

WALTER WILLIAM LAW'S

BRIARCLIFF MANOR

by

Edith Foldes

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When Walter W. Law, age twenty-two, from Kidderminster, England, landed in New York on the 22nd of January, 1860, he had some letters of recommendation in his pocket and enough money to tide him over for two weeks. But he had something much more valuable: complete faith--faith in God, in himself, in the purpose of being where he was. (He was also full of vitality and interest.) He recalled many years later that "The steamer could not land that day, because it was Sunday morning, but I recollect that with another passenger or two we went over to Brooklyn, and heard Henry Ward Beecher preach, and it was the first and only time I heard him."¹ Master Law arrived on these shores, and he was not going to waste a day and an opportunity which needed some organization and imagination (they must have gotten to shore on a rowboat) and, which at the same time, was certainly pleasing to God, too.

Next day he set about to find a job in the big city. His letters of introduction were to people in the carpet trade, as his father was in the worsted yarn and carpeting business. But there were nine children besides him and his father's business was not doing well. It was better to set out on his own in the New World and obviously this suited his temperament too. Did he always know that he was going to stay in the

carpet business? Did he find it "relevant" or did he dream of becoming a shipmaster? If he did, he dismissed these foolish dreams in his next meditation, which he observed every day: "...to see where I came from, to see what I am doing in this world, to see what the effect is of what I am doing -- it is a good thing to take stock of yourself and to be alone with God for a little time."² Besides the spirit of the times, so different from today's, made it easier to stay on the beaten path; to become prosperous, successful, respected, to "make it" was what most young men aspired to. And "make it" he was going to.

There were hardships at first; his job paid only a little over a dollar a day; he did not consider his boss honest enough and decided to leave him. His next place of employment folded up because of business stagnation caused by the Civil War that broke out in the meantime. There was no prospect of another job in sight. Yet, as he said years later, "Those were dark days; yet, let me tell you, I would not spare those days for any of the brighter ones. They were the making of me."³ After some miserable weeks he looked up William Sloane of W & J Sloane Carpet Co., who, although he did not actually need another employee at the moment, gave him a modest job out of kindness.

Commemorating his Seventieth Birthday

Mr. Walter W. Law

requests the pleasure of your company

to spend the day with him and

with other old friends of the Carpet and Linoleum trade

at the Briarcliff Lodge

on Thursday, the fourteenth day of November,

returning to New York the following morning

Kindly reply at once in order that adequate provision may be

made to meet the train

Carriages will meet train leaving Grand Central

Station for Scarborough at 10.45 a. m. Luncheon

at 1 o'clock Dinner at 6 o'clock. Driving around

Briarcliff Manor in the meantime.

The year was 1907, 48 years from the time that young Walter landed in New York. He made good use of these years. Nine years before he resigned from W & J Sloane, of which he was vice president at the time. Although his resignation was supposedly for reasons of health, it is unlikely that a sickly man could have accomplished that near miracle that he was going to show off to his former business friends on that drive around Briarcliff Manor.

What was there in the place of Briarcliff Manor before Mr. Law created it? The original inhabitants were the Sint Sinct branch of the Mohegan Indians. Hardly any traces remained of them, despite some attempts, like Adrien Van der Donck's, a lawyer and patron of Westchester County, who wrote in 1653: "We deem it worth our attention to treat concerning the nature of the original native inhabitants of the land; that after the Christians have multiplied and the natives have disappeared and melted away, a memorial of them may be preserved."⁴ The natives very obligingly fulfilled Mr. Van der Donck's prophecy, in the case of Briarcliff Manor and vicinity they were greatly helped in this by Vreddryck Flypsen, who later anglicized his name to Frederick Philipse. He purchased their land for some "wampum, axes, blankets, guns, knives, kettles, cloth, shirts and a persuasive amount of rum."⁵ His purchase was confirmed by Royal Patent in 1686. After the Revolutionary War his land was seized and sold by the Commission on Forfeiture because Colonel Frederick Philipse, a descendant of the first Philipse and then Lord of Philipse Manor, sided with the British. The land was bought up mostly by the former tenant farmers, who were not allowed to purchase any land of the Philipse land-holdings until then.

