

From the Frontier

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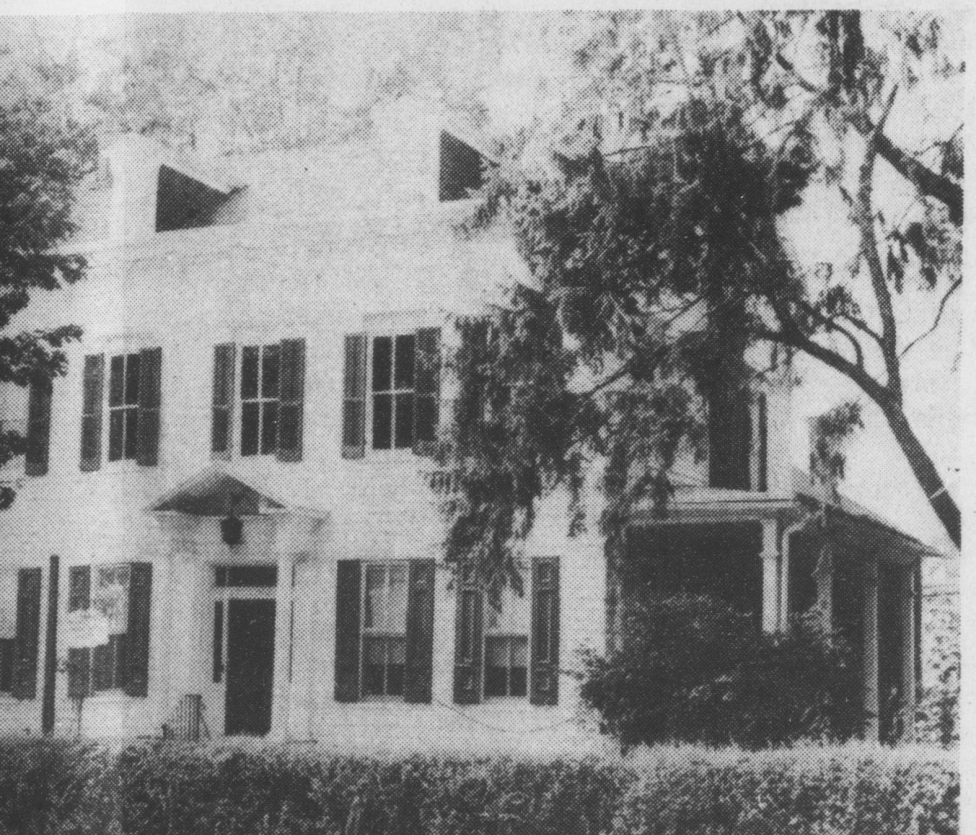


Chief Joseph [standing, center] and friends



e Fitzgerald

Dr. Jenkins Fitzgerald



The Marietta Community House

There is vast difference between one's personal history and the history of one's nation.

For example, if you would ever write your autobiography, the chances are that you would never mention any of the presidents who were in office during your life. Nor would you probably mention any but a few of the national crises you have lived through: a war if you were in the armed forces, or possibly Three Mile Island. For the most part, however, your autobiography would be about your relations with people and events that will never be mentioned in history books.

The great difference between personal and collective history was impressed on me recently when I read *An Army Doctor's Wife on the Frontier* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1962).

Except for a Preface and a few notes, the book is composed entirely of intimate letters written by Emily McCorkle Fitzgerald to her mother, Elizabeth McCorkle, in Columbia, Pa. Emily is from a distinguished family which traces its descent back through John Wright, founder of Columbia. After attending finishing school in Harrisburg, she is married to Dr. Jenkins A. Fitzgerald, an Army surgeon. He is stationed first in Sitka, Alaska (just acquired from the

Russians), and then in Fort Lapwei, Idaho, during the Nez Perce uprising there. The letters written by this genteel and sensitive young woman comprise a rare first-hand account of everyday life on the frontier in the 1870's.

In a charming and simple style Emily records anecdotally for her mother, and us, the significant events in her life. She traces the development of her daughter Bessie, 15 months old when the Fitzgeralds leave for Sitka and almost six when they return to Columbia four years later. Bessie at two begins to understand economics when she learns at the grocery in Sitka the connection between money and "tany" (candy). Seeing her mother pray with her hands over her face, Bessie comments, "Mommie hides." When her father chides her for a misdemeanor, Bessie responds through her tears, "Thank you, kind sir. I hear you very clearly."

There is a period of several weeks in the fall of 1874 when the letters stop arriving in Columbia. Then, there is a letter from Dr. Fitzgerald to Emily's mother announcing the birth of the Fitzgerald's second child, a son, Bertie, and also the news that Emily nearly died of a "peritoneal inflammation" after the birth. Recovering, Emily resumes her regular correspondence with her mother.

On the rude frontier there is an elegant and abundant commodity of interest to ladies of fashion like Emily and her mother—furs. And Dr. Fitzgerald caters to his wife's fascination with furs, as Emily tells her mother: "Doctor has gone and done it! Last night he came in and said, 'There is the loveliest silver fox skin downtown I ever saw in my life. Now if you say, I will get it.' I told him we could not afford it. I said, 'No.' But he was in love with it. This morning he came in and said, 'You possess a handsome silver fox.' It is hanging up in front of me now. It is lovely, so long and soft. I guess now I will have my velvet sack trimmed with it instead of sable...By the way, Doctor thinks a little muff of otter would be so pretty and serviceable for Bess."

The most dramatic events in Emily's life in Sitka, however, with the

exception of Berie's birth and her own near death, are concerned with her relationship with another Columbian in Sitka with the Fitzgeralds. Mary, a fifteen-year-old when she leaves Columbia to be Bessie's nursemaid, is black and from the opposite end of Columbia's social scale from Emily.

