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*Imprint*: published twice a year by the American Historical Print Collectors Society, Inc. It is available only through membership in the American Historical Print Collectors Society, Inc., 555 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017. Annual individual membership \$25. Copyright © 1982 by American Historical Print Collectors Society. All rights reserved. All correspondence, articles, inquiries, etc., should be sent to the editor at the above address. Advertising pages are open to all AHPCS members. Rates (camera ready): back cover, full \$150, inside front or back cover, full \$125, inside pages: full \$100, half \$60, quarter \$35. For material not camera-ready there is a minimal fee for typesetting.

*Cover*

Henry Farrer. *The Crooked Stoop*.  
Etching, 8" x 4 $\frac{3}{4}$ ". 1870.

## Jacques Wissler, Painter and Printmaker

Visitors to the Free Library of Philadelphia appear daily in large numbers and variety—easily a cross-section of the local population—with as many separate and individual reasons for being there. A casual observer would hardly have noticed the small neatly dressed woman who entered quietly one bright day in August 1971 and left a box containing as she said, her grandfather's papers, with one of the librarians. She explained that she felt, because of their possible value, they should be deposited in a collection where they would be cared for and would be accessible to scholars and other interested readers. The box was indeed labeled in manuscript "Grandfather's Papers," and contained about one hundred items of varying description. There were five personal documents, sixty-seven drawings and watercolors, and twenty-eight prints.

Grandfather was, of course, Jacques Wissler, an artist who was born in Strasbourg in 1803, and who distinguished himself as a lithographer, engraver, and painter in America and France where he spent his early life and years of apprenticeship. The collection of his papers which the Free Library received consisted of prints, drawings and watercolors, and a few documents.

Among the documents were items related to the Civil War, and a small notebook containing five obituaries mostly from local newspapers<sup>1</sup> and the fragment of a manuscript autobiography written in French. It is with this manuscript that the story of Jacques Wissler begins. The following is a translation.<sup>2</sup>

### REMINISCENCES OF AN OCTOGENARIAN 1806-1886

At 80, an age at which the enfeeblement of the body hardly allows the use of the faculties of the

mind, man willingly sacrifices a part of the present to the past. He especially likes to persuade himself that he has grown young again since the last recollections of his childhood, when pleasures smiled on him.

It was this alluring frame of mind that the idea of writing came to me, and, moreover, of writing my own history. Memory, that precious light upon days slipped by, will have to direct me not to give in to purile feelings or to gloomy suggestions which so often trouble the old man. My intention is to celebrate today, worthily and pleasantly, my 80th St. John and to turn everything to the most unrestrained gaiety, forgetting the storms and all the sunsets which in the springtime of my life threw shadows over my passing. I shall recall only rare blisses when, side by side with Fortune, I saw myself as her preferred cherub and the most fortunate of mortals in creation.

My entry into this world during the night of the 24th to the 25th of June 1806 must have been one of the most painful for my mother, for the forceps was used to facilitate the arrival of the youngster.

In that era the French Empire, under the spirit of Napoléon, was at war with all nations, and the new citizen seemed to come into the world with his sack on his back to march against the enemy. Since there was nothing of the soldier in me, I received my passport by requirement, having in one hand this safe-passage and in the other a complimentary ticket to the show which was about to open before me. I trotted cheerfully from the baby bottle to my first long trousers without accident, with that assurance that so well depicts the boisterous youngsters full of health.

But these sweet dreams were not to last long and were to prove that the most perfect happiness is not always cloudless. The death of my father, which took place in December 1815, put an end to any thought of joy, and from that moment a series of events, each one more doleful than the next, came swooping down upon our humble dwelling. Exposed as we were from then on to a number of misfortunes, the feeble financial means that my father had left upon dying were too soon used up and reduced us to what was strictly necessary.

For me it was necessary to give up school. Strict economy recommended this measure, for in those



times free schools were unknown. My absence from this institution was established for an indefinite time. Thus I grew in the way of the Lord in the year of grace 1817, the year of the great famine, when a pound [sic] of bread cost 25 sous and our dinners consisted of a few potatoes. At that time there were quite a few Lazaruses observing Lent at length; the days became long and began again too soon.

When one has never seen poverty at close hand, it is difficult to get an exact idea of the suffering and of the virtues it demands. In the presence of human distress one wonders why this unequal distribution of benefits and ills among men. In the midst of these terrible circumstances my mother sought to find me a place as a general helper, in order to be able to make a contribution to the well-being of the family according to my own share. Likewise, it was decided that my brother, then aged 13, should learn a trade.

