



# LITERARIES AND CHRISTMAS TREES

By CECIL B. WILLIAMS

IT is not easy to comprehend today to what extent a rural schoolhouse could be a community center in pioneer days. Vassar School, in Oklahoma, must have been largely typical. But it was more remote from towns than the majority of the schools, and there is some evidence that there was rather more of liveliness and initiative in its patrons, resulting in somewhat notable extra-curricular activities. Vassar District had its pride; it could do more things and do the same things better than could its neighbor districts, such as Lone Star, Darnell, and Poverty Knob.

The "Literaries" were, generally speaking, the most exciting of the Vassar night-time activities. These were held weekly, for a long time on Friday nights, as a kind of gilded adult postscript to a week of day-time intellectual activity by the youngsters. Some years another night was chosen, often Tuesday, to

avoid conflicts with similar activities in neighboring districts; for some literary-goers, especially the gay young horseback riders, liked to attend more than one literary in a week.

The country literaries prospered for somewhat the same reasons that lecture series by Emerson and lesser lights, lyceum courses, Chautauquas, and little theaters prospered. That is, the American people were in an emergent cultural stage, wanting more of both intellectual food and light amusement than was readily available to them in their rural homes, remote from urban culture and lacking means of communication and transportation.

The bill of fare at the Vassar literaries was a curious medley, to be sure. Since the literaries were held during the time of year when darkness comes early, the customary meeting hour was seven o'clock or seven-thirty, and the program lasted

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on the average about three hours, divided into two main parts, with a fifteen-minute recess between. The literary was set up according to the frontier interpretation of parliamentary procedure, with a president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer, and program chairman. The president would dispose of any business, old or new, then give way to the program chairman.

FOR the pre-recess part of the program, the chairman would present a medley of recitations, by both adults and schoolchildren; musical numbers — there were always a few good voices and persons who loved to sing, good voices or not; and dramatic skits and plays, often written by the casts themselves. Talent scouts from Broadway or Hollywood would not likely have been much excited by the talent displayed, but the performers usually pleased themselves and their audiences. What more was needed?

For some of the participants the fifteen-minute recess was just about the best time of all. The men would all go outside, into the semi-dark of a moonlit or starlit Oklahoma night, and stand around on the porch and in the schoolyard, smoking and cooking up business deals; discussing the merits of the performance they had just witnessed; berating the government or goings-on in the community; or telling stories, many of them representing American folk humor in its frankest, crudest form.

The schoolhouse was left to the women and small children. The women's activities, while the children played tag about the room and up and down the aisles, or ticktack-toe on the blackboards, were the feminine counterpart of the men's. They gossiped, exchanged recipes, remarked that one of the Grover boys had been getting sweet on one of the Huffman girls and speculated how soon they'd make a match of it; noted that Mamie Jones was in the family way and guessed about when her time would be; made plans to get up a quilting at the house of one of their number; and also made comments on the program, both the part that they had heard and the part that was left.

After recess, the president would rap his gavel on the schoolteacher's desk, quite impressively, and as the din of reassembly began to subside the program chairman would introduce the remaining feature of the evening's entertainment. Sometimes this would be a spelling bee or ciphering match. More often, however, it would be a debate, between teams of two men on a side.

Most of the debating was carried on by a dozen or so of the men of the community, and in time they achieved ratings, somewhat like the seeding of tennis players. Sam Garner and George Hodges were rated at the top. Nick Lester and Delbert Black, most frequently the president of the literaries, were also in great demand. Whenever possible,

the debate would be between a home team and a visiting team from another district; Lone Star, Darnell, Marena, occasionally Clarkson.

The debates were perhaps better as entertainment than as forensic performances. The participants used homely analogies and metaphors freely, and were particularly adept in tripping their opponents in fallacies, real or supposed.

