The Happy Valley: Constance F. Woolson’s View of Zoar

Kathleen M. Fernandez

In this practical century, with its railroad insulting the venerable majesty of Mount Washington, its suspension bridge spanning the tremendous chasm of foaming Niagara, and its telegraph penetrating the sacred mysteries of the deep sea, there were yet found three souls who dared start on a pilgrimage to the Happy Valley that lies hidden away from the world among the mountains through which winds the Tuscarawas River in Ohio. (1)

Such was the view of Constance Fenimore Woolson, novelist and short story writer of the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Woolson, growing up in nearby Cleveland, Ohio, visited Zoar with her family several times during the 1850’s and 601s. Her first published piece was the non-fiction account of Zoar entitled “The Happy Valley,” quoted above. She also wrote two fictional stories based on Zoar: “Solomon” and “Wilhelmina,” published in the Atlantic Monthly in 1873 and 1875 respectively.

The Zoar that Constance Woolson encountered in the 1850’s and 60’s was a fairly self-sufficient place. The Society raised almost all the wholesome food she enjoyed, made the woolen cloth for the old-fashioned clothing she disparaged and constructed from local materials the sturdy German houses she admired.

Since its founding in 1817 and its 1819 decision to become communal, the Society of Separatists of Zoar had come a long way from its hardscrabble beginnings. Shrewd business decisions and the building of the Ohio & Erie Canal through its lands in the late 1820’s enabled the Society to become prosperous.

The Society attained its greatest affluence in the years immediately preceding the Civil War. In 1852, the value of the Zoar property was estimated to be in the neighborhood of one million dollars. (2) It boasted a sawmill, planing mill, machine shop, two blast furnaces, a foundry, numerous craft shops and 8,826 acres of land, 2448 of it improved. (3) To use Woolson’s words, “the industrious habits and systematic labor” (4) of the Separatists had “made [Zoar] a garden of rest in the wilderness.” (5)

Woolson’s family made their visits to Zoar when the Society was changing. The Society’s dynamic leader, Joseph Bimeler, had recently died in 1853, but the Society continued forward on the momentum created by its founders. The second generation, although not as capable as its elders, had been schooled in the need for communal security and were taking over administration of the group.

Woolson also witnessed the stresses created by the advent of the Civil War on the pacifist Zoarites, and based one of her stories, “Wilhelmina,” on the conflict created when 14 young men forsook that fundamental Separatist belief to enlist in the 107th Ohio Volunteer Infantry, a German company.

Although all but two men returned to the welcoming arms of the Society (one died of malaria, the other of tuberculosis), the war caused a rift within the close-knit community and exposed the soldiers to the temptations of the outside world, as Woolson points out in “Wilhelmina.11 Although the soldiers all came home, many either never became members or eventually left the Society. (6)

Zoar had been a tourist attraction practically since its founding, and after the building of the canal, became an overnight stop for passengers on the packet boats. Two hotels, one right on the canal, were built in the early 1830’s to profit from this trade. The Canal Hotel was closed in the 1840’s when it proved to be too far from the eyes of the Trustees, but the Zoar Hotel remained in business throughout the Society, indeed until 1985.

Although the practical Separatists appreciated the increased income realized from “summer visitors,” they never fully accepted these outsiders, some regarding them as “extraneous and even harmful to the best interests of the community. The fact that for many years Zoar children were forbidden to talk with the hotel guests is significant.” (7)

But visitors like the Woolson family continued to come and the Society accommodated them, both in the Hotel and in some larger homes. These outsiders not only brought with them their fancy clothes and horses, but also with their tips introduced an underground money economy that only increased as time passed.

In 1892, the need for additional revenue overcame the old prejudice against “summer boarders,” and an addition of 50 rooms was made to the original Hotel. This influx of outsiders was a contributing reason for the dissolution of the Society in 1898.
Before the Civil War, Zoar was a simpler place. To Woolson, Zoar's seeming isolation created an island of
Old World charm which contrasted mightily with the burgeoning industrialism of Cleveland. Her writings are
imbued with this romantic vision of her “Happy Valley.”

