

David McNeely Stauffer

BY ELIZABETH CLARKE KIEFFER

To tell in detail, the life of the noteworthy son of Lancaster County whom we discuss tonight would require a full-length book, the critical services of a trained engineer, and a series of technical illustrations, preferably in color, which would eat up our publication budget for years to come. It is therefore my intention to emphasize Mr. Stauffer's connection with Lancaster, and merely outline the rest of his life. This, of course, will present a picture badly out of focus. Mr. Stauffer's most important work was done in the great world outside. We should be proud, however, to know that he had his roots deeply planted in the soil of our county, and always thought of it as his home.

The bulk of this paper is drawn from Mr. Stauffer's manuscript papers and diaries, now the property of the Fackenthal Library at Franklin and Marshall College.

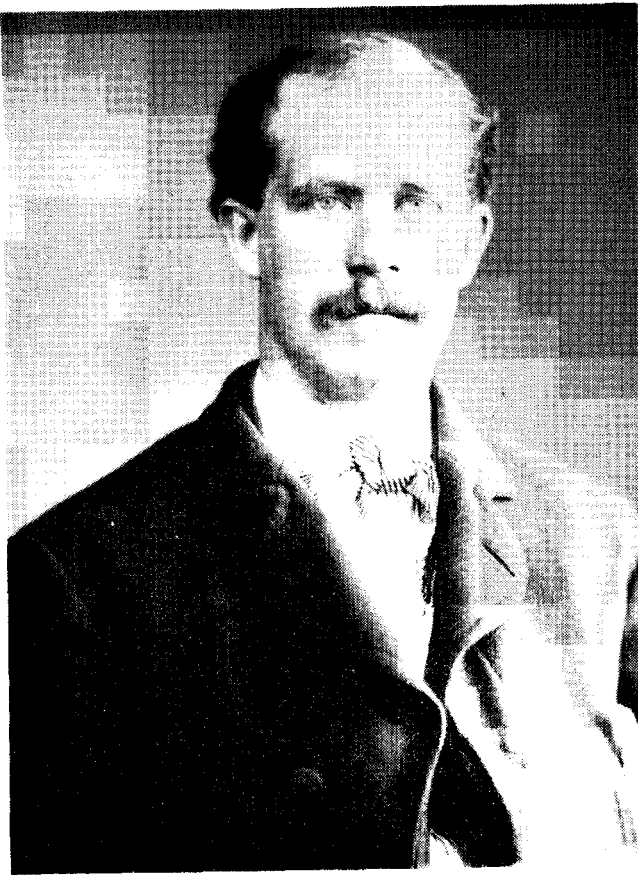
Like many of us, here tonight, David McNeely Stauffer, as his name suggests, was of that racial combination so typical of Lancaster County, Swiss Mennonite and Scotch-Irish. His father, Jacob Stauffer (1808-1880), is known to most of us through the recent revival of interest in his charming botanical paintings. He was of Mennonite ancestry of Thun, Switzerland, who came early to the county. On one of his lines he was related to the Haldemans of Chickies, which partly accounts for his lifelong intimacy with Prof. S. S. Haldeman. David's mother (Jacob Stauffer's second wife) was Mary Ann McNeely, of Mount Joy, who came of one of the early Presbyterian families of the Susquehanna valley. An ancestor was among the founders of old Derry church, which David remembered attending with his grandparents in his youth.

David was born in Mount Joy (then Richland), March 24, 1845. His mother died when he was a year old, and his step-mother, who reared him, was conscientious, but cold and unloving. The boy was thus thrown back upon a passionate devotion to his father. Luckily, Jacob Stauffer fully justified his son's adoration, and may be credited with seeing and developing all of the boy's unusual and great talents.

David's description of his childhood home, is worth preserving as a bit of county folklore:

