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A Magic Lantern Lecture

In a diary of the late William Alexander Wilson of Waterloo, Iowa, is the following entry for Thursday, October 18, 1894. "A. Bonheur and brother here. To give entertainment later." On Saturday, November 3, 1894, reference is made to "A CHURCH ENTERTAINMENT" in connection with "COMPANY" at the Wilson home.

For many years the writer of this story has hoped to find more proof of the visit of "A. Bonheur and brother" to Cedar Falls and Mount Hope Church. But time has netted no profits for, as far as known, only two persons are now living who know of the Bonheur brothers' appearance at the rural church in Black Hawk County.

A conversation with the late Emma I. Allen of Waterloo in September, 1939, on the data recorded in Mr. Wilson's diary, served to refresh as well as confirm the memories of the writer, who was then twelve years of age. Mrs. Allen stated that "A" stood for Rosa Bonheur's brother "Auguste". It is entirely possible that the brother who was traveling with Auguste (who at the time was about 66 years old) was the younger brother Raymond, and that the lad with them, known "as

a nephew", was Raymond's son. Their identity must pass into oblivion as far as first names are concerned.

Coupled with family reminiscence and the diary of Mr. Wilson, the writer's memory runs as follows: Just home from school and dashing out of the house with the usual piece of "after school" bread, butter, and jam, I ran full tilt into my father and a strange man about to enter the house. At that moment my ever-present playmate, a dog "Boise", jumped up and grabbed my lunch out of my hand. It was a moment of chagrin for me as I stopped short with the impressive visitor amused at the scene, and my father looking very stern. I quickly skipped out of sight as the two entered the house, and I made a mental note of the so-called "livery rig" tied at the hitching post.

Mr. Wilson, who recorded the items in his diary, was my father. He was a trustee of the church and superintendent of the Sunday School of Mount Hope Church. It was through my father's friends at the State Normal School in Cedar Falls that Monsieur A. Bonheur had learned of the possibility of obtaining consent to present the magic lantern pictures and lecture in the church.

When the distinguished gentleman and my father came out of the house a little later, my

father said: "Perle, this is Monsieur Bonheur. He says he is a brother of the woman artist, Rosa Bonheur, and he is going to give us a program at the church soon." The man took my hand and laughed about the "dog getting my lunch". He then said, "Tell all the children at school about the magic lantern show, or pictures you are going to see. Get them all out, for they have never seen anything like it before. When I come back, we will have more fun with your dog."

How did it happen that Auguste Bonheur, his brother, and Rosa's nephew were giving illustrated lectures in Iowa in the fall of 1894? The gentlemen explained that during the Chicago World's Fair in 1893 they had come to supervise and guard the exhibit of their famous sister, Rosa, at the Fair. This afforded them a good opportunity to see America. After the Fair was over, the Bonheur brothers, who had also shown their scenic lantern views at the Fair, decided to travel farther west and finance their trip by their exhibitions.

Auguste Bonheur was himself an artist of note, but at the time of the Chicago World's Fair there was probably no artist in the world who held the admiration of the people of the United States more than his sister, Rosa Bonheur. Throughout the length and breadth of the land her handiwork

was familiar. Pictured on calendars, in colored prints, and in lithograph were to be seen "The Old Monarch", "Oxen Ploughing", "Coming from the Fair", "A Noble Charger", "On the Alert", "Changing Pastures", "Morning in the Highlands", "Lions at Rest", "Sheep", "Straits of Ballachulish", and, of course, the famous "Horse Fair", purchased by Cornelius Vanderbilt for the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

Publicity for events of public interest in 1894 was provided by advertisement in local weekly newspapers, hand bills placed in stores or public places, on doorsteps, or taken home by school children, or by word carried to their social affairs by the young people. Anyway, in those days before the telephone, radio, and daily paper, people did know what was going on and where.

On November 2nd, my sister Asenath and I were overwhelmed with excitement by the arrival of a "great golden wagon, drawn by white horses" at our Mount Hope Farm home. It is not possible now to describe the thrills we experienced at the sight of the spectacular wagon. It was not a circus wagon. I would like to call it a gilded trailer of the gay nineties. In this wagon the Bonheur brothers carried the mysterious magic lantern equipment. Built for them in France, it

was nearly square in shape. This elaborate wagon house was furnished with a charcoal stove, two berths "built in" on one side, a table, and a wardrobe for clothes. Directly in the center over the table hung a picture of various members of the Bonheur family grouped around Rosa. Other pictures were hung or fitted into the space provided for them. The outside was decorated with lions' heads, painted, we were told, by "our sister Rosa". In the front and outside of the wagon proper was a place for the driver. A small door opened into the main compartment. The young nephew, who drove the horses and cared for them, slept on the long seat in front.

