



Georgiana Farr Sibley

(1887-1980)

Georgiana Farr Sibley, a civic as well as social leader, promoted improved housing and social services, fostered the creation of the Rochester Association for the United Nations, and fought for racial toleration.

Her husband, the grandson of Hiram Sibley, was a director of Western Union as well as of numerous banks and other corporations. Harper Sibley also served as president of the United States Chamber of Commerce. His chief contributions, however, were outside the business world. He took an active hand in the management of Protestant mission work and in efforts directed toward the relief of refugees around the world.

The enthusiasms of Georgiana (Farr) Sibley (1887-1980) ranged from hybridizing corn to integrated housing, from her husband and children to Japanese graduate students, from chambers of commerce to the United Nations. All her diverse interests, however, were expressions of one animating force: her religious faith.

Born to a life of aristocratic privilege, her father a New York City stockbroker and polo player, Georgiana Farr grew up in Orange, New Jersey. After attending select schools, she led the life of a debutante, which she later recalled as a continuous round of parties, saying, "It seems incredible now. We were not conscious of the existence of poverty then, unlike so many of the young people today. Years later I apologized to the coachman whom I had so many times kept waiting on the box until early hours of the morning." Every liberal idea she later had was fought out against her parents' narrow Victorian views, she has said.

At fourteen Georgiana met Harper Sibley of Rochester, New York, in Maine where their families spent the summer, and when she was twenty-one they were married, with Theodore Roosevelt's niece, Ethel Roosevelt, one other bridesmaids. She has called their marriage "an incredible relationship of work, play, love and worship," adding, "A lot depends on your dream."

Georgiana came as a bride to the Rochester area where the Sibleys, one of the city's most prestigious families, had lived since the 1820's. Her husband was a lawyer and a director of Western Union Company, which his father had founded. The couple first lived in and restored the old Sibley farmhouse in Honeoye Falls, and their first party in it included all the workers who had contributed to the restoration.





They later occupied a handsome home on Rochester's East Avenue. There Georgiana raised six children, Hiram; Harper, Jr.; Georgiana; Anne; Jane and Elizabeth. Again looking back to a different era, Mrs. Sibley once named in a tone of wonder the household staff: two nurses, a parlor maid, upstairs maid and kitchen maid, waitress, cook, laundress, houseman, three fulltime gardeners and two chauffeurs.

Sharing Harper's interest in agriculture, she joined him in studying soil chemistry and developing hybrid corn at Cornell University. Pretty and clothes-conscious (she long enjoyed the dress made by Worth which her husband gave her in 1918), she made a point of being, not Georgiana Farr Sibley, but Mrs. Harper Sibley. Her life was like that of many another young society women, but with one difference--she took her religious beliefs very seriously and put them into action.

"The Church was the center other life," says the Rev. Robert Wainwright, a later rector of St. Paul's Episcopal Church, who knew her from 1970 on. Beginning in the early 1920's when Harper was superintendent of that parish's church school, she taught a class, continuing for twenty-five years. Her first participation in activities of the worldwide Church came in 1928. En route to join Harper in Africa, she chanced to be on a ship with a group traveling to an ecumenical conference in Jerusalem. When the Rt. Rev. Charles Henry Brent, bishop of the Diocese of Western New York (then including both Buffalo and Rochester), was called home, he made Georgiana his alternate. This "most exciting time," as she termed it, prepared the way for her life's work. She soon followed it by reporting on the experience to the Church's General Convention, the first woman invited to speak at one of its triennial gatherings.

In 1931 John D. Rockefeller instituted an interdenominational program called "Rethinking Missions" and involved the Sib-leys in it as students of agriculture and ecumenical relations, respectively. This "moving and revealing experience" took them on 100,000 miles and two years of travel throughout India, China and Japan and included their work of helping found the International Christian University in Tokyo.

Georgiana joined her husband when, as president of the United States Chamber of Commerce, he chaired its national convention, after which they spent the year 1936 speaking to local chambers throughout the country. That time during the Depression, she believed, called for "hybrid thinking." As she said, "In creating hybrid seed, you combine several strains of inbreds with others to get greater potency. In business, too, you have to step out beyond your own specialty." She believed in private enterprise but thought that only government could undertake some relief programs. Perhaps it was then that she formulated her practice of going to lunch with the person at a meeting who most differed from her "in order to learn





where we can meet."

Another pilgrimage the next year was to Oxford, England, as a member of a delegation of St. Paul's Church to an ecumenical conference titled "Christian Life and Work," which was a forerunner of the World Council of Churches. In 1939 and for the six years following, Mrs. Sibley served as president of the United Council of Church Women. She used this position to appeal for an end to social barriers to interracial marriages. "Marriage of two people of different races who love each other," she declared, "is neither unethical or immoral. Christians should work to remove sociological obstacles against it."

Then came World War II and Harper's presidency of the USO (United Service Organizations), which sent the couple touring many bases in this country and abroad to oversee the welfare and recreation of members of the armed forces. Mrs. Sibley's being unanimously chosen American Mother of the Year in 1945 rather embarrassed her, but it meant that she was on the committee to choose the American Mother of the next year. One of the nominees was Mrs. Emma Clarissa Clement, the granddaughter of a slave, who would have gained the honor if the committee members from southern states had not felt constrained against voting for a Negro. Mrs. Sibley prevailed on them to break with this prejudice; Mrs. Clement was chosen; and the old way, Georgiana said, "could never be put back in the box again."