Constance Fenimore Woolson was born on March 5, 1840 in Claremont, NH, the sixth child of Charles J.
and Hannah Cooper Pomeroy Woolson. Mrs. Woolson was the daughter of one of James Fenimore Cooper's
elder sisters.

A few weeks after Constance's birth, three of her older sisters died of scarlet fever. The bereaved family
soon moved to Cleveland.

In the 1840's Cleveland was growing up as a Lake Erie port and northern terminus of the Ohio & Erie
Canal, the same waterway which passed through Zoar, 65 miles south.

Constance was educated as a well-bred Victorian young lady in Cleveland's finishing schools. Her father,
although now a businessman, had once been a journalist and publisher. According to her biographer, "Literary
expression was a normal part of Miss Woolson's childhood activities.” (8)

As a girl, Constance accompanied her father on summer trips, including ones to Zoar. A letter in the Zoar
manuscripts gives details of perhaps the first of these excursions. Dated July 3, 1856, Charles Woolson in-
quired about the rates at the Zoar Hotel and wondered if it would be all right to bring his wife, three daugh-
ters, granddaughter and nurse to visit. Christian Weibel, the Society treasurer, replied that the rate for that
many would be $45 per week, but that he preferred that they not bring the granddaughter and nurse, as they
"may render it difficult to bestow the necessary attention and comfort to all." (9)

In preparation for an 1862 visit, Woolson asked about the price for keeping horses (answer: $2) and if the
Society had sidesaddles, “I mean such saddles as Ladies use to ride on. Please let me know! My daughters
wish to ride on horseback when they go into the country, but to do that they must have saddles!” on this
letter's reverse, Weibel indicated his reply on the boarding of horses, but not on the availability of sidesaddles.
(10)

A third letter from Woolson, dated 1866, is addressed to Christian Ruof, “Landlord at the Zoar Hotel,”
and shows an easy familiarity between the family and the Society. He comments that a jug of wine was
missing in their luggage after their arrival home, as was a set of harness. He asks that both be sent by canal
boat. Apparently he gave a pair of white horses to the Society. “I hope the white horses please you? and that
the change of masters pleases them.” (11)

Constance grew close to her father on these trips and later remarked in a letter, “As I look back now, I see
it was the romantic side of my father's nature that was pleased with the little Tuscarawas community; father
had so much romance. It had but little to feed upon in Ohio.” (12)

By accounts, Constance Woolson was a popular schoolgirl, “at once fun-loving and dignified,” (13) who
enjoyed taking long walks and rowing, two pastimes that her semi-autobiographical narrators also enjoyed.

Woolson made additional summer trips to Mackinac Island, upstate New York and Wisconsin, locations
that figure prominently, along with Zoar, in her first collection of short stories, Castle Nowhere.

The Civil War was the “most prominent public event in Woolson's life.” (14) She fell into unrequited love
with a young officer and participated in the “sanitary fairs” of that time.

After her father's death in 1869, the Woolson family left Cleveland never to return, and Constance,
unmarried, embarked on her literary career. Her very first published story was “The Happy Valley,” printed
in Harpers Monthly in July 1870.

She traveled with her mother and sister Clara to St. Augustine, Florida, which also became a setting for
her stories. They also spent time in other resort towns of the south, especially Asheville, North Carolina. After
her mother's death in 1879, Woolson traveled to Europe to write and live out the rest of her life. She died after
an influenza attack in 1894.

Woolson's literary output was primarily short stories, although she also wrote several novels. In her own
day, Miss Woolson's work was well-received by the public and critics alike. She was especially noted for “the
illusion of reality created ... and by the humanity of her characters.” (15) She was a contemporary and friend
of both William Dean Howells and Henry James, both of whom gave positive reviews of her work.

Today, with her books out of print, Woolson is known mainly to literary scholars. Her reputation is now as
a pioneer in the “local-color movement” — using and describing her surroundings in the background of her
stories. Other scholars note her treatment of Americans in Europe (a prevalent theme in her later work) and her ability to describe accurately small-town life.

In 1947, in his book *The Times of Melville* and Whitman, critic Van Wyck Brooks summed up Woolson’s contributions: “Miss Woolson was a highly conscious writer, careful, skillful, subtle, with a sensitive clairvoyant feeling for human nature, [and] with the gift of discriminating observation….” (16)

The latter attribute, that of observation, is true in her three stories about Zoar.