“ . . . A rambling frame structure, standing well back from the main street in grounds bounded by village streets on three sides, and covering about half of the block. It was built in the last quarter of the eighteenth century by a sea-faring man, who was reported by his neighbors to have once been a pirate. Whether this was true or not, he lived here a lonely life, cared for only by an 'Indian woman' as housekeeper. Finally becoming tired of himself and life, he hanged himself in his bedroom on the first floor; and was buried in a tomb he had prepared for himself in the yard of the old 'Bell Schoolhouse'. The evil repute in which he was held is shown in the fact that the several churches of the village refused him the rights of interment in their churchyards; and it was for this reason that he purchased the right, for a small endowment, to erect his table monument in the schoolhouse yard. His reputation followed him after death, and it was currently reported that his spirit haunted the old house in the very peculiar form of a small black pyramid that moved about the house and grounds. About 1839 my father bought the property, and there I was later born. I remember, that in the cellar was the stone base of a great stack of stone chimnies. This base contained a vault or chamber closed by a heavy iron-banded door; it had been built as a strong room by the original proprietor; and none of our servants would go near it at any time, because they believed that here the old pirate still guarded his unseen treasures. My father utilised this belief, by there keeping his madeira and other liquids. Another feature of this house was 'the Room of the Eleven Doors' including in this count the high folding doors closing the great fireplace, and the glass doors of the china closet.”

David attended the Bell Schoolhouse of which he speaks, where he was taught by a Mr. Marple, who must have been a very good



DAVID McNEELY STAUFFER

teacher, for when David moved to Lancaster at the age of 13, he proved to be well in advance of the boys of his age in the city schools.

The removal from Mount Joy was the result of the Panic of 1858. Jacob Stauffer, whose varied career had included general storekeeping, job-printing, pharmacy, photography, and a little law, in addition to his more important avocations of art and botany, had signed a note for a friend who was caught by the crash, and as a result lost everything he possessed. At the age of fifty, he was forced to start life again, with not too much worldly wisdom to help him. David's older half-brother, Francis H. Stauffer was, at that time, editor of the Lancaster *Daily News*. He urged his father to move to town, where Jacob thought he might make a living as a patent lawyer.

Immediate funds were the first necessity, however, and Mr. E. C. Reigart, a friend of the family, proposed an arrangement. Mr. Reigart had just established a library and museum (The Lancaster Athenaeum) on the third floor of the old city hall. Jacob Stauffer accepted the position of librarian at very small pay, for the privilege of conducting his patent business in the library. Although the Stauffers lived on North Duke Street, David, inseparable from his father, spent all his free time in the library, to the great benefit of his education. The garret of the old city hall became his playroom, and he organized there a boy's club called the "Liberty Blowers" which practiced shooting cotton-tipped arrows and putty-wads from long blow-guns. We hope that the targets were not the passing citizens in the square.¹

Perhaps David's most educational experiences were his long Saturday walks with his father. Jacob Stauffer, a pillar of the Linnaean Society was a lifelong enthusiast for natural history and must have made it fascinatingly interesting to his son. David's hereditary talent for drawing and sketching everything he saw, must also have been encouraged and developed by his sympathetic father. When he first came to Lancaster, David was placed in the second class, first division of the Duke Street Secondary School. One term here, proved to him, if to no one else, that he was

¹ It was a mysterious reference to the "Liberty Blowers" in the diary of Manny Pehrson, which caused the present writer a great deal of futile research several years ago. L.C.H.S. vol. 54, no. 2.

wasting his time. Yet, in the normal course of promotion he would have another year to go before he could enter high school.

Always a believer in the direct approach, David went to Mr. Amos Row, Superintendent of Schools. Mr. Row felt that he could not make an exception to the rule by allowing David to skip a grade, but he suggested to him the practical, if rather unethical course, of applying for an entrance examination to the high school, as if he had just come to Lancaster, without mentioning his one term in the South Duke Street School. This proceeding was a double-barrelled success, for the examination proved David to be prepared for the fourth class rather than the fifth (or lowest) class. His enterprise thus enabled him to skip two years instead of one.

In high school, like many another lucky boy of Lancaster, he came under the spell of J. P. McCaskey, who was in his third year of teaching. With his usual sense of responsibility to each of his boys, Mr. McCaskey early recognised the genius of his talented pupil, and offered to give hours of his time for extra lessons for David after school hours. With this able assistance, and his own determined efforts, David was able to graduate from high school in 1861, in three years instead of the usual five. He was sixteen years old.

Franklin and Marshall College had been united in Lancaster less than ten years. In 1852, the city had collected money to buy a campus for the institution, and, in return, it had been agreed that the city might have the right to free tuition for one student in perpetuity. A tradition had already been established that this scholarship should be given only to a student who had led his class throughout his high school course.² Without knowing this fact David Stauffer had earned the scholarship. Judge Alexander L. Hayes, then President of the School Board, stopped him on the street and told him so. With his usual loyalty, David explains in his memoirs that his father had planned to give him as good a

² This unusual condition was of course, seldom fulfilled, and the scholarship was soon forgotten. In 1891 tuition was temporarily abolished, in order to do away with a number of inactive but legally perplexing scholarships. However, Stauffer scholarships are still awarded at Franklin and Marshall College from the income of an endowment of \$20,000 (now \$27,000) established by Florence (Stauffer) Rogers in her will, 1936, in memoriam to David McNeely Stauffer and Jacob Stauffer.

college education "as his income would permit" but that this unexpected good fortune was welcomed by them both.

