to his compilation, too; these were based on the Song of Solomon. However, Weiss revised the stanzas somewhat, and added a verse or two as a prayer to the majority of these Sudermann hymns. The new hymns by Weiss himself, numbering 128, formed several series of hymns based on the names of numerous Biblical characters: the patriarchs, the prophets, the apostles, etc. For more than 30 years this hymn book was used in America at their gatherings for divine worship and at the meetings of their children for catechetical instruction.

George Weiss was born in 1687 in Harpersdorf, but spent the last six years of his life here in Pennsylvania—from 1734 to 1740, when he died. He was well versed in Hebrew, Greek and Latin, and

thoroughly grounded in the tenets of Caspar von Schwenckfeld. Indeed, it has been said that there never has been a more spiritual Schwenckfelder than George Weiss, which explains the fact of his appointment as the first Schwenckfelder pastor in America.

When the Catholic missionaries appeared in Silesia in 1720 to make converts of the Schwenckfelders, it was George Weiss who was chosen to reply to the questions of these missionaries. The latter, having been worsted in their arguments, then resorted to force to compel the Schwenckfelders to attend their worship. With his family and friends Weiss fled by night from Silesia, leaving behind all their possessions, and the next month they arrived in Herrnhut, Saxony. Here he became a weaver and a teacher. This was the time, too, that the warm friendship sprang up between young Christopher Schultz and George Weiss, the latter serving as instructor of languages to the former. George Weiss possessed, evidently, a natural talent as a poet, and it was a matter of great regret to him that he had never received any training in this art.

Led in Printed Collection

Now Balthasar Hoffmann (1687-1775) had made transcriptions of both of the Weiss hymn collections, when completed. Evidently the study of hymns was for him an employment that he loved, and his analyses of numerous hymns have been preserved, all of which are worthy of a close homiletic study. In his transcription of the George Weiss collection, Balthasar Hoffmann supplied numerous interpretations to many of the hymns, and the margins contain copious annotations and Scripture references. Hoffmann wrote 106 hymns himself for the George Weiss compilation; they were known as the "Epistel-lieder." But when Balthasar Hoffmann succeeded Rev. George Weiss as the spiritual head of the Schwenckfelders in America, he found the hymn collection altogether deficient in the matter of arrangement as to sequence of doctrine, and, therefore, unsuited as a hymnal for church purposes. He felt the need of a printed Schwenckfelder hymn book and was a leader in the movement for its publication.

That Balthasar Hoffmann was of importance to the Schwenckfelders before their migration, as well as after their arrival in America, is indicated by the fact that he and his father, together with Balthasar Hoffrichter, constituted the embassy sent to Vienna to implore Emperor Charles VI for toleration for their severely persecuted brethren at home. This was in 1721, and the Hoffmanns remained in Vienna four years, during which time Balthasar Hoffmann delivered no less than seventeen memorials to the Emperor.

Finally they were forbidden to present any more petitions, and he and his father fled to Saxony, where they had the protection of Count Zinzendorf for eight years.

It was in Saxony that Balthasar's son, Christopher Hoffmann, was born in 1727. Like his father, he, too, became a Schwenkfelder minister and transcriber. His beautifully wrought manuscript hymn book of 1760 was his most important contribution to Schwenkfelder hymnology. However, in his version of the Weiss hymn book he incorporated the textual corrections of numerous hymns made by Caspar and George Weiss, writing the various changes in the margin with his initials. This book forms one of the choicest examples of the art of illuminative writing.

Strictly speaking, however, neither Christopher Hoffmann nor Hans Christopher Heebner (1718-1804) were poets. The latter was also a most active transcriber and compiler of hymns and homiletic literature, producing three folio volumes of hymns and massive collections of sermons.

Began Writing Before He Was 18

But one of the most prolific writers of verse among the Schwenkfelder immigrants was the learned physician, Dr. Abraham Wagener. Before he attained the age of eighteen years, he began writing poetry and continued doing so up until his death in 1763.

The first printed hymn book of the Schwenkfelders appeared in 1762. One hundred and nineteen of the hymns were of Schwenkfelder authorship, and Dr. Wagener is responsible for thirty-four of them. In the last "Gesangbuch" to be printed in 1869, only twenty-three hymns of that Schwenkfelder number were retained, but thirteen of these were written by Dr. Wagener.

Mr. H. W. Kriebel, of Pennsburg, informs me that one of Dr. Wagener's most popular hymns, "Meine Seel' wohl auf," represents Schwenkfelder principles in thought, and is also interesting in that the first letters of the stanzas spell the name of the author's wife, "Maria Wagenerin."

