

Carl Schurz Vrooman (1872-1966) & Julia Scott Vrooman (1876-1981)

Carl was born in Macon County, Missouri on October 25, 1872. He was the son of Judge Hiram Perkins and Sarah Buffington Vrooman. His father, a native of New York, was a lawyer, later a judge of the common pleas court, and a land owner. His father moved the family to Kansas where Carl would spend his boyhood years. Carl attended Washburn College in Topeka, Kansas from about 1890 to 1891. He also studied at Harvard University in Massachusetts for about three years. He then studied abroad at Oxford University in England for a few months.

Julia Scott Vrooman was born October 4, 1876 in Bloomington, Illinois. She was born into a 19th century life of privilege being that she was the daughter of Matthew T. and Julia Green Scott, one of the most prominent families in McLean County. Her uncle, Adlai E. Stevenson I, also served as vice-president of the United States under President Grover Cleveland.

Her parents moved to McLean County from Kentucky and were some of the first settlers of the town of Chenoa, Illinois. Her father in fact is credited with founding the town in 1854. Julia's father Matthew was a prominent land owner and speculator in McLean County. He also owned a great deal of land throughout Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, and Tennessee. Her mother Julia also came from the Upland Southern ascendency with ancestral connections to Thomas Jefferson and others. She was most famous for being twice elected President General of the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution, her philanthropic efforts during World War I, and her business savvy by taking over the family business after her husband Matthew died. Matthew and Julia moved the family to Bloomington in 1872 and purchased a home at 701 Taylor Street.

In 1894 when she was about eighteen years old, Julia met Carl while traveling in Europe and their courtship began. Later in life, Julia was often quoted to have said that Carl liked to tell the story of how he won her hand in marriage. She said that Carl would tell everyone that he proposed to her in every cathedral in Europe that they went to and that Julia finally accepted his proposal in Venice when they were on a gondola on a moonlit canal.¹

Almost two years later on December 28, 1896 Carl and Julia were wed at the home of her sister Letitia Scott Bromwell in St. Louis, Missouri. *The Daily Pantagraph*, printed a detailed account of the occasion calling it a "brilliant matrimonial event." Carl's brother Frank officiated the wedding and many members of both Julia and Carl's family attended. Because her father Matthew had passed away in 1891, Julia's uncle Adlai E. Stevenson I gave her away. The local chapter of the D.A.R. in St. Louis also gave a "handsome" reception for the newlyweds.² They returned to Europe in 1897 and spent a great deal of time traveling through Switzerland, France, and Germany. They would eventually come to settle in Bloomington in 1900. While Julia and Carl never had any children, the next 69 years of their marriage would be ones filled with bliss which was clearly evident by the many loving and caring letters they wrote to each other when they were apart. Carl wrote in one of his many letters that Julia "was a rare and loveable creature. I've never seen anyone in her class."³

¹ "Julia," *The Pantagraph*, November 3, 1978

² "Vrooman-Scott Wedding," *The Daily Pantagraph*, December 29, 1896

³ "Julia," *The Pantagraph*, November 3, 1978

Carl was a man of many interests. He began life as a publicist and had been recognized as an able writer early on. He was also a staunch and outspoken supporter of the Democratic Party. But above all was his life long interest and devotion to the improvement of agriculture. This interest began through his years as Regent of the Kansas State Agricultural College from 1898 to 1900. His marriage to Julia Scott brought with it a large amount of farm land outside of Bloomington which had been owned by Julia's father Matthew. Carl became a manager of some of the Scott land holdings and because of this, delved even further into scientific writings and consulted agricultural experts. He referred to himself as a "dirt farmer" and indeed farmed or managed several thousand acres of land throughout the Midwest, especially in McLean County.

His extensive knowledge in agriculture is most likely the reason for his appointment as assistant Secretary of Agriculture by President Woodrow Wilson in 1914. He would serve under Secretary of Agriculture David Houston of St. Louis. During this same time, he had also been campaigning for the Democratic nomination for United States senator from Illinois but had dropped out of the race for the sake of party unity.