It was roughly 115 years later that Walter W. Law appeared on the scene. The date of his first land purchase was 1890. By that time he raised a family of six children (a seventh died in infancy), made a name and a fortune in the carpet business, not only for himself, but also for his

employer, W & J Sloane. He seems to have had an imaginative, keen business sense, was also aggressive and shrewd at times (there is a reference in a trade journal⁶ in an article written about him to "the coup made by W & J Sloane in 1873 in securing the account of Alexander Smith" [a carpet manufacturer]), but then that was the way to success. He looked over the beautiful land on the shore of the Hudson, some 30 miles from New York, and with his mental eye, saw all the things he could do with that land. He also saw the poor and, in some instances, abandoned farms that would eventually greatly increase in value because of their proximity to New York, especially after he put them in shape. The original bookkeeping records tell much of the story, although some of it may be only conjectured. Between 1890 and 1900 he bought up most of the farms that he welded into "Briarcliff Farms," comprising about 5200 acres, first around the area then called "Whitson's," named after the original farmer whose descendants owned about 400 acres of land at the time in the area which is now the center of Briarcliff. After he had a big solid area around here he moved his buying out to more outlying areas, as far as about 15-20 miles to the north, to Yorktown and Cross River. Here he paid only \$27 to \$100 for an acre, except in one instance where the property included a lake which we assume he wanted badly for his cattle: this farm cost \$170 per acre. For the acreage on the "home farm," as the Briarcliff Farms are often called in the books, the prices vary from \$100 to \$1875 an acre, the last one for a farm of only two acres.

Several other ones, only six or seven acres in size, also brought prices above \$500. Whether these had houses and barns on it that made them that much more valuable, or whether the owners knew that Mr. Law did not want them to sit there in the middle of his manor and will eventually pay the price, we can only guess. There is also a large discrepancy between the prices of the normal-sized (between 50 and 150 acres) farms, some costing three times as much as others. Again this might have been due to improvements on some, or might reflect how hardly pressed or gullible the owners were. On paper the best bargains seem to be the farms where the owners, heirs of the deceased farmer, lived in a different part of the country. On many pages dealing with the sales transaction of a farm, there is a notation of the 1894 assessed value. If that was anywhere near the real value, then the sellers must have thought they got a very fair price. In no instance did Law pay less than at least double of that assessment, but usually quite a bit more; and this was only 6 to 16 years after the assessment. Three small farms, 77 acres in all, he designated as his future "home grounds." The purchase price, \$37,000, would buy about a two-acre "home ground" in the same vicinity today.

Now he was ready to set to work. He again followed the leading motto of his life:

"If a cobbler by trade, I'll make it my pride
The best of all cobblers to be;
And if only a tinker, no tinker on earth
Will mend an old kettle like me."

But he was by no means only a tinker now. At age 63, having become a very rich man by a combination of a wonderful sense for business, by being a hard and aggressive worker, and by the lucky combination of being all this in New York at the end of the 19th century with its tremendous possibilities, he was the image of the typical American success hero. What makes him unusual, is that instead of being content with becoming even richer and more powerful in his business, he turned around now and, at his age, dared to venture into huge undertakings in fields in which he had absolutely no previous experience or knowledge. Whether this was an old dream that he had to suppress so far, or he started to dream about it recently because he suddenly got tired of all the (as he himself expressed it) "wrestling" of the business world, is not clear. In any case, by the time he invited his old business friends (and maybe some enemies) nine years later, he turned this dream into an amazing reality.

The guests arrived at Scarborough station around noon. Scarborough, a narrow strip of land on the shore of the Hudson, consisted only of a few dozen houses, but because of its beautiful location and because it had a railway station since 1849, it was already then starting to be a commuter-suburb and became much more so in the years just succeeding, after the arrival of Frank Arthur Vanderlip, President of the National City Bank of New York. Mr. Vanderlip bought up all the available land in Scarborough and then sold parcels to friends, mostly Directors of National City Bank.

