

18 Ford Way, Derry NH
Nov. 19, 1931

[*editor: letter written by Hobart Ayres' younger sister, Addie, to Hobart's daughter, Katherine Elizabeth, who was about 9 years old when he abandoned the family.*]

My Dear Niece:

After so long a time I have actually begun the answer to your lovely letter. The reasons for the delay are too numerous to be given in detail: suffice it to say that I have not been very well some of the time and have had a good deal of company, some from out of town, who spent some time with us, so taking it all in all, it has not been easy to get to writing a letter of so much importance as I consider this to be. I am in full sympathy with you, in your desire to learn something of the early life and circumstances of your nearest of kin. You surely have been greatly deprived in this respect and I seem to be the only one surviving in your father's family that could give you the desired information. I feel deeply the delicacy, and responsibility, of the undertaking as well as the importance. My supreme desire is to give a correct retrospect, so far as I am able to, of the lives and experiences which you mentioned, of those so near and dear to us both.

Your grandfather Ayres was a tanner and shoemaker by trade, as his father was before him. At the age of 21 years, he left his home in Vermont and came to Peru, New York where he hired out to someone in that business and, as years went by, he became the proprietor of the largest shoe firm, or factory, in northern New York. He built a nice large shoe factory, and ran a successful business for several years. He and mother were active members of the M. E. Church, and he was honored with all the offices within the power of the church to bestow. In those days the "trust", or credit system, was the method of business. Father used to go to Montréal and buy supplies, to be paid for at a given time sufficiently distant for him to get returns for the goods which he put out. Ordinarily, the system worked well.

But there came a time when money tightened up, so to speak, and he failed to get the usual returns for his goods and, of course, his creditors were in the same plight. Many firms and banks collapsed and he, among others, had to give up his business. He made an assignment and moved to Black Brook, where he owned an interest in a large farm of nearly 300 acres. The family consisted of my father and mother, and oldest brother, Anson, 12 years of age, and your father, eight years, and myself, two years [*editor: this family description fits 1853. There was a major depression in 1857*]. Your uncle Anson entered the Army and died in the early part of the Civil War, in a hospital in one of the southern states. Your father was about 17 years of age when his brother died so was not able to take the place of a man on the farm but was a great help, of course. The farm possessed a fine productive soil, but very stony, and in those early days when farm machinery was rare and costly, farming was indeed an "uphill" business. But my parents were brave and trustful, and shouldered the new responsibilities with courage until their eldest son, their dependee, was laid away beneath the southern soil. For a whole year, so far as earthly hopes are concerned, seem to have deserted them. But, as your father grew up, he was a great comfort to them, as he was steady and reliable, and showed much skill on many lines, and was looked up to by men of the town. If I remember correctly, he was about 20 years of age when he became acquainted with your mother, and it's occurred in this way. Your grandmother, my mother, taught school for several years previous to her marriage with father, and she felt a special drawing