One of his first tasks as assistant Secretary of Agriculture was touring the country as a spokesman for agriculture and promoting the latest research on the topic. Carl believed that farming should be conducted scientifically and just as importantly, as a business. By this he did not simply mean bookkeeping, but felt that farmers needed to organize for both economic and political advantages. He pushed the importance of marketing as the key to the success of agriculture. Through his travels across the country he learned that there was a need to put the results of the new agricultural research in a language that the typical farmer could understand and apply to his own operations.⁴ To meet this need, he published several pamphlets and books aimed at regular farmers in the hopes that it would help them understand the changing technologies and also help them make the most out of their farms.

In 1916, he wrote a pamphlet called *Grain Farming in the Corn Belt with Live Stock as a Side Line*. Through this, Carl expressed most of his big ideas on agriculture. It was also written to suggest to "the farmer whose soil has been run down by continuous grain farming" in the corn-belt of the Midwest that there were methods which they could employ to increase the production of their farms. Methods such as raising livestock, using lime to fertilize the soil, and crop rotation were listed. Vrooman was pretty hard on traditional farmers who simply relied on the weather and planted grain year after year. He accused them of mortgaging the future of their children by their shortsighted ideas. On his own land he demanded that his tenants plant alfalfa as a means of recharging the soil. If they ignored this, they found themselves put off the land. This pamphlet was so simply written and in such demand that nearly one million copies were printed and distributed across the country.

Julia and Carl were both known for their writing. Together, they co-authored a book on travel titled *The Lure and Lore of Travel*, which gained some public attention. It was based upon their experiences traveling abroad. Julia also wrote a kind of political who-dun-it novel about life in Washington D.C., *The High Road to Honor*, which was reviewed widely and favorably. One reviewer said that guessing which actual politicians

⁴ Roland White. "Carl Vrooman Biography Good," unknown newspaper. Carl Vrooman file, McLean County Museum of History Archives

were models for her novel might match the current craze for the new rage, the crossword puzzle.

Carl is probably most known for his agricultural work during World War I. First, he was sent to Europe by President Wilson as a member of a special Presidential Commission whose goal was to help solve the agricultural problems of the Allied countries during World War I. He traveled through Great Britain, France, and Italy. Through this study, it was determined that Europe was in desperate need of aid in the form of food not only to feed their soldiers, but the millions of civilians as well. With this, Carl then helped to launch the War Garden program in the United States after the U.S. officially joined the Allied forces.

The War Garden program was designed to appeal to the patriotism and practicality of the American people and to convince as many as possible to become partly self-sufficient by planting their own gardens and canning and drying the produce that could not be used immediately. This movement also called for gardens to be created where they had not been previously, mainly in cities. Gardens were planted in both public and private spaces across the country. In every back lot, nook, and cranny gardens were planted. The food that was produced by these gardens was used to create a surplus so that other food grown could be sent to feed the soldiers fighting the war and the millions of starving Europeans affected by the war. This was also a way that people on the home front could feel like they were contributing to the war effort in some way. The Victory Garden movement of World War II would grow from this program.

Julia, who was very interested and active in philanthropic work, decided that she too wanted to help with the war effort in some way. She decided to accompany Carl on his trip to Europe as she had done on his travels before. Julia was an experienced traveler having traveled extensively in Europe with her mother before her marriage, and continued to do so both with Carl or on her own at various times. She was sometimes gone for many months. Carl helped her get a ticket over to Europe during World War I and beginning on August 23, 1918 until late 1919, she worked for the Young Women's Christian Association with American soldiers at the front. When asked why she was doing this, Julia replied "I have no children. I am in perfect health. I am fortunate enough to be able to speak both French and Italian. If, instead of looking for an opportunity to get into war work, I were looking for an excuse to avoid it, I could not find one."⁵

