

May 9, 1955 ✓

Internal Memorandum

Interview with Mrs. Wesley Mitchell on May 18, 1954

Subject: Adolph C. Miller

(This interview was held almost a year ago, but was not dictated at that time because the subject matter seemed so confidential. Since then, the staff has grown more experienced and the process of recording these interviews more accurate. It is still confidential material, but there is no reason why it should not be committed to paper. Mrs. Mitchell, who is the sister-in-law of Mr. Adolph C. Miller, talked with the utmost simplicity and frankness. She treats of part of this material in her book, "Two Lives," which she wrote about herself and Mr. Mitchell. Her opinions are her own and may have suffered some distortion in the translating of them to paper).

Mrs. Mitchell received me in her New York apartment, which is on the west side and not far from the famous Little Red Schoolhouse in which she made so much history for the whole movement of progressive schools. She is, I think, 72 years old, but still handsome and with a great deal of the character and magnetism which must have been so brilliant in earlier years. Walter Stewart remembers her with all the charm of a gypsy and singing gypsy songs to a guitar, a piece of unconventionality for which she was harshly reprovved by her brother-in-law at the time.

Mrs. Mitchell said that Mr. Miller's father and mother were both born in Germany. The father came over to this country first. He was a gardener. She believes that he went to California immediately where he got land and raised flowers for the florists. He was a gardener by trade in Germany and continued that trade when he came to the United States.

His children were three, and I think in this order, Fred, Adelia and Adolph. The father died when Adolph was only three or four years old, but his passion for growing things was passed on to his youngest son.

The family had a ranch at Boulder Creek which is in the Santa Cruz Mountains south of San Francisco. It was at that time an Italian wine growing country, and that tradition continues, as the district is rugged and not adapted to industry. There is also at the present time, and has been for many years, a good deal of small summer cabin life in that country. Adolph's older brother Fred married an Italian of the wine growing group. In Berkeley, Adolph kept hogsheads of fermenting grape juice in

his cellar, and he himself siphoned off those hogsheads at the proper time. He had a great respect for wine and the old European sense of how to use it.

Adolph's mother came over from Germany at 18 and went to California by way of Panama before the Gold Rush. She is said to have crossed the Isthmus on a donkey. She died at 84.

(Adolph was 87 in 1952).

Mrs. Miller's name was Fredericka. She was "the mildest little Alsatian." She remarried a Mr. Vogeler while Adolph was an adolescent. She was lovely and indomitable. At the time of the San Francisco earthquake in 1906, Mr. and Mrs. Miller and Lucy (now Mrs. Wesley Mitchell) were together in the Miller's Berkeley house on a hillside. The earthquake came at 3 a.m., and people in Berkeley thought it rather small. Adolph hired a boat and went over to San Francisco to get his mother, but when she and the younger children came over to Berkeley, they stayed with Lucy "because the children would have scratched the redwood finish of his Berkeley house."

Mrs. Miller - Vogeler - lived at Boulder Creek all her life and without many of the conveniences which are now thought essential. At 84 she still had no water faucet in the house. Asked how she got along without it, she said, "I never drink water," and said it with a laugh.

Adolph went to high school in San Francisco and to the University of California in Berkeley. Mrs. Mitchell does not know which high school he went to. She says that Franklin K. Lane or Warren Gregory might have known, but both of them are dead. Mrs. Gregory who is still living at the age of 83 might know which high school it was. Adolph never got his Ph.D. He was a very lazy man. He wrote only one real article, and Lucy typed that. He was very widely read, and he did considerable speaking, but he did not write.

His academic career, teaching career, began, so Mrs. Mitchell thinks, at Harvard. Then he went to Cornell when Benjamin , who later became President of the University of California, was there, then to Chicago on the original

of the then-new university which Rockefeller paid for and Harper chose (which Harper?). Chicago was at that time paying \$10,000 a year to Laughlin as head of the Department of Economics. Thorstein Veblen was in Chicago at that time. Wesley Mitchell was in the first class. He worked under Adolph Miller and said that he was the best expositor he had ever known, but not a challenging teacher because he laid things out so neatly.

After Chicago, Dr. Miller (if he never got his Ph.D., why was he always called Dr.?) went to the University of California. Few colleges had departments of economics in those days, and most of the ambitious ones which wanted such departments looked to Chicago University to furnish them with professors. Mr. Miller was taken from Chicago to be head of the new Department of Economics at the University of California. Stuart Daggett, who was teaching tariff, is still living in Berkeley and might have reminiscences of Miller.

