

## AS as AS WAS: ABOUT THE LIFE OF ESLIE ASBURY

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I was hesitant to write a club paper about my father, but if Lew Gatch can do it, I guess its o.k. for me to do it. Dad hated his first name and friends obligingly called him AS. He died in 1988 so that many here tonight did not know him. How many here tonight were members in 1988? Since he was so involved in the club during his sixty-two year membership, his name still comes up. Our able historian, John Diehl has read the budget paper Dad wrote as Secretary of the Celestial Branch of the Literary Club at the annual dinner as well as including it in Dad's memorial resolution. I will not repeat it tonight, but it is such a classic that it should be framed and hung in a conspicuous place in the club. I am sorry John cannot be here tonight. John also wrote as a part of the memorial, "AS was our beloved and most clubbable fellow-member, and long-time historian, a man of many talents and unusual achievements in many fields: a devoted family man, master surgeon, learned physician, noted thoroughbred horse breeder, environmentalist, author, lecturer and historian." To this list could be added more frivolous pursuits such as golf, he shot his age many times and bridge in which he was considered an expert by many.

AS was born in the proverbial log cabin in rural Nicholas County, Kentucky, in 1895 near a small town named Bald Hill, population 25. Someone once asked him if Bald Hill was the end of the world, he replied no, but I think you can see it from there. Bald Hill is about 75 miles Southeast of Cincinnati, halfway between Maysville and Lexington. He spent his early years there. When he was about ten, his father William Francis Asbury moved the family to Louisville so that he could attend Medical School. Soon thereafter his father established a country practice in the small town of Campbellsburg about 35 miles from Louisville. Campbellsburg, a town of about 250 then, is still about 250. This is like many smaller Kentucky communities which have about the same population as they had 50 or even 100 years ago.

My grandfather, Will Asbury, was a country doctor in every sense of the word. Office calls were 50 cents and house calls, made in the early days by horse and buggy, were one dollar no matter how far away. He never rendered a bill and probably never made \$7000 in any year of his thirty plus years of practice. On the positive side, he probably never had to fill out a medical insurance form.

More than one Literary Club paper by Eslie Asbury depicted some unique medical

experiences shared with his father such as tonsillectomies performed on the kitchen table at the home of the patient. Very few rural hospitals existed until after World War II and country patients did not trust those city hospitals anyway and not without reason. Many had the feeling that a hospital was a place where you go to die.

Dad attended local schools which fortunately included a small private academy in Campbellsburg where he obtained a good secondary education. His good scholastic record there earned him a full scholarship at Georgetown KY College which he turned down to attend the University of Cincinnati on a Julius Fleischmann partial scholarship. His early U.C. contacts with President C. W. Dabney and other University people are discussed in a book he wrote in 1976 entitled *Reflections*, put out by U.C. Publications. This monograph is an anecdotal account of his experiences with U.C. over a sixty year period, particularly his relationship with Presidents Dabney, Langsam, Bennis, and later Winkler. All but Dabney have been members of this Club. *Reflections* is one of five books he wrote, all after age 75, all anecdotal, with a good dose of biography and autobiography thrown in.

Dad paid for tuition not covered by the Fleischmann Scholarship by working many odd jobs, including the Cincinnati Milling Machine (Milacron), playing semi-pro baseball (up to \$10 a game), selling shoes, and raising tobacco on his father's small Kentucky farm which was probably his most lucrative source of income. He found time to play varsity basketball, being captain his senior year (1916). At 5 feet 8, he was hardly optimal height, nor had he played basketball in high school. In response to my question of what position did he play, he replied, "I was the back guard. My job was to knock down the first opponent down the floor on a fast break". I guess basketball was more of a contact sport in those days not that it isn't now. His role was limited on offense, usually scoring no more than 4 points. Game scores in this era were in the 20 to 15 range.