In less exciting times, David might have gone through college in the approved fashion, and perhaps returned to his Alma Mater as a professor. In the school year of 1861-62, most boys were under the same pervasive unrest that so many boys have known in so many recent years. David, not yet eighteen might have waited a little longer, but in September 1862, Lee invaded Maryland. In an earlier paper (L.C.H.S. vol. 54, no. 2) I have described the panic and confusion in Lancaster at this terrifying news. Manny Pehrson, whose diary I was then quoting, saw Dave Stauffer and his friend Sam Rathvon march away with the "Sigel Guards" (Captain James Dysart, 2d Pennsylvania Emergency Regiment), affectionately dubbed "The Skedaddlers" by the Lancaster *Ex-aminer*.

With no training, no uniforms, and very sketchy equipment, these youngsters, mostly from Franklin and Marshall College and the high school, were rushed, with other boys similarly equipped, to the defense of the border. A priceless little diary, illustrated with sketches, which already showed artistic maturity, was kept by Dave Stauffer of the twelve days' service of this very irregular regiment. It is now treasured in the vault of the Fackenthal Library. It was a gay adventure to the boys, on the whole, and makes amusing reading today. One wonders if their parents in Lancaster (Jacob Stauffer among them) thought it very funny.

The boys were taken first to Harrisburg. Professor T. C. Porter, of F. and M., seems to have gone along. The diary gives a picture of the wild confusion in Harrisburg, with raw troops arriving by every train. They lay about on the capitol grounds until late at night waiting for someone to give them orders. At the refreshment stand in the depot, they were given "coffee sweetened with mollasses, a piece of Bread, and a hunk of lard, *alias* a piece of Meat." At about midnight, they were given tents, but no instructions as to how to erect them. By the time they got them up, they were all wide awake and noisy, "fiddling, crowing, barking like dogs, grunting like hogs, or squaling like cats." Sleep was out of the question. In the morning, Prof. Row, now living in Harrisburg, came down and collected the Lancaster High School boys and took them all to breakfast at his home.

It must be understood, that in such an emergency, priorities went to the seasoned troops, and little attention could be spared for raw recruits. Therefore it was a long bewildered wait, until, late in the afternoon, they were loaded on flat cars, and taken down the Cumberland Valley, to Chambersburg, where they waited three more days until transportation to Hagerstown was available. By this time the Battle of Antietam was already raging, and the Lancaster group were finally assigned to the division of their fellow Lancastrian, Gen. John F. Reynolds, whose troops were guarding the Boonesboro road. David was impressed with the fact that "General Reynolds bunked in the field with the men."

"Of the battle itself we heard much but saw little," David wrote. On an expedition to get drinking water for the troop, he and a schoolmate tried to see more, by climbing a haystack on a hill, but a shell screaming overhead soon sent them sliding down. His diary shows that he understood almost nothing of what was going on around him. The boys were marched and counter-marched in the heat and the dust, but apparently great care was taken to keep them out of the real fighting. Dave, who had naively carried some college textbooks in his knapsack, was very glad to unload them, and leave them in the corner of a snake fence.

After the victory, the Skedaddlers were shipped off home again and mustered out of service on September 24. For another year, David returned to college, but with the new invasion of June 1863, he again was swept into the martial spirit. Robert Nevin, son of the college president, who had taught David Greek in his Freshman year, was now a captain of Independent Battery J, Pennsylvania Light Artillery. David enlisted with him, and was stationed within hearing of the guns of Gettysburg. In Philadelphia, where the battery was next ordered, David almost died of typhoid fever, but recovered in time to rejoin them in the Shenandoah Valley, for the early winter of 1863-64. He was mustered out at the expiration of his service in January 1864.

