

A 1908 Interview with the Author of *Aunt Jane of Kentucky*

In the summer of 1908, journalist and photographer Ewing Galloway traveled from Henderson, Kentucky to Bowling Green to interview Eliza Calvert Hall about her popular book of stories, Aunt Jane of Kentucky. Published in March 1907, the book was then in its eleventh edition and had gained a place on booksellers' "most requested" lists in cities such as Boston, Louisville, Cincinnati, Chicago and Philadelphia. Reviewers had favorably compared Eliza Calvert Hall's talent for storytelling to that of Elizabeth Gaskell, Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman, and even President Theodore Roosevelt had become a fan.

"Eliza Calvert Hall" was the pen name of Lida Calvert Obenchain, a fifty-two-year-old mother of four and a native of Bowling Green. An author of both fiction and poetry, Lida was also a passionate advocate of woman suffrage and equal rights. Since the early 1890s, she had written in support of the cause in essays and commentary appearing in such nationally circulated publications as the Woman's Journal, the Woman's Tribune and the New York Times.

The following interview, in which Lida spoke of her interests and the success of her first book, appeared in the Henderson Daily Gleaner on August 30, 1908, and in the Bowling Green Messenger on September 3. Interview text is in bold type; annotations are in italics.

ELIZA CALVERT HALL IS SEEN AT CLOSE RANGE

Well Known Kentucky Author Talks of Her Work and Family Life A Many-Sided Person

A Little Journey to the Home of the Creator of *Aunt Jane of Kentucky*.

by Ewing Galloway

On shady Chestnut Street in Bowling Green lives one of Kentucky's noblest women—one who has endeared herself not only to native-born Kentuckians in every State in the Union, but to thousands of other good Americans into whose hands her book and her short stories have fallen.

Aunt Jane of Kentucky was one of 1907's most successful books by a new author. Six months after it was published, Lida and her family moved into their new home at 1353 Chestnut Street in Bowling Green. A few days after giving this interview, Lida used royalties from her book to make the final payment on what she called the "house that Aunt Jane of Kentucky bought."

Eliza Calvert Hall, creator of *Aunt Jane of Kentucky*, is a woman of whom the people of the Park City are rightly proud, for she not only stands among the foremost novelists of Kentucky, but belongs to the highest type of Southern womanhood. Every one who has read *Aunt Jane of Kentucky* will agree that the author of that splendid book is endowed with a great soul in tune with God and Nature and possesses the true art of expression. A broad outlook upon nature and humanity, a sensitiveness to the rights of her own sex, and ideals attained only by work, patience and painstaking, are undoubtedly the qualities that have won for her the esteem in which she is held in the literary world and the devotion of her friends and acquaintances. The secret of her literary success, to be sure, lies in her power to bring before our vision the divinity of commonplace things.

Although reviewers often erroneously described the setting for Aunt Jane of Kentucky as the "Bluegrass," they were charmed by the book's elderly narrator, Aunt Jane, and by the humor, sentiment and wisdom in her stories of the plain folk of the Pennyroyal region. As Aunt Jane's creator, Lida employed her poetic talent, her knowledge of Warren County lore, and her familiarity with domestic arts like quilting and gardening to evoke the people, sights, sounds and smells of rural nineteenth-century Kentucky.

Though known to her readers as Eliza Calvert Hall, she is Mrs. Lida Calvert Obenchain, wife of Major W. A. Obenchain, a professor in Ogden College, who is as enthusiastic over her literary work as is the author herself. Major Obenchain is an ex-Confederate veteran and Southern gentleman of the old school.

William Alexander Obenchain of Buchanan, Virginia—the Major, as he was known to all—had married Lida in 1885. Fifteen years her senior, he was stilted, old-fashioned and dignified. His favorite hobby, joked his students at Bowling Green's Ogden College, was "discipline." He nevertheless expressed remarkably liberal views on women's equality.

When I called at the Obenchain home a few days ago for the purpose of obtaining an interview I found the author of *Aunt Jane of Kentucky* to be a many-sided woman. She is the mother of four children whom she idolizes, and is mistress of a household that bespoke family devotion and true Southern hospitality.