As part of her work with the Y.W.C.A., Julia formed a jazz band of soldiers of the American army of occupation in Europe to entertain and improve the morale of the troops in France, Germany, and Belgium. After the performances, she would often hold a dinner for the soldiers where she and her band entertained. She often provided the food from her own supplies or bought food with her own money. Julia would also hold "cocoa parties" to help Illinois soldiers fight against homesickness.⁶ The chief difficulty which Julia encountered over and over again during her service with the Y.W.C.A. was the fact that it was very hard to keep the members of her jazz band together. Troop transfers were a common occurrence between army units. On one occasion, Julia went so far as to ask the commander of a certain unit to "transfer two of her men to a certain village so they could be near the other members of the band" to which the commander replied "that if he

⁵ "Vroomans Abroad To Enter War Work," *Daily Pantagraph*, September 12, 1918

⁶ "Julia," *The Pantagraph*, November 3, 1978

transferred the men to the place as she requested, they would be the only Americans at that place, for all the other soldiers of our army had been taken out of there that day.”⁷

Shortly before his return to the U.S., because of his poor health Carl resigned his position as assistant Secretary of Agriculture. It was not known what Carl was suffering from at the time but he tendered his resignation so that he could spend some time abroad until he had fully recovered. Also prior to his return to the U.S., he spent two months at the Paris Peace Conference in an unofficial capacity, returning home in April of 1919. Julia however remained overseas for several more months until December of 1919. For her efforts to keep the troops’ morale high during the war, in 1921 Julia was made an honorary member of the John H. Kraus Post chapter of the Veterans of Foreign Wars in Bloomington, an honor of which she was very proud.

Julia was also very passionate about the idea of a World Court which later became known as the International Court of Justice. She believed this would be an agent of peace in the world and that it would eliminate war through the use of peaceful arbitration between nations. She spoke extensively in public about the fact that the idea for the court had been misinterpreted to the public by scheming politicians and that those politicians had tried to make people believe that it would cause the United States to become entangled in foreign disputes.

After the War, Carl was chosen by the American Farm Bureau to head a relief mission to Europe. He was charged with the collection, processing, and shipment of nearly a million bushels of corn to the starving European nations of Austria, Poland, and Czechoslovakia as a gift from American farmers. For these efforts, the Polish government decorated him for this service. In 1920 he also authored the first modern farm relief bill which provided credit for the sale of farm surplus abroad. This was the first official Democratic Party farm program.

Carl and Julia continued to have very active lives after World War I. Both had a very deep religious faith and were active members of Second Presbyterian Church in Bloomington. Carl was a member of the original Lions Club of Bloomington, an honorary vice-president for life of the McLean County Historical Society, belonged to the Masons and the Order of the Eastern Star, and was elected president of the Community Players Theater in 1923 among other things. Julia continued her philanthropic work and also played the role of hostess during the many parties she and Carl held at their mansion on Taylor Street. She and Carl would often open their home up to the community holding tea parties, formal dances of Illinois Wesleyan University fraternities and sororities, and during World War II had sectioned off the third floor of their home as apartments for soldiers and their families.

Sadly, shortly before their 70th wedding anniversary, Carl died suddenly at the age of 93 on April 8, 1966. Julia would go on to live another fifteen years. On her 100th birthday, she stated that she never knew a couple that was closer than she and Carl. She believed that they lived a marvelous and interesting life wherever they happened to be located. She attributed the secret to their life together to their mutual strong belief in religion.⁸ Julia passed away quietly in the family home on Taylor Street on May 30, 1981. She was 104 years old. Her will cited 118 beneficiaries of her estate that was estimated as being worth \$1.5 million in personal property and \$2.75 million in real

⁷ “Mrs. Vrooman and Her Jazz Band,” *Daily Pantagraph*, November 28, 1919

⁸ “Mrs. Julia Vrooman looks at ‘her’ century,” *The Pantagraph*, October 3, 1976

estate. She was buried next to her husband and other members of her family in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington.

By: Candace Summers, 2008