This attempted résumé does not by any means exhaust the list of early Schwenkfelder poets, for if you examine the printed hymnal of 1762, you will find still other names: Caspar Kribel, David Seibt, Christopher Kribel, and the distinguished Christopher Schultz, who besides writing seven of the hymns was also the editor of this 1762 "Gesangbuch."

Thus among the followers of Schwenckfeld there always have been lovers of hymns, who sought to preserve this form of verse. In the middle of the 16th century there was Reisner with his "Teglichs

Gesangbuch," through which medium he saved for us hundreds of the hymns of the earliest Schwenkfelder writers. In like manner Sudermann continued this work a half-century later. Likewise, Caspar Weiss in the 17th century preserved for us the hymns of Sudermann, Martin John, Jr., George Heydrich, etc. Then, despite the persecution in Europe and the hardships of pioneer life in America, we see Caspar Weiss, George Weiss, Balthasar Hoffmann, Christopher Kriebel, Hans Christopher Heebner, Christopher Hoffmann and Christopher Schultz, all producing large transcripts of Schwenkfelder hymns.

It was with a sense of deep humility and a renewed appreciation of our wonderful heritage as Schwenkfelder descendants, that I completed this study.—*Are we proving ourselves worthy of this heritage?*

[Source material: "Genealogical Record of the Schwenkfelder Families," by Brecht; "Corpus Schwenckfeldianorum;" and Dr. Seipt's "Schwenkfelder Hymnology."]

LIST OF THE MEMBERS
OF THE
DESCENDANTS OF THE SCHWENKFELDIAN
EXILES
JANUARY 1, 1933

- Adams (Mrs. Israel S.), Frieda Kriebel.....1246 Hill Road, Reading, Pa.
- Amonson, Mrs. Emma.....922 West Marshall Street, Norristown, Pa.
- Anders, Andrew A., M.D.....1706 Diamond Street, Philadelphia, Pa.
- Anders, Daniel M.....11 East Airy Street, Norristown, Pa.
- Anders, Mrs. Eveline S.Curren Terrace, R. F. D. 4, Norristown, Pa.
- Anders, J. Leidy.....1118 West Airy Street, Norristown, Pa.
- Anders, Mrs. J. Leidy.....1118 West Airy Street, Norristown, Pa.
- *Anders, James M., M.D.....250 South Seventeenth Street, Philadelphia, Pa.
- Anders, Monroe H.....Ardmore, Pa.
- Anders, Morrell Z.....4935 Pulaski Avenue, Germantown, Pa.
- Anders, Russell.....R. F. D. No. 2, Norristown, Pa.
- Anders, Warren Z., M.D.....Collegeville, Pa.
- Anders, William H.....831 W. Second Street, Lansdale, Pa.
- Barrett, Mrs. Laura A.....30 East Freedley Street, Norristown, Pa.
- Bean, Theodore Lane.....317 Swede Street, Norristown, Pa.
- Beyer, Alvin D.1809 DeKalb Street, Norristown, Pa.
- Beyer, Emma C.....1809 DeKalb Street, Norristown, Pa.
- Beyer, Wesley B.....833 DeKalb Street, Norristown, Pa.
- Bobb, Miss Minnie.....Lansdale, Pa.