Concerns of Church and government meshed in a thrilling way for this idealist when, as an official observer representing Churchwomen United, she attended the founding conference of the United Nations. "One of the great moments in history," she named it and wholeheartedly applauded the Declaration of Human Rights, largely the work of Eleanor Roosevelt, whom she had long before met through Ethel Roosevelt.

In an interview later, Georgiana Sibley spelled out her conviction that patterns of race, sex, language and religious exclusiveness must be broken. Citing the story of Jesus and the woman at the well in Samaria as indication of the will of God, she declared that, while human rights have not yet been achieved worldwide, the Preamble to the U. N. Charter was a platform on which to stand and a tremendous step forward for humanity. This, she commented, was "why I knock myself out in this work all the time," and the next year she helped found the Rochester Association for the United Nations.

"Sometimes women can go through smaller cracks than men can," Georgiana once said. She referred to her having gone to Germany in 1948 as one of a group of women whom the War Department sent to help German women rebuild their organizations. Members of the United States Military Government, the American women traveled the country for three months encouraging women who had not been allowed to meet freely to form groups again, as well





as conferring with dignitaries at educational conferences.

A side trip to Prague as guest of the Young Women's Christian Association was the one time in her travels that Mrs. Sibley was frightened, for Czechoslovakia was then sealed off from non-Communist Europe. Fortunate timing of this trip made it convenient for Mrs. Sibley to attend the founding conference of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam--as she expressed it, "deep moments, when the lights were turned on again." More post-war reconstruction took her and Mr. Sibley to Honolulu in 1949 to help raise funds for new YWCA headquarters. From there they went to Tokyo where, by invitation of the United Council of Churchwomen, she conferred with Gen. Douglas MacArthur about the need for the Army of Occupation to return the commandeered St. Luke's Hospital to the control of the Japanese. She met, too, with the Empress, who wanted to learn how American women use their freedom, and what had been scheduled as a twenty-minute meeting became an hour-and-forty-minute conversation.

It was 1953 and yet another war when she represented the YWCA on a trip to Korea. Then in Japan with her husband, she helped raise funds for the addition of a graduate school to the inter-denominational International Christian University of Tokyo. Here they had the unusual opportunity of an interview with both the Emperor and Empress with no others present but two interpreters. Untiring in this work, the Sibleys were delegates three years later to the Second Beirut Conference on World Refugees and the next year traveled throughout the Orient for Church World Service. Back home in 1958 they celebrated their golden wedding anniversary, for which, she said, "I wore a lovely gold brocade dress." Harper Sibley died suddenly of a coronary occlusion the next year.

Her globe-trotting was beginning to rival Mrs. Roosevelt's. Her children asked, "Oh, Mother, why do you want to do that?" when, hearing in 1962 of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, she determined to attend it and reserved a room in the YMCA of Rome. An unofficial observer, she spent six weeks attending those meetings open to her, including three sessions with Pope John XXIII. She went to assist on a day which chanced to be the rime when the Pope made an unannounced pilgrimage there and heard this humble follower of St. Francis wonder aloud, "What would my mother say to see me today?" The opening service of the Council in St. Peter's Cathedral was to Georgiana "the greatest service of all Christendom, with Europeans, Africans, Asians -- every nationality represented." Where did a seventy-five year old woman find the stamina for these experiences? She has answered that, saying, "I believe that God is not only power, goodness and love, but also energy. I believe that one can tap the energy of God, and I do this many times a day with little periods of prayer. I also believe that one must live on the wavelength of this energy and that anger and pride and all the seven deadly sins, including frustration and over-hurrying, separate you from God's wavelength. I also believe in thinking positively."





With the 1960's, racial conflict came to Rochester. This perhaps did not surprise Mrs. Sibley, who some ten years earlier had convened a meeting of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in her home to urge the group to greater activity. "We can no longer allow superstition and ignorance to prevent the development of any American, regardless of his color, race, religion or national origin. Until we put our words and state laws into practice, however, our community will continue to pay the price of its negligence in poverty, disease and delinquency." Again, addressing members of the New York State Federation of Women's Clubs, she told Negroes that it was their task to make their communities what they should be.

Not many Rotary Club speakers quote Dante, but this believer told the Rochester Rotary his warning, "A special place in hell is reserved for those who in times of crisis remain neutral. The triumph of evil comes because good men remain silent." Both Whites and Negroes are equally brain-washed, she asserted, with false ideas about one another. She enjoined her audience to desegregate their hearts and minds, create open housing, provide job opportunities and job training and give all the people the sense that they are part of the community.

Blake McKelvey, then Rochester Historian, has told of the time when Mrs. Sibley came to a meeting already in progress at which proponents for integrated public housing were being rudely attacked by a city official. After waiting in the back of the room until this diatribe was finished, she came forward, nodding graciously to her opponents, and the atmosphere of the gathering was completely changed. "She had a manner," McKelvey said, "that was so sincere she was able to move into situations of great hostility and ease them."