Scarborough had been incorporated into Briarcliff the year before, in 1906. The Village of Briarcliff Manor, (named by Mr. Law after All Saints Church, Brier Cliff, which still stands, although in an enlarged version at the corner of Scarborough Road and Old Briarcliff Road, on the imaginary boundary line between the two places) was incorporated in 1902 with a population of 381 persons. The relation between the two places was tongue-in-cheek. Scarborough was determined not to lose what it considered its older and more refined identity to upstart Briarcliff; and Briarcliff, proud of its achievements, felt slightly resentful. Briarcliff did have plenty to be proud of. Mr. Law engaged Mr. Olmstead, the landscape gardener who planned New York City's Central Park, to lay out the plan of the whole estate. The carriages that met the guests drove them on the most modern macadam roads lined with trees through the big park with its rare imported trees and shrubs (although now due to the season, no flowers), to the beautiful fieldstone, stucco, and wood Briarcliff Lodge, reminiscent in style of the English country inns, but grown to American proportions. The Lodge itself is best described by quoting from different Briarcliff Lodge brochures: "...fit for its splended scenic setting, and possessing the conditions and atmosphere that are found in the homes of gentle folk." "It was established in 1901 on a magnificent five-thousand-acre estate." "The beauty of the surroundings, the luxurious furnishings and the delightful associations at Briarcliff would pale into insignificance were the wants of the inner man not equally well provided for." There

was an excellent golf course, a lake for swimming and an indoor pool, 13 tennis courts, and a good riding stable. A Lodge organization played baseball regularly. During the season there were daily concerts, often with a prominent guest artist. The music room had a pipe organ. At the last hole of the golf course stood the Casino. There was still the ballroom, the library, and the billiard rooms. It was the epitome of a turn-of-the-century, luxury hotel and he, Walter William Law, created and owned it. False modesty was not one of his attributes by the presence of some of the guests. William D. Sloane, who as a young member of the firm, gave him the helping hand that turned out to have been a decisive factor in the career of both men, and to whom Law never ceased to be grateful, was there. He was now head of the house of W & J Sloane and one of New York's leading financiers. Three other members of his family were there as well, and John Trumbull, Jr. came all the way from Baltimore despite his age of 92. He would have liked to show them still more of the Lodge, but they had to sit down to lunch because the carriages would be coming for them shortly to take them around Briarcliff Manor.

Their first step might have been the Manor House, the Law family's imposing, cold-looking residence, about half a mile from the Lodge. There they possibly met Mrs. Law, a heavy set lady, who seemed a little bit bewildered by her husband's life of constant feverish activity. She did not seem to be as much a part of her husband's life as his Lodge, barns, and greenhouses (as a matter of fact, we know she was

forbidden to ever cut a rose without his permission); and there is never any mention about her in the few speeches we have that are written by him or in any material written about him, except in obituary notices. They had four girls and two boys. The two boys, Walter Jr. and Henry, joined their father's Briarcliff Manor enterprises, which by now included, besides the Lodge and the Farm, a Real Estate office and Pocantico Lodge (a much smaller and more modest hotel, converted a couple of years earlier from the School of Practical Agriculture and Horticulture, which Mr. Law helped to found, but which outgrew its quarters and moved further away where land was cheaper, but still supplied a steady flow of reliable workers to Briarcliff Farms).

After leaving the mansion, Mr. Law pointed out some landmarks: the Holbrook Preparatory School for Boys, founded in 1854; Miss Knox's School for Girls; the District (public) School; Mrs. Mary E. Dow's School, which later was to become Briarcliff Junior College, was just moved from its temporary quarters in Briarcliff Lodge (which was only open as a hotel in summer) to its present location on Elm Road on a 35-acre tract donated by Mr. Law, who built and donated Dow Hall, the school's building as well. Among the beautiful churches, his main pride and joy was the Briarcliff Congregational Church, just down the road from Mrs. Dow's School, which was also built from money donated by him, including the later additions and the beautiful memorial windows. He was still a deeply religious man. Once, when the Premier of Canada,

who grew very interested in his farming methods, sent word that he would like to visit the farm the coming Sunday at 11, Mr. Law replied, "I already have an engagement every Sunday at 11 a. m."

