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Martha McMillan Journal

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The [McMillan Journal Collection](#) is an archive of the journals of Martha McMillan of Cedarville, Ohio, who maintained a daily journal from 1867 until her death in 1913.

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Farmer's Night

Friday, February 22, 2013

Martha McMillan Journal

Intro: Carol Lee

Tucked away inside Cedarville's library archives is a treasure... a set of journals that **begin in 1867**, predating the University.

Martha McMillan had no special qualification to write this journal, she was a **farm wife** who sent her children to school in this community.

- Her family worshipped in the Reformed Presbyterian Church that is today Alford Auditorium, right here on our campus.
- Two of her children were among the first to enroll at **Cedarville College**, and her son, Homer, was a member of the first graduating class.

Martha kept the daily journal for **more than 46 years**, and Cedarville is privileged to own all 46 volumes, a gift from her grandchildren.

- You could say she was an **ethnographer**, recording observations about 19th century farm life in rural Ohio.
- Or perhaps she was a **local historian**, writing about her community and the founding of Cedarville College.
- But no question, she was a **witness to the changes in American life** at the turn of the century.

I had fun looking through her journals — there must be tens of thousands of **handwritten pages**, back to back with no margins. **I wish I could show you a sample of her handwriting.** Although her style was probably common in its day, if you didn't know better, you'd think you were looking at volumes and volumes of ... illegible shorthand. You can't help but mourn for what's right there on the page, but nearly impossible to access.

However, there are passages where her script is a little larger, perhaps her pen tip was a little finer, where you can more clearly make out the narrative. **And when you find those gems**, you get a glimpse of Martha's daily life on the farm.

Through selected pages of her journal, **Rebecca Baker, Associate Professor of Theatre**, will introduce you to a truly remarkable woman, **Martha McMillan**.

Presentation: Rebecca Baker

“Tonight James and I stand upon the threshold of a new existence in which the future, like a great unfathomed ocean, is spread out before us. O! May we glide along its bosom in peace and love until, at last, we reach its sunset shores...”

With these words, written on her wedding day in 1867, Martha Murdock McMillan began a handwritten journal of her life — her family, her faith, and her farm. She kept this journal every day for more than 46 years until just one week before her death.

Martha and her husband, James, lived about four miles East of Cedarville on Route 42. Together they raised eight children to adulthood — Fannie, Fred, Harlan, Homer, Clara, Clayton, Jason, and Paul. Two other children died in infancy. James was a farmer well-known for raising sheep, hogs, and high-bred trotting horses as well as the usual field crops.

“Some days I can’t help feeling that housekeeping is going to be more real than I ever dreamed,” she wrote in her first year of marriage. So much for “gliding along that great unfathomed ocean.” **“For this life I can’t help sighing.”** Yet she continues on, revealing a glimpse of steadfast character that will see her through so much joy and heartache in years to come: **“I must try and banish such feelings forever from my heart and look for the bright side.”**

In her 1868 journal, she records in April that James is discouraged by the weather and wonders if he shouldn’t sell out and start a grocery business. In May... she says it’s “very wet” and the corn was planted late. But things look up in June. On the 23rd, they sold 585 sheep to an Illinois man and took 22 days in July to drive them there on foot. In August, they entered sheep in the Jamestown fair. Forty-four men came in November to help with a barn raising.

“A most beautiful day,” she records in September 1894, and mentions how two of her sons and extended family are helping with farm chores. **“Clayton is at home from school to help with the wheat. Jason went back to school at noon, he has been home most of the week... Uncle Joe helping is Aunt Katy and me with the apple butter making. We did not finish until 9:00 this evening.”**

She records details worthy of an almanac like planting the corn on the 6th of May... how the spring of 1870 was the “driest on record,” or how much it rained in June and July... making a year’s supply of soap in November, and selling 78 hogs at four cents a pound. She records other climatological milestones including each year’s first freeze and first snow.

Between the apple butter making, the child rearing, sheering 1,000 sheep, and feeding the hired help (who, by the way, earned \$80 plus room and board for six months of labor), there was plenty of work to be done. And between the rain and the drought, between the measles and the typhoid, it’s reasonable to believe that this whole farming business was beyond anyone’s grasp.

“I have been feeling very much discouraged for the last few days, with neither the help nor ability to do one half the work there is to do — farm men to be waited on at morning, noon, and night; four children to be attended to with only a little girl to depend upon ...

It’s no surprise where Martha drew her strength to get through the difficult times. **“The more I read the Psalms,”** she wrote in 1871, **“the more I love and appreciate them and feel confident that they will endure forever.”**

She had what folks today call “old time religion.” Whenever the doors of Cedarville’s Reformed Presbyterian Church were open, her family was there. And each Sunday, Martha recorded the basic plot line of the weekly sermon.

Her faith in God was resolute. She took seriously her responsibility to provide a godly home. On the occasion of her son's birth in 1882, she wrote, **"At half past three this morning, our darling son, Jason, came into our home — a poor little piece of humanity yet possessing a life that will exist when time and worlds will have passed away. Upon this first morning of thy life, what blessing do I desire for thee? That my precious son may be strong in spirit, filled with wisdom, and that the power of God may be upon him."**

The children's education was paramount. Each year, at the start of her new journal, she recounts the ages of all her children and where they are going to school — the little ones at the McMillan School in Cedarville, the older children at Selma High School, and nearly all the children eventually attending college.