A good opportunity presented itself, for me, in a factory which made colored paper, with a salary of 28 sous per week. It was thus occupied at a time when I was putting my week's wages into my mother's hands, not without observing that she might make me some new clothes: sometimes an accident happened to my trousers which allowed everyone to see an opening at a spot where one does not customarily put a handkerchief, which exposed me at the same time to drafts and to the jibes of my comrades, who, every time they saw me, asked me for the napkin.

But all these annoyances could not seriously stop the budding ingenuous artist from making his way, although often his first excursions in life were not always strewn with roses. Someone found that I had a liking for drawing upon seeing a sample of my ability outlined on the wall; it was the profile of Louis XVI done from a coin, the perfect likeness of which drew the admiration of the experts.

It was here that my connection with lithography took root. At that time lithography was still in its infancy, and the small number of those who took up this branch of the arts were not very expert. The owner of the factory added to his establishment a press. I was employed to place the paper on the stone which passed under the press. This job gave me the good luck to see continually the designs that were being printed and no doubt contributed greatly to the taste that I developed for sketching on walls and scribbling on all the pieces of paper that I could find. The director of the house, it seems, believed that he saw in me a modern Raphael who needed only to be cultivated and whose unusual talents for fine arts were evident enough not to lose time. The propositions that were made about this to my mother—to sign me up for a period of nine consecutive years, that is, up to

my majority—could not, in respect to the long apprenticeship, satisfy our expectation. As for the arrangement for compensation, which would increase each year by 100 francs, I regretted very much that my mother was unwilling to listen to the ringing stipulations.

In the spring of 1820 mother and son could be seen crossing the Rhine; friends advised us to visit the institution of M. Herder at Freiburg. This house recruited youngsters of my age, to whom was taught engraving on stone. These boys, dressed uniformly at the expense of the house in verdigris clothes, reminded me of inmates coming from an orphans' asylum. The day after our arrival we went to seek out the manager of the large establishment. I cannot today account for this boldness, and I was not very much stirred up upon entering the quarters of the concierge. But what was our astonishment when this person told us that he did not want to see us! It is necessary to have undergone the trial of a reception from which one is thrown out to know the anger that the humble, timid applicant can build up.

I saw at that time things that I learned to recognize later and that I will explain in another chapter. Let us leave for a moment this cursed trip over the Rhine which threw us into expenses for everyday things which were so burdensome that my mother gave up as lost any undertaking abroad and was no longer willing to hear any such thing spoken of. The question of teaching me a trade came up, naturally, and that of tinsmith seemed to me the most preferable. The businessman to whom we were recommended was married and the father of a family; he insisted that his apprentice would have to carry out the functions of a nursemaid during the first year of his apprenticeship. These were ridiculous demands, which displeased us extremely. The St. John of 1821 was announced under the most favorable omens for our pursuits; it began with my being installed at the Engelmann Lithography House in Melhouse, where my mother gave her assent to a generous arrangement, signing an engagement of five years, my board being my pay for the first year.

So there was I was, established on a solid base which left nothing further to be desired, since we had all the guarantees which would assure my future and the end to all our troubles. Since my board was my payment as agreed, this condition of my engagement left me without any cash at all; otherwise, however, I had no urgent need. But it was always with a heavy heart that I saw those of my own age enjoying themselves as they gave themselves up to various pleasures through the means of a few copper coins.

At that time forgotten, and far from my own family, I began to feel that a person gets dropped from awareness quite quickly and that he has no



friends at all if his vest pocket is not full. In 1823 a fine opportunity to distinguish myself arose. The portraits of Mr. Engelmann's four children that I had made and which had been sent to Paris brought me from the father, when he returned, a beautiful gift consisting of a box of colors with everything needed for miniature painting. Today I still recall with delight this work, which put in place the first stone of the pedestal on which one day I was to occupy a place of honor in the esteem of my employer. This recollection will always be with me, alive with youth and beauty. Completely unknown as I was in 1822, some distance separated me from my companions who were more fortunate than I. Henceforth I understood on which path I was to walk, and I arrived at 1824 modestly, when I saw my salary increase considerably. From this moment on, free to make use of my income, I still had enough left with which to ease the sickly old age of my grandmother. Time had not entirely stifled in me a feeling of gratitude to the point of forgetting the care that this wonderful woman had put into apportioning our meals during the dark days of 1817.