Actually his best sport was baseball. In addition to playing on the U.C. varsity, he played semi-pro both in Cincinnati and Kentucky. On one occasion his semi-pro team played the Louisville Colonels of the American Association, the highest minor league. After the game, the Louisville manager, Joe McCarthy, tried to sign Dad to a contract for the following year. You baseball aficionados will recognize Joe as the longtime very successful manager of the New York Yankees in the Lou Gehrig, Joe DiMaggio era. As respectfully declined, saying he would be entering his junior year of medical school in the fall. Joe told him that he might make it to the big league, but he advised concentrating on medicine, "Look at me! I am nearly forty, washed up as a player, with little to show for twenty years in baseball." Of course, he could not know that he was on the verge of a remarkable career as a big league manager and

would later be elected to baseball's Hall of Fame. He is generally rated in the top five on the all-time manager's list, right up there with Connie Mack, John McGraw, and Miller Huggins.

Before leaving the subject of baseball, it should be noted AS maintained a life-long keen interest in the sport. Brothers Lewis and Powel Crosley were early patients who became life long friends. AS and Lewis were particularly close as Lewis bought a Nicholas County farm one mile from Forest Retreat soon after Forest Retreat was purchased. He was interested in general farming and only to a limited degree in thoroughbred horses. Powel purchased several mares which were boarded at Forest Retreat. Later after his first wife died, Powel and his second wife were married at Forest Retreat. There is no question that Powel Crosley's purchase of the Reds in 1933 saved the team for the city. Many of you have probably read the Crosley story in an excellent recent book written by Rusty McClure, grandson of Lewis Crosley. I know enough about the family to know that the book is very accurate, for instance portraying Powel as the leader and idea man, while brother Lewis was the consummate executive officer. Powel was truly an inventive genius. He founded pioneer radio station WLW in 1922 and also had great success manufacturing radios and refrigerators. His only failure was the Crosley car which was of small design and ahead of its time.

AS interjected himself into the cause of electing Happy Chandler to baseball's hall of fame. Happy succeeded the first baseball commissioner, Kennesaw Mountain Landis, a federal judge who had been brought in to counter bad publicity resulting from the Chicago Black Sox scandal involving the 1919 World Series, won by the Cincinnati Reds. Rumors were rampant after the Red's upset victory that the fix was in. The next year the truth came out and eight Chicago players were suspended for life. Landis had been hired to help restore integrity to the game which he certainly did. He remained commissioner for over 20 years and was replaced by Happy Chandler, former Kentucky Governor and U.S. Senator. His term was seven years during which time baseball prospered particularly after World War II. The biggest issue of Chandler's term was whether an Afro-American would be allowed to play in the major league. Branch Rickey of Brooklyn planned to play Jackie Robinson in 1947. The vote of the owners was fifteen to one against his being allowed to play. Brooklyn cast the only positive vote. Despite this, Chandler, a Southerner, ruled that Robinson could play. This ruling, of course, did not sit well with the owners who voted not to renew his contract when it came up a year or two later.

AS felt that Chandler was being unfairly denied election to the Baseball Hall of Fame. By the 1970's Chandler's election rested in the hands of the committee concerned with old timers where unanimous approval was needed for election. AS learned that Waite Hoyt, long-

time popular announcer of the Reds was the only committee member holdout against Happy. Eventually this was worked out and Chandler was elected, which likely would not have happened without the persistent efforts of AS.

After graduating from U.C. Medical School in 1920, AS obtained a surgical fellowship at the Mayo Clinic. Such training positions were hard to obtain, since only a few medical centers had worthwhile teaching programs and most of them were for only six months or a year. Many medical school graduates in this era entered private practice, calling themselves surgeons, even though they had little or no surgical training. Hospitals out of necessity, allowed these relatively untrained surgeons to operate, often with inadequate oversight and predictably bad surgical results.

AS stayed at the Mayo Clinic for five years, eventually becoming Dr. Will Mayo's first assistant, which was the most coveted position a trainee could attain. He was urged to join the clinic's regular surgical staff, but he opted to return to Cincinnati to establish his own practice. My mother, Mary Knight Asbury, had graduated in the same 1920 medical school class at U.C. and also went to the Mayo Clinic, as a fellow in Ophthalmic Pathology. My parents had not dated while in medical school, but romance blossomed in Minnesota leading to their marriage in 1923, which lasted 63 years until mother died in 1986.

