

VII

Rockefeller in Cleveland

UNLESS you search about carefully, it is almost as if John Davison Rockefeller, the richest man in the world, never had lived in Cleveland.

Millions of footprints have almost obliterated the path that John D. made in his Cleveland lifetime, and the spreading blanket of a modern metropolis has all but covered completely the old landmarks that once marked his presence.

The city's memory of its most famous son becomes progressively fuzzier with each day, and there is already a noticeable vagueness about the details of his years there, even in the firsthand accounts of people who knew him. Such memory of him as lives on is tinged with a mixture of pride and hurt. There is a lingering vicarious sense of triumph that one of the local boys made it big in the money game, but isn't it too bad he let success go to his head?

It's a perfectly normal, perfectly American reaction; the indignation of a hometown scorned. John D., as almost everyone knows, hit it very large in Cleveland, businesswise, that is, but the time in his career finally arrived when he became the victim of his own success. Mahomet at last had to go to the mountain. Rockefeller had created a global business, the Standard Oil Company, and it was not feasible to have its headquarters anywhere else but in the financial capital of the world. In the years from 1877 to 1883, John D., his family, his partners, and his principal executives moved from Cleveland to New York.

It was an exodus that did not go unnoticed or unresented, even though the Rockefellers themselves made it clear that Cleveland was still their real love. Each summer, beginning in 1884, they returned home to Forest Hill, a lovely seven-hundred-acre patch of greenery in the high hills of the East Side with its own lake, with dark, clean-smelling woods, and a vista that took in almost all of the town and the bright blue waters of Lake Erie to the north. Later, it would have winding paths for bicycling by moonlight and for the leisurely stroll in the fresh morning air smelling of dew and the Lake Erie waters. It even

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would have its own nine-hole golf course and a network of private roads.

The very perfection of the Forest Hill estate itself was a divisive force in the relationship between John D. Rockefeller and his Cleveland neighbors. With a Shangri-La as his daily environment, John D. had no need nor urge to venture beyond his own acreage. Cleveland therefore saw little of the famous man in his prime years, whether he was in New York or in Forest Hill. If he were in town, though, he could be counted on to emerge with his family on Sunday morning for the trip through the lower East Side to the Euclid Avenue Baptist Church at East 18th Street and Euclid Avenue, the church that he had joined as a fifteen-year-old boy freshly arrived in town and which he gave magnificent moral and financial support throughout his life.

It was in Strongsville, a town on the southern outskirts of Cleveland, that the Rockefeller family first settled in 1853, following a rather abrupt departure from New York State. Among the several explanations for the move, the most intriguing is the story that the head of the family, William Avery Rockefeller, decided to pull up stakes in order to avoid an embarrassing involvement with the law.

Ida Tarbell, an acid-penned biographer of the Rockefellers, once wrote of William Avery Rockefeller that he had "all the vices save one." He did not drink. Otherwise, he was depicted as something of a rounder who had little use for religion and lived under a shaky set of ethics.

Father William was, at the same time, the most interesting and the most mysterious of all the Rockefellers. All the fragmented descriptions and anecdotes about him bring forth a personality as far removed from John D. Rockefeller as possible. Where John D., the son, was quiet, religious, conservative, restrained, and proper almost to a painful degree, Father William was outgoing, boisterous, restless, and careless of the conventions that bind.

William Avery Rockefeller made what was seemingly a substantial living as a peddler of patent medicines and miraculous medical cures. He was, essentially, one of the enterprising quacks of his day, even calling himself "Dr. Rockefeller." He sought out his "patients" in the wild western country, spending many months of the year away from home swinging about the frontier with his wagon full of medical goodies and with syrupy assurances of good health for each and every customer. No ailment was beyond his great powers to remedy, judging from one of his handbills, which read:

"Dr. William A. Rockefeller here for one day only. All cases of cancer cured unless they are too far gone and then they can be greatly benefited."

