

THE LIBRARY

The Poor Vanderbilts

BY AMY VANDERBILT

"**M**ADAM," said the dowager Mrs. Vanderbilt's butler, as she was serving tea at 1 East 67th Street to two of my less fortunate cousins, "there is a messenger here from the bank with an envelope he insists on delivering to you personally."

"Well, show him up," barked the old lady who, to historians at least, was Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt II. The messenger handed her the bonds only to have them tossed back at him promptly.

"You may tell the bank," said the lady in her severest tone, "that when they address me properly, I shall receive their correspondence. I know of no Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt. I am Mrs. Vanderbilt."

There is always a Mrs. Vanderbilt without any prefixed first-name handles or suffixed numerals — *the* Mrs. Vanderbilt. In 1934 *the* Mrs. Vanderbilt about whom the above anecdote is told died and her title passed to her son's wife, who, though not so insistent in the mat-

ter as her mother-in-law, does to be known as Mrs. Vanderk. In case, by now, you are properly confused, she is the Vanderbilt now regarded as the leader of New York society — she of the beige fox scarves (it isn't true that she has only one and that one ratty), the diamond stomacher and the headache bands. She is the long-suffering mother of Neely, thrice divorced and oft-bankrupt scion of the house, whose weakness for loud journalism has increased his standing neither in journalistic nor society circles. Her husband is General Vanderbilt, who loves the military but loves not society and shows it by camping out most of the time on his houseboat.

For years I have not thought, one way or the other, about being a Vanderbilt, until a volume such as the one just published — *The Vanderbilt Legend* by Wayne Andrews¹ — comes along to remind

¹ *The Vanderbilt Legend*, by Wayne Andrews. \$3.50. Harcourt, Brace.

ne. But it was not always so. As a small child and later, in my adolescence, I suffered acutely because, although a *bona fide* Vanderbilt, I had no money. Well, not the kind of money that is termed Vanderbilt money. I had been born a poor Vanderbilt.

My own family was considerably shy on the subject, too. My mother was embarrassed when shopping because the salesgirls, in waiting the check for modest purchases, invariably asked if she were one of the Vanderbilts. She always said "No," to avoid further discussion of the matter. They still ask me the same, and I say "Yes" with a look that defies further comment.

The fact that there *are* poor Vanderbilts has somehow been slurred over by the press and the public; by everyone, indeed, except the said poor Vanderbilts. There are the monthly bills, there is the need for careful budgeting, to remind them if ever they should forget. The truth is that there are more poor Vanderbilts than rich ones. Although there are only fifteen Vanderbilt listings in the New York telephone book (two of them mine, and one my father's), and only eleven Vanderbilts listed under "Married Maidens" in the Social Register, and only nine Vanderbilt listings in the rest of the

book, the family is enormous. But enormous! Maybe not yet as extensive as the Smith family, but well on the way.

The latest book on "the Vanderbilt legend" pulls out the old chestnuts that all Vanderbilts are rich, unintellectual, ostentatious, snobbish and, above all, penurious. Of course there have been, and possibly still are, Vanderbilts to fit all these adjectives. But these adjectives do not fit all the Vanderbilts or even a substantial portion of the clan. The low-down, if you want it, is that there is almost as much variety among Vanderbilts as among Smiths and Andrewses.

Mr. Wayne Andrews, who writes this book, is evidently a Vanderbilt-phobe. I was not surprised to learn, on investigation, that he is a very young man, that this is his first book, and that he is not listed in the Social Register. The Vanderbilt legend has a way of intruding itself on young men, who go to Harvard and such, who are society-conscious and not in the Book.

Mr. Andrews records one piece of familiar information, however, that would have consoled me as a child. The "Commodore" had eight sons, three daughters and thirty-two grandchildren. Allowing for time and nature to take their well-known course, that makes a

terrific pile of descendants, even if you do leave \$105,000,000. For many members of his immediate family it meant, if not poverty, certainly extremely modest circumstances. The women of the family, moreover, got the wrong end of the stick when the will was read. Most of them got a mere \$250,000 apiece and only one got as much as \$500,000, in trust. When the sections begin to be subdivided over the years among a collection of grand- and great-grandchildren, some of them not too wise in money matters, you head for the sort of trouble that hit extensions of the line like myself.

