Lawnfield: “a new sweet tie”

John Shaw

James Garfield’s earliest years were spent on a farm. In his Diary, which he began in 1848 at the age of 17, many references having to do with helping his brother Thomas in the farm chores appear—planting, haying, harvesting, chopping wood, building fences, boiling salts, “hiving a swarm of bees” and so on. About his original home in Orange, he once wrote in later years: “The farther I grow away from these scenes, the more I am attracted by their memories.” Obviously, those years made a deep impression on him, and he looked back on them with considerable nostalgia, as indeed did Jason Dolson Cox, who in a eulogistic passage after Garfield’s death, wrote:

I can think of few more healthy places for the growth of mind and body than a farming community in Northern Ohio fifty years ago. . . The country was just passing from the rude conditions of first settlements in the wilderness to that of a thriving industrial region, dotted with prosperous villages. Under such circumstances poverty had none of the degradation which too often accompanies it in old and populous communities. Here was no squalor, no vice, no loss of caste. It involved no closing of any career to a boy who had health and courage, brains and will.

Of course, we realize how much of a romanticization this statement is when we read what Garfield said in a letter to his friend Harry Rhodes, written on his 31st birthday in 1862:

I, an over-grown, uncombed, unwashed boy . . . was at that age compelled to begin the work of exhuming my manhood from the drift and rubbish which every chance had thrown upon me . . . Hardly a day passes in which I do not find sad traces of the seventeen year’s chaos.

Still, by 1876, Garfield’s thoughts had mellowed into fond recollections of his life as a farm boy. “Here is my love of a farm revived in me,” he said. Accordingly, in October of that year, undoubtedly after discussions with his wife, Lucretia, Garfield bought the Dickey property just east of Mentor, along the Lake Shore Railway, about twenty miles from Cleveland. In his Diary entry for Tuesday, September 26, he had written:

Dr. Robison drove me to his farm, about two miles from Mentor village, where I found Crete and Mother awaiting me. Spent most of the day in examining some farms which are for sale. Made the widow Dickey an offer of $115 per acre for her farm of 116 acres, and I think it will result in a purchase. I must get a place where I can put my boys at work, and teach them farming. I think this farm will always be worth the price I offer, and probably more by and by.

And to this statement he added a little more realistically on October 11, 1876:

We . . . consummated the purchase of the Dickey farm of 118 74/100ths acres in Mentor. So at last I am to be a farmer again. As a financial investment, I do not think it very wise; but as a means of securing a summer home, and teaching my boys to do farm work, I feel well about it.

Garfield soon added to his 118 acres another 40, for a total cost of about $17,500. Dr. Robison, the Garfields’ old friend going back to Hiram days, had a farm a half mile to the west of theirs. He and Lucretia (Crete, as Garfield called his wife) counted heavily on Robison’s help and direction, as they went about the business of restoring the shabby, dilapidated property to a fine working farm.

Beyond its nostalgic meaning for Garfield, the farm served several other purposes in his mind. First, Portage County had been removed from Garfield’s district. The Garfield home had been sold to Burke Hinsdale. Now the family was inconveniently using the Rudolph house, Lucretia’s childhood home, for vacations in the summers, thus establishing a residence in Garfield’s district. But Portage County was no longer in his district. Mentor in Lake County was. Then, with the two boys growing into their teens, the Garfield’s felt that farm life would be good for them, as mentioned in both Diary entries just read: “I can put my boys at work and teach them farming.”
Furthermore, Garfield himself thought he needed a complete change each summer from the heavy burdens of his congressional work. Once he had decided to continue in politics, rather than resigning his seat and joining a Cleveland law firm, Garfield believed he needed the “touch” of the soil in the summers to renew his strength, as in the Greek myth of Antaeus, who derived his strength from the earth. After his first summer’s work on the farm, Garfield said he felt his mental powers much increased by having lain “fallow for a while.” “From the first day of the October session,” he wrote, “I felt my intellectual atmosphere to be clearer and more vigorous thinking was easier for me than usual.”