Like all parents who sacrifice for their children, Martha had high hopes for her son, Homer, in September 1892: **"I helped Homer pack his trunk tonight. He leaves for Monmouth College in the morning. For years I have longed and planned and hoped that he might have the advantage of a college education. Now I do hope that he will never stop short of getting the very best that can be obtained. It is near midnight. There were so many things to be thought of, but I must rest ..."**

Two years later, Homer continued his education during some rather lean years. **"Homer went down to tell the folks in town goodbye. Mr. McMillan took him to Springfield to the evening train to go back to [school]. On account of the scarcity of money and hard times in the country ... it was quite a struggle and at a great sacrifice that he went back ... While I feel sad for him to go, I know I would have felt more than I could have expressed if he had not gone. For something tells me it is worth all the sacrifices, all the struggle."**

During these lean years, Cedarville College was a languishing venture that had little more than a charter, \$1,000 in cash, and a board of trustees to its name. The "hard times in the country" that Martha referred to — including a draught and two recessions — crippled the fundraising for the new college. The board very nearly voted to "abandon the enterprise," but in 1891, a \$25,000 bequest renewed interest in the college.

On September 19, 1894, Martha **"... began the day by taking Homer and Clara to the opening of Cedarville College...Who can foretell the end? We came home and had supper and went back to the opening exercises of the College at the Opera House. Music fine and audience large. The occasion grand. Everyone pleased."**

Two of Martha's children, Homer and Clara, were among the first to enroll. No more packing trunks, no more sending children on the train... Martha's sons and daughters could pursue their education right here, in their hometown. **September 18, 1895: "This morning Paul and I took Clara down to the college opening. The exercises were held in our church, but tomorrow the students will be received in the new college building. There was quite a delegation of students."**

1897 was an exciting year for the family. Corn sold at 20 cents a bushel, potatoes at 25 cents. James and Martha celebrated their 30th wedding anniversary, and on June 10, **"Mr. McMillan, Clayton, Jason, Paul, Uncle Joe, and I attended the first commencement of Cedarville**

College, at ten o'clock in the Opera House. The five graduates were Raymond Gorbald of Ross, Ohio; John Bickett of Xenia; John Orr, Calvin Morton, and our son, Homer McMillan, of Cedarville. ... Dr. David McKinney, President of the College, conferred the diplomas. He said, 'Young men of the graduating class, and my boys ... you bid your alma mater farewell today... but we will follow you with our prayers. We hope, however high the position you may attain, you will never forget Cedarville College or duty.'

You might imagine that after seeing her children through college Martha might decide to slow down, take things easy for a while. But that was not her style, and there was far too much going on at the turn of the century for her to put down her pen. **January 1, 1900: "This is the first time I have written 1900 in this book. Since yesterday, we have passed into a new year and into a new century... Many whose lives have been interwoven into ours have passed from this earth. We can ask ourselves, 'What shall this twentieth century, or even this year, bring to us?' Let us not wait for the answer, but let us seek refuge 'under the shadow of Him who is the Almighty.'"**

Indeed, the 20th century brought changes to the McMillan household. Renovations around the farmhouse included a new coal furnace, a bathroom, a telephone, and an automobile. Sons- and daughters-in-law joined the family, followed by doted-on grandchildren. **October 1908: "Father and I are here alone... How strange to think that these boys and girls have left the Old Home Nest to go out to make homes for themselves ... May they never lose sight of their great accountability."**

As the day-to-day care of the farm transitioned to their son, Clayton, James and Martha transitioned into a new life of retirement. **January 15, 1910: "This is the anniversary of our marriage, 1867-1910. How many years did I say! Well, everything has changed so much since then, so changed you can hardly think it is the same old world. Those who were the young folks then are the old gray heads of today. The years have passed so swiftly that we were not aware how quickly they were going."**

On August 5, 1913, Martha began her final journal entry in the usual way writing, **"This has been an ideal day,"** and she described what various family members were doing as well as her rheumatism treatments. One week later, on August 12, 1913, Martha finally **"reached the sunset shores,"** fulfilling the promise of her inaugural journal entry. There, she was reunited with her husband, James, her dear son, Paul, and her infant daughter, Florence.

At this point in the journal, the handwriting abruptly changes, and an unidentified author, perhaps one of her children, brings Martha's story to a close.

"The above is the last entry made by the hand of she who for the last 46 years has wielded the pen in chronicling, day by day, the leading events in the home as well as happenings in the community. But as it required another to compile the story of Moses in the Pentateuch, so a different pen must finish the record of that noble life which so quietly slipped thru the veil into the Father's mansion.

The homecoming at this season was an event to which she always looked forward with much pleasure... May we not indulge in the hope that she is looking forward to another,

more blessed homecoming — when all, including those already there, will constitute an unbroken circle.

Although she closed her journal 100 years ago, we relate to so many aspects of Martha's life. Through her words, we see *our* homes, *our* families, *our* community. Through her heart, we understand the legacy we are writing today for generations to come.