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Some of those great-grandchildren, poor little Vanderbilts, were and are pretty unhappy, blood-proud, arrogant creatures without clothes to their backs. One of them finally sought haven in the Marines after running through — in pseudo-play-boy style — the pittance that came down to him. He thought it was expected.

There are plenty of what we, in our family, call "hand-out" Vanderbilts around. When they could no longer get their remittance money from Chauncey Depew (who gave out for the Commo-

dore's estate) or from Frederick who was generous to the extreme especially with the "have-not" members, some of them went on relief. Yes, Vanderbilts on relief. The Commodore knew what he was talking about when, on asked for a donation out of pocket he answered "Why, if I sit that, I'd have a line outside a block long." In addition to his immense large family, he had a brother Jacob, a power on Staten Island and wealthy himself, comparatively speaking. He also had two sisters. Think of their kin, too, in visualizing some of the demands which were made on the Commodore and on his current descendants by the army able to claim Vanderbilt connections.

When I was in Holland, I went to Haarlem, said to be the family seat of the Vanderbilts. The original founders seem to have been of the *burgemeister* or landowner class. There are several Vanderbilts buried under the floor of the Haarlem Kerk but I could find only one live one, an old man. The name is not common in Holland. It was Jan Aoertsen Van Der Bilt who settled in Flatbush in 1650, not Art Jan- sen, as Mr. Andrews states. It is probably true, then, that everyone in this country whose surname is legally Vanderbilt, is descended

from the same Hollander. When I look at some of his numerous progeny I am more than willing to stress my fancy Irish and English inheritance on my mother's side.

On the other hand, there are Vanderbilts who, starting from relatively poor, have been successful, well-educated citizens without any excess of *chi-chi* in spite of their names. One of them is Arthur T. Vanderbilt, former president of the New Jersey Bar Association, a Phi Beta Kappa who this year received the organization's citation for high intellectual leadership. Robert T. Vanderbilt is a successful New York chemist. Young Sanderson Vanderbilt is a *New Yorker* writer and newspaper man. None of these is listed in the Social Register. Incidentally, there is no reason why all the Vanderbilts should know one another. Harold Vanderbilt did not recognize his first cousin, once removed, Cornelius Vanderbilt, Jr., when the latter was "covering" the Cup Races. At that, when he was made to understand that Neely was a Vanderbilt, too, he wouldn't believe it.

Much to my surprise, as I waded through Mr. Andrews' biased book on my family I found that the moneyed branch of it, contrary to what everyone including myself

has always heard, has given large sums of money to philanthropy. With only the evidence of Mr. Andrews' will listings before me, I sum up over \$12,500,000 donated by the Vanderbilts to charity in the past sixty-seven years, or since the last days of the Commodore. And that gentleman, supposedly noted for his niggardliness, kicked in \$1,500,000 of that total. And I am not counting gifts to the public of such holdings as the Long Island Motor Parkway or Frederick Vanderbilt's place at Hyde Park.

The general misconception derives, it seems, from the fact that many of the Vanderbilts gave to charities while they lived instead of at the time of their death, which did not make such good reading in the papers. Others, like Harold, give plenty in a quiet way without public announcement. And all the educational grants have not gone to Vanderbilt University, either; large hunks (one of \$1,000,000 at one time from Frederick the Giver) have gone to Yale and Harvard. If you have a college-age Vanderbilt boy in your family, there's a room (number 31) waiting for him at Yale.

The reigning Vanderbilts, in most cases, were no dopes in college, either, even if they were and are billed as playboys in the gossip

columns. Frederick W. took his Ph.B. at Yale; Harold Stirling took his A.B. and his law degree at Harvard; Cornelius III, the "General," has a Ph.B. from Yale and an Engineering degree as well. The present William H., former Governor of Rhode Island, a Princeton man, is a white hope of the young Republicans.