Finally, Garfield saw the farm as an opportunity to do scientific experiments in agriculture. “I long for a time,” he wrote, “to study agricultural chemistry and make experiments with soils and forces.” As a politician with a rare spirit of curiosity about scientific endeavors, Garfield had no outlet for his ever-searching mind. With the farm he could challenge himself with many experiments. For instance, in December of 1880, after he had become the president-elect of the United States, he wrote in his Diary: “Had Green sow 20 bushels of fresh elm wood ash to the acre on half the meadow by the barns. I try the experiment on the snow. Will put bone dust on the other half.”

Altogether, the farm would fulfill his ambitions nicely. And so, as he put it in an 1880 account to a biographer, “I saw this farm down here for sale and late in the fall of 1876, just as I was starting for Washington, I bought it on five or six years time.” To his wife in a letter written October 5, 1876, he concluded, “So, my darling, you shall have a home and a cow.”

There’s little doubt that without his wife, Crete, and without Dr. Robison next door, the Garfield agricultural experiment would not have fared so well as it did. Both James and Lucretia threw themselves into the project with tremendous energy. Despite some very depressing moments, most of them experienced by Crete, they kept their spirits up and tackled the many problems with good humor. During that first spring of 1877, when they took up residence at the farm, Crete wrote to James: I asked Bancroft

if he had planted the sweet corn by his house. He said he told you that he would like all that garden for himself and that you said all right. Of course, I couldn’t contradict him, but I don’t believe you ever told him he could have all that acre. I am thoroughly disgusted with a man with a family on the place. His wife is of no account in the world to us, and I warrant they will get a good support off the farm beside their wages... Also, the ants and cutworm are playing mischief. Behold the farmer’s vexations. But enough of complaints. We must take the bitter with the sweet.

Garfield himself, when he could be at the farm, which was typically only a few weeks during the summer, went at the work in his usual energetic and thorough manner, as if he were preparing an oration on the census, or an article for The North American Review.

On Tuesday, March 20, 1877 the intense work of rebuilding the farm began. On that first day:

Dr. Robison, Mrs. Robison, Crete and I drove to the farm, where we spent several hours in examining the house and making arrangements for putting it in order. We concluded to build a small addition to the rear so as to make a sufficiently large family room. Drove back to the brow of the hill with Robison and discussed the drainage of the swamp and the arrangements for the hydraulic ram. Returned to the Doctor’s for dinner. After dinner went again to the farm and made further studies of the situation and determined to what point I would move the barns. Back to the Doctor’s in the evening a good deal tired.

During the spring and summer of 1877, then, a flurry of activity took place on the Mentor farm: Crete and James went shopping in Cleveland for furniture, dishes, crockery and kitchen items, as well as farm tools, while workmen moved manure heaps, the pig sty (which, according to a visitor “wafted its sweetness to the windows of the parlor”), drained the swamp, put in the pipes for spring water to be carried to the house, and while carpenters began the new addition, James bought horses and got the ploughing started, planted barley, and sought to buy some livestock.

But James had to be away a lot. Three days later he and Crete returned to their home in Washington, staying until April 12. Then they went back to the farm. For his April 14 entry Garfield wrote:

After dinner Crete and I went with Dr. R. to our farm, and found the carpenters and painters at work putting the place in order. The barns have just been moved to the rear,
the waterworks are nearly done, but the general state of chaos opens before us a fine field for work and contrivance. We commenced work, and put up a few beds on the second or roof story.

On April 16, 1877, the entire Garfield family, including, of course, Garfield's mother, Eliza, spent their first night in their new summer home. Russell H. Conwell, one of Garfield's campaign biographers, visited the family at just this time: I “found the General's writing table in the front hall, surrounded by boxes, furniture, papers, letters, books, children, and callers. Yet how happy they all seemed!”