Adolph appointed Jessica Pixotto to be a member of the Economics Department. This was in direct contradiction to his own beliefs about women. He thought that women had a double function in the world - as housekeeper and as ornament. "A lady is the finest flower of civilization. She may do any work in her household and remain a lady, but none outside" - was his creed in regard to women.

"People don't grow old - they grow more so" - could certainly be applied to Adolph as he grew older. He became a caricature of his former self. He made all decisions for the household. His wife was a charming hostess.

Justice Harlan Stone was a great friend of Mr. Miller. Mrs. Stone is still alive and still friendly with Mrs. Miller (see memorandum on interview with Mrs. Stone).

Adolph was a great talker, an orator who always needed listeners unless he had someone like Stone to whom he could listen with reverence.

Adolph Mitchell and Mary Sprague, sister of Lucy Sprague Mitchell and wife of Adolph, met in Chicago. The University of Chicago opened in 1903 (?). Mary had gone to Farmington for her education (both girls were born in Chicago) partly because her parents came from Vermont.

Lucy herself was 17 when Adolph and Mary married. She put up her hair for the first time on the day of the wedding. It was Lucy who was the home girl and the pride of her parents, and Mary who was the spoiled child to whom they gave everything. (See "Two Lives" on this).

Adolph was tremendously interested in Oswald Spengler and his theory of the decline of the west. He swallowed it whole, and in the history which was found among his papers it is Mrs. Mitchell's opinion that he was probably trying to improve on Spengler.

He was going blind in the last eight or nine years, and Mary read aloud to him. He had a great sense of classic beauty and appreciation of the past. He thought that modern education and modern music should be banned by law. He faced the past always. Consistency was his measure, and never change.

When the Millers built their house thirty or more years ago, "each doorknob was a crisis," and the same thing was true of the moldings. Adolph had an emotional response to all sorts of things, but less often to people. Mrs. Mitchell has seen him kiss a redwood tree and delight at its beauty. He adored parks, but he wanted to keep people out of them. He knew something of Chinese art and a great deal about Greek art and a little about the Renaissance art. He thought that from the Renaissance on the human race has gone downhill. In music, he would listen to nothing later than Brahms.

(Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge was a double first cousin of Mrs. Miller's. She sent Adolph tickets to concerts at the Library of Congress which she endowed, but he never went. His response to the courtesy was, "Elizabeth, I go only to the best.")

He had no imagination about what another person might be thinking or feeling. Yet, he gave the men in his Department of Economics great freedom of choice in what they taught. In Mrs. Mitchell's view, he had a brilliant mind which he did not work half hard enough. He was a man who believed to the utmost in rigid infallibility.

Robert Herrick, the novelist, was a great friend, but after Robert Herrick put Mr. Miller into a novel, he never spoke to him again.

Mrs. Mitchell observed that Franklin Roosevelt had a great weakness of not being able to face people when he had something unpleasant to tell them. When he decided not to reappoint Adolph Miller to the Board of Governors, he did not tell him. The family learned about it from the papers. Thereupon, Mr. Roosevelt became to the Millers, who had been great friends of his, "a snake in the grass." Yet Eleanor Roosevelt goes every month to see Mary Sprague Miller, who is now rapidly disintegrating. (It has been told me by other people that Mr. Miller spent his life trying to be a Governor of the Federal Reserve System. The term was made part of the Act of 1935, but it was at that time that he was not reappointed to the Board, and if this was truly the wish of his life, he was defeated in it).

Mrs. Mitchell says that Adolph was "tighter than a frozen nickel." He had an eclectic mind. He gathered and digested material easily and well but only of a special kind. Robert Sproul, now President of the University of California and brother of Allan Sproul, said at one time that Miller's was the "best stored mind" he had ever seen. Everyone liked to listen to him. (This probably does not include the staff, which seems to have had other ideas.) He had a wonderful control of English (which is the more remarkable in that he was of German parents) but no patience with the inarticulate and no tolerance with those who agreed with him. He was not liked by servants, which is understandable in view of this great rigidity which seems to have been his characteristic. Mary, on the other hand, was adored by servants who would stay with her always.

They had a four-year old child, Polly, who died of leukemia and thus brought her parents a grief which they never recovered from. Mrs. Miller hated California ever since Polly died there.

