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ROY FLOYD DIBBLE
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**ALBION W. TOURGEE
AND HIS BIOGRAPHER, ROY. F. DIBBLE**

(Two men of local "fame")

When I was first asked to speak on Tourgee, I was requested to include my reminiscences of his, apparently first, biographer, Roy Floyd Dibble, first because he was my uncle, and secondly, because he was also a local Chautauqua County author. Both men achieved their "fifteen minutes of fame", then both were generally forgotten, except for a temporary revival during the mid-twentieth century of Tourgee's political activities when finally the Negro, or "African-American", became a genuine issue in our political arena. In 1966, Otto Olsen published a much longer and more complete biography of "The Life of Albion W. Tourgee", named CARPETBAGGER'S CRUSADE. I will be talking about all the "hats", plus a couple of others, we have listed in our program title. Our particular interest here in Westfield and Mayville is based on Tourgee's having made his home in Mayville for some years, and his authorship of a novel involving our local "halfway house" between Westfield and Mayville, BUTTON'S INN.

When I was around four and becoming aware of my extended family, Uncle Roy stayed at our house over Christmas. Hazy though the memories of him at that time are, I do know he impressed me as a "nice guy" who took time to play and get acquainted with his littlest niece. Over the next couple of years I heard my parents talk about Uncle Roy traveling around the world and of how Uncle Roy had written a book about Judge Tourgee, who had written a book called "Button's Inn". During the next few years, we saw Uncle Roy once more at Christmas time and in the summers at our family reunions. I also heard talk of some more of his writings - my folks had autographed copies of them, of course, but they somehow slipped through my fingers and the copies I have of them now belonged to another uncle. But I do have the copy of "Button's Inn" that my dad gave to his mother, Grandma Dibble, and it is the copy that Uncle Roy made use of in his depiction of Tourgee. I also have the copy of his biography that he gave to my folks.

Uncle Roy was the youngest of my dad's parents, Mr. and Mrs. George E. Dibble. They lived up on the old Elm Flats Road and the boys and their one sister went to school in the one-room schoolhouse where Bliss Road runs into Elm Flats Road. Next to the schoolhouse was a little church that the family attended. Both were standing as late as the 1940's, but now the church is gone and the school has become quite a large home. Uncle Roy graduated from Westfield High School in 1906, and from Clark University in 1912. He then went to Columbia University, teaching English there while earning his PhD degree. Later he taught English in Hunter College. It was for his dissertation to complete his doctorate that he chose to write the biography of Albion W. Tourgee.

May I read to you a few sentences of his preface to the book, which I think give a reason for his choice of topic. READ

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On a cold December night in 1929, we received a telegram at our home that Roy Floyd Dibble had died in New York City. My dad was down town and it was my lot to go down to tell him (we didn't have a phone at that time!) And it fell to him to go tell Grandma Dibble and get hold of his brothers and sister. Uncle Roy had had a kidney removed in 1916, a result of what I believe was called Addison's Disease. He had not told his parents as he did not want to worry them unnecessarily. At the time the doctors had said he probably would not live more than a couple of years. As it was he had had 13 more years of a scholar's life of teaching, writing and travelling. He is buried on the family lot in the Westfield Cemetary

It was about this time that I decided I might become a writer – but that dream was only faintly realized! There was just too much else to do!

I had wondered why Uncle Roy had not married and believe it was because he realized he might not be around too long. After Grandpa Dibble died he spent some of his summer vacations on the old farm and often Grandma would go up and "keep house" for him. As I mentioned he had written three more books: STRENOUS AMERICANS which contains short biographies of interesting nineteenth century relatively famous people, a biography of JOHN L SULLIVAN and a biography of MOHAMMED, of all people. In reading them I think I discovered something about why people do research and write biographies, one has to almost get into the mind of the person about whom they are writing. I think my uncle was searching for his own spiritual needs. Indeed, at the time he died he had completed a biography of MARTIN LUTHER, which was never published. Two of his early drafts of the MMS got destroyed in some moving about of the families. At one time I recall my dad and uncle being asked about movie rights to the biography. For some reason that deal was never consummated. I have always been curious as to whether someone did have access to a copy of his MSS and did complete it, using his own name, and selling movie rights, because I know there has been a movie about the father of the Protestant Reformation. That we will never know. Uncle Roy might have had another "five minutes of fame"!