AS entered private practice in surgery and orthopedics and did most of his surgery at Good Samaritan Hospital. His excellent training attracted a large practice almost immediately. Energetic and hard working, his practice prospered even as the depression deepened, although it should be noted that Cincinnati was less affected than many other areas. Procter and Gamble, The Milling Machine Company (now Milacron) and many smaller, mostly family owned businesses such as LeBlond Machine Tool, U.S. Playing Card, local banks and many smaller machine tool companies prospered despite hard times elsewhere. In no small measure the Cincinnati economy was helped by a hard working, frugal, largely German population in pre World War II times.

Orthopedics comprised a large part of his practice. He teamed with a long-time member of the Literary Club, Dr. Ralph Carothers and between them they did most of the orthopedic surgery in the city for many years. Our own Dr. Chuck Carothers, nephew of Dr. Ralph, worked with his uncle for many years and continued the practice after Ralph retired.

A reliable source estimated that AS did more surgery from 1925 to 1960 than any other area surgeon. Some of his surgery was performed at the 28 bed Carlisle Kentucky Hospital where he often had full schedules on Saturday and Mondays, wrapped around his Sunday of farming at nearby Forest Retreat. With beds in Cincinnati at a premium, many of his

Cincinnati patients were operated upon at Carlisle. He finally stopped doing major surgery at age 70, but continued to diagnose and treat patients for another 10 to 12 years. He referred to this phase of his medical career as "rendering pastoral care."

AS received a number of honorary degrees, being most proud of those from U.C., Berea College, and the University of Kentucky. He was also recognized with numerous awards. He was particularly proud of being honored as the Man of the Year by the Thoroughbred Club of America in 1977 and a Greatest Living Cincinnati in 1978. Except for early Literary Club papers, his writing and after dinner speaking career did not really begin until he was past 70. Including historical pieces, he wrote nearly 100 Literary Club papers.

To give you a first hand sample of his writing I am going to read a short non-literary club paper he gave to members of a group of prominent Catholic business men who called themselves the Xavier Table. They met weekly for lunch with AS the only non-Catholic in the group. The Table honored him with a dinner at the Queen City Club November, 1977. His remarks that evening serve as the second essayist of tonight's budget even though presented thirty years after being written and twenty years posthumously. The talk has a Latin title which I can neither pronounce or translate. His remarks to the Xavier Table follow.

#### De Amicitia et De Senectute

This occasion is a great honor to me, especially for a "heathen." Sister Murphy, long-time, witty supervisor of the operating room and member of the order since the Good Sam was first built on Locke Street, gave me the title of "heathen". I was one of the few non-Catholic surgeons at Good Sam. On that day I had 4 operations and when I arrived for the fourth I said "Sister, there is no rest for the wicked"! "No, Doctor, she replied, "you mean there is no rest for the heathen." No surgeon ever had greater friends than those nuns and no one ever had greater friends than those assembled here tonight. Since I am the only non-Catholic, I am the heathen again. If this dinner were given by a younger generation, it would merely mean putting flowers on an old man's grave, but it means more to be noticed by contemporaries who have been friends for over 40 years. Such an honor gives one the comfortable feeling that you are still fooling people and that the skeletons are still safely hidden in the closet.

The older we get the more we appreciate friends, especially those who will listen to our feeble wit and philosophy, as you all are doing tonight. Retirement time is when people can reclassify themselves. Some continue involvement in civic affairs and new interests. Unfortunately, many retirees no longer in the fray, and with nothing materially to gain, drop all outside activities and often do not even keep up with world affairs. They become involuted and

uninteresting. That is why Oscar Wilde said "active men like to associate with men who have a future and with women who have a past!" The chief pleasure of many older people is recounting the past and they are not above embellishment and exaggeration if they can get away with it.

We need more men in public life with ability and discernment who also are literate, articulate, and willing to commit themselves, instead of being only self-centered politicians. We also have a horde of self-appointed academicians who too often hog the stage as spokesman for society. Most of even the smartest people tend to retain the ideas they are raised with and use their intelligence only to rationalize their prejudices, thus making it difficult to be objective about ideologies and politics. It is logical and commendable that people do hold to their religious beliefs and their church, but partisan arbitrary political ideas are not productive.