Brecht, Arthur M.....83 Eagle Road, Manoa, Upper Darby, Pa.
 Brecht, George K.....926 West Marshall Street, Norristown, Pa.
 Brecht, Harold W.....201 Cricket Avenue, Ardmore, Pa.
 Brecht, Mrs. Sarah K.....926 West Marshall Street, Norristown, Pa.
 *Brecht, Samuel K.....83 Eagle Road, Manoa, Upper Darby, Pa.
 Breitenbaugh, Mrs. Annie.....501 North Broad Street, Lansdale, Pa.
 Buckenham, Miss Adelaide Marion.....Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia, Pa.
 Buckenham, Miss Clara Virginia.....Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia, Pa.
 *Buckenham, John Edgar Burnett, M.D.....Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia, Pa.
 Cassel, Harry.....307 Linden Avenue, Haddonfield, N. J.
 Cassel, Oscar Heebner.....14 Park Avenue, Milbourne, Upper Darby, Pa.
 Clark, Mrs. Elmira Heebner.....4605 North Tenth Street, Philadelphia, Pa.
 Clothier, Mrs. William J.....Valley Forge, Pa.
 Cole, Mrs. Samuel V.....6141 Oxford Street, Overbrook, Philadelphia, Pa.
 Cook, Mrs. Helen Shultz.....243 High Street, Germantown, Philadelphia, Pa.
 Craven, A. Sanford.....505 Independence Avenue, Oak Lane, Philadelphia, Pa.
 Crawford, Mrs. Martha H.....623 Swede Street, Norristown, Pa.
 Danehower, Mrs. H. B.....1032 West Marshall Street, Norristown, Pa.
 Daub, Miss Sadie Seifert.....20 Huron Avenue, Norwood, Pa.
 Daub, Samuel S.....Green Lake, Maine
 Day, Mrs. Alexander S.....3221 Columbia Avenue, Philadelphia, Pa.
 Doll, Mrs. Amanda K.....511 Mohawk Avenue, Norwood, Pa.
 Dresher, Mrs. Ella.....523 Columbia Avenue, Lansdale, Pa.
 Dresher, Raymond.....523 Columbia Avenue, Lansdale, Pa.
 Ettinger, James A.....414 Merchant Street, Audubon, N. J.
 Evans, Hon. Burd Patterson... "Fairfield Farms," Trappe, Montgomery Co., Pa.
 Farrell, Mrs. John L.....20 Huron Avenue, Norwood, Pa.
 Fisher, John S.....4632 North Warnock Street, Logan, Philadelphia, Pa.
 Fry, Mrs. Alma Schultz.....1321 Markley Street, Norristown, Pa.
 Genszler, Mrs. Florence S.....R. F. D., Barto, Pa.
 Gerhard, Homer S.....1024 West Marshall Street, Norristown, Pa.
 Gerhard, Josephus.....Clayton, Pa.
 Gerhard, Marvin S.....735 Noble Street, Norristown, Pa.
 Gerhard, Samuel P., M.D.....639 North Sixteenth Street, Philadelphia, Pa.
 *Getelman, Ralph, M.D.....2011 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, Pa.
 Glass, Mrs. Marion Weber.....39 North Whitehall Road, Norristown, Pa.
 Groff, Henry C., M.D.....Broad and Venango Streets, Philadelphia, Pa.
 Groff, J. W., M.D.....3500 North Broad Street, Philadelphia, Pa.
 Hartranft, John Harrison.....1824 Ruscomb Street, Philadelphia, Pa.
 Heebner, Arthur R.....48 North Ardmore Avenue, Lansdowne, Pa.
 Heebner, Charles.....501 The Mermont, Bryn Mawr, Pa.
 Heebner, Charles K.....543 West Ellet Street, Philadelphia, Pa.
 Heebner, Earl W.....R. F. D. 5, Norristown, Pa.
 Heebner, Miss Ellen K.....Pennsburg, Pa.
 Heebner, Ernest A.....R. F. D. 2, Norristown, Pa.
 Heebner, George K.....1337 Hunting Park Avenue, Philadelphia, Pa.
 Heebner, Rev. Harvey K.....2509 North Thirtieth Street, Philadelphia, Pa.
 Heebner, Miss Ida J.....4605 North Tenth Street, Philadelphia, Pa.
 Heebner, Wilfred.....48 Ardmore Avenue, Lansdowne, Pa.
 Henwood, Mrs. Sarah B.....43 North Whitehall Road, Norristown, Pa.
 Heydrick, Mrs. Sophia K.....77 North Highland Avenue, Norristown, Pa.
 Heydrick, Miss Stella.....77 North Highland Avenue, Norristown, Pa.
 Hickman, Mrs. Leila F.....4934 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, Pa.
 Hoffman, Mrs. Carlotta Schultz.....Meadowbrook, Montgomery Co., Pa.
 Hoffman, Rev. Levi S.....739 West Main Street, Lansdale, Pa.
 Huber, Mrs. Caroline Roberts.....Gulph Road, Haverford, Pa.
 Jarrett, Mrs. Henry.....Box 4372, Chestnut Hill, Pa.
 Jervis, Mrs. Nora Anders.....25 North Whitehall Road, Norristown, Pa.
 Johnson, Mrs. Agnes Gerhard.....Hereford, Pa.