This is my favorite picture of Uncle Roy, getting Uncle Ernie's dog, Dick, to beg for a weiner at one of our family reunions! (Show)

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Some years ago – maybe 10 or so, I received a phone call from someone in Oklahoma, I think, who wanted to know what I could tell him of Roy Dibble. He was writing some sort of review of writers. He didn't explain much; I told him what I could remember, and he promised I would receive a copy of whatever he wrote. I never did – and had forgotten all about it until I came across a note I'd made, a couple of years ago. I didn't bother to keep it – too much time had passed to give it any more thought. But I did recall some of the things he said he had observed about my uncle's writing. "Sarcastic" and "biting" were a couple of them! I knew of course, Uncle Roy hadn't painted any beautiful pictures of those rough and ready characters he'd written about. You might say

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he attempted to portray the “unvarnished truth” about the people. And in reading some reviews in which his biography of Tourgee was mentioned, the words “unsympathetic” and “pessimistic” were descriptive. I believe he was sort of an avant garde of the group of historians who have in recent years exposed many of our high school heroes as having the same human foibles as most human beings. Mark Van Doren, a good friend of Uncle Roy, wrote an item for the *DICTIONARY OF AMERICAN BIOGRAPHERS*, in which he called Roy’s writings “cryptic”, which I think is a good definitive adjective for them. I wonder how Uncle Roy might have dealt with Jim Bakker or President Clinton??

Mr. Olsen, the 1966 biographer I mentioned, speaks of Roy F. Dibble’s book in his bibliography thus. Listed under Secondary Works on Tourgee, he says: “The most complete biographical account of Tourgee is *Roy F. Dibble’s Albion W. Tourgee (New York, 1921)*, an unsympathetic and almost entirely literary treatment.” This is why I emphasized the words I did in Uncle Roy’s Preface. His book is perhaps, more of a literary critique of Tourgee’s writings. And if some readers consider him a satirical writer, perhaps, he was, but many of the reviews of Tourgee’s works and his personality as a political leader do not put halos or crowns on Tourgee. Indeed, Mr. Olsen, in the “Epilogue” of his biography of the Carpetbagger, describes him thus: “The best of intentions [] could not hide the Judge’s faults. His conceit, tactlessness and pride were prejudicial to his efforts and there were touches of helplessness. He was deficient as an organizer and a leader and at times his passion warped his talent.” A clipping apparently from an encyclopedia states: “As a judge [he] was a bitter political partisan, seeking at all times the larger financial rewards and opportunities of a place in Congress and converting the bench into a stump. He was utterly careless in attendance upon courts and won the enmity of the mass of the white people, who doubted his honesty.”

Perhaps Uncle Roy’s not-always-complimentary portrayal of Judge Tourgee was justified.

So who was this Albion W. Tourgee who wore so many hats in his life time of sixty-seven years, the past twenty or so which were spent among our recent “ancestors”?

He was born in Ohio, spent some time in Massachusetts, attended school in both states and had entered the University of Rochester. This is what brought him to New York State. He was teaching in Wilson when the Civil War began and was soon a soldier in the Union Army. He was wounded early and received a back wound from which he never fully recovered. Some said and indeed he implied once in a while that the loss of his left eye was also a result of war injury, but this has been generally denied and pretty much proven to have happened in a childhood scrape. From pictures one would not notice anything amiss – he must have learned to deal with it well.

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another which failed, he also wrote under a pseudonym, a story of a beautiful slave girl, Toinette, her gentleman lover and the “poor white” girl, a melodrama which did not sell!