There are dark suggestions in several of the Rockefeller biographies

that Rockefeller *père* was not above chasing the girls wherever he could find them, and the evidence hints that this hobby was one of his most enduring weaknesses. In the tradition of playboys everywhere, though, when it came to choosing a wife, William carefully selected a girl of strict upbringing and high moral standards, Eliza Davison, a member in good standing of the Dutch Reformed Church.

In his initial bid for Eliza's hand, William showed a rare technique, if the story of that first encounter is true. It seems that the shrewd elder Rockefeller (who was at that time, of course, the young Rockefeller) could play the role of a deaf mute to perfection. It had been a useful device in cultivating friendly relations—and business, probably—among the Indians, they having a great superstitious regard for anybody so afflicted. When William presented himself at the door of Eliza Davison's house, he pretended this inability to speak or to hear with some piteous gestures, and the sight of the tall, handsome, handicapped boy apparently wrenched the heart of this good woman. It is said that she exclaimed: "If he weren't deaf and dumb, I'd marry him!"

The roguish William held her to her word and they were married.

As demanding as was his job of touring the West in the interest of a healthier America, William still interrupted his field trips often enough to sire a family. His first child was a girl, Lucy. The second was a boy, John Davison Rockefeller, named after Eliza's father, John Davison, a stern Scotsman. The date of the first boy child's birth was July 8, 1839, and the place was Richford. The town later would become famous for the event, and the accent would be shifted to the first syllable of the town name. The family in following years was further augmented by the births of William, Mary Ann, and a set of twins, Franklin and Frances. Of the latter pair, only Franklin survived infancy.

The family moved to Moravia, some forty miles distant, in 1843, and then on to Owego in Tioga County in 1850, finally breaking the home ties with New York State three years later in the move to Strongsville, Ohio. There is nothing to indicate that the selection of Strongsville as the family's home community was anything more than a random choice. William Rockefeller was motivated not so much by a desire to live in Ohio, it seems, as he was by the powerful wish to leave New York State.

John D. was fourteen and his brother William was thirteen when the big move interrupted their education at Owego Academy. There was no high school in Strongsville; indeed, there was but one high school in Cleveland, and that was too far from home—twelve miles or so distant. The elder Rockefeller still was determined to provide his sons with a good education, however, and he could afford to do so. It was decided to have the boys board in downtown Cleveland and enroll in Central High School in the heart of the little lake town to the north.

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The enrollment at Central was small, high school being something of an educational luxury in the middle of the nineteenth century, but John and William found themselves among some interesting classmates. One was a sixteen-year-old boy named Marcus A. Hanna. Another was a pretty, shy girl named Laura Celestia Spelman. She would marry John D. Rockefeller one day. He, of course, would become the richest man in the world, while Mark Hanna would become a United States senator, a President-maker and, some say, the most powerful politician in the world.

It was most unlikely that two such future notables should be brought together in the tiny classroom of a small school in a sleepy Ohio village, but there they were, in open defiance of the cosmic odds, together for two years at least. Sometime in that period, John's interest in further educational preparation for the world flagged. He became, in today's parlance, a high school dropout. It was not such a dreadful offense against society then as it is now, and, as a matter of fact, John D. didn't completely drop out of the field of education. He switched from the high school to Folsom's Mercantile College (forerunner of today's Dyke Business School) where, he said later, the foundation for his future business success was laid.

"My business college training, though lasting only a few months, was very valuable to me," he wrote. "But to get a job—that was the question. I tramped the streets of Cleveland for days and weeks, asking merchants and storekeepers if they didn't want a boy. But offers of my services met with little appreciation. No one wanted a boy and very few showed any overwhelming anxiety to talk with me on the subject. At last one man on the Cleveland docks told me I might come back after the noonday meal. I was elated; it seemed that I might get a start.

"I was in a fever of anxiety lest I should lose this one opportunity that I had unearthed. When finally I presented myself to my would-be employer he said he would give me a chance, but not a word passed between us about pay. This was in September, 1855. I joyfully went to work. The name of the firm was Hewitt & Tuttle, wholesale commission house."

