

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers I*, 1885 – 1886 Oct 3, '85 to May 29, '86) The original is very badly faded.

Budget, Ferris Editor  
May 29th 1886

### A Visit to Virgil's Birthplace

We were at Verona on the way to Venice, and had never seen Mantua. Mantua is more than "well-worth seeing," for her position on the Mincio, her forts, and military history, she is part of the famous quadrilateral, for the artistic remains including the Palace of the Fe, where the fantastic genius of Giulio Romano left its greatest works, but above all, as the city of Virgil. His epitaph, said to have been written by himself runs:

"Mantua bore me,  
Calabria received me,  
Naples holds me,  
I sang of pastures, farms, and Captains."

In the ancient as in the medieval world, the city ruled the country around it, and whoever was born within its jurisdiction was a native citizen or subject. It seems to be the better opinion that Virgil was born, not in Mantua, but in Mantuan territory, at Andes, and our pilgrimage was to that village. The railway runs down the valley, and crossing the Mincio at about 20 miles from Verona, enters the earthworks and walls of Mantua. The strength of the position is increased by the abundance of water filling wide moats and deep ditches, so as to enable its defenders to turn the city into an island. We visited the pictured palaces, the churches, and the great square which the French planted with trees, adorned with a statue and dedicated to "Virgilius." In the afternoon we took the carriage, and leaving the city by the southwestern gate, and following a broad turn-Pike road raised above the land shaded by willows, lined with canals, guarded by bridges, and commanded by earthworks and batteries of heavy guns, we entered the rich and well cultivated plain and after four or five miles reached a less traveled cross-road, and taking the left, going south-easterly followed the way for two or three miles through farms, well-watered and well-tilled, until we came to another cross-road where stands the church, the tavern, and a few shops and houses called "Andes." Here, opposite the church was the foundation of the monument to Virgil, which the learned world had already dedicated with great pomp, and which has since been completed.

It was the season of the vintage and a holiday, and the village was full of people and festival costume. On the grass in front of the church the young men and women were dancing joyously to simple music while their friends surrounded them in circles and groups, applauding their performance. In the street were carts and wagons with donkeys

and yokes of white oxen and cows decorated with ribbons, rosettes, and garlands. By the tavern door and within worthy elders tasting the new wine.

Our appearance was approved, and when it became known that we came as pilgrims to the shrine of Virgil, we were made most welcome. The whole company was at our service as guides, instructors, and friends. We might have danced with the fair and the brave, but we felt better qualified to sit with the wise and good. The grounds swells gently, here so as to overlook the plane and broaden the horizon.

For a quiet spirit content in retirement and communion with nature, it would seem a well-chosen home. The people are happy, and as proud of their place as are the inhabitants of the greatest cities. They were surprised when we asked to be shown the “farm,” the very spot where Virgil was born. They assured us it was there, and all around. The glory seemed to them expanded and diffused, so that the whole region was sacred, and the town the central and most sacred part, the holy of holies. But as we insisted, and the wine mellowed their minds in sympathy with ours they began to humor us, and to confess that Virgil's little “farm” was a little way from the town, and finally all agreed it was some distance, a kilometer or two, perhaps three, towards Mantua, not on the highway to the city, but up the byway which passes through the village. Choosing a genial young man from the volunteers who offered to go with us, we drove up the country road which by a gradual ascent bears north east between hedges, and trees, and fields, and vineyards. After going nearly a mile, the guide invited us to enter a young forest, where he found the ruins of a house. These he assured us were the remnants of the old homestead, and here “Virgilia” was born. We mused, listened to the birds, and the murmuring breeze, and might have lived and died in the belief that we had visited the hearthstone of Virgil but for that excess of enthusiasm which prompted us to drive on beyond so as to reach the summit of the hill, and get the view. Here we found the house and an old woman waiting for us at the gate. She saluted us and inquired if we sought the Virgil farm. We said Yes, but we had seen it. Her fine scorn convinced us that we had erred, and put our too-sufficient guide to the blush: and we were glad to follow her on her side of the road through an open grove of tall trees along a bluff bordering a rivulet, to the highest point where were other ruins of a stone house. “Here,” said she, “stood the house of Virgil. Here was he born, and this was his farm.” The site was the more worthy: and she was so earnest and sincere that we accepted her claim as at least the more probable. Standing on the old wall we could see Mantua in the distance about four miles off; beyond, far away, were the mountains: around us extended the valley: nearby were such features of the landscape as recalled the descriptions of the poet. Under the bluff he might have made his grotto, and from its side might have flowed the spring covered with green branches. It required little imagination to see his goats with their kids and the “he-goat which butts with the horn;” his ewes with their lambs, and the steers and heifers grazing by the brook or chewing the cud in the shade. We could see the fruit hanging ungathered on the trees, and the grapes on the vine, as Virgil in despair for the loss of his farm wandered off seeking friends to plead with the young Emperor who had assigned the Mantua lands to his veteran victors at Philippi. Then we beheld the poet a delicate youth, with his rural

companions driving their lambs “the tender offspring of their ewes” to Mantua for sale, and returning with pockets little heavier than they went. Then the scene changed, and we saw Virgil tall and slender, dark and sun-[browned] with dark hair and large black eyes, reposing with his companions under the spreading beech, singing sweet songs of triumph, and thanksgiving for the restoration of this farm, while his fellow-shepherds accompanied him on the melodious pipe.

While we indulged these dreams the day declined, & from our vantage ground we saw in the West the setting sun, a great, warm, golden globe, suspended in the hazy sky, while in the East the rising moon showed forth her full, broad, silver disk, and so the two celestial worlds appeared to balance over Virgil's birthplace, and consciously to shed upon it their mingled beams. We were loth to leave, yet felt that it was better to keep this impression unchanged.

The return to Mantua by sun-set and twilight passing into moonlight, a good Italian supper there, & the rail ride to Verona closed the day.

Job E. Stevenson