When Aunt Jane of Kentucky was published in March 1907, Lida modestly hoped that her "March book" would be as successful as her "March baby"—her youngest daughter Cecilia (Cecil), born twelve years earlier. Though she pronounced all of her children "remarkable," Lida spent much of her married life bored and exhausted by her domestic duties. A wife, she once complained, was "cook, scullion, nurse, laundress, charwoman, dining room servant, and chambermaid all in one short twelve hours."

For several years Mrs. Obenchain has been an advocate of woman's rights, believing that women should be equal to man before the laws of suffrage and of property. As a member of the publicity committee of the Woman's Suffrage League, she has been engaged in the work of sending to the daily newspapers

literature for the advancement of the equal suffrage movement. On meeting and conversing with her in her quiet little home one would not take Mrs. Obenchain for a suffragette of the British type, and she is not, for she believes in persuasion as a method of convincing the public that she is right rather than shrieking in public places and being arrested in order to excite public sympathy, as do some of her sisters in the cause. She believes in the ultimate success of the suffragists.

Since 1900, Lida had been press superintendent for the Kentucky Equal Rights Association and a valued colleague of its president, Laura Clay. Each week, hoping to gain editorial support and publicity for women's rights, Lida circulated both original and syndicated articles to newspapers across the state. She also served as president of her county suffrage league. Lida understood the pressure on American suffragists, particularly in the South, to appear respectable and ladylike rather than "shriek in public," but Galloway understated her devotion to the cause. In national suffrage publications like the Woman's Journal and the Woman's Tribune, Lida wrote with intellectual breadth, passion and stinging sarcasm of the legal and social injustices heaped upon women.

Mrs. Obenchain may have her hobbies—and if she has, I am sure they are family, literature and woman suffrage—but she is far from being narrow. There are few women better informed on all subjects of general interest. She admires President Roosevelt, for his praise of *Aunt Jane of Kentucky* did as much as anything else toward placing it before the reading public. John Brisben Walker, former editor and publisher of the *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, was first to accept and publish any of her more successful writings, and it was through Mr. Walker's publication that "Sally Ann's Experience" became known.

The Cosmopolitan Magazine was nothing like its namesake of today. In addition to news, travel accounts and essays on culture and politics, it published fiction by H. G. Wells, Mark Twain, Arthur Conan Doyle and a host of lesser-known writers. The July, 1898 issue had carried what would become Aunt Jane of Kentucky's first and most famous story, "Sally Ann's Experience." Inspired by the tales Lida had heard while circulating petitions for suffrage and the reform of married women's property laws, it was a plain-spoken indictment of husbands' insensitive and parsimonious treatment of their wives under the cover of law and scripture. Facing down a male antagonist, Sally Ann complains in her rural dialect that "You're one o' the men that makes me think that it's better to be a Kentucky horse than a Kentucky woman." Three other stories in Aunt Jane of Kentucky had also first appeared in the Cosmopolitan.

In May 1907, before a large audience in Lansing, Michigan, President Theodore Roosevelt created even greater interest in Aunt Jane of Kentucky when he proclaimed "Sally Ann's Experience" required reading for men who tended to "selfish or thoughtless or overbearing disregard of the rights of their womenkind." Taking notice of his endorsement, the New York Times published an excerpt from the story under the headline "'Husbands, Love Your Wives,' Roosevelt's Message to Americans." Lida, however, was already thinking ahead to the next stage of her literary career.

“I am going to quit writing Aunt Jane stories next spring,” she told me, as we sat on her vine-clad veranda. “I am tired of writing dialect, and I find it difficult to keep from permitting it to corrupt my English. My second book of Aunt Jane stories will be published next spring, and after that I will try to write something else. Little, Brown & Company, my publishers, write me that the sales of my first book, *Aunt Jane of Kentucky*, are increasing.”