They reached the farms and now Mr. Law was really in his element as the "Laird of Briarcliff Manor," a name given to him by his friend, Andrew Carnegie. From issues of the "Briarcliff Farm Bulletin," printed in his own "Briarcliff Printshop," we have a lively picture of the things his guests saw. Other data came from the "Briarcliff Outlook," another of his publications. This was a monthly, for which the yearly subscription price was 50 cents, postpaid. It concerned itself with local matters, ranging from social notices to discussions on the aim of "new education," but always had an article on some aspect of the Farm. A third publication, the "Briarcliff Once-a-Week," was published for the Lodge guests and appeared only in summer. One of Mr. Law's favorite enterprises was his greenhouses. They specialized in American Beauty Roses and Briarcliff Roses, but also grew carnations. In a top year, close to half a million roses and carnations were cut for the market. All the vegetables used in the Lodge, and also for the market, were also grown in this area. The Poultry Department of Briarcliff Manor is the title of Briarcliff Farms Bulletin No. VI, published in June, 1900. It shows pictures of the modern poultry houses, describes care and feeding of the poultry according to the most perfect modern methods. How big it became later, we don't know, but it says here: "Last year when the department was

still in its infancy 6,000 broilers were raised and sold and over 60,000 dozen eggs were disposed of at prices ranging from 25 to 50 cents per dozen, according to the season. But by far the biggest and most famous operations, was the dairy farm. The herd at that time consisted of close to 12,000 head of cattle, out of which about 500 were cows furnishing milk. They were housed in the most modern barns, which, together with the other dairy buildings, resembled a hospital in comfort, cleanliness, and sanitary precautions. As a matter of fact, one wonders whether patients of the time received as good care in every New York hospital. Surely, one tends to agree with one of the statements in a Briarcliff Farms' booklet, which says, "A Briarcliff Farms' cow, by the time it has reached its third year, has received as much attention as an average human child of the same age..." This same booklet also gives a detailed description of the operations of the dairy farm, illustrated with pictures of all the operations. The cows got a tuberculin test twice a year. All the workers in the barns and dairy buildings had sterilized white suits, which were changed twice daily (after each milking). The workers had to wash their hands after each individual milking. The milk was strained several times and sent immediately to the dairy house where it was put into sterilized bottles within five minutes. It was kept at a temperature of 45 degrees Fahrenheit from then on. The results spoke for themselves: "The milk is regularly analyzed and the bacteria present are frequently below a thousand to the cubic inch. To appreciate these figures it must be understood that it is the bacteria in milk which sours

it, and make it a distributor of disease and that the bulk of milk sold in our large cities contains hundreds of thousands of bacteria to the cubic inch." No milk ever left the dairy with a bacteria count above 2,000. This was 1/5 of the amount medical authorities of the day considered quite acceptable,⁷ although they were very far from trying to enforce even that standard. To grasp the importance of this, one has to realize that this was the age when tuberculosis and infant mortality were rampant; and one of the contributors to each was unsanitary milk. In the case of infant mortality, it caused diarrhea epidemics, especially in hot weather. It is beyond doubt that Mr. Law must have saved the lives of scores of people, either directly by supplying them with clean milk, or indirectly by being a strong advocate of sanitary dairy practices. How important this subject was and how far reaching his reputation we can see from the fact that His Excellency Lord Grey, Governor-General of Canada, after having visited Briarcliff Farms (a few hours later that Sunday, since 11 o'clock appointment was not suitable), invited Walter Law the same year (1906) to come to Canada and speak to different organizations on the subject. Mr. Law did not believe that milk with such a low bacterial count, as the one his Farms produced, needed to be pasteurized. Only his milk for infants was pasteurized in hot weather. His claim of the ability of his milk to keep its freshness would seem incredible had it not come from such a reliable perfectionist. Certainly, he would not stake his high reputation on an ad like the following, which appeared in the

"Briarcliff Outlook":

BRIARCLIFF FARM PRODUCTS FOR OCEAN VOYAGES

are carefully packed in zink lined cases and delivered on board of Steamer in care of the Chief Steward.