The company's office was on Merwin Street in the river bottomland area called the Flats.

"When January of 1856 arrived Mr. Tuttle presented me with \$50 for my three months' work—about \$4 per week. No doubt it was all I was worth, and it was entirely satisfactory to me. For the next year at \$25 a month I kept my position, learning details and clerical work connected with such business. It was a wholesale commission house.

"At the end of my first year's service I became bookkeeper with a salary of \$500. The next year I was offered \$700, but thought I was worth \$800. We had not settled the matter by April and as a favorable

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opportunity had presented itself for carrying on the same line of business on my own account I resigned."

The "favorable opportunity" was the formation of a partnership in 1859 with a man ten years his senior, Maurice B. Clark. The two pooled their money to finance a commission merchant business dealing principally in the handling of vegetables. Clark, a native of England, had two thousand dollars to invest. Rockefeller had only nine hundred dollars saved, but his father had promised him and his brothers a cash gift of one thousand dollars each when they should reach their twenty-first birthdays. John D. was only nineteen, but his father offered to give him his money in advance, provided he agreed to pay interest on the one thousand dollars until his twenty-first birthday arrived. The promise was given and the firm of Clark & Rockefeller was made possible.

Even as the world looked askance at William Avery Rockefeller in later years, John D. indicated his deep affection and respect for his father, writing: "To my father I owe a great debt in that he himself trained me to practical ways. He was engaged in different enterprises; he used to tell me about these things, explaining their significance; and he taught me the principles and methods of business.

"He used to dicker with me and buy things from me. He taught me how to buy and sell."

William Rockefeller's revealing postscript to this revelation was his statement that "I cheat my boys every time I get a chance. I want to make them sharp. I trade with the boys and skin them and just beat them every time I can."

John D., reminiscing at another time, said his father never carried less than one thousand dollars in his pockets. This at a time when a thousand dollars was a large sum even to have in the bank. John D., who won a reputation himself for carrying a supply of dimes in his own pockets, recalled his father's big money foible with admiration.

Mark Hanna once said his old schoolmate Rockefeller was "mad about money, though sane in everything else."

The Rockefeller family did not stay long in Strongsville, moving on briefly to Parma, another Cleveland suburb, and finally into Cleveland itself, renting a house in late 1854 on the west side of Perry Street (East 22nd Street), near Prospect Avenue. The landlord was Colonel O. J. Hodge.

Hodge leased the house to the William Avery Rockefeller family for one year at a rent of two hundred dollars per annum, payable quarterly.

"Never was rent paid more promptly," Colonel Hodge wrote, "and never did I have, in all respects, a better tenant. On the day the lease expired, the keys were brought to me by Mr. Rockefeller's son, now John D. Rockefeller, the great multi-millionaire. I had become some-

what acquainted with the young man at his father's house, where, to me, he seemed a quiet, unassuming youth. He showed none of that hilarity often seen in boys of his age. Usually he sat quietly in his chair, listening to what was being said. In 1858, three years after . . . I was surprised to see his name coupled with that of Mr. Morris [sic] B. Clark in a business enterprise . . ."

A number of Clevelanders were surprised at the speed with which the teen-ager moved into a position of business independence. By 1863, the firm of Clark & Rockefeller had made enough money that the partners were searching about for a likely business in which to invest their surplus. That their attention should have been drawn to the possibilities of the oil business is hardly surprising. The first oil well had been struck near Titusville, Pennsylvania, in 1859, and it is a matter of record that the production of the Pennsylvania fields had reached two hundred thousand barrels in the following year and continued to leap upward with each passing month.

The nation suddenly was caught in a frenzy over oil, but in few places was it as noticeable as it was in Cleveland, which, during the decade of the 1850s, had left the languorous bliss of a small town for the robust pace of a booming city. The Ohio Canal, although a tremendous boon to the community in the previous twenty-five-year period, now seemed to typify what was being left behind—a slow-moving, quiet, calculating way of life. Now there were no fewer than five railroads clanking through the stirring city, and their tracks scarred meadows and yards, took over the riverbanks and even the lakefront in a kind of arrogant show of industry's pre-eminence.