toward those of the same occupation, and tried to do her part to make things pleasant for those within her reach. It was a common thing for her to invite the schoolteacher in our district to take tea with us on a certain day named by her or them. At the time of the above mentioned, your mother was teaching in a district adjoining ours and mother thought it would be nice to invite both teachers so they could get acquainted with each other and we with both. Accordingly, invitations were sent to them. I think this was the first time any of the family had met your mother. I guess we all fell in love with her, I know I did, for one. According to custom, some pieces were sung before the occasion ended in your mother's rich alto captivated us all. Your father at once became eager to learn to read music and your mother agreed to give him music lessons. So, once a week, a tall beardless young man might be seen singing book in hand, perambulating with long strides, toward the "Dean Charles Neighborhood," and halting at the boarding place of Miss Thayer. Don't for a moment imagine he were not an assiduous student of music. I don't think it could be exaggerating to say that every time he could spare five or 10 minutes from farm work studying his lesson to be recited the next week, is what he could be found doing. Yet, as ardently as he loved music, I think he came to love the teacher more, so that by the time her term closed at school, he was ready to tell her his heart secret, and ask her to become his wife. So, he asked the privilege of taking her home at the close of the term to which she consented. On the way he conveyed to her his secret devotion to her and she assured him his love was reciprocated, but, she was engaged to another. Then the question came, could not the engagement be broken? Your mother agreed to try to get the consent of the other party, but they refused, so she wrote your father a letter telling him the situation and adding that it would be best for he and she not to meet again. Your mother was only 16 when she became engaged to this other man, had been engaged to him for three years. I remember well when he received the "fatal" information. The evening following he built a fire in the parlor, and when it was warm enough to sit there he lighted the parlor lamp and asked me to come in there with him. (I wondered what misdemeanor I had been guilty of.) Then he handed me the letter to read and went and laid down on the lounge. When I finished reading it I went over where he was, only to find him weeping bitterly, his heart was broken. Human sympathy, even a sister's, was unavailing, even to soothe his heart's distress. He felt bereaved! For a time, the home was indeed "a house of mourning." I might say, the whole family were stricken with his stroke.

After a time, he rallied from the depression of grief, and took up life's duties with a solemn interest in "the life that now is, and that which is to come." He became a member of the choir of the village church and very helpful in religious meetings held in the neighborhood where we lived. After a time, your aunt Winnie was chosen to teach the district school in our neighborhood and she boarded at father's, and she and I became quite intimate, and remained so, as long as we were within reach of each other. And I suppose the cares that came to each hindered correspondence. After a while, your father began to wait upon your aunt Celia [*editor: Cecila Thayer (1843-1889), Emma's sister*] and brought her to father's sometimes, and we all liked her very much but I don't think she ever seemed quite as near to me as your mother did. As time went on they became quite interested in each other, and were finally engaged, though I don't think the exact date had been set, when it became known to your father that the engagement of your mother had been dissolved and she was free. They both soon became aware that the old love had been only crushed, not killed, and soon, by some mysterious course of events or plan, the engagement with your aunt became annulled, and the engagement ring which she had worn was transferred to your mother's finger. As near as I am able to recall, this was about a year before your father and mother were married.

[*editor: this purchase was announced in the 6-Dec-1867 issue of The Plattsburgh Sentinel, Hobart was 19.*] I think it was about this time that your father met an old retired businessman who owned a large tract of timber a little above Wilmington, who became very desirous that your father should purchase his standing timber and agreed to get your father very extended time for the payments. He also owned a sawmill in Wilmington Village, having a gang of [indecipherable] somewhere from 12 to 18 in number, I don't remember the exact number, and offered the whole at a reasonable price and on extended time, the same as the timber. Most of the timber was on a steep mountainside which was difficult to haul down to the river but, after due consideration, your father decided to accept the proposition and signed the contract.

The following winter [*editor: probably early 1868*] was a busy one for young Hobart Ayres. He hired a good many men to chop the timber down and haul it to the river bank, ready to float it down to the mill pond in the spring when the water was high. In early spring he engaged a millwright, who, with two or three of his brothers, went to work repairing the sawmill, which he thought would be a six week job, and your father made his business engagements accordingly, such as goods required to carry on the repairs, dry goods and groceries with which to pay those who worked in the winter chopping and hauling timber, and in spring floating logs etc., all to be paid for after the mill got running. A merchant in Keeseville furnished him with lumber and everything necessary for the mill repairing, the bill was a large one, as the mill was in worse condition than the millwright at first thought and the mill wasn't ready for business for a long time after it was supposed to be, the Keeseville creditor seemed the most urgent of any. I think it was as much as three months later than the time first set before the mill was pronounced "finished." Then the saws [?] had to be placed, and adjusted for business, and just as that work was being done, the merchant at Keeseville becoming weary of the long delay, sent a sheriff and put an injunction on the mill and nothing more could be done. Your father said, as the sheriff handed him the paper, the tears came into his eyes, and he was known to tell someone who was near that he never felt so sorry to do a thing in his life as he did to give that paper to that enterprising young businessman, completely crushing his hopes.