Briarcliff Milk and cream has been shipped across the ocean, for use on return voyage, and kept in perfect condition until arrival at New York.

Briarcliff Butter has been shipped to China, reaching consumers in that country in perfect condition.

Orders for foreign shipment should be received two days before delivery to carrier is required.

Another proof of the fresh quality of the milk is the fact that Briarcliff Milk shipped in this manner won a Gold Medal at the Paris Exposition in 1900.

There was no end to Mr. Law's enterprizes and plans. As the Rev. Alexander MacColl, minister of Briarcliff Congregational Church, said about him at the 70th Birthday banquet that evening: "I think that he has not been wholly sorry that all the ideals have not been realized, for he has sometimes said to me that if our ideals were fully realized there would be nothing else for us to work for." In the January, 1903 issue of the "Briarcliff Outlook" there is a picture of "The Plasmon Factory of Briarcliff" and a very long testimonial article by C. Virchow (who was apparently so well known that he did not need further introduction)

describing Plasmon as a curative albumin food, and the most nutritive food known to modern science. All the same, it is never mentioned again, but instead Kumyss, another milk extract, is being advertised the following years.

He took excellent care of his workers. The married couples lived in neat cottages scattered throughout the farms, the unmarried man in a big modern dormitory called "Dalmeny." Here he gave prizes for the neatest room; he also had prizes for the gentlest handler of cows. This was very important to him. On all barn doors there was a sign: "Be kind to cows. Do unto the cow as you would the cow should do unto you." He was very fond of mottoes. The walls of "Dalmeny" were full of them, even the washrooms, exhorting his workers to industry, clean bodies and thoughts, and other ennobling things.

By the time they saw all these things, it must have been time to head back for the Lodge if they wanted to be on time for the 6 o'clock dinner. But we hope they went via Briarcliff Station, which was on the Putnam line of the railroad, about three miles from the Hudson. Here Mr. Law built a new railroad station the year before, a fitting one for his Manor. Its waiting rooms were furnished with comfortable chairs and tables and there were oriental carpets on the floor. It was the most luxurious railroad waiting room in the country.

Dinner was served in the Palm Dining Room, which was decorated with flowers and greens. The beautifully set table (the Lodge used only

Limoges and Haviland china and Gorham silver) had a continuous row of American Beauty Roses and Briarcliff Roses in the middle. While the orchestra played old songs and ballads of England and national airs, they dined on a six-course dinner, prepared by the famous Lodge kitchen.⁸ After coffee and cigars, toastmaster George McNair (who was by now a Briarcliff resident--he built "Braevue," one of the largest mansions of Briarcliff a couple of years earlier) started the speeches going. He called on ten people to give a toast, but first he gave his own and Mr. Law replied. After all the speeches were finished there was still a concert in the hall. The orchestra played, among others, Handel's Largo, Mr. Law's favorite.

Walter W. Law had still many fulfilling, productive years ahead of him; he lived to be 87. But this day remained in his memory as one of the most meaningful ones in his life.

Footnotes

- ¹ Walter W. Law, An Address Delivered to the men of Briarcliff May fourteenth, nineteen hundred seven, and Printed as a Souvenir for his sons and daughters on his Seventieth Birthday, November thirteenth, nineteen hundred seven (Briarcliff Print Shop, Briarcliff Manor, N. Y.) p.5.
- ² Ibid. p. 9.
- ³ Ibid. p. 6.
- ⁴ Ernest Freeland, Griffin (ed) Westchester County and its People. A Record. (Lewis Historical Publishing Co. Inc. N. Y. 1946).
- ⁵ Our Village: Briarcliff Manor, N. Y. 1902-1952 (Imperial Ad Service, New York, N. Y.) p.12.
- ⁶ A Triumphant Life. (The Carpet and Upholstery Trade Review and the Rug Trade Review, New York, N. Y. February, 1924) p. 74.
- ⁷ Pure Milk Addresses in Canada. (Briarcliff Print Shop, Briarcliff Manor, N. Y. 1906) p.19.
- ⁸ Information taken from Ossining, N. Y. newspaper clipping. No name or date of paper available.

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