By this time, there were only seven of David's classmates left in college, and David, a hardened veteran of nineteen years, decided he was too old to go back to school. He took a job as rodman with the Engineer Corps of the Columbia-Port Deposit Railway; but before he had worked with them two months, he had an offer of an appointment as Master's Mate in the U. S. Navy, under Admiral

David D. Porter. He was assigned to the *U.S.S. Alexandria* whose Master was David Porter Rosenmiller, a Lancaster man, and nephew of the Admiral. The two Davids had known each other at home, and the Master made things easy for the completely untrained young officer, so that he was able to get by with the old jack tars under his command, for a year and a half of service in the Mississippi and Red River valleys. For a time he was dispatch bearer between Admiral Porter and Admiral Farragut, and once had his hair "combed" by a bushwacker's bullet. In June 1865, he was commissioned ensign, and on November 5, received his honorable discharge.

He returned at once to his work on the railway, informing John A. Sheaff, the chief engineer, of his determination to learn engineering. Mr. Sheaff advised him to work, in turn, at each of the tasks in an engineering project, until he knew everything that was included in a perfect whole. Following this suggestion, David worked for \$1.50 a day, at cutting brush, driving stakes, carrying the chain and rod, and all the time studying everything he could gather on engineering. He moved steadily upward in his field, working on a number of railroads, until, in 1870, while he was still 25 years of age, he was appointed as engineer in charge of construction of the South Street Bridge in Philadelphia.

For the construction of this bridge, Mr. Stauffer wished to use a new method, recently invented in France, the "plenum pneumatic" process, of sinking piles. He found that the only book on the process was in French, so he studied the language in order to read it. At the successful conclusion of the work in 1872, he published an article on his method in the *Journal of the Franklin Institute*, which was reprinted in the *New York Railway Gazette*, and in the *Proceedings of the Institute of Civil Engineers, London*. Thus before he was thirty, David Stauffer had become an international authority in his field.

In 1874, Mr. Stauffer was made Assistant Chief Engineer of the Delaware and Bound Brook Railway Co., being immediately in charge of construction of the Yardleyville Bridge. In order to accept this, he resigned his position on the South Street Bridge; but the commission insisted on retaining him as consulting engineer until the completion of the work, requiring of him only one report a month, for which they paid him full salary.

When the second bridge was finished in 1876, he came home to Lancaster for his first vacation in eleven years; but while here, he drew for the City of Philadelphia a complete set of bridge plans, which were eventually used as a basis of later construction. Early in 1877 he was appointed Engineer of Construction in the Philadelphia Water Department, in which capacity, he built the Frankford reservoir and pumping station. He became involved in a fight to drive dirty politics out of the Water Department, and was eventually forced to resign.

He had already, however, begun preparations for the greatest engineering work of his career. Mr. Richard A. Malone, a contractor, of Lancaster, wished to bid on a proposed tunnel under the Dorchester Bay, to siphon off the sewage of the City of Boston. In order to be accepted as a bidder, it was required that he have a practical engineer as a member of his firm. He therefore proposed to Mr. Stauffer that they become partners. The contract for which they were bidding was to drive a tunnel, two miles long, about two hundred feet below the surface of the bay. It was to be worked from three shafts all in the water. Estimates were to be made on the basis of a series of test borings furnished by the City of Boston. The proposal, however, contained a rather dubious clause to the effect that while the borings were "assumed to be correct," the city would not be responsible for losses incurred if conditions were found to be other than those indicated. To Mr. Stauffer, this conveyed a distinct warning, and he placed his estimates high, to allow for the suggested possibility of error. Mr. Malone, however, was ready to take almost any risk to secure the contract, which would give tremendous prestige to any firm handling it. He therefore cut \$100,000 from the bid, and obtained the contract.

The task was begun in the autumn of 1879. Before it had advanced very far, it became obvious that the test borings were almost entirely wrong. Where they had expected clay, they found quicksand. Where solid rock was indicated they found water-bearing strata. In spite of these and the added complications of a severe winter, the work progressed steadily, but by the spring of 1880, the firm of Malone and Stauffer was \$150,000 in debt with no relief allowed by their contract. One day, while Mr. Stauffer was looking up some data in the office of the City Engineer, he

came upon a chart of borings quite different from the one he had bid on, and completely in accord with conditions as found. The obvious inference was that the City had knowingly furnished a falsified chart in order to secure a lower bid. Mr. Stauffer quietly sought out the engineer who had made the borings, secured his original chart and notes, and his promise to serve as a witness, and then instructed the company's lawyer to sue the city for damages. On this threat of public exposure the city quickly came to terms, paid the debts incurred through the misinformation, and gave them a new contract based on the correct chart. The tunnel was thus carried to completion without loss, although with no substantial profit. In September 1881, the chief engineering part of the labor being accomplished, Mr. Stauffer resigned from the firm, and returned to Philadelphia.

