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Letter from Delia Gibbs Describing Lindenwood and the Sibleys During the 1850s, circa 1920

Delia A. Gibbs

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Dear Cousin Mame:

Your letter of the sixth received and I will try to do my best to answer it. I started to Lindenwood about 1856 or '7. The square box of a building, with a pepperbox of a cupola on top, was then the new building, though Mrs. and Mrs. Sibley [sic – clearly “Mr. and Mrs. Sibley” is intended] had a school in a long, rambling, frame building to the north of the new one, for some years before. I think your Aunt Aurelia McDearmon went to school there. Mr. and Mrs. Sibley lived in the east part of this frame building, and I remember eating many good dinners with my father and mother at their hospitable board.

The school exercises proper were mostly carried on in this frame building, which had been built as necessity required, until there were many narrow stairways and passages, and odd-shaped rooms, and porches made into rooms, the floors of which always seemed to me to be at an angle of about sixty [sic] degrees. There were pianos in these porch rooms and the girls practiced there. Altogether, it was a weird sort of a structure, which did not take the girls long to declare was haunted. I remember I would not go into certain parts of it alone. From the heavy footfalls and unearthly screams, which at times seemed to come from all parts at once, and then to sink away into its very foundations, I really believe it was haunted, but by rodents only. The housekeeping was in the new brick building, – the kitchen, dining-room, office, library, and dormitories, being in it.

The president, when I started to Lindenwood, was the Reverend Addison Van Court Schenck, a man of pleasing address, and I think generally liked. I remember him, his wife, son Willie, and his father-in-law, Mr. Carey, a cousin of the famous Carey sisters. His son, Willie, died of typhoid fever at the College, and is buried in the little graveyard back of the College. If you ever go there, look for a tombstone marked “Willie”, – that is his. That time comes back to me so plain, even the looks and gossip of the girls, the dear, sweet teachers, and how much they knew.

My primary teacher was a Miss Carpenter, a lovely character and a most excellent teacher. After I entered the intermediate department, my teacher in mathematics was a Miss Sherman, from Vermont, a very bright woman, who knew her subject thoroughly and knew how to make others know. She gave me a most excellent foundation in mathematics, and I thank her to this day for it. She was not so popular as some of the other teachers, but was strictly business from the time you entered her recitation room until you left it.

I do not know how long Mr. Schenck was president, but his successor was Mr. Thomas Pendleton Barbour, a born teacher, a Christian gentleman, to whom I owe any success as a teacher that I may have achieved. He taught me how to teach. All I know about teaching I learned from him. He forgot everything else in the classroom except the subject of the hour.

After chapel exercises in the morning, which consisted of reading of the Scriptures, singing a hymn, a little talk and prayer, by Mr. Barbour, (and these talks were so good), each teacher had her own Bible class. The Bible was just as much a textbook as algebra or geography or any other in the curriculum. And it was not put off until the latter part of the day, when our minds and bodies were tired, and we could not take hold of the truths as we ought. It was the first recitation after chapel exercises. I was fortunate enough to be in Mr. Barbour's Bible class the last year I was there, and I shall never forget our study of Joshua, Judges, and Samuel. He taught me to love to study the Bible, and it has been such a comfort and safeguard to me all my life long, and I am so very thankful that my parents were able to educate me in a Christian school.

I was a day scholar, you know. We lived in St. Charles at that time. Mr. Barbour died two or three years ago in Brownsville, Texas, and as far as I know, his widow still lives there. There was an article in the Herald & Presbyter some weeks after his death, that spoke very highly of him. You might write to Mrs. Barbour.

The school closed on account of the Civil War, early in 1864. I was in my junior year and did not go to school after that.

Mr. and Mrs. Strother were the next parties who took charge of Lindenwood. I took music lessons from Mrs. Strother one winter, and my father sent a cousin of mine to school there during their regime. Further than that, I know nothing about their administration.

I am not a graduate of Lindenwood; I would be proud to be one, and would have been, had the war not closed the school when it did. I sometimes think I would like to return and take the course and get my diploma.

I don't believe all the grand new buildings that have been erected since I trod the campus, can take the place of those magnificent old lindens, at whose base we sat and studied and gossiped, and whose branches waved so gloriously above our heads. They were grand trees, but, I presume, like "Little Joe", have been compelled to "move on". I am the last of my class, and there were some whose names I cannot now recall. Lizzie Bolton married soon after leaving school, and died young. Alice Boal married Frank Adkins, and died about a-year-and-a-half-ago. Josephine Provines has been dead a number of years. Lizzie Rood and Mary Ferguson you know about. I have no old catalogues or newspaper clippings. I move about so that I destroy everything not needed at the time. I think I have some old essays, stored with some things in St. Louis. If I ever get back there and can get at them, would be glad to let you have them. Aunt Tillie knows nothing about Lindenwood, except that for a short time she boarded in Cousin Sallie Evans' family, who lived in the east end of the old Sibley house, and used to see the girls swing and play in the yard.

I recall many happy days spent at Lindenwood. I worked hard and at times thought I was terribly abused, and could have managed the school much better than the teachers. But now, as I look back, what a privilege to have come in contact with such grand, Christian men and women, and with what a blessing did they bless me. My whole life has felt the influence of their strong personalities.