In the Rochester race riots of 1964 Georgiana Sibley found her true calling. She was a conciliator. All the wit, tact and sensitivity to others she possessed were needed in this crisis, and she acted with the courage of her convictions. Her son, Harper, Jr., who happened to be out of the city when the riots broke out, tells of receiving a phone call from a city official urging him to come home and stop his mother because "as soon as a Black was arrested she was bailing him out." In fact, she did, as a symbolic protest, bail out one prisoner. Her stately home on fashionable East Avenue became a sort of headquarters where members of both factions could come together and the head of the Black Muslims was welcomed as graciously as the mayor.

Opportunities for Negroes were not greatly improved in 1967 when Saul Alinsky came from Chicago to organize the civil rights group. FIGHT, its acronym standing for Freedom, Integration, God, Honor, Today. Among other demands, this militant group pressed Kodak and





Xerox to hire more members of minorities. The Rochester Area Council of Churches, which had the role of mediator, was split on the issue of whether to support FIGHT. When the office of president became vacant just then, it was the job no one wanted. Enter the seventy-nine-year-old Mrs. Sibley, who, accepting the presidency, said her goal was to make Rochester the first fully integrated city in the country and who continued to hold meetings seeking reconciliation in her home. "I called it later an 'unpopularity' contest. Everyone hated me. I lost twenty pounds in two months.

"She had to be president," says her daughter, Jane Auchincloss. "No one else could. All the others had constituencies that wouldn't make concessions. She got the president of Kodak and Black leaders to sit down and talk. She could get people to talk about why there weren't any Blacks in certain jobs. But then she would work to get Blacks to realize the importance of education and job training to be prepared for those jobs. She believed it was especially important for Blacks to have pride in themselves." Mrs. Sibley's own appraisal of her work: "We have not gone far enough in opportunities for all, but at least there's a consciousness of the problem in many people's minds." She also served as president of the Episcopal Church's National Women's Auxiliary.

Among the tributes paid Georgiana Sibley at the time of her eightieth birthday was her being included in a Life Magazine article, "Grande Dames Who Grace America." She received honorary degrees from the International Christian University of Tokyo and Rochester's Nazareth College, saying on the latter occasion, "When we began the ecumenical movement, this was impossible, but the impossible happened. This is why I believe in the impossible. . . . This is the thing that keeps me going--the cause I serve cannot fail."

Her family celebrated her birthday at a picnic with many of her six children, twenty-two grandchildren and fifteen great-grandchildren present. At a community birthday celebration, eight hundred people seated at eighty tables gathered in the Chamber of Commerce banquet hall to join in her praises. "She was ecumenical before most of us knew there was such a word." said one of the speakers. In response she shared her belief that:

"Equality is not an anthropological, political, sociological or economic question; it is a theological question. Either God made everybody in his own image, or he didn't make anybody at all. The secret of my life is that for the last sixty-eight years I have followed God through various faiths throughout the world. . . . People cannot live on this small planet unless we live in accord with one another."

For the mediator that Mrs. Sibley was, one decision she made was not easy. The mayor's secretary had phoned to ask if she would invite to her home President Richard Nixon during





his forthcoming visit to Rochester. She could not in good conscience welcome and so seem to endorse the man most responsible for the continuing war in Vietnam. But whether to keep her refusal to herself or to make it public was difficult for one who had never sought controversy or personal publicity. Yet, she asked herself, hadn't she often preached, "Always take a stand; the victory of evil is because people don't speak out against it"? She made a televised statement that she could not "seem to approve of this man who I think has so much innocent blood on his hands, is responsible for the outrageous slaughter of innocent people. ... He has spoiled the fair name of our country which carried out the Marshall Plan. . . . These are things I can hardly bear."

In her eighties, Mrs. Sibley served as president of the Rochester Association for the United Nations, being awarded its civic medal, and was named by Kiwanis Club "Citizen of the Year," but her civic activities gradually lessened. With greater leisure, her special gift of relating to young people became more apparent. As a friend recalled, the children of the neighborhood, whether black, white or Asian, whether dressed up or in old clothes, were invited to have tea with her every afternoon, and she talked to each one as if he or she were an adult. According to the Rev. Mr. Wainwright, "When you talked to her, you had her undivided attention. Whether you were seven or seventy, she drew you out. Children loved her; she talked to them about things that mattered to them." When burglars broke into her home and tied and gagged her, she evidently engaged even them in conversation, for her maid reported that she later said, "You feel so sad that these young people have turned to this. They told me that this is what they do for a living because they make more money that way than working."

Mrs. Sibley left Rochester, her home of sixty-three years, in 1976 to live with Gordon and Jane Auchincloss in Millbrook, New York, and died four years later. While women of her stature are often called "grand dames," there is some suggestion of haughtiness about the term. It might better be said with the words in English: Rochester had lost a great lady.

Resources

"Interview with Mrs. Harper Sibley"

"Grande Dames Who Grace America"

Rochester *Democrat and Chronicle*, June 1, 1967. June 12, 1980