While his troubles in Boston were at their worst, his father Jacob Stauffer died in Lancaster, March 22, 1880. "In losing him," he writes, "I lost my most beloved in the world; one whose pride in me was the chief incentive of my life struggle."

After leaving Boston, Mr. Stauffer worked for a year for the Philadelphia Bridge Works, and then, in 1882, opened his own office in New York, as a consulting engineer. From the very first he was in constant demand on engineering projects all over the United States, and, indeed in many foreign countries, so that while he never again undertook the actual labor of a great feat of engineering, he influenced many of the great projects of the end of the nineteenth century. In addition to this work, Mr. Stauffer bought a third interest in the *Engineering News*, which he edited until 1905.

Meanwhile, Mr. Stauffer's interests had by no means been confined to his own profession. The *Dictionary of American Biography* says of him, "He will be remembered for his avocations almost as much as for his professional success." Like his father, he had an insatiable curiosity in widely divergent fields. He was by nature a collector. One can see from his diaries how, very early in his career, he began to comb the bookstores for autographs, and engravings. After listing a purchase of old letters made at Yardleyville in 1875, he wrote: "Quite a haul for a little Quaker village!"



Bookplates Designed by David McNeely Stauffer

In the field of engravings he became one of the world authorities. His two-volume work *American Engravers on Copper and Steel* (1907) is now as much sought after by collectors as the works of art which it describes. He also gathered a notable collection of bookplates and made a hobby of designing very distinctive and beautiful ones himself. Among these are the plates of this Society and of two of its former presidents, Joseph H. Dubbs, and Frank R. Diffenderffer. All of these plates are now collectors' items. Throughout his life he maintained his boyhood habit of sketching everything that interested him. His diaries contain more sketches than notes, and in the extensive travels of his later life he painted exquisite water-color sketches of scenery and people, many of which are now in the possession of the Fackenthal Library.

To members of this Society he is perhaps best known for his drawings of old and historic buildings in Lancaster. Many of these have been used as illustrations for our papers. He illustrated the *History of Franklin and Marshall College* by Joseph H. Dubbs, and the extra illustrations which he had prepared, but which were not used for lack of funds, he preserved and bound up with the large-paper edition of the book, into a two-volume set, bound in blue and white morocco, which was presented to the college by his widow. A similar extra-illustrated set of Westcott's *History of Philadelphia* was given to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania by Mr. Stauffer.

On his many trips to Lancaster, there were certain friends whom he invariably visited. Besides the members of his own family, and the Malones, the most regular of these visits were to George Steinman, and J. H. Dubbs, with both of whom, of course, he shared identical interests. A typical entry in his brief but revealing diary is: "Prof. Dubbs called to see my autogs. Cigars 25 cents." There is evidence in these diaries, also, that he made regular calls on certain young ladies of this place (always discreetly mentioned by initials only). But until he was forty-six, Mr. Stauffer remained a bachelor. Then romance caught up with him in a really big way:

In 1891, Senator Warner Miller, who was president of the Nicaragua Canal Company which was attempting to construct an inter-oceanic canal across Nicaragua, chartered the steamer *Aguan*, and in an attempt to secure more backing for his scheme, invited

capitalists, army and navy officers, newspaper reporters, and engineers, to go with him to Nicaragua to inspect the work which had been begun. Mr. Stauffer went along as editor of the *Engineering News*. Among the other guests were the Hon. G. Hilton Scribner of Yonkers, a stockholder in the company, and his daughter Miss Florence Scribner. At 3:15 A.M. on the 26th of March, on its way from Jamaica to Nicaragua, the ship was wrecked on the Roncador Reef.

Now began a story which would be very improbable if it were told in fiction. The surf was running unusually light, a fact which saved the ship from being beaten to pieces in the first few minutes; it was, however, decided to abandon ship at daybreak, and the boats were prepared. The first officer and three men were put into the best boat, and ordered to attempt to reach the Corn Islands off Honduras. One of the passengers owned a small coasting steamer which was due at that point, and the owner sent orders to her captain to put about and attempt a rescue.