Mr. and Mrs. Sibley lived, after they left Lindenwood, in a house they built some distance back of the College grounds. I remember it very well, a brick house, with all the modern improvements of that time. It was considered quite fine. I have eaten many good meals in it.

Mr. Sibley was an invalid for many years before his death and seldom left his own house. He was a little bit of a man, keen black eyes, intellectual-looking, a great reader, and sometimes wrote on current topics for the papers. During the winters, many dinings were given, and those at the Sibleys' were always enjoyable. Mr. Sibley was a great entertainer when he felt at all equal to it.

Mr. Watson built a new house just east of Mr. and Mrs. Sibleys' and about the same time. They moved from their farm on the prairie. Mr. Watson had a beautiful place. An Englishman by the name of Gumm laid out his grounds. It was quite a show place, the "Shaw's Garden" of St. Charles.

Mr. Sibley died at this home, and after his death, Mrs. Sibley sold the place to Captain John Shaw, who lived in it a short time, when the house burned down. A smaller, frame house was erected on the site. After selling, Mrs. Sibley moved to st. [sic] Louis, and built on a short street running south

from Lafayette Park, I think it was McNair Avenue. At the end of the street, her brother-in-law, Hamilton Gamble, lived and at at [sic] the corner of this street was Mr. Gibson's house. Mr. Gibson married her niece, Miss Louise Gamble. On the same street, another niece lived, so she built among her kinfolks. I visited her in this home in 1866, I remember, for it was the year that the General Assembly met in Doctor Brookes' church, which was at that time on the corner of Fifth and Walnut Streets. I was there the afternoon that the old Variety Theatre burned. It was so close that it broke up the session. It was all we could do to get out and get home. How long Mrs. Sibley lived there, I do not know. She was not a good manager of money, very close in small things, but liberal in great ones. I think she was compelled to sell her house in St. Louis. She then built the cottage near Lindenwood, where you knew her. During the time she lived in St. Louis, she frequently visited us, and would spend some days or perhaps a week.

She and my father were great Bible students, studied the prophecies, and read everything they could get a hold of on the second coming of our Lord. Dr. Rice about that time wrote a great many articles upon this subject, all of which they read and compared with the Scriptures. During her visits, as soon as they had their breakfast they would get their books and papers and Bibles, and spread them upon the sitting-room table, and study and talk and read until called to dinner. Father attended to little business when she was there. Her visits were always welcome. Mother enjoyed them very much, though of course she was compelled to be the Martha.

When Mrs. Sibley lived out beyond Lindenwood, for three successive winters she conducted an adult Bible class at our house. As I was an only child, Mother always had me present, and I remember how everyone seemed to enjoy the afternoons. Miss Aurelia McDearmon was a regular attendant.

She was peculiar, but a wonderfully good woman, and so many incidents in her life stand out clearly before me. We were all very much surprised at the bad management of her property after Major Sibley's death. She seemed to attend to everything in his lifetime. For twenty years he had been an invalid, and she had done the banking business, and bought and sold. It was Mrs. Sibley who went east to beg the money to put up the square, brick building. I heard her say in my father's house that she had begged \$8,000.00 from her own and Major Sibley's friends east. And yet, after his death, she could not manage. I presume he was the power behind the throne.

Mr. Watson came in later, when Mrs. Sibley had no more to give. I can give you nothing clear about what he did for Lindenwood, but Dr. Niccolls can.

Mrs. Ella Holt lives in the first house on the south side of the street, as you enter Lewis Place from Taylor Avenue, at the head of Finney. She is an old Lindenwood girl and can perhaps give you something. She can at least give you Mrs. Mildred Whiteny's address, who can put you in touch with Mrs. Barbour or her family, and perhaps some others.

There is a Mrs. Goldsborough here, who graduated from Lindenwood in 1860. I have spoken to her and I think she will write you some of her recollections. She was Miss Hattie Baker.

I am going to try to see a Mrs. Marshall, who lives in Pasadena. She was Miss Lena Provines. Her sister, Miss Mary Provines, taught there at one time.

Mrs. Cairns, of Forest Park University, was a teacher at Lindenwood during Mr. Schenck's time. She was Miss Anna Sneed, and a beautiful woman, had [sic] the prettiest complexion I ever saw.

When I return to St. Louis in the early fall, I would like to see you, and go over Lindenwood grounds with you. Hope you may be able to get something out of this you can use. My best wishes for

Lindenwood's peace and prosperity. I am glad to know that you are walking together again. If you have any questions that I can answer, – ask.

Affectionately yours,

(Signed) Delia A. Gibbs

[This letter copied from a typed transcript which is headed by the following:]

RECOLLECTIONS OF LINDENWOOD DAYS

The following letter written to Mrs. Mary Irwin McDearmon, by a former Lindenwood girl, contains so much that is interesting regarding the school in 1856, Major and Mrs. Sibley, and some of the faculty, that it is quoted in full.

[Other notes: a) Several errors that are almost certainly typos, such as “i” for “l,” “attendnat” for “attendant,” and “spoekn” for “spoken” have been corrected without note. The rest are noted with a “sic” in square brackets. b) “like ‘little Joe’, have been compelled to ‘move on’” is a reference to Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House*, in which the character of Jo, a street urchin, is often told to “move on” and eventually dies.]