Their attitude toward death was very curious. When Wesley Mitchell died,

there was no response whatsoever from Adolph, in spite of the fact that it was his brother-in-law and his wife's sister.

The story is, and this Mrs. Mitchell believes, that Adolph Miller got his wife's fortune into his own hands and then left his entire fortune to the University of California, "his" meaning his and hers. Robert Sproul is said to be the only man who ever got the better of him in a business deal. One of the lawyers used the phrase, "He disinherited his wife," and this greatly distressed Mrs. Miller. Apparently the only mitigating circumstance was the fact that though he used to keep saying, "We've got too much money in our checking account," (this was a joint checking account), he never did anything about putting the excess into bonds. When he died, they found \$500,000 in the checking account. This money alone has made it possible for Mrs. Miller, now a mental invalid, to keep up her present scale of living, including maintenance of the charming house on S Street. (I did not think in time to ask why Mrs. Miller did not receive the usual widow's third of the estate.)

(Mrs. Mitchell said at one time something about the house going to "the museum." Did she mean the University of California?)

The reason given for this strange disinheriting of the wife was that Adolph expected to outlive his wife. Also, he did not think she had any mind of her own or any power of decision. All their lives he had known best, and so he made all the plans, including the disposal of what was, in effect, her own fortune.

Mr. Miller was losing his sight for the last seven or eight years, and he frightened his wife badly by threatening to kill himself and saying at the same time, "I do not intend to die alone." Mrs. Miller told her sister that she had no desire to die, even if Adolph wanted to.

Apparently, in his last years Mr. Miller became very difficult, even to the wife who had stuck to him always. The act of disinheriting her, which she knew about, was the last straw. Mrs. Mitchell now regards it as one of her own tasks to restore to

her sister the old respect she had for her husband. This task is the more bitter because of the mutual between Lucy and Adolph which must have been life-long.

When Wesley Mitchell died, Adolph sent no word to Mrs. Mitchell. When Lucy went to Washington, he offered her no sympathy. Mary told her sister that she must stay on in the house, but she said, "I will not be in this house much."

"Why?" asked Mary, bristling. (Mary always bridled.) "What's the matter with this house?"

"Nothing is the matter with the house," said Lucy, "but Adolph and I see many things very differently," a phrase which evoked floods of tears from Mary.

Adolph was apparently a terrific social climber. When he got to Washington and was associating with Presidents, (he was appointed by Woodrow Wilson on the recommendation of Franklin K. Lane, he was a friend of Herbert Hoover and also of Franklin Roosevelt), he tried to turn his back on the academic world from which he had come. Anyone who called him "professor" was promptly fined a box of cigars (or was it one cigar?).

This may not have been an example of refusing to recognize your own way up, though that is the way Lucy interprets it. It could have been an attempt to remove himself from the sacrosanct position of a professor and make himself on the Board one of the boys. To a German, "professor" is traditionally a title of great honor. It is strange that he should have tried to shed it. Lucy's statement that Adolph was lazy raises questions. What about all those pamphlets? Were they all written by researchers and signed by him? He and Mitchell, both economists, did not get on. Neither gave the other his view.

Mary has left her money to a hospital founded in memory of her daughter Polly, but not to the University of California. Lucy is named executrix of her will. As evidence of the kind of wit of which Mary Sprague Miller was capable, Lucy quoted this story. At a dinner party a guest, fumbling for something to say, asked, "Is your husband an Elk?"

"No, no," replied Mary, "I'm sure he isn't. He looks much more like a moose."

Lucy says, "As a matter of fact, he looked more like Savonarola," but the clear-eyed Mary didn't mind saying that her husband looked much more like a moose. She was being clear-eyed and not comparing one fraternal organization with another.

All this makes the character and operation of Adolph Miller the more interesting for any student who tries to unravel that strange Germanic character. I may have recorded elsewhere that he was asked to head the committee which decided on the architectural details of the present building of the Federal Reserve Board, a building which was completed after he left the Board. His taste in getting Paul De Cret as the architect and in determining with him not only the proportions and plan of the building, but also every smallest detail, is probably a better monument to him than are the memories of his contemporaries. However, anyone studying him should talk with Wayne C. Taylor, William Hard, William Phillips and his wife. These people, in addition to the Harlan Stones, are counted as friends of the Millers.

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