*In giving her characters a distinct regional identity, Lida joined other practitioners of the literary genre known as “local color” fiction. The dialogue in such stories reproduced clipped New England accents, Creole patois, “negro dialect” and Southern drawls; thus did Aunt Jane, a “plain old woman” of Kentucky, speak of the “daffydils” in her “gyarden” and of wives who “b’iled their clothes” in a “kittle” on wash day. Aunt Jane of Kentucky was in its fourteenth edition when Lida’s second book of stories, *The Land of Long Ago*, appeared in September, 1909. She published a short novel, *To Love and To Cherish*, in 1911 and a groundbreaking exploration of the weaver’s art, *A Book of Hand-Woven Coverlets*, in 1912. Lida’s last “Aunt Jane” story appeared in *Clover and Blue Grass*, a collection published in 1916. Ultimately, *Aunt Jane of Kentucky* appeared in more than thirty editions.*

“Of your later stories, which do you like best?” I asked her.

“Next to ‘Sally Ann’s Experience’ comes ‘The House That Was a Wedding Fee.’ Of course the former is the best story I have ever written. I wrote ‘A Ride to Town,’ which, as have all my latest stories, appeared in the *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, when I was ill. I was feeling miserably at the time, but somehow I wanted to complete it while it was on my mind, and, too, the publishers wanted to get it as soon as possible.”

*Between September 1907 and October 1909, Lida published nine “Aunt Jane” stories in the *Cosmopolitan*. “The House That Was a Wedding Fee” was loosely based on a local legend about Reverend Joseph Lapsley, founding pastor of Bowling Green’s First Presbyterian Church, and James Rumsey Skiles, who was said to have given Lapsley a house and farm as payment for performing his wedding ceremony. Local readers would also have recognized some of Bowling Green’s history and landmarks in “A Ride to Town.”*

Then she changed the subject rather suddenly, shifting to something she seemed to like better than anything else in the world.

“You must see my four children,” she said, “They are just the finest in all the world, and you may rest assured that I am prouder of them than of anything I have ever written, or expect to write.”

Her pride in the three of them I had the pleasure of meeting a little later was wholly justifiable. The eldest, a handsome young man of pleasing address who stands six feet three, is preparing himself for the profession of civil engineer.

Lida’s oldest son William Alexander Obenchain, Jr. (Alex) became a highway engineer in Kentucky and Texas, but his life would be shadowed by a melancholy and restless nature

and a weakness for alcohol. Later in life, he expressed pride in his mother's writing even as he blamed his family for his unhappiness. Opinions differed on whether Alex's mysterious death at age fifty was due to murder or suicide.

The second was a pretty girl of sixteen or seventeen, with many of her mother's characteristics.

Margery Obenchain was actually nearing her twenty-first birthday. Two years later, she married and moved to Dallas, Texas. When Margery was diagnosed with tuberculosis in 1919, Lida, now widowed, took charge of her daughter's household and two young children with a sense of both maternal duty and dismay. "I seem to have started life all over again, raising children and keeping house, when I thought I was through with such work forever," she wrote. Margery's death in 1923 left Lida deeply sad and pessimistic.

The third was a miss of thirteen summers, who has displayed remarkable musical talent. In the course of the interview Mrs. Obenchain inquired of the youngest girl's whereabouts and urged the older one to go in search of her, so that I might hear her perform on the violin, but just before I left she came in from the street and played beautifully, her mother furnishing an accompaniment on the piano.

Cecilia (Cecil) Obenchain pursued both music and writing as an adult, but her older brother Tom claimed that she caused Lida the most trouble of any of the children. Their relationship, indeed, was complex; Cecil adored her mother even as she felt controlled by her. After Lida's death in 1935, Cecil's mental state deteriorated. She died in 1937, after falling from the sixth floor of a Dallas office building.

"Several years ago," the author continued, "I had a strong desire to go into journalism. I believed I could succeed, but now I do not care for it. Some years ago John Brisben Walker offered me a good salary to write for a newspaper syndicate of which he was the head, but at that time my youngest girl was a baby. I would have been compelled to give most of my attention to one or the other, and, of course, I could not give up my baby for anything.

In 1897, when Cecil was not yet three years old, Lida wrote a series of articles for the New York Times on such progressive topics as women in college, older woman-younger man marriages, and the right of the "literary woman" to exemption from household chores. One of these articles came to Walker's attention, prompting the syndicate offer and, soon afterward, his publication of "Sally Ann's Experience."