A virtually unmastered shyness did not allow me to reveal the secret of the disposal of my funds; no one knew, either, the reason for my somewhat shabby attire or the odd satisfaction that the young man took from wearing shoes without heels. It was around this era that I made the acquaintance of the Reiners, two impoverished pupils. An introduction between individuals in the same position is not very ceremonious, and the most sincere friendship is communicated instantly. A little later we were to be reunited in Paris under better circumstances. Joseph, your godfather, who has been dead for quite a few years, certainly showed himself to be my true friend. How many times, in our little garret in Paris, did we recount, one by one, the sad chapters of our disastrous past? But, on the other hand, we used to find in a glass of burgundy those delightful dreams in which the most perfect opulence calms the rough wounds of days past. Nor does anything give better proof of how little it takes to produce happiness when one's heart is young and enjoys everything. Still, since the departure of my friend, morose and contrite, I went about my work, acknowledging destiny, which is so cavalierly pleased to upset our most beautiful plans, our dearest illusions.

While on the one hand I heaped all my anger on fate, the philosopher said to me, "You must take the weather as it comes and the soup as it is"—a wise precept, no doubt, but not very profound when it is addressed to a young man nineteen years of age. In 1825, under a beautiful autumn sky illuminated by a brilliant sun, I received the good news that I should prepare for the journey to Paris. In an instant all misfortunes were

forgotten to make room for imaginings of a simple-minded joy. Thus I was born at the age of nineteen and tossed onto the boulevards of the capital of the civilized world. You will no longer want to doubt for long the progress that the emancipated apprentice made; he had so perfected his work that his salary was put at 2,000 francs from the 1,500 that it had been. It was in the intoxication of success that I saw a great number of castles in Spain arise which were out of harmony with my lean suitcase. I had not seen my family for more than a year and was delighted at being able to spend a few hours with them before going on to my destination. Up to this point Polichinelle had been my Don Juan and the hand-organ my opera; that was the most that a province could offer to the humble apprentice in his garret. Instead of that, concerts in the open air, tightrope-walkers, and a thousand and one diversions from the Boulevard des Italiens to the marionettes near the Bastille beckoned graciously to the newly arrived provincial. However, I beg you to see in my enthusiasm only serene silliness. I was very fond of the theater, particularly the opera, and in my repeated visits to this sanctuary it was given to me to bring to life the dream that I had been pursuing for a long time in vain—that of seeing Pouchard and Madame Rigaut in *La Dame Blanche*. However, my refined taste in music did not want me to remain idle in the presence of the masterpieces of Rossini and Meyerbeer, two immortals who have been dead a long time but who have left us these trifles in their way of doing which do not die and which still make at this hour the delights of the musical world. To satisfy my taste for music I found that a guitar was the ideal instrument for accompanying the singer and enabled him to get through dark hours when the tone of my distress was in a minor key.

During the first days of 1826 the horizon of prosperity was suddenly covered by a twilight which threatened a new storm. St. John wept warm tears; the conscription came to claim its victim. Although I was prepared for the cry to arms, I could not envisage—without trembling—the summons in question, knowing very well that my savings could not meet the requirements demanded by the cost of buying a substitute in the event of my succeeding at print-making. Here again my employer Mr. Engelmann came to my aid, putting at my disposal the sum necessary to procure for me, if I should succumb, a substitute.

Fortunately the generosity of my employer turned out not to be needed because the Board of Review found me not liable for military service. After thanking Providence for having protected me through its holy watchfulness, I went off to Mulhouse to await the outcome of the Board, which was to pronounce my liberation. I hastened



to throw some flowers on the grave of my grandmother, who had given up her soul to God shortly after the wedding of my mother.

I returned to Strausbourg, where I spent several days in the bosom of my family before going back to Paris. My mother proposed that I do something for my younger brother for when he would be starting out a few years hence. This was Theodore, who was never able to be successful in making himself useful and who persisted in counteracting all my schemes for his benefit, while for me he was a source of distress. At that time it was the Feast of St. John of 1828, and from this moment on the country frolics pursued their course. Bacchus himself was in joyfully good health, which was always welcomed by the friends of madness. It was in these pleasant pastimes that the days were going by when the revolution of 1830, and, specifically, on the eve of my 24th Feast of St. John, broke out, changing completely the face of happiest holiday. It would be a difficult task to fulfill to give you here an idea of this revolution. Not having taken any active part in the furious scuffle of the three days July 27, 28, and 29, I returned to peaceable people and gave myself over to my own concerns.

For a young man to whom the revolution had taught a lesson it is doubtless surprising to see him remaining unaware of the changes that this revolution had produced in every type of business affairs, and particularly in finance. To argue for an increase [in salary] during a crisis of upheaval was an act of imprudence at the very least; today I cannot believe this clumsy move.

A refusal followed upon the request, and, my pride having been wounded, I awaited the moment when I would be able to avenge myself for this disappointment. This moment came at the end of my engagement six months later. At Gueleviller (Haut Rhin) they were seeking an artist, with a salary of 2,000 francs. That was enough to make me decide to take on a province; the engagement for one year did not seem to me very heavy to bear.