I can not forget the fun we had with the lad and his enjoyment of our pets and beautiful surroundings. The lovely white horses were turned into a pasture to gallop and roll in freedom. Over the fence, perchance, these horses from France might have rubbed noses with the Morgan colts and Cleveland Bay trotters that my father raised.

Saturday, November 3, 1894, was the date of the Bonheur program. On the afternoon of that day the huge golden wagon was moved from the Wilson lawn to the yard of Mount Hope Church, and preparations were made for the evening performance.

When we arrived at the church that evening,

we found Monsieur A. Bonheur, dressed in his best Paris-made clothes: A frock coat, a high silk hat, and a cane which was later used as a pointer. The other two men were dressed in the French guard uniforms they had worn at the World's Fair. The church was crowded with people and it fell to my father's lot to introduce the speaker, A. Bonheur. The machine was operated by the other man. The lad sold the admission tickets from the wagon, and two local youths, Harry Allen and Frank G. Wilson, "took tickets" at the door.

The equipment of the Bonheurs apparently included a kinoscope which simulated moving objects. This kind of magic lantern was, of course, something to be marveled at, especially since several inventors lived in the community. One of them was then trying, in his own way, to invent perpetual motion. The kinoscope was a primitive type of motion picture projector. Lumière had been experimenting with this type of magic lantern in France, and Edison had developed a successful machine for taking and projecting pictures of races and other activities. My husband, Louis B. Schmidt, professor of history at Iowa State College, remembers "a much publicized event" at the Belle Plaine opera house in 1896 when a "boxing exhibit was presented on a screen

with a kinoscope." The Bonheur display in the Mount Hope Church was two years earlier.

Most of the pictures exhibited by the Frenchmen were of famous scenic places in Europe. A few showed Rosa Bonheur at her home and with the horses and other animals she loved to paint. I recall well "Highland Cattle" and "Monarch of all he Surveys". The scenes of Switzerland I still can see in memory distinctly.

It was the climax of the program that startled the whole audience and sent my sister and two little boy friends with us under the church pews for refuge.

The final picture was a moving train crossing a high trestle over a gorge. The bridge, suspended from mountain-side to mountain-side presented, in color effect, an inspiring scene. The spellbound audience applauded loudly and insisted on seeing the picture again and again. The brilliant colors, the dashing stream, and the sound of the little train seemed perfectly real. Suddenly the operator brought the show to a crashing climax. The bridge across the rocky gorge collapsed and down, down went the racing train with a deafening crash. Broken and in flames at the bottom of the stream, it came to its fantastic doom. The horror struck both old and young but, to my knowledge, we four youngsters were all that managed to duck

under the pews to safety. Well I recall being dragged out of our hiding place by our laughing parents.

On Sunday the Bonheur brothers went to church with the Wilson family in the afternoon. As usual guests came from the church service to our house for Sunday supper. This time the main attraction was to meet the Bonheurs and see their interesting wagon and the strong white horses. Autograph albums, one of which still exists, were brought out. I had a sketch of the paw of my kitten, "Cooky", drawn in my arithmetic book by A. Bonheur.

On Monday morning, November 5, 1894, the Bonheur brothers hitched up their horses to their wagon and drove away. I do not know their destination, but the inspiration of that childhood experience has endured. In fact every one around became potential artists, lecturers, or owners of a magic lantern. One young woman went away to study art in Chicago.

Many years later, when my sister and I stood for the first time before Rosa Bonheur's "Horse Fair" in the Metropolitan Art Museum of New York City, we could not refrain from reminiscing. If any other visitors had paused to listen, they might have been surprised at our conversation.

"Do you remember, when Rosa's brother held

your hand to guide it when drawing the head of a lion?" I suggested.

"Remember how you sat on the lap of Auguste Bonheur, when he drew your kitten's paw?" she replied.

Yes, inspiration did come to Iowa's youth "way back in the gay nineties". It really was a magic lantern lighting the way.

G. PERLE SCHMIDT