This was the transition time for the city. The horse-drawn barges still ambled through the canals; the white-sailed schooners still sailed into the harbor; heavily laden wagons and stagecoaches still rumbled and squeaked over the cobblestoned streets, but the picturesque scene was fading. The city was yielding to the vanguard of the Industrial Revolution, and it already was being sullied. Of the mighty flow of petroleum that had been drawn from the Pennsylvania oil fields, thousands of barrels of the viscous wealth had been shipped to Cleveland. Refineries to process the petroleum were springing up all over town, especially in the Cuyahoga Valley area where proximity to the railroads was the strategic advantage.

By late summer of 1863, there were twenty refineries actively at work in Cleveland. The smell of oil was in the air that Rockefeller breathed and it was beginning to discolor the waters of the Cuyahoga River flowing past his office. Little wonder that he and his partner should have considered the advantages of investing in petroleum when they already were swimming in its fumes!

It was John D.'s decision, after a careful study of the situation, that

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the production end of the oil business was entirely too speculative; too risky to meet his requirements of a sound investment. It was his judgment that he and his partners should skirt this get-rich-quick end of the business and concentrate on the processing and distribution of petroleum and its derivative products, thereby reducing the element of risk in the venture.

Through that wonderfully mysterious element of chance that is almost always a part of every success story, there had arrived in Cleveland at this critical juncture a young Englishman named Samuel Andrews, a candlemaker, no less, by trade. He had developed a new process for refining oil kerosene from crude petroleum, but he needed financial backing to put his idea to work.

The firm of Clark & Rockefeller decided to go into the oil refining business, using the Andrews' process, and the hope of the partners was that this would be a profitable sideline; a diversification which would relieve them of the fears that everywhere follow men who insist on carrying all their eggs in one basket. The offshoot company was called Andrews, Clark & Co.

The venture turned out rather well—better, even, than the vegetable commission house business. It led within seven years (January 10, 1870) to the formation of a joint stock corporation called the Standard Oil Company, which has prospered to this very day. Along the way, it helped to make John D. Rockefeller a billionaire and the most important business tycoon in the world. It established Cleveland as the world center of oil refining—a blessing not without its drawbacks.

William Ganson Rose, a leading Cleveland historian, described it this way:

"... This was the era of oil. Cleveland had a number of small refineries in operation, and it was estimated that more than one-third of the entire production of the oil region was shipped to local plants.

"The city was flavored and saturated with oil; the river and lake were smeared with it. Oil wagons rumbled through the streets and tanks blocked the railroads.

"Oil fires kept the city firemen eternally vigilant and filled the valley with painful apprehension. Kerosene lamps were instantly popular, replacing feeble, flickering candles and whale-oil lamps.

"Rockefeller and his associates envisioned Cleveland as a great refining center; and, buying up their small rivals, they launched the gigantic Standard Oil empire . . ."

Rockefeller was not the ostentatious type. He and his bride, Laura Spelman, lived well but not extravagantly. He was already on his way to high financial success when they were married on September 8, 1864, being involved in the commission house business and the oil

business both at the time. If that doesn't seem much of a start, remember that he was only twenty-five years old and still groping for direction.

In all the years that John D. and his family lived in Cleveland, they occupied only three houses. As honeymooners, they lived briefly with his parents. The first home of the honeymooning couple was on East 19th Street, close to today's Carnegie Avenue. Four short years later, they moved to swank Euclid Avenue and a mansion in Millionaire's Row at the corner of Case Avenue, now East 40th Street. It was a large, ungainly brick house with mansard roof and the usual gingerbread trim, but it met the needs of the young, growing family, and the address was the correct one for a young, rising businessman as the price, estimated at more than forty thousand dollars, would suggest.