By the end of May an outbuilding behind the house had been gutted and fitted into a library; fertilizer had been purchased and applied; the kitchen stove had been put in with an exhaust pipe; a mare, harness and buggy had been bought; more loads of furniture and books from Hiram had been brought over; fields had been harrowed and barley and corn planted; and a cow had been purchased. At this time Garfield wrote Burke Hinsdale: “You can hardly imagine how completely I have turned my mind out of its usual channels during the last four weeks. You know I have never been able to do anything moderately; and today I find myself lame in every muscle with too much lifting and digging.” Soon after, Garfield left for Mobile, Alabama, to consult on a law case.

Lucretia was in charge. It was during this time that she wrote James one of her “blue” letters about their twelve year old son, Jim: they were not as happy as Conwell thought: I don’t know how to manage him, she wrote:

I cannot conceive of any possible reason why he should be such a trial to my life... I cannot be patient with him, any more than I could submit with patience to some extreme physical torture... from morning till night I can never know one moment what he will do next... It is horrible to be a man, but the grinding misery of being a woman between the upper and nether millstone of household cares and training children is almost as bad. To be half civilized with some aspirations for enlightenment, and obliged to spend the largest part of the time the victim of young barbarians keeps one in a perpetual ferment.

Two days later Crete wrote of Jim’s near-fatal accident. He had thoughtlessly thrown open an umbrella on the wagon seat, and the horses had panicked, racing back toward the barn, pulling out a stump, crashing against the fence, and breaking a wheel as they madly dashed down the lane. Jim and the wagon box were thrown into the air when the wagon hit the fence, with tile, which was the wagon load, flying all over the place. “The crash brought us all to our feet,” Crete goes on,

Both horses were broken loose, the tongue of the wagon broken, and the part left on the wagon plunged a foot into the turf. You can imagine our terror, knowing that Mr. Bancroft and Jim had been with them, and we made a general rush for the lane, but before we reached the barnyard their two heads appeared above the hill.

Unscathed, Jim was merely knocked out for a few minutes. On another occasion two years later Jim, now fourteen, saw in the farm library a match lying on the floor just for the fun of it and to give the other children in the room a shock with the noise of its explosion, he kept up and landed on the match striking it with his heel. “Instantly,” as Lucretia wrote, “from the lower north corner of the curtain a flame went rippling up and almost before one could look two of the curtains seemed to be all ablaze. Mr. Rose sprang up and tore them down before any other damage was done.” Garfield was right; the boys, especially Jim, needed to learn farming, or something useful!

In July, 1877, Garfield helped get the hay in, hoed corn, and reported his first crop: 114 bushels of wheat, or 17 1/2 bushel per acre. “I hope to better this by fertilizers another year,” he wrote. That September Garfield wrote Crete, “It is surprising how soon and how strongly our farm has got hold of me... Don’t you think the farm will be a new, sweet tie between us all?”

It was Crete replied by giving an attractive picture of family life in Mentor at the conclusion of their first summer:

This afternoon Jim and Hal are in the woods splitting up wood. Miss Mays and Mollie are at the picnic with Florence Rose... The little boys are out playing. The grandmothers are in their own rooms. I hear an occasional sound from the kitchen and just now a song from
the barn. But the whole farm is lonesome with out you. When will the years come that you can stay with me through the beautiful autumn days... to rejoice with rejoicing Nature."

As is well known, the Garfield marriage during the first half dozen years was not a happy one. James was away most of the time, cold, distant, hostile; and Lucretia was miserable with feelings of guilt and inadequacy. In Milton’s words about Adam and Eve after the Fall: “discountenanced both and discomposed.” Their letters speak metaphorically of these agonizing moments, using terms like storms and depths and darkness. For some reason—and who knows what events brought it about?—in the mid-1860’s Garfield clearly fell in love with Crete, and the marriage became a precious, affectionate relationship for them both.