“The Happy Valley,” printed in Harpers Monthly in July 1870, was Woolson’s first published article. She was now 30 years old. Her father had recently died, and she had moved away from Cleveland with her mother to St. Augustine, Florida. Perhaps this 4-page piece brought back pleasant memories of summer visits to Zoar with her father.

The account is first-person. The narrator, her father and her sister Sadie drive a carriage down from Cleveland (a three-day trip then), noting the changes in landscape from the flat Lake Erie shore to the Appalachian foothills surrounding Zoar. The hills are seen as a device protecting the “Happy Valley.” The names Zoar or Separatist never appear in the story, but the context makes clear the location.

The narrator gives a fulsome description of Zoar entered at evening: the cows coming home, the milking, the hotel and its fare, the young people singing in the twilight.

…The tree-bordered fields stretched over the plain; and up to the forest-crowned hills, which stood like ramparts against the sky, a fortification from the outside world. We drove slowly down into the valley, passing groups of laborers in their uncouth costumes, and following the full-udder cows, with fragrant breath and mild eyes, as they wound toward the white dairy buildings, where a girl stood on the steps, blowing an antique horn to hasten the loiterers. (17)

…We strolled by to the hotel, a large white building, regarded by the entire community as a wonder of size and beauty. The smiling landlord appeared, rubbed his hands, and, in answer to our inquiries, replied, “Gut fare fur mann und beast; one feed victuals, twelve cents; we keeps folks for forty-five cents a day, but we allows kein smoke und kein swear; breakfast at six, dinner at twelve, supper at half past five; walk in.” (18)

When we had finished supper, we strolled out into the town and listened to the young men and girls singing together on the piazzas, while a rustic band of home-made instruments accompanied them in the simple melody. (19)

The next day is Sunday, and the visitors go to a church service.

On Sunday we went to the little church and watched the long file of worshippers march gravely in ... the service began with a hymn, followed by a long sermon.... The singers were accompanied by a band ... a collection of quaint wooden pipes, flageolets, flutes and violins whose patterns came from the old country half a century before, and, like everything else in the Happy Valley remained unchanged. (20)

The narrator devotes a long passage to prove that “Love does not seem to be a ruling passion in the Happy Valley.” (21) She cites incidents of the phlegmatic courtship of storekeeper Louis and Hotel waitress Salome (real people, by the way), and a trustee who, forced to marry by the “pastor” (probably Joseph Bimeler), interrupts his work only briefly to take a bride.

Woolson exalts over the food: the rich cream, the pretzels - the queen of cakes,” fresh butter, noodles, sauerkraut fritters. “We soon learned to relish these dishes, although we did not succeed in acquiring the constant hunger of the natives.... 11 (22)

Although she alludes to the Happy Valley’s communalism: a monetary tip to a hotel porter was declared “gut fur nicht” (23), the milk pails indicated each household with a “hieroglyphic sign” (24), and the houses were all furnished alike (25), she never says why these people kept themselves separate, why their customs and architecture “reminded one of Old World pictures.” (26)

Although the narrator mentions how “rich” the community is, how much land they have, how their “morality is without a flaw,” (27) she doesn’t detail why the Separatists came here and why they prospered in America. Zoar is admired for its picturesqueness, its embodiment of the pastoral ideal, not its Utopian vision.

For whatever reason, she does admire it. The story concludes: “Happy little Valley; our ways are not as thy ways, but who can say that thou hast not chosen the better part?” (28)

27
Woolson’s next story featuring Zoar was published first in the Atlantic Monthly in October, 1873. “Solomon” uses Zoar as a backdrop for a story of unrealized dreams.

In the story, a pair of young, unmarried women, Erminia and Dora, the first-person narrator, travel from “C—” (Cleveland) to an unnamed “Community,” Zoar, in the autumn. Sophisticated city-dwellers, they represent the educated women of the time.

