

Porter
Draft #1, 10/1/86

My father was the only child of a widowed mother, who was always simply "grandmother" to us children. We never called (or referred to her) by more endearing terms, probably because on the death of her husband she assumed life-long mourning, dressing always in long, full black shirts and shirtwaists that buttoned closely around her neck. A costume of such formality, together with an inherent reserve, inhibited spontaneous expressions and demonstrations of affection by her grandchildren. Father, however, always called her affectionately "marmie."

Grandmother's maiden name was Julia Foster. She had two sisters, Clara and Adele, and their father was John Foster, a doctor. He had a brother, who was an officer in the army at Fort Dearborn on the southern tip of Lake Michigan. John Foster visited his brother at Fort Dearborn, and together they purchased land near the fort in the first government land sale. The brother was transferred to another military outpost farther north on Lake Michigan, where he was killed by an enlisted man he had reprimanded for being drunk on duty. John Foster inherited his brother's share of the land they had purchased together.

Because of its strategic location, Fort Dearborn, established originally as a defensive outpost against the Indians, grew rapidly following the end of the Indian wars to become an important agricultural and industrial center. Early during its

growth it was given the Indian name "Chicago," a name not intended to characterize industrial development but meant as a disparaging epithet for the swampy environment surrounding the site; the term is reputed to be the Indian word for skunk cabbage.

John Foster married Nancy Smith of Peterborough, New Hampshire and brought her as his bride to Fort Dearborn, where he practiced medicine and was a member of the school board. They lived on Madison and Franklin Streets in what became Chicago, and Foster Avenue still bears his name. With the building of the railroads, Chicago grew from a small farming town into a major transportation and shipping center for the entire Midwest. Not foreseeing the enormous appreciation in value (concurrent with the growth of Chicago) of the land they inherited from their father, Clara and Adele, preferring more civilized society, sold their shares to Julia and returned to Peterborough, the home of their mother. They became residents of New Hampshire and settled on Elm Hill Farm, Clara marrying a Bass and Adele an Adams.

Julia Foster married Maurice Porter, an Episcopal minister. They went to Europe on their honeymoon before settling in Racine, Wisconsin, where he had his parish. In Racine two sons were born-- Maurice Junior, who died in childhood at the age of 12 or 14, and James Foster, my father. My grandfather died of appendicitis when my father was five years old, and following that tragic event grandmother moved back to Chicago to devote herself to the upbringing of her son and to various charitable enterprises.

Motivated by her religious beliefs to help alleviate the sufferings of others and to make her own sorrow more bearable, she established with the aid of women friends a hospital for children of the poor. At first a simple project in a rented

house, where the sick would receive constant care, it soon expanded, with male financial and administrative assistance, to a professional institution. Dedicated to the memory of my grandmother's eldest son, it was named the Maurice Memorial Childrens Hospital.

My father received his early schooling in Chicago and was a young man at the time of Darwin's revolutionary theories on biological succession. With a group of contemporaries--young men and women of Chicago who were similarly influenced--he helped found the Agassiz Association, a discussion group which met frequently to exchange ideas on current scientific theories in biology, geology and evolution. My father became a dedicated protagonist of the scientific interpretation of natural phenomena, with an unshakeable belief in causality and a fierce rejection of purpose as a driving force in the universe. Under the influence of Darwin's writings, my father professed agnosticism; in later years he disclaimed such qualified skepticism and pronounced his disbelief in a god or the need for a supernatural explanation of existence as inconsistent with a purposeless world. But perhaps because he was the only surviving child of a widowed mother, who was the wife of an Episcopal minister, and had been brought up under the strict guidance of the Episcopalian faith, he retained, if not the religion, certainly its moral precepts. He held to very high standards of conduct. Truth, honesty and fulfillment of all promises were his guiding principles. He did not lecture us on these ethical matters; it was by example that we learned to honor and live by them.

Although he seldom talked about his anti-religious beliefs, it is not surprising that I absorbed my father's point of view. Years later, it was dramatically demonstrated to me how beliefs are unknowingly passed on to one's children, when, quite out of the blue, my son asked me, "Daddy, do you believe in God?" I was taken aback and tried to evade the question by saying there