It's the women of the family, most of whom were not Vanderbilts but just married to them, who caused the most outcries against Vanderbilt extravagance and lack of taste. Some of them have been unfortunate, to say the least, in their choice of friends, and most of the women have been neglected from an educational standpoint. But then, they're no worse off in that respect than most of the daughters of the very rich. No matter, too, how little the present Vanderbilt men seem to be doing to insure their patrimony, it does grow. They show native executive ability to a man. William Henry, whom Mr. Andrews consistently calls timid and unaggressive, was able more than to double his take by the time of his death. He increased the money left him by his father from \$90,000,000 to \$200,000,000, and he didn't do it lolling on his yacht.

The Commodore, lusty and shrewd as he was, undoubtedly had more fun out of life than any of his heirs. William K. is quoted in *The Vanderbilt Legend* as saying, "If a man makes money, no matter how much, he finds a certain business in its possession, for a desire to increase his business has a constant use of it. But a man who inherits it has none of this. The first satisfaction, and greatest, that of building the foundation of a fortune, is denied him. He must labor, if he does labor, simply to add to an oversufficiency". Or, I might add, give it away.

But they have given a lot of it away and most of the wealthy ones will have plenty more to leave to good causes. I am glad none of it is coming to me. As Eleanor Roosevelt said recently, the day of great fortunes and great holdings is almost over. When the rest of the Vanderbilts go back to work I'll be way ahead of them. I've been in there doing just that for years by choice. I have so much Vanderbilt blood in me and I love it. But despite Mr. Andrews' play-by-play description of the Vanderbilt marriages, births, deaths and divorces, I still cannot keep them all straight. I don't know how anyone else can.

THE CHECK LIST

NON-FICTION

OF THE NIGHT, by Jan Valtin. *Alliance*. This Book-of-the-Month selection for February is in many respects the most exciting personal document to come out of the tragic years between the two wars. What makes it especially significant, almost symbolic, of the period is that by a historic conjuncture of events the author's career as a secret agent of the Communist International merged with an amazing assignment as an agent of the German Gestapo. The two streams of brutalitarianism thus flowed together in his life, as they have in world politics. The total effect of his blood-curdling narrative is to convey the horror of a type of thought, regardless of its political color. The volume is especially recommended to those well-meaning liberals who still make fine distinctions between various brands of sadism.

As a boy the author was sucked into the revolutionary vortex of his native postwar Germany. From there he was drawn into a career as Moscow agent that took him into every country of the world, including the United States. That career ended about twenty years later, when Valtin escaped purge at the hands of Stalin's killers. In between, he crowded an incredible sum-total of sheer adventure, experience in prisons and torture chambers, intimate flesh-and-blood contact with the horrifying cruelties of both Red and Brown dictatorships. The 841 pages of this unusual autobiography depict the political underworld of Communism and Nazism in terms of one man's life and works. Whether read as a document of our times or as a tale of strange people, strange places, strange events, Jan Valtin's book will haunt the reader always. We do not hesitate to prophesy that it will have a profound effect

in curing the political innocence of thousands of Americans.

U. S. CAMERA 1941, edited by T. J. Maloney. Pictures judged by Edward Steichen. \$4.85. *Duell, Sloan and Pearce*. This year's U. S. Camera emerges in handsome two-volume format, Volume I devoted to special phases of camera work by leading photographers: J. W. McManigal's agricultural pictures; Dorothea Lange's pictures with a purpose, with commentary by Pere Lorentz; and contributions by Lusha Nelson, Carl Mydans, and others. Eliot Elisofon writes on the use of the flash. William Henry Jackson, the ninety-seven-year-old pioneer, is represented with Western pictures and a deserved tribute. In the second volume scores of photographers contribute outstanding studies. The annual this year is characterized by a greater range in subjects and techniques, with hundreds of pictures, including color work.

THE CITY OF MAN, by William Allan Neilson, Herbert Agar, William Yandell Elliott, Lewis Mumford and thirteen others. \$1.00. *Viking*. Here is some tonic which is guaranteed to put hair on democracy's chest. Democracy must quit being little Red Riding Hood and learn how to take care of itself. It needs cartridges in the little yellow basket instead of butter patties. The authors outline a program for "total democracy" which is deadly earnest and no fooling. They grimly face the question of restricting the civil liberties and activities of democratic foes and argue persuasively for a new psychology of democratic self-discipline.

LIFE ON OTHER WORLDS, by H. Spencer Jones. \$3.00. *Macmillan*. While we are blowing ourselves up on this world Mr.