"Are you still interested in the woman's suffrage movement?" I asked her, knowing well that I was bringing up one of her favorite subjects, for she has been engaged for several years in spreading suffragist propaganda.

"I am glad you mentioned that subject," she replied. "I am really more deeply interested in woman suffrage than in literature. For some time I have been

compelled to drop my work in that connection, but I will take it up again. I believe we will win in our fight for suffrage. It has been my duty to send suffragist literature to one hundred newspapers, but I am going to weed out all except those papers which give space to some of the matter I send.

On her mailing list of Kentucky newspapers, Lida tried to keep track of those that were sympathetic to suffrage and those that were not. The state's most influential paper, the Louisville Courier-Journal, was in the latter category; in fact, Lida complained, there was "not a paper in Louisville friendly to Equal Rights." Despite her devotion to the cause, exhaustion and illness forced her to give up her press work in 1909. Another contributing factor was Lida's grim determination that, in light of her husband's modest teaching salary, she had to concentrate on her fiction writing in order to "support the family."

"I am a believer in the public ownership of public service corporations."

This brief interjection hinted at Lida's opinion of trusts and corporate concentrations of wealth. She had other highly reform-minded political views. Writing on the "industrial problem" in the 1890s, she expressed sympathy for labor unions even though they were often associated with communism and anarchism. As a self-described woman of "very, very moderate means," Lida objected to her culture's unwillingness to assign monetary value to wives' domestic work, and supported the idea of "public kitchens" to provide families with pre-cooked food and other services. Like many modern feminists, she deplored excessive consumerism, especially as practiced during the Christmas season. In later life, however, she grew more conservative, voicing skepticism of socialist-style attempts to "turn society bottom side upwards." She was, she admitted, "a firm believer in classes."

In the course of the interview Major Obenchain told of a striking little incident in his wife's struggle to "get into print."

"She sent 'Sally Ann's Experience' to several publishers before it was accepted by Mr. Walker, all of whom returned it. Among these was a Philadelphia editor who returned the story with a polite letter in which he explained that he liked it for its literary value, but that he thought the church scene, in which Sally Ann spoke her mind to a little congregation of her country neighbors, telling them how she viewed the treatment some of the wives received at the hands of their husbands, was irreverent. He feared the story would not be received in the right spirit. Later the story was published in the *Cosmopolitan Magazine* and when it became popular this same editor offered my wife a very large sum of money for permission to reprint it in his magazine."

The Philadelphia editor who rejected "Sally Ann's Experience" was Edward Bok of the Ladies' Home Journal. To Lida's great satisfaction, in 1907 he paid \$200 for reprint rights (equivalent to about \$4,500 today) to bring the story to his magazine's one million readers.

Mrs. Obenchain remarked that she would be pleased to recover possession of some of her short stories that were accepted and paid for by John Brisben Walker but never published, the failure to publish being caused probably by his retirement from the editorship of the *Cosmopolitan Magazine*.

John Brisben Walker had sold the Cosmopolitan to William Randolph Hearst in 1905. In contrast to her fiction, Lida was less concerned about retaining copies of her suffrage writing, considering it to have no lasting literary value. She acknowledged, however, that if she had not worked for the Kentucky Equal Rights Association “I would never have been the author of Aunt Jane of Kentucky, so my share of literary fame and fortune rests on my belief in woman suffrage.”

This “many-sided” woman later began other projects—a book of poetry, one of essays and another on basketry—that, unfortunately, never saw publication, but even in 1935, struggling with arthritis in the last year of her life, Lida was ambitious. “There is so much work that I am capable of doing and want to do,” she wrote. Nevertheless, for a self-described “ordinary woman” whose life was “bounded by the four walls of home,” her output was impressive. In addition to her five books, she published at least thirty-five poems and twenty stories in magazines, not to mention dozens of essays and editorials in support of suffrage and equal rights—a crusade that was rewarded when, in 1920, Kentucky became one of only four southern states to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment guaranteeing women the vote.