Our two political parties are becoming more alike and often more concerned with votes rather than with the truth. Senators Javits, Percy and Case more often vote with Ted Kennedy and how would you distinguish between Sen. Robert Taft, Sr. Republican and Governor Lausche Democrat? I have observed our downtown Xavier Table through 40 years. The members have been citizens of the highest order. Anyone would be proud to be associated with them. The Xavier Table has extensive representation in both political parties but I find only a very few differences in their general outlook. There has never been a "John Bircher" among us and on the other hand, none that would support extreme socialism, all-out busing, reverse discrimination, same sex marriage or protection of pornography. We seem able to agree on most things, but not a party label, so that we usually remain partisan Democrats or Republicans. I don't think either party currently stands for the morals and principles which made this country a haven of liberty and unique in the world. Extreme elements cannot be kept out of any party, but a party does not have to kow-tow to them. Sensible people should unite. We can't let either big business or left wing liberals dominate. If we do, it could lead to dictatorship. However much wisdom we gather in our lifetimes, I doubt if there are many who feel as confident about any of these political questions as they did when they were younger.

But of one thing I am sure -- whatever little differences there may be among the members of our table, we shall remain friends. I think one reason is that so many have more or less Irish ancestry. Even I have a Geohagen cross way back. Probably mostly by coincidence, my best friends in school, at the Mayo Clinic and in the horse world, have been mostly Irish and I have often wondered why the Irish make friends so easily and keep them. One reason is their natural charm and sincerity with Jack Kennedy and Jim Parley being good examples. I think the reason Irish Americans keep friends is an holdover from the old country where for centuries it was vital to know who your real friends were. In contrast, the English, who lorded

over much of the world for so long, have been casual about their friends, act like they don't need friends and often are not even friendly with their own siblings. I have seen this myself among some of my English friends and it is further confirmed in Anthony Trollope's novels. Despite this critique, I am an unabashed anglophile.

Thanks again for the honor of this dinner and especially for the 40 years of your friendship.

Perhaps of more direct interest to our club members are the five year-end Literary Club meetings held at Forest Retreat Farm. The first was on June 29, 1936 and was attended by 22 members who endured a six hour round trip bus ride. Among those present were Randolph L. Wadsworth, Otto P. Geier and Eslie Asbury all past presidents who have sons who are current members. Other sons of members who readily come to mind although their fathers were not present at Forest Retreat in 1936 are David Reichert, Frank Mayfield, Allan Winkler, Lou Prince, Lew Gatch, Virginius Hall, Francis Barrett, Vincent Aug and probably one or two others I have missed. Later I got to know the 1936 attendees who were still active when I became a club member in 1961. These included several all-time prominent members such as James Albert Green. I have heard this icon mentioned many times, always with his three names distinctly intoned. I have never heard him referred to as Jim Green, Al Green or even James Green; always James Albert Green. This distinction is no doubt deserved because of his remarkable dedication to the club. In his 55 years of membership (1901-1956) he authored nearly 300 papers, by far the all-time club record, and he otherwise distinguished himself by many services to the club.

Gerrit Sykes read a four paper budget at this first meeting which included a very laudatory piece about my grandfather, Arthur L. Knight, M.D., a member since 1917 who had died earlier in 1936. It was written by Gilbert P. Symons. Sec'y William Stiegler recorded the presence of five wives and one guest. This may have been a first for wives, at least the presence of a wife other than the host's.

The second meeting at Forest Retreat was held June 8, 1957 on a Saturday. Attendance was much better, as 44 members and many Kentucky guests were there as recorded by Secretary George Ford. The host was the Club President, and the essayist was the talented Walter Draper, another club hall of famer. He read a paper entitled "My Most Unforgettable Character", which was about Sol Stephan, animal keeper at the Zoo who died in 1950 at age 100. I do not know how many papers Draper wrote in all for the club, but he authored an even 100 from 1924 to 1949 as recorded in the 100th anniversary book.

The third meeting was June 10, 1968. John Lee read a paper entitled "Kentuckians I Have Known or Hear About" which was very well received. Secretary Brodhead did not mention the attendance, but I remember that it was large including a number of Kentucky guests such as U.S. Senator Thurston Morton and Governor Happy Chandler, a lifelong friend of AS as previously mentioned.

The fourth meeting took place June 11, 1973. Secretary Clark noted: 50 members, 8 guests. The paper entitled "Gaudeamus Igitur," by Stephen Starr, was a particularly erudite work. It concluded with a verse in Latin, perhaps not completely understood by some members.