Looking for diversion, they walk to the sulfur spring on the edge of the Community’s property. The spring is inside a log cabin, looking “like the huts of the Black Forest.” (29)

Presently residing in the cabin are outsiders Solomon and Dorcas Bangs who have fallen on hard times. Solomon, who was “no Dutchman,” (30) grew up working for the Society as an outsider and now works for them as a coal miner. Solomon is an untrained artist who worships his once-beautiful wife. In primitive style, he has often painted her portrait as the “Queen of Sheby” and other Biblical and allegorical heroines.

Seeing the well-dressed city women reminds the dispirited Dorcas of her faded beauty and former status as the daughter of a storekeeper in nearby “Sandy” [Sandyville], who once wore “feathered bonnets, openwork stockings” and owned a set of painted “chany” (china).

After viewing the portraits, the girls bestow gifts of a scarf and handkerchief upon Dorcas and vow to return the following day.

Dorcas’ spirit has risen in the meantime, and she has fixed up the cabin in anticipation of Erminia and Dora’s arrival. A storm arises while the women are visiting and they stay the night. They meet Solomon for the first time when he arrives home from his work in the mines. Erminia, having taken lessons, teaches Solomon something of the rules of drawing and perspective.

The next day, after going back to Zoar, the girls hear news that Solomon has been injured in a mining accident. They rush to the cabin and find him on his death-bed, his wife disconsolate. Hanging on an easel nearby is a new charcoal portrait of his wife, now done with a delicate hand. His last words are: “It’s you, Dorcas, that’s how you looked to me, but I never could get it right before.” (31)

Zoar is only the setting for this short story. The Community’s different lifestyle is the reason Solomon was never trained as an artist: “He had been in the Community from boyhood, therefore he had no chance to learn life, to see its art- treasures. He has been shipwrecked, poor soul, shipwrecked.” (32) The insular life of Zoar offered a stark contrast to what might have been the life of Solomon.

Woolson does include descriptive passages which depict a pastoral Zoar, one that city-dwellers might wish to escape to:

The village was our favorite retreat, our little hiding place in the hill-country; at that time it was almost as isolated as a solitary island... Each tiled roof covered a home with a thrifty mother and a train of grave little children.... We liked them all, we liked the life; we liked the mountain-high beds, the coarse snowy linen, and the remarkable counterpanes; we liked the cream-stewed chicken, the Kase-lab, and fresh butter, but, best of all, the fresh bretzels (pretzels) for breakfast.

We stayed among the simple people and played at shepherdesses and pastorellas; we adopted the hours of the birds, we went to church on Sunday and sang German chorals as old as Luther. We even played at work to the extent of helping to gather apples... (33)

As with “The Happy Valley,” Woolson makes much of Zoar’s isolation: “Fritz belonged to the Community, and knew nothing of the outside world. . . .” (34) She does touch briefly on Zoar’s economic system, communalism:

Content with their own, unmindful of the rest of the world, these Germans grew steadily richer and richer, solving the problem of co-operative labor, while the French and Americans worked at it in vain . . . .”(35)

“Solomon,” unlike “The Happy Valley,” uses Zoar only as a backdrop and as contrast, and does not give many details of Society life. The story of Solomon and his thwarted ambition takes center stage.

The third story, “Wilhelmina,” is more of a descriptive piece. Published in January 1875 in the Atlantic Monthly, it again uses the device of a female first person narrator. This time the unnamed narrator is married, although the husband is only alluded to and never becomes part of the action.
We meet the narrator, who has a self-confessed “romantic imagination,” in a rowboat on the Tuscarawas. Accompanying her is Wilhelmina, a young woman member of the Society, who in coloring and temperament is seen as somehow different from the “rosy Salomes.11 “From the first we felt sure she was grafted, and not a shoot from the Community stalk.” (36)

The time is the end of the Civil War; the troops are returning home. Wilhelmina is in love with Gustav, one of the Society’s young men who enlisted in the Army and she anxiously awaits his return.

The narrator, privy to the information about returning troops in the newspaper, tells her that he will be coming home soon.

The soldiers return, to the great joy of the Community, but Gustav returns changed, and rejects his childhood sweetheart, Wilhelmina. He leaves the Society soon after his return to marry an “overdressed, flashy” outsider. He tells the narrator, 11 ... I do like to be free. I feel all cramped up here, with these rules and bells... (37)

Wilhelmina, in the no-nonsense fashion of the Separatists, marries the baker, whom she does not love, and, tragically, dies soon after.

