

Nellie Van Mater's Journal, 1864

Born in 1847, Cornelia

Nellie

Van Mater moved to Yellow Springs when her father, a successful merchant and Christian Church deacon of Greeneville, Ohio, was made a trustee of Antioch College (1861). John Van Mater's time with the College was a difficult one. Brought in as treasurer to care for its ever-precarious finances, he had the misfortune of joining the Board of Trustees just as a smoldering sectarian conflict for control of the institution was coming to blows. In this imbroglio he immediately (and inadvertently) made an enemy of the College president, Thomas Hill. Once Unitarian control of the College was achieved, he was removed as treasurer, though he would continue to serve as a trustee for several consecutive terms, a minority board member quietly representing the waning interests of the Founders.

Nellie's journal from 1864 when she was a student is one of the gems of Antiochiana. In her masters thesis *The Delicious Sunshine: The Journal of Nellie Van Mater*, archivist Tina Ratcliff describes it as

the expression of a feminine culture in transition.

Nellie lived in a time when women gradually shook off the reigns of domesticity

and began to pursue lives and professions for themselves rather than as an extension of a woman's traditional role within the household. The cultural fear that this provoked was that women would somehow lose their virtue as they entered the world of men. Nellie experienced these pressures and wrote of them in her journal frequently, usually in a discussion of purity.

The concept is somewhat elusive, but she seems only concerned with purity as it pertains to herself or other women.

In the following excerpt from 1864, Nellie describes an incident of racial prejudice in her Sunday school. Here she showcases her obsession with purity, her penchant for the dash as a universal punctuation mark, her religiosity, and her intolerance for ignorance. Fanny Hunster, the focus of her entry, was from a local African American family that ran the Union House Hotel in downtown Yellow Springs. The Hunsters boarded Antioch students through the nineteenth century and many of their descendants attended the College.

From *The Journal of Nellie Van Mater*

Sep 11th, 1864

Predjudice! will it never be taken away. How shameful it is that the things that are sometimes done can pass off under the wing of popular predjudices. Today at Sunday school, something happened that ought to make ever Sunday school scholar blush. Mrs. [Mahala] Jay was not at Sunday school to day'so we girls wanted Fanny Hunster to teach us, that is Jennie Georgretta and I wanted her to'and we didn't think the Shellar girls had any opinion worth asking for. So

Fanny after many beggings off yielded to our teasing and began to teach us'or rather we began to read around.

The day was very bright and beautiful and the class was quickly filled. At last, Miss Emerson and a young lady came in. It happened that there were only two vacant places'one beside Miss Shellar on the seat I sat on and the other by Fanny, on the bench opposite us. Well Miss Emerson crowded herself in next to Miss Shellar so only the seat next to Fanny was left. What do you think the other girl did? Like a true gentle woman did she accept the proffered place I blush to say it'but she curled her lip at Fanny and seated herself on the other already too crowded bench! And this in a Sunday school! Our bench was quite full, before she sat down Jennie and I had plenty of room but we wouldn't move an inch, to accommodate her. That might have been wrong but I don't believe it was. So there she stuck, with her crinoline in the shape of a half-globe, her eyes insolently staring at Fanny. Poor Fanny! Rather poor girl! I should have said. Jennie said,

I wish I had taken the place by Fanny and let that girl see me do it,
but we wanted her to be uncomfortable as she deserved to be, so we did not budge.

I looked at her sharply and I think saw a very ill concealed (I didn't try to conceal it) expression of contempt for her on my face'but I didn't care. She stared at me in the most polite manner all the rest of the time. Such faces as hers are disagreeable to be remembered. Eyes but no expression in them, forehead but not much intellect'what there is wasted, mouth graced with an expression of scorn. Dressed in high colors'two shades of red on'and a very fussy hat. Somebody has said

However undefined the difference is between a clown and a gentleman every body knows it.

You knew in a glance she was not a lady.

I would not like to be well acquainted with her. Such companionship would be degrading'for her face is not lighted up with the light of innocence and purity of heart. Her conversation would not always be the language of a pure and beautiful soul. I knew this by her face and my disgust was wrought up to the highest pitch to see her act toward Fanny in the way she did. I was ashamed and mortified and angry. In Sunday school'before the altar of God where all are equal!

How sad it is to think of this prejudice!

are we not all God's children? When I leaned over to Fanny told her I was angry'she said, t say a word. Such things are not worthy of notice.

Is not this the god-like spirit. Can I say poor girl

of her! No'she is above such pity! There are some people who are obliged to bear the greatest and heaviest burdens in this life but whom we feel do not need our pity'but our love and our

sympathy. Will she not pass through the trials of life to come purified to the Eternal sea? Verily, I believe that we who have no such crosses to bear and whose feet tread the velvety moss on our pathway to the life eternal, instead of bruising our feet on the rugged and sharp stones we, I believe, will at last, not receive so glad a welcome nor so bright a crown as Fanny Hunster. What consolation to her is this! So she needs not our pity but our admiration and teaches us a beautiful but difficult lesson which she must have learned well but surely she shall not go unrewarded.

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From The Journal of Nellie Van Mater

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