

CLAUDE MEEKER

1861--1929

By Osman G Kooper

Claude Meeker was my friend, as he was the friend of all of us. His unexpected death, December 6, 1929, came as a shock to the entire city, for here he had spent the major portion of his years, and here he had risen to a position of universal respect and esteem, ~~and~~ His name would certainly have been included in any list of Columbus' first citizens. My acquaintance with him began fifty years ago when we were beginning, each a newspaper career. I was working on the Dispatch, which was owned by Myers and Brickell; he on the Times, the Democratic organ which had succeeded the Ohio Statesman of Samuel Medary and others. John G. Thompson and George H. Tyler were the proprietors, and Carson Lake and Leslie McPherson were the principal editors. The third daily of that period was the Ohio State Journal, then published by Conly, Francisco & Co., with Alfred E. Lee, Samuel J. Flickinger, Daniel Bowersmith and W. W. Bond on the writing staff.

The newspaper business of that day was extremely hazardous. The population of Columbus was then something over 51,000, and the patronage of the local papers was none too generous. The Journal and the Times were always on the ragged edge of adversity, and the changes of ownership were frequent. Only the Dispatch, then about ten years old, could lay any claim to prosperity, and its greatness was in the distance. No one who began a newspaper career at that time could be said to be financially wise. Those who invested money were apt to lose it, while a beginner in ~~the~~ ^{news} writing or reporting could

not hope for more than \$12 or \$15 a week. The conditions of the business did not justify a larger wage.

So we may safely conclude that Claude Meeker became a reporter and writer, not because he wanted gain, but because he loved action, the mingling with men and telling of what they did and aspired to do. Even today, most men adopt journalism as a profession for much the same reason. They see the struggle of humanity and are not content unless they are in the midst of it, watching it and writing about it. Great money rewards come only to the few; the majority find their greatest compensation in the pleasure of the work.

Claude Meeker had no extended formal education. The son of George W. Meeker, who was Mayor of Columbus in 1869-70, he went from the Columbus public schools to his work as a journalist. He began in a small way, working as already stated, on the Times and then with Arnold H. Isler as associate editor of the Bohemian, a Saturday paper of eight pages, devoted to news and criticism of the stage, society, and politics. That paper was short-lived, and before the end of its second year, or in 1883, Mr Meeker went to Cincinnati to accept a position on the News-Journal, a new paper. To secure that position he must already have shown some aptitude for political writing, and must have continued to show it, for it was not long before he returned to Columbus as the political writer for the Cincinnati Enquirer. His ability as an observer and writer and his unusual facility in making friends had opened the way to a career as correspondent for a newspaper of financial stability. He had made his third step

upward.

Here as correspondent of a paper that every politician read, whatever his party, he bore himself so well as to make a multitude of friends. His friendships were on both sides of the party wall, and there was general approval when James E. Campbell, who was elected Governor of Ohio in 1889, called Mr Meeker to be his private secretary. He was now 28 years old. As private secretary he served so acceptably that Grover Cleveland, who was elected President in 1892, appointed him as United States Consul at Bradford, England. There he was led in his leisure hours into a study of ~~the~~ English government and literature, and the life of the people of Yorkshire. The careers of the Bronte sisters attracted him. He visited the place where they had lived and written, finding much to please himself and to report for the delight of others. He wrote much of the Brontes and became a member of the Bronte Society. A handsome brochure, "The Home of the Brontes," is now a prized item in many a local library. The text of it was read before the Kit-Kat Club of Columbus, of which he was a member, December 2, 1915, his last words on that occasion being an expression of his purpose to go back to England, taking his auditors with him to Haworth, the home of the Brontes. Of the Kit-Kat Club Mr. Meeker was president for the customary year, and was instrumental in bringing to Columbus as speakers at the annual meetings, Edwin Markham, the poet, and Charles J. Finger, author of several prize-winning books. For leaders, whether in journalism or literature, Mr. Meeker had a strong affinity, and many of them accepted ~~the~~^{the} hospitality of his home

in this city.

When Mr Meeker returned to Columbus from his consulship at Bradford, his office-holding career was ended. But politics had in no way harmed him. His public office simply provided for him a period of comparative ease in which he could broaden his vision and satisfy his sense of the beautiful in literature, art and nature. He had in his earlier years passed from the hectic career of a political correspondent to the scarcely less exacting post of companion to an executive and solace of disappointed office-seekers. Now, after a delightful period abroad in which he could take measure of himself, he showed his versatility by entering on a ~~business~~^{business} career. Few men, I venture to say, could have turned the corner as he did, and pressed on to success, without sacrificing something of the fineness of character that he had inherited.

Living in the atmosphere of stocks and bonds, he retained all of his geniality, all his capacity for friendship and all his love of the beautiful in thought^{and} expression. When Fortune favored him, he remembered the friends of his young manhood and was prompt to offer a helping hand in any distress. Testimony to his many kindnesses is daily offered in the spoken and written word.

Mr Meeker was an honored member of this Society of Franklin County ~~Pioneers~~^{and, often had in monuments, literary and historical,} as well as political. The diversity of his interests was unusual, and his leadership was always welcome, because it was given not in vanity, but in genuine appreciation and cordial comradeship. His personality was ~~unique~~ unique in that while he had strong convictions, he

rarely gave and never sought affronts. It was his habit to think well of others and, when they failed to do as he expected, he was considerate enough to feel that there was some good reason for the failure. He thus contributed to his own happiness and that of others. Ever courteous and kindly, he went his way in various circles, leaving in the minds of all of us a cherished memory.