The fifth and final meeting took place on June 10, 1991. AS had passed away three years earlier. I presented a short paper on the history of Forest Retreat Farm. The real paper was read by Milo Beran entitled "Going Home". I remember it as vintage Milo. This meeting attracted the largest attendance of the five and included seven guests and one wife - mine. President Richard Vilter took extensive video to preserve the occasion. I know I have been present at the last four meetings and may have been at the first one in 1936 as a lad of eleven peeking around the corner.

A few of you may remember another Forest Retreat connection with the club. We raised turkeys for many years giving most of them to friends at Thanksgiving and Christmas. For fifty years, the club received a large turkey for our holiday celebration. This tradition ended in 1990 when the family sold Forest Retreat. I wrote a short paper on the subject for the holiday celebration of 1983.

A final thought on AS and the club. Again quoting our esteemed historian. "There can be no doubt he loved the club. For many years he took personal care of the plants and shrubbery in the little garden in front of and on the west side of the clubhouse which became known as Asbury Park."

One aspect of Dad's interests was not well known, even to some of his best friends. He loved hunting, particularly the game bird Quail. From age 10 on, I was his frequent hunting companion, which meant getting up before dawn and driving several hours to some remote Kentucky location. He seemed to always know some native in the area, often someone he had operated upon and very often someone who could direct us to the best hunting area. AS considered this activity more of a hunt than a shoot since his main interest was working the dogs. We were always on foot and usually hunted all day with time off only for lunch. Thirty years his junior I could never keep up, whether I was 15 and he 45 or I 40 and he 70.

I vividly remember one occasion that after several hours of particularly hard walking, I

was ready to rest if not quit for the day. As usual he wanted to keep going saying, "Somebody has to hunt these quail!" Although a good marksman, he particularly enjoyed finding the coveys and following singles after the covey rise. Although the Kentucky quail population was shrinking, mainly due to man's interference with their natural habitat, he continued to pursue the elusive bird well into his 80s.

Now to put the farm and the horse business into proper perspective, we go back to 1935 when Forest Retreat was acquired. The purchase occurred on the recommendation of Thomas Asbury, Dad's uncle who had extensive farm holdings in Nicholas County. Forest Retreat has a significant history since it was originally owned by Thomas Metcalfe, the tenth Governor of Kentucky (1828-1832). Born in Virginia in 1780, he came to Kentucky with the great influx of pioneers through the Cumberland Gap about 1800, settling in Nicholas County. He became an accomplished stone mason and also entered politics at an early age. A Whig, he was elected to several terms in the State Legislature before being elected to four terms in the U.S. House (1820-1828). Later he served two years in the U.S. Senate, filling the unexpired term of Sen. John Crittendon (1848-49). Metcalfe was a close friend of Henry Clay who was the only other Kentucky Whig to gain national office in that era.

Forest Retreat passed into other hands after Metcalfe's death in 1855. An absentee owner had the farm from 1900 to 1934, and he did little to maintain the house, fences or barns. AS purchased the farm at auction at depression prices; \$60 per acre for 250 acres. The dilapidated Governor's Mansion was restored although from a purely financial point of view, it would have been better to have built a new house.

The horse involvement began insidiously two or three years later. Like Topsy the horse population grew and the success of Forest Retreat became well recognized within a few years. AS had a touch, was financially conservative, used good judgment and was lucky. Not too long ago in going through some of his old papers, I ran across extensive correspondence that he had had with a broad range of prominent people in the industry. By such effort he was able to breed to the most desirable stallions available in Kentucky, form productive partnerships and in general make his presence known in the horse world. Asked years later what it takes to be successful with thoroughbreds, he said "All anyone can do is put oneself in the position that if good luck occurs, one can benefit." AS a corollary I believe he was saying that many who enter the business do not give themselves much chance for success, no matter how lucky they have.

