

Personal MemorandumOwen D. Young

It has been said before in these memoranda that all kinds of details shed light on the abilities of Owen Young and his contribution to the work of the System. The facts of his ancestors and early life are detailed in the book which Ida Tarbell wrote, and which was published by Macmillan in 1932. Apparently, although the story is only hinted there, Mr. Young was born on a farm which had been in his family for generations, and after he began to make money, he went on buying one farm after another in the rolling country around Van Hornesville. Miss Tarbell speaks of him as a practical dairy farmer and indicates that he bought more farms in order to have land enough to raise cattle economically and efficiently. He began building up his herds, and there is also indication that he gave away young calves in order to help surrounding farmers build up their herds. In any event, it is evident that he owned a vast amount of land in the countryside. He raised Holstein Fresian cows, and among the documents hung on his walls is an appreciation of 25 years of active service given him by the Holstein Fresian Association.

At some time between 1932 and 1955 Mr. Young began giving one farm after another to his children, Charles, Philip, Jo and Dick, who now have their own farms. Dick raises apples, but I am uncertain as to what the others do with their farms.

Philip, who was Dean of the Business School of Columbia University and is now the chairman of the Civil Service Commission in Washington, has what is known as the home farm, that is, the property (the house) in which Mr. Young himself was born and the surrounding acres which he tilled as a growing farm boy.

The home farmhouse is painted white, obviously old, obviously rebuilt or added to from time to time as necessity dictated. The house was locked, and Philip had the key, so that Mr. Young could do no more than point out the room in

which he had been born, the old kitchen, etc. as we peered through windows. The barn is big, competent and old. Haying was going on at the time, and loads of alfalfa, cut and baled, were being drawn by a small tractor down the opposite hill and up the hill on which we sat, to be stored in the barn. The scene obviously gave Mr. Young the liveliest pleasure.

Whereas Van Hornesville lies in the valley, the home farm is high on a shoulder above the town and gets only a partial view of that village. It looks across the shoulder of another hill due north to the Adirondacks. Over the other hill rises a ^{paved} road, and it was there that Mr. Young, who must have been a very lonely farm boy, watched the world go by before he was able to leave and go to school.

It was this loneliness which made him ask, when radio came along, whether it was possible to take music and lectures into remote farm houses, and it was this particular farmhouse which he wished to fill with music and good talk for the sake of his mother. (The probability is, although these dates would need to be checked, that by the time radio was actively practical, his mother had moved to the village.) It was down these hills that he went to the village school, and up them he came trudging at the end of a long school day.

One of the curious characteristics of this man is that he sees himself as an actor in the drama which has been his life, and particularly he sees the little boy, longing to leave a lonely farmhouse for the world which went by on the shoulder of the next hill. "When I was young I couldn't wait to get away, and then came a time when I couldn't wait to get back."

Other anecdotes contributed by Mr. Young at this time and dating from his youth including the story of Mrs. Philkins who was born on the day of Waterloo, and whom he remembered when he was a small boy telling him all about what kind of clothes people wore and how they acted on the day of his great-grandmother's wedding. This ability to stretch his own remembrance so that he reached back to 1815 was obviously a delight to Mr. Young.

Another anecdote was the story of Roxanna Druse, a buxom young farm woman married to a husband named Bill, whom she disposed of in a fashion that fascinated and horrified the surrounding country. The story, as told by Mr. Young, makes it sound like a murder mystery which would delight modern readers. Apparently, Roxanna Druse lost her taste for her husband, killed him and cut him up and burned the pieces in the kitchen stove one by one. The neighbors noted first that Bill did not seem to be around. Next they noted horrid smells coming from Roxanna Druse's kitchen, but it took a long time for the belief to spread that she had actually killed and tried to dispose of the body. She was finally arrested and a trial held in ^{Leckrone} ~~Utica~~ (at least the story is said to have appeared in the Utica paper). She was sentenced to be hanged, and, according to Mr. Young, was the first woman hanged in the state of New York (that is, hanged for murder). (EC)

Mr. Young told the story with great skill and delight, as one tells an old folk tale of a countryside in which one has lived. His daughter Jo said she had always intended to look it up in a local newspaper, but had never got around to it. Apparently it is one of the sagas of the Van Hornesville region.

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Post script

Ida Tarbell tells the story of bringing electricity into Van Hornesville, but Mr. Young added details not in that tale. A motivating reason for many things seems to have been his desire to free his mother from the drudgery with which he saw her surrounded in all his young life. One point of drudgery was the cleaning of kerosene lamps, and the care of them. He said that the night electricity was turned on for the first time in Van Hornesville the town burst into light just as his mother was coming downstairs with a kerosene lamp in her hand, and it was a marvel that she did not drop it. The switch for turning on lights in the village

street was put in his mother's house, and she regarded it as her particularly trust. She turned on lights when twilight fell, and when she was ready to go to bed, she turned them off, no matter what other reasons there might have been in the town for leaving them on. If people came out from a church meeting and found the town dark, they said, "Mother Young must have gone to bed," and that was all there was to it. In that one thing Owen Young laid his entire career as chairman of the General Electric at his mother's feet, and made for her a plaything as well as a convenience of all the electrical progress which he had helped to bring about.

It has been said in an earlier memorandum that he was very proud of his work in bringing together the Radio Corporation of America. I asked him how he liked the results of those efforts, and he shivered. He said that he thought that the advertising programs which are such a blight in present day radio were partly his fault. At the time when radio was being staked out, there was a meeting in England at which the Briton, Mr. Isaacs, said that they were going to have to handle radio as a government monopoly and pay for it through taxes. Mr. Young said this would not do for the United States. He was not for government control of radio, and he wanted free enterprise to have its way. If necessary they would sell time on the air and pay for radio that way. Mr. Young says it is this memory which makes him feel that he bears a certain responsibility for modern advertising programs over the air. His dream was music and lectures in his mother's kitchen, but the reality is ^{too often} soap opera and ^{singing commercials, or} spot announcements in rhyme.

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