We were told afterward that he resigned his office as Sheriff soon after, saying he would never do anything like that again. Of course, his business prospects were blighted. I think the above occurred the later part of August. Your father and mother were married the previous May [*editor: May-1868?*] and had lived in Wilmington Village during the summer but after the "crash" moved a little out and, in the following spring, moved to Black Brook where your sister Bertha was born the next August [*editor: first child of Hobart, born 1870*]. They lived at that time at father's, but later in the season went to keeping house by themselves in a cottage near on the farm where they lived until Anson was born [*editor: second child of Hobart, born Dec-1871*] and I think until the following fall when they moved to Clintonville. I was married the next March after your brother Anson was born. He was about three months old. My father and mother [*editor: Anson and Sally Ayres*] moved to Clintonville with your folks and, in the spring [*editor: 1872*], mother came to our house and spent a few weeks during which time your cousin Hobart was born. We were quite desirous that mother should remain with us and she consented, provided all parties were suited. I seemed to need her most so it was agreed upon, provided father could come, to which he did in the fall following. Your uncle and I lived in Saranac at this time. Your father got work where he could find it for a time, I don't remember just how long, but a few years. Then they moved to Chateaugay where your father hired a shop and engaged in cabinet work. He put out some nice work but I believe it was not very profitable and after a while he gave it up and they

moved elsewhere. I don't now remember the place. I think it wasn't long after this that he took up carpenter work and became quite efficient at the trade until he became a victim of hemorrhoids (piles) and after a while he had to give up that kind of work altogether.

Sometimes he would be confined to his bed for several days with the disorder. During those years, when out of work that he could do, he would go out to different places and give concerts. This method was first to interest the people in the fact of a concert which he was going to give. Whole talent was to comprise the singers and the concert practice was soon in full swing. Sometimes he made considerable, but often it cost a great deal, and the attendance depended on weather conditions as well as on the health of those who might go so, on the whole, it was not very profitable, and his family were often in destitute circumstances.

One thing I forgot to mention, in the proper place, is the fact that father lost his farm through its becoming involved in his son's business at Wilmington and it was the millwright that got it. His bill was large as he and the men he hired were to be paid after the mill got to running there was nothing else that could help out at the time, everything that could be done to help pay the running expenses had been so used.

But to return. I don't remember the details at this point, I don't remember just where your folks were living but he moved to Saranac, where we were living, and only a few rods from us. Father had died over two years before [editor: 1879] but mother was still living with us, but she died before your folks left Saranac. She died in the fall, in November, [editor: 16-Nov-1881] and your people went to Morrisonville the next spring and we moved to Willsboro the same spring.

Sometime within the next year and a half your father began building a house in Morrisonville and hoped to have a nice home someday. You doubtless remember the house. For lack of means to go farther with the building, as I remember it, your father left it unfinished to go out to hold concerts to get money to finish the house [editor: the local Plattsburgh papers make several mentions of the concert partnership of "Profs. Ober and Ayres"]. I don't now remember where he went, where he was there, he was taken with hemorrhoids, and a severe form, and was confined to his bed for several weeks during which time Mr. Emery came to him and informed him of the destitute condition of his family. This nearly broke his heart he wrote me something about it afterwards. It was while he was prostrated at this time that he invented the "extension ladder" which he developed later. He and Mr. Emery went into partnership in the latter business later, Mr. Emery furnishing the capital [editor: front page of The Plattsburgh Sentinel 29-Jun-1883: "R. H. Emery & Co., manufacturers of Ayres' Patent Sectional Extensible Ladder"]. A map was drawn of the territory to be canvassed in the United States and was divided into eastern portion and western portion, your father giving Mr. Emery his choice, and he chose the Eastern as his store, and whatever other business he had could then have his attention.