[At this point several pages have been removed from the notebook of M. Wissler. Only two pages remain at the end. Where the reminiscences pick up again the writer is evidently living in the United States (after 1849, and probably in Camden, N. J., where he ended his days).

The hand is smaller and more cramped than where it left off, and far more so than at the beginning, where it is flowing and artistic. Only three short sections remain, all more or less versions of the same material, displaying more errors in spelling and usage than previously, offering various undecided choices of word and phrase, and not entirely coherent.]

However, I was very much inclined to celebrate the 4th of July, but, on the one hand, the extreme heat and, on the other, the new law about fireworks made me renounce my duty to send up my national firecrackers for this occasion. The recollection of the 15th of July is not wiped out sufficiently to allow us to give ourselves up generally, body and soul, to the national rejoicing.

Moreover, with dismay we see a great emptiness, and, surrounded by the most seductive pleasures, I am seized with the desire to give a funeral oration. The elderly are hardly ever seized [in this way]. Atlantic City is inviting. On the gravel[ly beach] of Atlantic City, whatever may be the pleasure of being able to. . . .

However, I was very much inclined [well resolved] to celebrate the 4th of July like the first American arrived, but, on the one hand, the great heat and, on the other, the new national law on firecrackers, induced me to give up these good inclinations. For the rest, the recollection of the 15th of July, which time has not completely done away with, does not allow me to give myself up, body and soul, to the merry-making of a political event.

At the same time from my window I see the crowds heading for the gravel of Atlantic City, contending for who will get there first, the smooth, refreshing waves of a zephyr, and I make my observations. Fortunate are those who live at the seaside during this season, coming out of their lodgings in bathing suits and bathrobes, and the required straw hats. Parades. . . .

However, I had definitely decided to celebrate the 4th of July, as the first American to arrive would have done, but, on the one hand, the great heat and, on the other, the new national ordinance on firecrackers induced me to give up these good inclinations. The recollection of the 15th of July, which time will never be able to wipe out, will not allow me to give myself up, body and soul, to the merry-making of political events. It fills me with the harshest thoughts, disturbing the merry-making of life. From my window I want to try to sketch, to give you some of the [illegible], as if for checking. I see the crowd heading for the gravel of Atlantic City, determining who will arrive first to take [plunge into] [achieve forgetfulness in] the waves, refreshing fatigue.

The remainder of Wissler's life is here taken from the obituaries, and other printed sources which at best supply only brief or sketchy accounts.

Wissler's fame and accomplishment as an artist receive much emphasis as well as his quiet manner, good heart, intelligence and



high academic standing in Parisian institutions where he was educated and learned the art of lithography. Many improvements and inventions in lithographic processes are also attributed to him, though no specific examples are cited.

He came to America in 1849 and settled in Philadelphia where he was immediately employed at Peter Duval's lithograph firm. Duval was then well established in Philadelphia and produced a great many city views and portrait prints. Wissler worked here until about 1860 when his services were secured by a firm in New York who sent him to live and work in Richmond, Virginia.

When the Civil War broke out Wissler was required by the government of the Confederacy to engrave banknotes and other documents. Included in the collection of papers in the Free Library is one such note for two dollars, ornamented in the usual manner but only on one side of the sheet and without signature.

While living in Richmond, Jacques Wissler and his family remained loyal, at least in sentiment, to the Union cause, for the obituaries note that the Wissler women were given to shouting for the success of the Union forces and displaying bunting after their victories. Their house was threatened with destruction by angered neighbors, but Mr. Wissler's high position as Lord Chancellor of the Exchequer stayed their hand.

Among the papers there is a pass permitting Mrs. A. Wissler to visit in Columbia, South Carolina, suggesting the restriction imposed upon the movements of the Wisslers, and other citizens in Richmond.

Wissler's son, Jacques, was required to serve in the Confederate army and though quartered near Richmond was not allowed to visit with his parents. Another son, Charles, served with the Union army as a commissioned officer. After the war he settled with his wife in Macon, Mississippi, but was later killed in a raid by the infamous Ku Klux Klan.

Jacques Wissler himself also retired to a small farm at Macon. Among the papers



Fig. 1. Ornamental piece for Union Factory. Richmond, Va. J. Wissler. Lith. of Hoyer & Ludwig. Courtesy of The Free Library of Philadelphia.