Emily's troubles with Mary begin aboard ship en route to Sitka. Mary walks in her sleep, not on deck where she might fall overboard, but into other passengers' staterooms. Emily is embarrassed, and disturbed that Mary, far from sharing Emily's concern about her abnormality, is fascinated by her unconscious personal psychology:

During a stopover in Portland on the way to Sitka, Mary is seen getting into Bessie's baby carriage with her, to race down a hill.

Also in Portland Emily is horrified to see Mary dangling Bessie over a second-floor balcony railing. Mary tries to reassure Emily that Bessie is in no danger by telling her that while they were at sea on their way to Sitka she swung Bessie over the ship's rail and never dropped her into the ocean.

Emily keeps hoping that Mary, daughter of Barbara, a trusted servant of Emily's mother, will settle down after they move into their own home in Sitka.

But during almost two years that the Fitzgeralds live in Sitka, Emily's

problems with Mary worsen. At fifteen, then sixteen and seventeen, Mary's interest in the lonely soldiers stationed at the Army post in Sitka, deepens. As she becomes more obsessed with the soldiers, Mary becomes more oblivious to her responsibility for Bessie. Finally, Mary openly defies the Fitzgeralds, and they lose all control over her.

Faraway from Mary's mother, Barbara, in Columbia, the Fitzgeralds don't know what to do about Mary. They can't just ship her home. Mary says she would never return to Columbia. They feel responsible for Mary, but absolutely frustrated by her. The military Dr. Fitzgerald wants to whip Mary, thinking that would straighten her out, but gentle Emily keeps hoping that more civilized techniques somehow will have an effect on her.

This little social drama being enacted in Sitka, but having its origins in Columbia, Pa., begins to wind up when Dr. Fitzgerald learns from a soldier whom he is treating for gonorrhea that he could have caught the disease only from Mary. Fearful that his children may be blinded by the disease through contact with Mary, the doctor treats her and admonishes her severely.

Soon after, Mary comes to Emily and tells her that through friends she has heard of a high-paying job in Portland that she would like to take. With a sigh of relief Emily tells Mary, "Go and prosper."

And prosper Mary does. When the Fitzgeralds stop in Portland in 1876 on their way to their new assignment at Fort Lapwei, Idaho, Mary comes to call on them. Emily describes the visit to her mother: "I do wish you could have seen her. Such clothes! Much finer than any of us. A new light spring suit...a silk parasol...light doekin gloves...and such an air with it all...She thinks she will go East to the Centennial...Where did all these fine clothes come from?"

When the Fitzgeralds move to Fort Lapwei, life is at first serene in the idyllic scenery of Idaho. Emily writes about the profusion of wild flowers. Little Bertie is making literary remarks. When his father asks him at the table whether he wants more potatoes, Bertie, well-versed in *Mother Goose*, responds, "Yessir,

yessir, three bags full!"

But their domestic tranquility is interrupted. Now, for the first time, events recorded in history books intrude into Emily's life. News of Custer's Last Stand arrives, stirring fears about the threatening Nez Perce Indians all around Fort Lapwei. White settlers nearby are forced by the Nez Perce to move out. The settlers arm and prepare to move back. The Indian Commissioners meet at Lapwei with Indian chiefs, headed by Chief Joseph, and try to talk the Indians into moving onto the reservation, but without success.

The next spring, 1877, another conference is held with the Indians. Emily describes the arrival of the Indians: "The Indians rode out from the canyon in single file. All were on ponies and in their gorgeous array and instead of turning into the post gates, they circled the post three times, cupping their mouths with their hands, making the sound of Wah-Wah-Wah. When they finally stopped at the gate, they stacked their arms before entering the post. At one time during the Council...one young brave got very excited in his gestures. As he raised his arm in emphasis, a long sharp knife fell on the ground. (They were to enter the Council unarmed!)"

Emily describes Chief Joseph as a friendly man, quite a hand-shaker, who looks you straight in the eye.

But despite this friendliness, the Indians' and the whites' goals are incompatible. The whites want the Indians to move onto the reservation, and the Indians want to keep their traditional hunting grounds. In June, 1877, word comes that the Indians have killed some settlers and are holding war dances. A pitched battle is fought between the soldiers and the Indians fifty miles from the Fort. More than half the command at the Fort is killed or missing. The wounded are left to die on the field.

Every now and then word comes that the Indians are advancing on the Fort, and the women, many of them widows now, and their children huddle together for hours in a cellar.

Dr. Fitzgerald goes off with the troops in search of Chief Joseph and his army, which is moving north toward Canada, and Emily begins to worry about how she will care for the children if the doctor is killed. Little Bertie says a grace before breakfast: "Please, God, give our dear Papa a good breakfast, for Jesus Christ's sake."

From the thick of the fighting Dr. Fitzgerald writes gallantly to Emily: "Poor Nez Perce! There are not more than 140 or 150 of them, while we have 400 soldiers and nearly as many Crow Indians. I am actually beginning to admire their bravery and endurance."

The doctor survives the war, and in late 1878 the Fitzgeralds return after four arduous years to Columbia. They enjoy a few happy weeks, but then the doctor comes down with a lung infection, the result of a lingering cold contracted during the Nez Perce campaign. By the following August, he is dead.

Emily lives on, "much of the time in memories," according to her daughter Bessie. Then she is buried by the doctor's side in Columbia.

Bessie grows up and marries Henry S. Hiestand of Marietta. Her son Fitzgerald lives in Marietta today.

When another of Bessie's sons, Benjamin Hiestand is killed as a pilot in World War I, Bessie and her husband use the insurance money to provide a memorial Community House, which is used by the citizens of Marietta today.

No one knows what happened to the Fitzgeralds' nursemaid, Mary. □