

How He Landed a Job and Got a Wife

More About Peter Gibson Thomson OHIO'S FIRST BIBLIOGRAPHER

by CHILTON THOMSON

PETER G. THOMSON would have had even more of his mother's "joie de vivre" had things turned out more happily, but his generation was to bear the brunt of the mid-19th century. His younger brother, Alexander — (and perhaps it should be noted that Scottish families very often alternate the given name, in the ancient Nordic fashion, avoiding "Juniors" and "Seniors" . . . for four generations; my family alternated "Peter" and "Alexander" for the eldest son and gave the other name to the second-born) — died tragically in babyhood. As my mother tells it: "His mother, who was preparing an old-time hair tonic, had asked the nurse to bring her a cup of hot water, and the nurse had thoughtlessly set the cup down within reach of the child. He drank the scalding water, and it burned his mouth and throat so severely that he died before help could be given."

His powerful father strained his heart in grief, perhaps, or in some of his renowned feats — but certainly he caught an extremely bad cold on a return coach trip to Cincinnati in 1857, which soon turned into rheumatic fever. He held court in his

bed chamber, in his red flannel nightgown, for seven years . . . watching savings trickle away to nothing, but even that great, strong heart finally had to give way and he died in the winter of 1864 — during the worst period of occupation jitters in The Queen City.



"Old Peter" Thomson, the original immigrant, died within a month — leaving a spindly, under-developed fourteen year-old boy as the "only man" in the house on the east side of Broadway. His only uncle, James, had moved to Indianapolis. His mother's family were living in Louisiana and Virginia. One second

cousin was still known to be alive in Indiana and his older sister, Millie, was being courted by a hard-working young mechanic named Rammelsberg, who had not yet invented the shaping machine that was to revolutionize the furniture industry.

The second installment of the text of a paper delivered at The Rowfant Club in Cleveland by Chilton Thomson, grandson of Peter Thomson. The author of the paper is head of the English Department of University School, Cleveland.

An Honor Student

He was not totally bereft, though. His father had enrolled him in the second intermediate school in the city, where he became an honor student. He had also started, in 1860, regular attendance in the "gymnastic classes" conducted by a professional boxer named Samuel Barrett on Third Street, just around the corner from his home, to get over being ". . . very thin and delicate, and, as my mother often said, just a bag of bones." Determination and zest for competition paid off: by the time he was 22, he had won the gym record for dead weight lifting—1,265 pounds—and the prize for Indian-club swinging! So far as I know, both records still stand at the Cincinnati Athletic Club, the gym's successor.

Moreover, Great Grandmother Thomson somewhere found fifty dollars which enabled him, at 17, to enroll in the Bryant-Stafford & Co. Business Colleges, "to pursue a full course of instruction in Bookkeeping, Commercial Arithmetic, Commercial Law, Practical Penmanship, Correspondence, and the Details of Business, and the review of the same at pleasure." Just a year or two later, he obtained his job with Robert Clarke as a shipping clerk, unpacking and making up shipments and doing general work in Cincinnati's best-known book store.

This position combined with two other experiences to make the framework of Peter Thomson's life. Robert Clarke was an astonishing man in any age, but was particularly so in a midwestern city of the 1870's. He was an accomplished and brilliant scholar, a thorough-going gentleman of quality and distinction, the possessor of one of the three or four fine libraries in the United States (he is the

first man known to have possessed an incunabula, west of the mountains) and a remarkably generous and considerate employer. He required only 10½ hours of labor a day from his staff! They were permitted to use the other 1½ hours of the customary total for the partaking of "decent nourishment in decent surroundings" and "readings and studies contributory to their personal, social and professional advancement" . . . and I quote, since such generosity was deemed noteworthy by a local commentator, Henry A. Ford of Hillsboro, Ohio. As a side-issue, I do wonder whether that Henry Ford thought to comment about Mr. Clarke's "benevolence" to his young relative who was to gain so much greater fame than the author of *Cincinnati in 1876*.

Concert Brought a Spouse

The second great experience of Peter's life concerned a concert which, just as it had for his mother, brought him his spouse. "Old Judge" Hendrick, who lived across Broadway, had two pretty daughters who had often attended parties across the river in Kentucky, more accessible now that the world's first suspension bridge was finished. There they had met Laura Gamble, of Louisville, and had prevailed on her to visit in Cincinnati during the fall of 1874 to enjoy the theatre, which she dearly loved. On the last night of her visit, Peter Thomson was called over to escort the visitor to Pike's Opera House. They hadn't even reached the famous old playhouse before he wanted to marry Laura. My mother wrote, some years ago: "He has told me a number of times that he wanted to ask her to marry him that

(Continued on page 115)

rather special. That is all right. But before we begin flapping our wings too virtuously it might be a good thing if we spent just a little time trying to figure out just what being Ohioans makes of us. To be sure, it made authors of us: *Ohio* authors. But precisely what does that mean? If we are different, as we fondly believe, how are we different? What has Ohio done to us? What does it mean to us? If Ohio somehow speaks through us, what has it got to say?

Our History Runs Deep

I suppose we need to go back in history to get an understanding of this. This is the great land of the middle border; the area which, only a century ago, was known as the Great Northwest. Its history is briefer than the history of the eastern and southern parts of our country, but it runs very deep, and it has its own significance. This was not one of the original colonies. At the time when the new nation won its independence from Great Britain, the Ohio country was a howling wilderness. The society that was established here was the creation of the nation as a whole. If that new nation was in fact, as we fondly believe, a magnificent experiment carried on by people who saw that they had been blessed with an opportunity to make a fresh start in the world, Ohio was the place where this experiment was first and most fully developed. It embodied the deepest aspirations and the highest hopes of the American people. It was staked out in the hour of national dawn; its guide lines were laid down, not by what people had always done before but by their notions of what might be done in the future. Here, if anywhere, the American dream was given its chance to become real.

It is only stating the obvious, of course, to point out that the great determining factor in the formation of this society was the universal acceptance of the idea of human freedom. The basic charter of the Northwest Territories stipulated that the institution of chattel slavery could never be established here. But that was only part of it. Freedom meant more than the mere denial of one man's right to own another man. It involved an unspoken but unshakeable belief in the sacredness of the individual personality. It rested upon the assumption which lies at the very heart of our faith in democracy itself—the assumption that the average human being has not only the right but the capacity to make his own way in the world, the conviction that the mistakes which he makes when he follows his own light—his blunders, his follies and his meannesses, all wrapped up together—will be more than counter-balanced by the resources of intelligence, of good will and of unselfishness which he can and will find in his own spirit. Fundamentally, this is simply a belief in people.

(Continued in next issue)

OHIO'S FIRST BIBLIOGRAPHER

(Continued from page 113)

night, and she has freely admitted to me that if he had done so, she would have said, 'yes.' They had known a great deal about each other through mutual friends and relations, but it's still rather astonishing that their seventh *meeting* was their wedding day! 189 miles was a long distance to travel by steamer and the young bookman didn't have as much time or money as he had determination.

(Continued in next issue)