After World II, Dad was particularly active in breeding and selling yearlings, topping the prestigious Keeneland Sale for average several times. It was during this period that he bred the

1954 Kentucky Derby Winner, DETERMINE, and later the 1969 Kentucky Oaks Winner, HAIL TO PATSY. Forest Retreat was the first to breed a Derby and an Oaks winner although several breeders have done so since. The Oaks also for 3 year olds is the filly version of the Derby, always run the day before. AS was elected to the exclusive Jockey Club in 1955, a remarkable achievement for a Midwestern physician who engaged in the horse business mostly on Sundays. He was the first commercial breeder, and one of the first Kentuckians elected and he liked to say, "I am the only poor man in the club". Somewhat later, other commercial Kentucky breeders such as Leslie Combs and Bull Hancock were elected, but AS was surely the Kentucky pioneer of the Jockey Club. By 1970 Forest Retreat had grown to 1200 acres and housed as many as 300 horses in the spring breeding seasons. The stallion roster peaked at 10, all of which made Forest Retreat a big business, not just a pastime.

Although he never said so, I believe that having bred a Derby Winner and having been elected to the Jockey Club, AS felt he had accomplished what was meaningful to him in the horse business. His horse activities diminished noticeably in the 1960's. He surprised me one day at the 1972 Keeneland Summer Sale when he suddenly said it was time for me to take over running Forest Retreat. He was a mere 77 and as energetic as ever, and at first I did not think he would stick with this decision. I was wrong. From then on, unless I sought his advice, which I did frequently, he never interfered. He even stopped taking the trade journals and stayed active only as our chief salesman. He approved of our change in sales format from utilizing auctions to emphasizing private sales and forming partnerships. He remained a valuable salesman. He sold more than one yearling completely sight unseen, I mean unseen by either buyer or seller, perhaps while playing golf in Florida. People believed in him and for good reason. He had established total credibility upon entering the horse arena and it remained his hallmark.

AS always regarded the horse business as a sideline never depending upon it for income. Nevertheless Forest Retreat showed a significant profit in 22 of 25 of its most active years beginning in 1946. One can divide the horse business into two distinct entities; one, breeding and selling the offspring and two, racing. The former way is the conservative approach and has provided a very good living standard for many families, some now in the third or fourth generation. Racing is much more speculative and on any large scale only affordable by the very wealthy. AS was not particularly interested in the racing aspect of the business, although Forest Retreat did race some well-bred fillies in order to replenish the broodmare band. Generally his philosophy was to let someone else pay the training bills.

Forest Retreat's horse activity continued through the 1980's. He died suddenly in 1988 just short of his 93rd birthday. Both he and I managed the farm while conducting very active

medical practices. In retrospect I would not recommend combining major farm management with another full-time career. Forest Retreat had become big business, requiring full-time attention. There was no one in the next generation who wanted such a career. Accordingly the horses were dispersed and the farm sold during 1991 and 1992.

A serious attempt was made to interest the State into making Forest Retreat a State Park. This proved to be bad timing since no State funds were then available. The present owner is Dr. Philip Tibbs, a neuro-surgeon in Lexington who is a caring owner and wonderful friend. Dialogue with State authorities is ongoing and Forest Retreat may yet come under state control.

On a Thursday in early September 1988, AS played golf in a twosome with Dr. Joe Montanus, his frequent golf partner at that time. They were the only two players on the Cincinnati Country Club course that rainy, raw, chilly day. From the front tees Dad shot his age again and in the process managed to win 50 cents from the good doctor. The next afternoon there were eight bridge players at the club, cutting in and out and changing partners. AS was the only winner. Late that afternoon he called my sister Lib Stone, saying he did not feel well, feeling discomfort in his back and asking her to take him to Christ Hospital. With typical doctor mentality, he diagnosed himself as having kidney stones. He spent an uncomfortable Saturday and most of Sunday with continuing back pain. He saw both the Bengals and Reds games on T.V. that Sunday. About 11:00 p.m. the pain had become much worse and he became unconscious and died almost immediately. A post-mortem exam revealed a leaking abdominal aorta which had not been previously anticipated but might have been treatable.

He planned most things in life carefully, and it's almost as if he planned his ending. He was not a religious person, but certainly lived by the Golden Rule and strongly believed in the benefits of organized religion. I cannot help but think he was influenced by his father-in-law Dr. Arthur Knight, previously alluded to. Dr. Knight was a learned theologian who strongly believed in the benefits of all religions except radical extremisms. While AS might have lived a longer useful life had he received timely medical care, it is hard to imagine a more satisfactory ending to an extraordinary life.