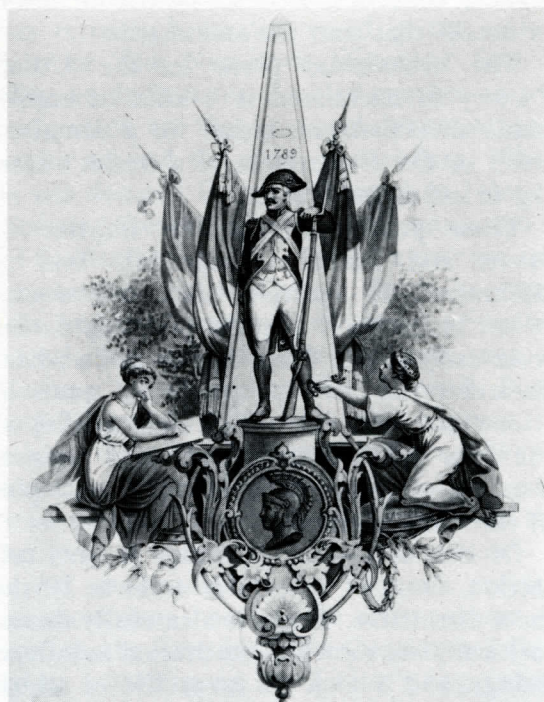


Fig. 2. Idealized concept of French Revolution. J. Wissler. Courtesy of The Free Library of Philadelphia.



is a postcard view of a typical Southern antebellum mansion with the title, *The Old Calhoun Institute, Macon, Mississippi*; on the reverse side is inscribed "My Old House." The possible conclusion is that this was Wissler's residence in the late 1860's. But, there is no proof. He sold the property in Mississippi after a few years, and removed to Camden, New Jersey, where he lived until his death in 1887.<sup>3</sup>

Of the twenty-eight prints in the collection only nine can be identified positively as Wissler's work. Another print, an unsigned engraving, appears to be his work, but style is not conclusive proof.<sup>4</sup>

Wissler is cited frequently for his work in lithography and it seems to be through this medium that he achieved much of his success as a printmaker. Among the specimens in this collection are several lithographs of quality largely from the 1860's. He was known as a portraitist, and the print of Henry J. Toudy proves his skill in formal treatment of his subject. The view of the Richmond Female Institute, while rigid in concept is softened by the inclusion of details that lend life and charm.

The ornamental piece for the Union Factory in Richmond is a kind of emblematic advertisement, either for a container cover or the frontispiece of a dealer's catalog or other publication.

These prints all bear the imprint of Hoyer and Ludwig lithographic firm of Richmond. In addition, there are several prints in chromolithograph probably dating from early 1870's. They appear to be advertisements for various products, none of which are identified. The high quality of the color printing and accuracy of registration places them among excellent examples of chromolithography.

Of the sixty-seven drawings in this collection, those in watercolor seem to be the most distinctive. There is a carefully drawn satirical piece showing cats dressed as human beings, and a view of street life in which the figures are mild images of social foible and working class unfortunates. There is also a romantic drawing of a young girl, a

fine ink sketch of a lion, and scenes from ancient history in pencil.

Fifty of the drawings are literary illustrations for children, all in ink on small cards about four inches square—small pictures for small hands, as it were. Each has an ornamental border, and in the center are scenes from *Robinson Crusoe*, *Cinderella*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *History of France*, and *Sleeping Beauty*. In these finely detailed line drawings the artistry of the engraver is readily apparent.

The emblematic wash drawing, an idealized concept of the French Revolution, is among the best examples of Wissler's work. It shows a revolutionary soldier as the central figure on a pedestal surrounded by a gathering of *Tri-Coleurs* and before an obelisk emblazoned with a wreath and the date of the beginning of the Revolution. On either side are muses of History and Liberty, and below a medallion with the head of a Roman soldier as a symbol of heroism.

The most skillful drawing is in the drapery and the medallion made to look like a bas relief. The entire piece is drawn with such artistry as to assure a realistic dimensional appearance.

The graphic work of Jacques Wissler is varied in application and, judging from these specimens, is of sentimental character yet drawn with much sensitivity and care for detail.

The gentleness of the man shows up well in the work of the artist who carved for himself a quiet yet distinguished place in the history of American art of the nineteenth century.

#### NOTES

1. One obituary is from *The Public Ledger* (Philadelphia) November 26, 1887; the others are unidentified.

2. Translation by Robert Jordan, Communications Services, Philadelphia, Pa.

3. The dates of Wissler's birth and death vary in all the printed sources (1803-1887) from those given in the manuscript (1806-1886). The death date, however, is verified in the obituary from *The Public Ledger*.

4. David McNeely Stauffer includes Wissler in his *American Engravers Upon Copper and Steel* but states he had not seen any signed engravings by him.