In the course of the story, the narrator wants to take Wilhelmina home, “[accustom] her gradually to other clothes and ways, [teach] her enough of the world to enable her to hold her place without pain... And find a situation for Gustav in the iron mills near Cleveland... 11 (38) In reply, Wilhelmina shakes her head no and says, “Ilse better here.” (39)

“Wilhelmina” is similar in many ways to “The Happy Valley.” It even shares descriptive passages that may well have been copied from the previous story. These include a description of the dairy, where “the milk was poured into a huge strainer, a constant procession of girls with tubs above and the old milk-mother ladling out as fast as she could below.” (40) Similar also are passages on the worthlessness of money (41), placing rosebushes on graves (42), and the reply, “No, Ilse better here,” after an invitation to come to the city. (43)

Woolson gives more background on the Society than in the other two stories. The Separatists were

“... a hardy, simple-minded band, whose fathers for religion’s sake, had taken the long journey from Wurttemburg to this distant valley and made it a garden in the wilderness.” (44)

Their “pastor” (alluding to Bimeler) 11 ... had led these sheep to their refuge in the wilds of the New World.” (45)

As in the previous story, her view of Zoar was a romantic one. She describes the greenhouse as 11 ... all antiquated, but to me none the less charming.” (46) She admired the “ancient cottages” (47), probably the log cabins, and took pleasure in her Old World surroundings.

But Woolson had some idealized views about the Society that we now know were wrong. She describes her narrator as “... a being from the outside world where newspapers, the modern Tree of Knowledge, were not forbidden.” (48) We know from the list of periodicals received at the Zoar Post Office in 1870 that the Society subscribed to at least nine different newspapers, many with multiple copies. Outsiders in the community subscribed to even more. (49) Zoar was not the isolated place that even we today think it was.

After the soldiers arrive home, the narrator speculates that twenty years before, the soldiers would not have been allowed back into village life, “... but now they dared not, since even into Zoar had penetrated the knowledge that America was a free country.” (50) This bit of intelligence was never far from the original Separatists’ minds, for freedom, the freedom to worship as they chose, was the reason they had immigrated to America in the first place.

In all of the stories, Woolson gives the impression that all Separatists were flaxen haired, and that all the women were broad-shouldered. Having studied numerous photographs of Society members, I can say that although the majority may have been Nordic in color and build, there were others that were small and dark, like Wilhelmina.

In her depiction of Zoar during the Civil War, Woolson is misinformed. She is correct in relating the Society’s pacifism, “... their conscientious scruples against rendering military service,” but she claims that it was “... the surrounding towns, long jealous of the wealth of this foreign community, misunderstanding its tenets and glowing with the zeal against ‘sympathizers’ ...” (51) that forced the Zoar men to enlist for the Union.
In a study of area newspapers, no such evidence was found. (52) The Society paid a $200 draft exemption for each eligible soldier under the law permitting conscientious objectors. (53) It was the patriotic ardor of these young men which caused them to enlist, not outside pressure.

Of the three stories, “Wilhelmina” is the most descriptive, and gives the outsider a fairly accurate, although romanticized, view of the Society.

“Wilhelmina” was printed in its entirety in the January 1, 1875, issue of the Tuscarawas Advocate, published in nearby New Philadelphia. (54) Its publication caused a letter to the editor to appear in the January 22 issue criticizing the article and its author.

Written by one ‘N,” presumably a close neighbor to the Separatists and one who knew intimately of their lives, the letter uses strong language to correct some of the assumptions made by Miss Woolson in the story. “She would try and make the world believe that ... the whole Society was as ignorant as the Fejee [sic] Islanders.” (55)

N. states correctly that newspapers were allowed in Zoar. In regard to the Civil War, his view is that Woolson

“would seem to call in question the loyalty of the Society, by asserting that not until the war threatened with hanging could they be induced to hang out the flag. Now, that assertion might have been dropped in to spice and adorn the tale, but has no foundation in truth.” (56)

He is most incensed regarding Woolson’s description of the gardener’s wife, Wilhelminals mother, who is referred to several times as “leather-colored,” reflecting the time she spent in the sun gardening. N. is indignant that such a “modest lady” should be called such a derogatory term.