The passengers, in the other boat, with a few seamen to help row, were taken off to Roncador Island, seven miles to the west—a small uninhabited strip of coral sand about nine by four miles. The boat was leaky, the sharks numerous, and some of the women hysterical. Mr. Stauffer, bailing frantically near Miss Scribner, saw her gather the frightened children around her, and keep them quiet with nursery stories. "I made a mental note accordingly." The island when reached proved to be empty of everything but turtle grass, booby birds, hawkbill turtles, the ruins of a pirate fort, and two palmetto huts built by turtle hunters.

In several trips, all the passengers were brought to land. There remained the crew and some sixty Jamaica negroes who had been taken aboard at Kingston. During the long wait, with the imminent fear of the ship going to pieces, the crew and the negroes had managed to get mixed up with a number of casks of Jamaica rum which had come aboard at the same port. By the time they were rescued they were in no state to be let loose among women and children. They were therefore placed for safe-keeping in the old fort, and the women were quartered in the huts at the other end of the island, while the officers and the men of the passengers took turns mounting guard midway.

While provisions had been brought off, they were alarmed to find that the ship's water tanks had filled with salt water. The only drinking water to be had was in a small deck tank, and the smaller tanks in the bathroom. This left a dangerously low water-supply for ninety-six people for an indefinite period. Mr. Stauffer, using his engineering experience, and working at night so as not to arouse false hopes, succeeded in digging a well with a coal shovel, which supplied water good enough for cooking purposes. He was gratified years later, when reading a newspaper account of another wreck on El Roncador, to learn that the survivors were kept alive by water from a well, "boxed in with a cracker barrel," which they had found on the atoll.

With all the unpleasantness, the few days on the island were rather fun, especially for two people rapidly falling in love. By the time they were rescued, on March 31, by the steamer, which had been sent for from Corn Island, most of the party was expecting an announcement, which did not, however, come until the following October, when the Scribners held a shipwreck-reunion party. The wedding took place in Yonkers on April 19, 1892.

About half of Mr. Stauffer's memoirs, is occupied with the detailed account of his travels. From 1886, until a few years before his death, he made it a habit to take at least one long journey a year, first alone or with friends, and then with his wife. On these trips, he visited not only the usual tourist attractions, but remote places, then seldom seen by Americans. One of his most interesting trips was a visit in 1890 to Nijni-Novgorod, by way of Constantinople, and the oil-wells at Baku, where a former engineering associate was in charge. This trip ended with a flight across the Caucasus to avoid a threatened internment for cholera.

The married life of the Stauffers was harmonious and beautiful. They lived first in New York, later in Yonkers where they bought a beautiful home which they appropriately christened El Roncador. Although saddened by several long illnesses for Mrs. Stauffer, and the death of two small children, they made their home a pleasant place for friends and visitors, and an artistic center enriched with treasures collected on four continents. Here they lived until Mr. Stauffer's death on February 5, 1913. Mrs. Stauffer, who married again, survived until 1936.

During the preparation of this paper, there have come to the writer, unsolicited, a great number of communications, by letter, by telephone, and by word of mouth, all from persons who have warm personal recollections of Mr. Stauffer, or who have family traditions of long connection with this interesting family.³

The picture of Mr. Stauffer, which I have gained from all these reports, is a very charming one. His personality was so vivid that it left its imprint on the minds of persons who were young children when they knew him. This may have been due to the fact that he had a deep love of children, and was always eager to do things for them. I have heard of a boy who secured an engineering education by personal correspondence with Mr. Stauffer over a long period of years. His reading and studies were directed by the busy expert, and examination papers prepared and corrected by mail.⁴ I know of a young girl, who showed promise in line drawing, for whom Mr. Stauffer offered to pay for an art education, under his personal supervision. After the death of his own children, he tried to adopt a little distant cousin, but her parents, although sympathetic, could not spare her.

I think perhaps the nicest thing I have heard said of him is the report of a woman who recalled, "When my father invited celebrities to meals, my mother was always nervous; but when Mr. Stauffer was in town, she invited him herself."

³ I have also received a very interesting genealogical report on the Stauffer family from Mrs. Harry B. Gall, who is a cousin of Mr. Stauffer. I had hoped to include her report with this paper, but several discrepancies between her records and those given by Mr. Stauffer, need rechecking before the list can be published, so I am placing her notes on file with Mr. Stauffer's at the Fackenthal Library, where they can be consulted with ease.

⁴ As reported by Martin D. Sell, it was his brother, William Drumm Sell, who was the young man aided by Mr. Stauffer. William became a prominent civil engineer of West Virginia, and during World War I served as captain of engineers.