Johnson, Rev. Elmer E. S., Ph.D..... Hereford, Pa.
 Jones, Mrs. A. Conrad..... 125 Fourth Avenue, Conshohocken, Pa.
 Jones, Charles C..... 156 Pelham Road, Germantown, Pa.
 Knipe, J. C., M.D... Medical Arts Bldg., 18th and Chestnut Sts., Philadelphia, Pa.
 Knipe, Reinocnl, M.D..... 549 Haws Avenue, Norristown, Pa.
 Knoll, Mrs. Lloyd M..... 6120 Carpenter Street, Philadelphia, Pa.
 Krauss, Rev. E. F..... 1618 South Eleventh Avenue, Maywood, Illinois
 Krauss, John S..... 5049 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, Pa.
 Kriebel, Mrs. Alverda Souder..... 23 West Main Street, Lansdale, Pa.
 Kriebel, Ambrose..... R. F. D. No. 1, Lansdale, Pa.
 Kriebel, Calvin G..... Hereford, Pa.
 Kriebel, Miss Irma..... 279 Wyoming Avenue, Maplewood, N. J.
 *Kriebel, Rev. Lester K..... Pennsburg, Pa.
 Kriebel, William F..... 227 North Lansdowne Avenue, Lansdowne, Pa.
 Kriebel, Miss Lillian R..... 244 Jacoby Street, Norristown, Pa.
 Kriebel, Mrs. Nora Meschter..... 1022 West Main Street, Norristown, Pa.
 Kriebel, Mrs. Nora Meschter..... Hereford, Pa.
 Kriebel, Rev. E. Wilbur..... 2004 Hanover Street, Allentown, Pa.
 Kriebel, William S..... 6121 McCallum Street, Germantown, Pa.
 Kurtz, Edgar H..... 122 High Street, Pottstown, Pa.
 Lapp, Mrs. Margaret Beaumont..... West Chester, Pa.
 *Little, Mrs. Eleanor Slingluff..... 1700 DeKalb Street, Norristown, Pa.
 Lloyd, Mrs. Annie B..... 405 Derstine Avenue, Lansdale, Pa.
 Lodor, Miss Elmira..... 311 South Thirteenth Street, Philadelphia, Pa.
 Longaker, Miss Mae..... 645 North Fortieth Street, Philadelphia, Pa.
 Lowrie, Mrs. Robert N..... 210 Hawkins Avenue, North Braddock, Pa.
 Lyle, Mrs. Martha Yeakle..... 424 West Marshall Street, Norristown, Pa.
 *McHarg, Mrs. Elizabeth..... R. F. D. 1, Norristown, Pa.
 Mathias, Miss Ethel..... Hamilton Apartments, Norristown, Pa.
 Maxwell, Miss Frances Helen..... 64 East Greenwood Avenue, Lansdowne, Pa.
 Maxwell, Mrs. Irene Longaker, "The Llewellyn," Park Place, Atlantic City, N. J.
 Merchant, Mrs. Elizabeth Lodor... 119 West Mt. Airy Avenue, Philadelphia, Pa.
 Meschter, Prof. Charles K..... 1221 Loraine Avenue, Bethlehem, Pa.
 Meschter, Eugene, M.D... Rock Spring Road and Mayflower, Stamford, Conn.
 Meschter, Harvey C..... Palm, Pa.
 *Meschter, Mrs. Leila Kriebel..... 126 Roberts Avenue, Glenside, Pa.
 *Meschter, Wayne C..... 126 Roberts Avenue, Glenside, Pa.
 Meloy, Mrs. Ida..... 216 Sixth Street, Renovo, Pa.
 Miller, Daniel Yeakel..... Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia, Pa.
 Miller, Mrs. John Faber..... 333 DeKalb Street, Norristown, Pa.
 Miller, William H., Jr..... 216 Clymer Street, Reading, Pa.
 *Mosser, Mrs. Miriam E. Schultz... 5031 Copley Road, Germantown, Phila., Pa.
 Pinner, Mrs. Robert..... 2735 Mickle Street, Camden, N. J.
 Porter, Andrew Wagener..... 2132 Pine Street, Philadelphia, Pa.
 Porter, William Hobart..... 1500 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, Pa.
 Powell, Mrs. Ray Heydrick..... State Street, Dover, Delaware
 Rittenhouse, Miss Katherine..... 6025 Jefferson Street, Philadelphia, Pa.
 Rittenhouse, John K..... 6025 Jefferson Street, Philadelphia, Pa.
 Roberts, Hon. Owen J..... Box 1725, Washington, D. C.
 Rosenberger, Seward M..... Quakertown, Pa.
 Rudy, Mrs. Alice Meschter..... 1731 W. Huntingdon Street, Philadelphia, Pa.
 Ruth, Mrs. Henry L..... 501 North Broad Street, Lansdale, Pa.
 Schantz, Mrs. Emma R..... 8103 Ardmore Avenue, Chestnut Hill, Pa.
 Schelly, Miss Adelia..... 350 Lafayette Street, New York City
 Schelly, Cyrus Y..... 32 North Seventh Street, Allentown, Pa.
 Schultz, Mrs. Ada De Haven..... 84 Ledgeways, Wellesley Hills, Mass.
 Schultz, Miss Alice S..... 141 North Reading Avenue, Boyertown, Pa.
 Schultz, Amos K..... R. F. D. 1, Barto, Pa.
 Schultz, Andrew..... 84 Ledgeways, Wellesley Hills, Mass.