Your father visited us on his way to West and told us of the above transaction. [editor: this division of territory is an explanation for Hobart's travels among Iowa, Chicago, and St. Louis.] I think he went directly to Missouri, made his headquarters in that state but I do not now recall the city. Perhaps I may be able to sometime. He and I kept up correspondence until we moved from Willsboro to Saranac, which we did some three years later. (The name of the city where your father located was St. Louis.) About a year after your father went west, I think it was, your mother visited us a few days. We enjoyed the visit very much, it seemed good that she could relax for a few days even, she was necessarily a hard working woman. The family was large, and the poverty with its hopelessness was surely a great burden

to be on one woman's shoulders. Your father wrote me soon after the first Christmas he spent in the West, of his loneliness and the sad thoughts of his previous ones, so far away. He had no money to send them and none to take him to see them. Someone gave me a dollar for a Christmas present and I sent it on to him in my next letter. In his reply, he expressed gratitude for the favor saying his room rent was just due and he had nothing to pay it with but would return it as soon as possible. However, when I wrote him again, I assured him it was given to keep. After a few weeks he sent it, and I made haste to send it to your mother, and like the last dove sent out of the ark it never returned and we were satisfied.

Your mother and I and the whole family had a fine visit. But before your mother went home she told me that Mr. Emery went West to see your father a while before and he told her he found him living in a luxurious apartment, where he entertained one or more women. I think she more than half believed him but I didn't believe it at all and told her how he had written to me of his loneliness and how I accidentally ran across his poverty when I sent him that dollar. Only the judgment day will fully reveal secrets which are hidden from human observation but I have never believed that report. The author of it bore a reputation which would not bear the light of human investigation even, so I consider his statements unreliable. You may remember something about him, but I never knew. I don't now remember ever having seen him to speak with him. I wrote him after we went back to Saranac to live but I never received an answer. Some years later I was at your mother's and learned that she had received word that your father was coming home soon. I was glad and hoped to see him and expected to with joyful anticipation. But, to my almost overwhelming disappointment, I heard a few weeks later that he had been home and had gone. It has always been one of those unsolvable mysteries, why he did not come and see his only sister when he was so near. No one has given me an explanation. I don't know if there is anyone who can. If there is, and they feel disposed to tell me, I would certainly be grateful to them for so doing.

Now I don't know but I have taxed your patience beyond measure, with such a lengthy history, but somehow I have found it difficult to let go after beginning the subject. One train of thought followed another such rapid succession that I have been loath to leave off. I recall with pleasure to me someone your mother and I spent together when we all lived in Saranac. Occasionally, when your uncle Frank [editor: Addie's husband, Franklin Henry Haynes] was situated so he could spare one of the horses, he would hitch it on to the buggy and she and I would go calling. What such time we called on a sick lady who was given up to die. We talked with her a little, read some Scripture, singing some hymns, and I remember how sweetly your mother sang, her wonderful alto voice never was more musical. One of the hymns we sang that day were "fade, fade each earthly joy." As we sang, the tears coursed down her faded cheeks, soon a sweet expression stole over her, and a heavenly light came into her eyes and she said before we left her she was ready to leave this world for the home above, before that, she had expressed reluctance.

After your mother's death we would have been glad to have "little Grace" [editor: Hobart's daughter] come to live with us, but we were so affected at that time that we could not. We were being borders, and my hands were more than full. It is quite a while since I missed this writing, it is now December 2. If I have written too much forgive me: if I have omitted anything you would like to know about, please let me know, and I will do my best to give the information you desire. I am feeling better than when I wrote you last. I think that cough medicine is splendid. It reached me alright and I have bought one bottle since. I thank you so much. I hope to hear from you as soon as you have time to write to me.

With much love and best wishes for you all,

Your loving aunt Addie.