By 1879, Tourgee decided it was best for him and his family (daughter, Aimee, was born in 1870) to depart the South. He was “persona non grata”, with even more enmity and hatred expressed than in the beginning. He went to New York and then to Denver, finally finding and buying the lovely home in Mayville, where he becomes “our” Judge Tourgee.

Most of Tourgee’s writing was done here – chiefly novels of the rankest Victorian type of romance literature. He did write articles for a number of magazines throughout the country. He augmented his somewhat meager income, and also to pay off debts incurred from several more unsuccessful business ventures, by giving lectures on various political themes, but always he managed to include a diatribe against the racial inequality shown to the blacks.

His published books are these.

As you will be hearing the story of “Button’s Inn” at a later meeting I won’t steal any of Nancy Hanks’ “thunder”. I will mention that there were three other novels that were set in this area. I have never had the opportunity to see or read them. After rereading **BUTTON’S INN**, I am impressed more than ever with motivation of an author. A novel, if it can be done without losing the thread of the story OR delaying the action one comes to expect in an adventure or a romantic story, is a good literary vehicle by which to get across social concepts, either historical or contemporary. This is surely what Tourgee did, even to examining the Mormon religious sect!

The conclusion of the encyclopedia article from which I have quoted a couple of times bears out what Uncle Roy had examined and presented: “All of his novels are conventionally romantic, show little originality and lack literary finish. His political articles, reflecting the author, are dogmatic and egotistical.”

So far much of what we have seen of our illustrious area resident has been – in the words of Olsen, “pessimistic”, to say the least. But I would like to share a couple of redeeming things about Tourgee from Uncle Roy’s book. **READ MARKED PASSAGES**

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I would not have thought of one who appeared so angry and bitter about so many things, and so involved in unwise choices for making a living and just being the stern, strong (NOT MACHO) type, to write poetry. Neither did he – but occasionally a good poem would appear, often within a story or article, and one occasion, he wrote for a friends' 50th wedding anniversary. This I must share with you – it shows a depth of thinking, as well as a novel choice of metaphor for the event, and it also helps us to know the “inner man” a bit better. READ

So when all is said and done, the more pleasant and heroic qualities, all of which have been spoken of or written about in the local papers, at times when for some reason or other Tourgee was being remembered, are well-deserved. He is to be honored for the stand he took on rights for Negroes – the right to vote, to own property and to receive education. So that we do not leave our local “hero” with a “bad taste in our mouths”, his obituary, (They were much more personal a century ago), states: “[His] novels were not popular in the south for the violent doings of the political societies, handled without gloves, and the Southerners thought of him as an enemy. But before he died Judge Tourgee set aside all bitterness and spoke kindly of the South.”

Mrs. Tourgee ended her 1896 diary with “The close of the most distressful year of my life! “ Tourgee’s health began to fail and with it his literary efforts were not successful. He sought some sort of appointment in the U.S. Consulate and was eventually, with his wife’s intervention, appointed consul to Bordeaux, France. His health continued to deteriorate and he passed away May 21, 1905. He was sixty-seven. His ashes were brought “home” to Thorheim and to Mayville Cemetery for burial. Many local people and several state and national figures were present for the Memorial Service.

SHOW articles about Tourgee and mention especially that it was Mr. Nixon who knew about the collection that had been left at the Museum in Westfield, and just happened to be there when Mr. Olsen was looking for information and memorabilia.

I hope I have helped you become better acquainted with one of our nationally-known residents and to understand that he was a man ahead of his time in his zeal and understanding of the racial problems. He even prophesied that if certain changes in attitude and deals with the blacks were not corrected that there would come a time when some sort of backlash would take place. We have lived to see that day of racial riots, and “hate” crimes have not yet ceased. Maybe we need another white zealot like Tourgee to stand up for what he believes. He would have a host of media invitations!

And I hope, too, that some of you might be interested in reading more about or more of Tourgee, and his first biographer, Roy Dibble. Thank you for your kind attention.