Now, Mr. Editor, I am acquainted with the gardener’s wife, and have seen the authoress, Miss Woolson, and so far as comeliness is concerned, the odds is [sic] in favor of the gardener’s wife, if not in gab and gaudy plumage. (57)

Constance Woolson received a copy of this letter to the editor, and in correspondence to her nephew Samuel Mather, she acknowledged that the publication of “Wilhelmina” disturbed some at the community. “Someone sent me a New Philadelphia paper containing a savage article on ‘Wilhelmina,’” based upon the idea that my characters were all from life, and consequently the leathery woman was the good Mrs. [Simon] Beiter, the gardener’s wife, etc., etc. Of course the article in the country paper was of no consequence, but I was distressed to think that perhaps the Beiters, always good friends of mine, thought so, too. I therefore wrote to Mr. Beiter telling him it was but a fancy sketch.” (58)

Other reviewers were not so kind to Miss Woolson. In his review of Castle Nowhere: Lake-Country Sketches (1875) in which both “Solomon” and “Wilhelmina” were reprinted in an anthology, William Dean Howells, Ohio-born editor of the Atlantic Monthly, thought that “Solomon” was “a triumph of its kind.... The Zoar Community ... has had the fortune to find an artist [as] the first who introduces us to its life. Solomon’s character is studied with a delicate and courageous sympathy ... and keenly touches us with his pathetic history. An even greater success of the literary art is his poor, complaining wife.... It is a very complete and beautiful story.” (59)

Howells thought “Wilhelminall “not quite so good” as “Solomon.” Rayburn S. Moore, author of a book on Woolson and her work, writes that the character of Wilhelmina “fails to come alive,” and that “the emotional attachment to her lover Gustav never seems quite real.” (60)

To students of Zoar, Woolson’s work gives us lively and lucid descriptions of everyday life seen through a tourist’s eyes. Although the characters may seem somewhat wooden, the views somewhat romantic and, in some cases, misinformed, the stories have the ring of truth. Woolson’s feelings for Zoar show through. You can visualize the “old milk-mother ladling out as fast as she could” (61) and hear the singing of the young people “while a rustic band of home-made instruments accompanied them in the simple melody.” (62)

We at historic sites must rely on such first-person accounts to give life to our communities. Ledger books and business letters only go so far. They don’t tell you how the people really lived. These three stories, “descriptive articles in the guise of fiction,” (63) serve as eyewitness accounts of someone who really cared about Zoar and its people and wanted others to appreciate this “Happy Valley” too.
NOTES

3 Nixon Family Papers. MSS Collection 680, The Ohio Historical Society, Columbus, Ohio, Box 3, Folder 11.
9 Nixon Family Papers, Box 2, Folder 13.
10 Ibid., Box 2, Folder 14.
11 Ibid., Box 2, Folder 13.
12 Moore, Constance Fenimore Woolson, p. 144.
13 Ibid., p. 21.
14 Ibid., p. 22.
15 Ibid., p. 136.
16 Ibid., p. 141.
18 Ibid., p. 283.
19 Ibid., p. 284.
20 Ibid., p. 285.
21 Ibid., p. 284.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., p. 283.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., p. 285.
28 Ibid.
30 Ibid., p. 248.
31 Ibid., p. 265.
32 Ibid., p. 251.
33 Ibid., p. 239.
34 Ibid., p. 252.
37 Ibid., p. 296.
38 Ibid., p. 297.
39 Ibid., p. 277.
46 Ibid., p. 276.
47 Ibid., p. 275.
48 Ibid., p. 270.
49 “Newspapers and Periodicals Received. Zoar, Ohio, Post Office Records,” *Zoar, Ohio, Papers*, MSS Collection 110, The Ohio Historical Society, Columbus, Ohio, Box 80, Folder 5.
51 Ibid., p. 288.
55 *Tuscarawas Advocate*, Vol. 41, No. 11, p. 3.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
59 Ibid., p. 48.
60 Ibid., p. 49.
63 Ibid., p. 41.