In 1867 James took Lucretia abroad on an extended journey through England and Europe, the first long trip they had ever taken together; and in 1868 James began plans for a home in Washington, where they could be together during the congressional terms. Crete wrote him in 1869 as the house was nearing completion: “I believe I feel more a bride than I did eleven years ago. I am sure if your home should be really finished and you permitted to take me into it, that I shall feel more than ever before that I am your wedded wife taken to your hearth and heart.”

In Hamlin Garland’s last remarkable story in Main Travelled Roads, called “A ‘Good Fellow’s’ Wife,” published in 1891, the protagonist, a banker whose name is James Sanford, gets into trouble when his depositors suddenly demand their money, money which he has lost in a questionable business venture. He goes to pieces under the stress of the town’s anger, but his wife, Nellie, supports and directs him, so that they are able together to weather the storm and, in the end, come out happily and successfully. At the end of the story, Nellie, a tower of strength to James, establishes a business for herself in order to help pay back their debt obligations. The story closes with the following exchange:

Nellie: “I’ve done a lot of figuring, Jim, these last three years and it’s kind of broadened me, I hope. I can’t go back where I was [merely housekeeping and cooking]. I’m a better woman than I was before, and I hope and believe that I’m better able to be a real mother to my children.”

Jim: “I know one thing, Nellie; I’m a better man than I was before, and it’s all owin’ to you.”

Nellie: “Jim, I want a partner in my store. Let us begin again, right here. I can’t say that I’ll ever feel just as I did once—I don’t know as it’s right to. I looked up to you too much. I expected too much of you, too. Let’s begin again, as equal partners.”

Jim: “All right, Nell; I’ll do it... It’s almost like getting married again, Nell—for me.”

Is it too far-fetched to think some kind of conversation like that one took place between the Garfields, around 1864? At any rate, with the farm in Mentor, it seems to me, James and Lucretia became true partners. And with James away each spring at the Congress, and each fall campaigning, to say nothing of other trips east or south, Crete had to shoulder the daily burdens alone. She had the help of Dr. Robison, it’s true, but even that could at times cause problems for her. In June of 1878 Lucretia writes James: “The Doctor and Northcote have both made me very angry since I have been home, but I have given them both to understand—and angrily—that I am mistress here and master too when you are away.”

Though in those days she kept no diary of daily work, as James did, it is clear from Crete’s letters that trying to manage the farm affairs was not easy for her. “It is now Thursday morning,” she wrote that same June of 1878, “and old Barnes is still putting away at those barnyard gates and Dilley is daubing around on the inside of the barn... The man I employed worked a day and a half and then cleared out. I am thoroughly disgusted with cheap help.” And she adds, “You have got to have a man here who can manage and direct and keep watch of the workmen employed, a man who knows what an elegant farm should be like, and knows how to make it such a farm, or else you will be better off without a farm.”

Though she did not hesitate to try, Lucretia felt inadequate to direct workmen in the fields and around the house. She wrote in the fall of 1877:

I am afraid you will be disappointed that more has not been done when you return, but there is so much to be done, and then I think it needs someone to manage the men. I often notice where a little headwork would help them to accomplish a good deal more without
adding to the labor, but I haven't the courage to suggest to them any ideas. Men have too much contempt for a woman's ideas, especially men without culture.

Again, with this same tendency to help manage the farm, she wrote a year later: "Your crops are looking almost the best of any in all the country around; but there must be more attention given to the fruits and the growing of all our trees. I hope you will be interested to give special attention to this when you are home again."

Garfield was fully aware of what he had in Lucretia, with her talents, ideas, and practical energy. Of her entertaining skills he wrote in his Diary for October 7, 1877, about a dinner party given for A. G. Riddle of Washington: "Cretaceous gave us a very fine dinner, and showed, more than ever before, the quiet, serene power she possessed to do the right thing at the right time and in the right way." It's a comment reminiscent of Florizel's wonderful compliment to Perdita in Shakespeare's Winter's Tale: "Each your doing, So singular in each particular, Crowns what you are doing in the present deed, That all your acts are queens."

