

## TILDY

Matilda Swain was born in Guilford County, North Carolina on August 2, 1823. Two baby girls were born but her twin died at birth. She survived but with a very small start in life. She weighed less than a pound and was so small we were always told that she could be fitted into a quart coffee pot. As incubators were unknown she was wrapped in cotton and placed on a pillow, which was her home for weeks. But she was a determined mite and in spite of her slim chance grew and flourished. Her parents the Jethro Swains, were devout Quakers frugal, industrious and ambitious and determined their children should have the best education possible, so they sent Tildy to a boarding school not too far away called Newberry Academy. Newberry not only taught the students the three R's but also all sorts of housekeeping skills as well. Incidentally what was Newberry Academy is now Guilford College, a very fine and selective co-educational institution.

The Swains were also quite proud of their heritage and ancestry. They had come from the island of Nantucket where they had prospered and helped to build a small whaling empire. Some of the landmarks on Nantucket still bear the Swain name. But Tildy met and fell in love with a handsome young blade, not too long over from England, and a complete outsider, by the name of Thomas Northam. He not only was an outsider but he wasn't even a Quaker. He was a methodist, and nothing could have been worse. But although Tildy was quite religious herself, she married him. In doing so she lost her birthright in the Quaker church for both her and her

descendants.

She and Thomas lived on in Guilford County, were devoted Methodists and had three children. After saving a little money they decided to leave North Carolina and go to the middle west. An older brother and sister of Tildy's had already settled in Indiana so they decided to follow. It was a momentous decision, as the only way to get there was by covered wagon, through the mountains. So they loaded their Lares and Penates, such as they were, into their wagon and started. Their most important possessions were three babies under six years old, and possibly next in importance, a sleeping tent. It was mid-September, and they hoped to have Thanksgiving dinner in their new home, which incidently would be a one room and loft log cabin on a plot of ground large enough for a garden and truck patch of sorts. Tildy's brother Yancey had arranged for it all and that was their promised land.

It took six weeks for the trip, but the way grandma told it I am sure it never was dull or monotonous and surely not uneventful. They would drive all day until both they and the horses were tired. They then would start looking for a spot to pitch their tent. They looked for a beauty spot with trees and wood for their fire much as we hunt for a motel with tv and swimming pool. They especially liked to find a large stump where a tree had been cut or had blown over, and guild a fire in it and around it. It not only gave them a fire to cook on and keep them a little warm but furnished light enough to sit by and to light them to bed in their ten which they had pitched nearby. One night they found an unusually large stump so they stopped quite near it and in a short while it was burning bright enough that they could read a chapter from their Bible as they always had done at home before going to bed. They turned in early for they wanted to get an early start the next day and went to sleep at once. In the night the mother awakened with a feeling that something was crawling on her face. She knocked it off but still felt something

crawling. She jumped out of bed and lighted a candle she kept nearby and was horrified to see that she, the children and her husband were covered with big black spiders. Needless to say they got out of there very quickly and drove the rest of the night. Stumps were out for a fire after that. They had routed the spiders from their home with the fire.

Grandma told of another hair-raising experience on the way. The route they took was directly through the mountains so they camped in a valley overlooked by a huge peak. The older child Jane, who was six, would tend the two smaller ones while her mother cooked the supper. Tildy was busy and suddenly realized she didn't hear the children. She started to look for them and suddenly heard Jane call. She looked up and Jane with a child holding each hand, was walking along a goat path at the very top of the mountain with a sheer drop of hundreds of feet below her. Mother like she was, terrified and afraid to call for on mis-step would take all three to eternity, so she closed her eyes and prayed. Jane thought her mother wasn't afraid so she wouldn't be either. So she turned around and brought her brother and sister down the way they had come. As for as grandmother was concerned that was a direct answer to her prayers as she insisted everything in her life was. I never have known anyone with the completely absolute faith in prayer that grandma had, and it never faltered in all of her 80 years although she had her share of hardships.

But her trip to Indiana according to her, wasn't one of them. They did make it to their little cabin by Thanksgiving. They lived their first northern winter in their one room cabin and she said often that it was the very happiest year of her life. She did her laundry for the family in a big iron kettle over a fire in the back yard and dried the clothes by the fireplace. Someone gave her a hen and she got fifteen eggs from a neighbor and set the hen in the loft of her house. The hen hatched all 15 eggs which she felt sure was an act of God, as never or hardly ever, did a

whole setting of eggs hatch.