- *Schultz, Elmer K...1006 The Cambridge, Alden Park, Germantown, Phila., Pa.
 Schultz, Miss Hannah E.....715 West Marshall Street, Norristown, Pa.
 Schultz, Howard B.....Danville, Pa.
 Schultz, Miss Irma.....Apartment 308, 4517 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, Pa.
 Schultz, Lloyd H.....Elkins Park, Pa.
 Schultz, Miss Lucina K.....Palm, Pa.
 Schultz, Miss Margie.....604 Noble Street, Norristown, Pa.
 Schultz, Marvin G.....910 East Stafford, Germantown, Philadelphia, Pa.
 Schultz, Miss Minnie S.....141 North Reading Avenue, Boyertown, Pa.
 Schultz, Mrs. Nora.....R. F. D., Barto, Pa.
 Schultz, Oscar S.....142 Reading Avenue, Boyertown, Pa.
 Schultz, Raymond A.....Mt. Penn, Pa.
 Schultz, Walter A.....246 State Road, Highland Park, Upper Darby, Pa.
 Seipt, Manilius D.....1043 DeKalb Street, Norristown, Pa.
 *Seipt, Miss Mary.....2035 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, Pa.
 Seipt, Samuel.....Wyndmoor Avenue, Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia, Pa.
 Seipt, Mrs. Samuel.....Wyndmoor Avenue, Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia, Pa.
 Shelly, Mrs. Ida Schultz.....144 West Chew Street, Olney, Philadelphia, Pa.
 Sheppard, George S.....169 Main Street, Penn Yan, N. Y.
 Shultz, Mrs. Ellen.....243 High Street, Germantown, Philadelphia, Pa.
 Silva, Mrs. Stella Schultz.....Baynton and Tulpehocken, Philadelphia, Pa.
 Slingluff, Mrs. William H.....1700 DeKalb Street, Norristown, Pa.
 *Smith, Herbert Heebner.....2715 Overbrook Terrace, Ardmore, Pa.
 Snyder, John K.....General Delivery, Ambler, Pa.
 Steinbright, Mrs. Anna Dixon.....636 Stanbridge Street, Norristown, Pa.
 Stephen, William M.....Port Kennedy, Montgomery County, Pa.
 *Stockham, Mrs. Marion.....Perryman, Md.
 Thomas, Mrs. E. Louis.....The Eitherton, Lansdale, Pa.
 Underkuffler, Frank M.....Haddon Heights, N. J.
 Underkuffler, Mrs. Frank M.....Haddon Heights, N. J.
 Weber, Mrs. Emma Brecht.....43 North Whitehall Road, Norristown, Pa.
 Weber, Herbert B.....43 North Whitehall Road, Norristown, Pa.
 Weldin, Mrs. Howard F.....2331 Dellwood Avenue, Jacksonville, Florida
 White, Mrs. Carrie E.....923 Wilde Avenue, Upper Darby, Pa.
 White, Clarence E.....923 Wilde Avenue, Upper Darby, Pa.
 Winter, Mrs. Mabel Kriebel.....279 Wyoming Avenue, Maplewood, N. J.
 Wieand, Miss Irma C.....6141 Oxford Street, Overbrook, Philadelphia, Pa.
 Willard, De Forest Porter, M.D.....1916 Spruce Street, Philadelphia, Pa.
 Witham, Mrs. Amy Shultz.....Swarthmore Crest, Swarthmore, Pa.
 Wolfe, C. Anthony.....Jenkintown, Pa.
 Wolford, Mrs. Alice Stahlnecker.....1323 Locust Street, Norristown, Pa.
 Wright, Mrs. Franklin L.....R. F. D. 4, Norristown, Pa.
 Yeakel, Miss Sarah Jane.....280 Roseville Avenue, Newark, N. J.
 Yeakle, Frank S.....1217 DeKalb Street, Norristown, Pa.
 Yeakle, Miss Mary A.....901 West Marshall Street, Norristown, Pa.
 Yeakle, Walter A., M.D.....600 DeKalb Street, Norristown, Pa.
 Yeakle, William R.....Fort Washington, Pa.
 Yocum, Mrs. Cleta Anders.....405 W. Schoolhouse Lane, Germantown, Pa.
 Ziegler, Rev. Harry R.....105 Bridge Street, Elkton, Md.
 Zimmerman, Mrs. C. H.....Centre Square, Montgomery County, Pa.
 Zweier, Mrs. Dora.....Lansdale, Pa.

*Life Members.