In the spring of 1880 James in Washington and Lucretia on the farm were exchanging suggestions and drawings in their letters for extensive alterations to be made to the house. At this time James wrote of Lucretia's influence on home and family, one of his loveliest compliments to her: "I am sure," he wrote, you have never realized how entirely this family are centered in you. And how every motion of your life is felt in the smallest fibre of every one of us. If I were to try, I am sure I could not analyze the processes by which you have gained such an ascendancy over us all, but the power is none the less real."

James went from Washington to Chicago to the Republican Convention in late May, early June of 1880. The correspondence between James and Crete forms a vivid contrast between the rural values of farm and home, as opposed to those of public ambition in the political arena. While James wrote of the "sharp and fierce antagonisms" of this famous Republican convention, Lucretia tells about having located a fine cherry mantle piece in Cleveland, just right for the sitting room fireplace, and she writes about the painters having "finished all the painting inside except the last coat on the sitting room and our room."

"Last night," she added, "we had a good soaking rain and another tremendous rain today. Are those rains portentous?" Admitting that the possibility of his being the dark horse candidate is growing stronger each day, James writes, "For any man to have kept his head upon his shoulders is no small matter. If I have succeeded better than most it is largely due to the fact that I see always before me your calm sweet face counseling wisdom, prudence and truth." In answer Lucretia writes, "I don't want you to have the nomination merely because no one else can get it. I want you to have it when the whole country calls for you as the State of Ohio did [to make you Senator] last fall." And she adds, "I wish you would get a new bedroom set for your Mother's room. And more, I wish you could afford to get one of the red mahogany sets. Her room opening as it does off the sitting room ought to be nicely furnished, and the mahogany would not only be beautiful in that room but would be a set to keep." James replied: "Were I less able than I am to bear the expense, I should approve. Do it. Esthetics join with filial duty in its favor."

The four years James Garfield and his family occupied the farm at Mentor were mostly happy years. As E. V. Smalley wrote in the Century Magazine just after Garfield's death:

He was a countryman through and through, a lover of orchards, forests, growing crops, cattle, meadows and wild flowers. I remember the pleasure he took in driving a yoke of cattle and in helping his farm-hands in the hay field... his old knowledge of soils and seasons... gained when a boy, all came back to him. His farm was the first home he had that satisfied his tastes... [It] gave him the conditions of a broad, free, natural home life which to his thinking was possible only in the country.

Yes, the farm was indeed a "sweet tie" for them all. And for many others, too. Reading through the Diary of Garfield for those years, and the letters of Crete, one is astonished at how many visitors came to the farm as overnight or longer guests. The Garfields took serious St. Paul's injunction to "practice hospitality." I do not mean the thousands calling on Garfield in the winter of 1880-81, when he was president-elect, in order to congratulate him or give advice or ask a favor, or consult with him. I mean friends like Harry Rhodes and wife, or the Burke Hindsales, or Dr. Streator, or Irwin McDowell, or the Henrys, or the Rockwells, those many, many friends from Hiram and Civil War days, who came to stay over night or for
several days. Somehow Lucretia could accommodate friend after friend. And this is to say nothing about the dozens of relatives, the grandmothers, Zeb Rudolph, the Boyntons, the Masons, the Larabees and so on, who were frequent overnight guests, or indeed semi-permanent lodgers. The "sweet tie between us all" evidently meant more than the immediate family only. Let me close with a wonderful comment of Lucretia's to James, written in the summer of 1879, the third year of their management of the farm, when things were as good as they got:

Everything here now seems to give life and health. Although it is so dry—too dry—it is cool, and the cleanliness and freshness surpass either previous year. The old farm bursts into gladness under each caress and grows beautiful with every touch, and I want you all here to catch the inspiration which it breathes out in grateful generosity. I wish we had a place big enough for all our friends, too. I would love to have a host of them here to lie on the grass, drink milk and loaf into a new lease on life.

Sources cited:
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