The family eventually moved to a little larger quarters and had four more children. One child died at birth and when Willie, the youngest was two years old her husband died. He left her wonderful memories but not much else and her life for a few years was filled with hard work to feed and clothe her family. She did anything she could find to do and after getting up before daylight to do for her family would walk (she said she usually ran) to a neighbor's a mile and a half away to wash, iron, pick fruit or anything else there was to do. But soon her older son Walter was old enough to help out. Then as the others grew up they started to take care of her and you would have to hear her tell it to know how wonderful she thought they were. After the older ones all married she and Willie lived in one half of the house and Jasper and his wife lived in the other. Then when he was twenty Willie married and moved to a little house a few rods away. But at the end of two and a half years he had been ordained in the ministry, had a daughter and lost his wife. So he went back to his mother and took his six month old daughter for her to care for and that is where I came in. I was that daughter and I knew no other mother until I was nine years old. All my background and early training was due to her and her manner of teaching me the fundamentals was so very unique that this is the reason for this treatise. This has been my way of immortalizing her for the generations who were born too late or had no way of knowing her in her life.

As I said earlier, her faith came first but next to that she was of the plain people and could not tolerate anything that was put on or sham. Her favorite jingle for that was "Silk on the outside what you think's nunder? Two shirts and petticoats and they're as coarse as thunder."

Then I think her next in importance was to never say anything bad about anyone. If you couldn't think of anything good, keep still, as everyone has some good quality if you just knew

about it. And as usual she illustrated that lesson with a little story. She said when she was young she was inclined to be a little intolerant too and an old fashioned drunk lived near the. He spent all his money on liquor, his family went hungry, etc. One morning she and a dear old lady next door were talking over the back fence when this man was just going home. He was very drunk and grandmother remarked that hew was just no good for anything. The old lady said, "Well now thee knows Tildy he is a very good whistler." So she (grandma) said that is the lesson. She hated gossip. She said it was worse than stealing for then you took something you could never pay back, money you could make right by returning it but reputation never. An untruth was the ultimate sin. The only real hard spanking she ever gave me was for that and I never forgot it. I loved to gather the eggs more than anything. I was allowed to do it in the day and the more eggs I could come up with the greater the joy. One evening I didn't find as many as I thought would be all that startling so I gathered some under a setting hen then told her I found them in the hay mow. I didn't do that again. My father spoiled me unmercifully but she didn't and told him he would be sorry. Perhaps he was. One time I thought she was going to spank me when she didn't. She told me not to climb a butternut tree for I might fall. Well I never was good at climbing so I did both. Climbed the tree and fell out. But I fell in a very large cockleburr bush. I had curly hair then and you know the rest. She made me sit still while she took every little burr out of my hair. It hurt much worse than and spanking and I decided maybe she knew best after all. She also believed that the Devil always had work for idle hands so one should improve each shining hour. No girl was ever fit to grow up until she had pieced a quilt so when I rested she tried to teach m to piece a quilt but I never made it. A few blocks but not a quilt. But I did sew endless carpet rags while I rested from rough play which she was sure would make me sick. She had a little square walnut table with a drawer and in that drawer were keepsakes. When I was

very small she would sit down in her rocking chair with me on her lap and tell me about each tiny item. A spindle which she used for spinning the ticking for her first bedspread, a tin type picture of my grandfather, my mother's lace wedding mitt and fan, my first baby shirt, some things that she brought over the mountains as she said with her. That was a shining hour and although I was quite small I have never forgotten it. She loved people and never missed making the chicken pies, sweet potato pies and persimmon puddings for all the threshing dinners and the likes in the community as long as she was able. She told my father she took care of me until I was old enough to be some help then he took me away. But she knew it was the way it should be and as she would say, was God's will. But I never really was away. She had a saint for a daughter in law and another one for a son and they looked after her as no one else could, as long as she lived which was less than six years. I stayed with my father during the school year and the day after school was out went to Uncle Jap's and stayed with them and grandma until it was ready to start again.

Her doctor said at the last that she was one of the very few completely healthy persons he had ever known. She was like "One Hoss Shay" every part wore out at once. She lies buried in the little country church yard back of the only church she ever knew after she came to the midwest. Her children all fine men and women are buried around her as she would wish it to be. And if her spirit could look down and speak I am sure she would say that all was as it should be and thank God for a full life.

So to me, her granddaughter who knew her so well, she was the most unforgettable character I ever knew.