Finally, there was Forest Hill, the name given to seventy-nine acres of scenic, wooded land six miles to the east of the city's center. It was high, sloping land topped by a plateau with a magnificent view of the green countryside and the shimmering lake to the north. Rockefeller loved the beauties of nature. He admired the site and he bought the land—not with the thought of extracting personal pleasure from it, but as an investment. Two years after he purchased the acreage, a group of three men became interested in it as the site for a hydropathic sanitarium. Rockefeller joined with them in the project, incorporating as the Euclid Avenue-Forest Hill Association, capitalized at \$250,000. The association bought the land from Rockefeller and proceeded to construct a large frame building to house the sanitarium. Before it was finished, however, financial difficulties discouraged the sponsors of the project and it was never carried through. John D. repurchased the land and then entered on what was undeniably one of the strangest episodes of his career. He took a flyer as an innkeeper, turning the building into a private club-hotel.

It was a very large building that the sanitarium association had started out to build, of course, and its adaptability to use as a hotel immediately occurred to John D. His experience in the short-lived venture in that summer of 1877 discouraged him.

"I found that the guests expected Mother to entertain them and act as hostess," he wryly commented later.

The hotel idea was abandoned at the end of that summer and the building, thenceforth, became the Rockefeller summer home. It quickly found high favor with everybody in the family and the big, gloomy mansion on Euclid Avenue in time became nothing more than an occasional stopping place, used mainly on Sundays, when the Rockefellers would ride in from Forest Hill to attend services at the Euclid Avenue Baptist Church. The family would retire to the big house after church and spend a quiet afternoon in the cool, high-roofed parlors, returning in the evening to Forest Hill, the fun spot.

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ROCKEFELLER IN CLEVELAND

69

John D. kept adding acreage to his original investment in Forest Hill until it comprised some seven hundred acres of choice land. Even when business compelled him to move the family to New York and to take up legal residence there in 1882, Forest Hill continued to draw the Rockefellers back every summer, and there never was any doubt that this was the real family home. It remained the favorite refuge of John D. until it burned to the ground in 1918.

One of the features of Forest Hill late in the century was a nine-hole golf course which was laid out, not for John D.'s pleasure, but for his wife, Laura, who took up the strange, foreign game three years before he did. It was, of course, Laura's pursuit of par which caught John's interest and led him to take up the game. Her teacher was one of America's pioneer professionals, Joe Mitchell, a native of Scotland who came to Cleveland to be pro at Lake Shore Country Club. Sometimes, during the lessons, John D. would stand apart, listening intently and watching every move. When his wife was playing the course, he often would saunter to the links and study her progress.

One day he called Mitchell aside and gravely asked the question that millions of golfers since have repeated.

"Do you think that I can learn to play that game?" he asked Mitchell.

"Of course," said Mitchell.

"Very well," said the billionaire. "I will send for you at eight in the morning, but you must tell nobody. It must be a secret."

Mitchell agreed and the lessons began. Every morning he would be picked up by the Rockefeller carriage at the Lake Shore Club to be driven to Forest Hill to meet with Rockefeller. Mitchell charged five dollars an hour, portal to portal.

After months of instruction, Rockefeller decided that he was ready to make his competitive debut on the links, hoping thereby to astonish everybody in sight, most of all his wife.

Mrs. Rockefeller and her sister, Lucy, were on the home course early the next morning, ready to tee off, when John D. suddenly showed up. They greeted him and he, with eyes a-twinkle, suggested perhaps it would be helpful to them if he showed them how to hit the ball.

There were the shrieks of womanly laughter and hoots of derision that were to be expected under the circumstances, but Rockefeller insisted this game of golf was simple enough that even he could handle the clubs. His wife and his sister-in-law reacted as he had hoped, challenging him to step up to the tee and take a swing. As he was making ready for his first shot, they repressed their giggles as best they could. They quieted down, though, when John D. flexed the club once or twice and then clouted the ball straight down the fairway.

It was a highly competent performance that stilled all ridicule. There

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