The topics debated were often chosen more for entertainment value than for educational significance: "Resolved: That man is more truthful than woman." "Resolved: That the pen is mightier than the sword." "Resolved: That gossip is more harmful than whiskey." Or such more serious subjects as, "Resolved: That Vassar District's greatest need is a longer term of school." "Resolved: That the State of Oklahoma should adopt measures to control soil-washing" (the term *erosion* was not yet in use). And "Resolved: That Democratic government is more beneficial to the nation than Republican."

IT WAS only very seldom that any of the Wilsons attended the Vassar literaries. On the whole Jake Wilson was opposed to them. They meant wear and tear on the schoolhouse and its equipment, and extra expense to the district for wood for heating and oil for lights. Mostly they were worldliness anyway, unbecoming to followers of the good life.

Occasionally the Wilsons would attend when they had learned, by way of the schoolteacher's customary announcement to the schoolchildren, that the second part of the program was to be a spelling bee or ciphering match. These were educational activities beyond a doubt, and Jake's own children could participate in them (weren't Carrie and Terry recognized as the best spellers in the whole school?). One time the captain of one of the spelling teams, choosing the members of his team from young and old, as was the custom, chose Martha Wilson. No one ever knew why; perhaps one of the Wilson children had boasted enough of Mother's spelling prowess that the word had got around. Martha, who had gone to school much more than Jake, was proud of her spelling, as well as her penmanship, but she demurred at being a member of a team; it was not in keeping with her quiet living. Finally, however, she consented, and Jake must have been more than a little proud when she stood up and remained along with Carrie and Terry among the last five to go down. Carrie won, and Mother was second.

After that triumph, the Wilsons came to the literaries several times, and Terry was inspired by the give-and-take of pitched debates, particularly the rebuttals. Father, however, soon found much to disapprove in the "worldly" aspects of the goings-on. Men and women dressed in the clothes of the other sex to

play parts in the dialogues. Faces were blacked to imitate Negroes, and guns fired blank shells to lend excitement to the amateurish acting on the rostrum. He told Martha and the children that they would go no more; such things were not for members of the Church of the Brethren, who had forsworn the vanities of the world.

SOMETIMES a regular literary would be skipped to make way for a box supper or pie supper. This was especially likely to happen a month or so before Christmas, in order to raise money for a Christmas celebration, high-lighted by the gaily decorated cedar tree and presents for one and all.

The Wilsons didn't often go to the pie suppers either, and consequently seldom to the Christmas trees. You *could* go to a Christmas tree without having participated in the pie supper beforehand, but it was embarrassing to do so, since Santa wouldn't call your name for presents — or he might, if someone had managed to pin a present on the tree for you anyway. Terry Wilson always remembered as one of the great events of his childhood his first Christmas tree at Vassar. Teacher had talked a good deal about the tree during school hours; so he had let Mother know how very much he would like to go. She had managed to get Father's grudging consent. So after supper and the chores were over they set out — on

foot — down the muddy lane and through the pasture.

When they got inside the school-house, it was already full of people, and they kept coming. Mother got a seat for them fairly near the front. Since nothing was really going on yet, she let Terry go up to the tree itself, where several of his school-mates had gathered. The tree, a big cedar brought from the Brooks pasture not far away, was beautiful. There were big winding festoons of bright-colored paper chains on it. Terry had helped make such chains during his first year in school. There were popcorn chains too, lighted candles here and there, and a lot of shiny stuff such as Terry had never seen before.

There were several songs and recitations and a little play, which they called a dialogue, the usual Vassar name for a dramatic performance. The dialogue was rather dull for Terry, and he was sort of dozing off, crowded into the seat beside Mother, and with his head about to fall into her lap, when Mr. Black made the great announcement — Santa Claus was coming, and was almost here.

"Santa Claus drives reindeer, you know," he said. "They're not ordinary reindeer either, but magic reindeer that can travel faster than the wind. We've just had the news that Santa has already come most of the way from the North Pole and is now coming through Wichita, Kansas." He paused a moment.

"He's still coming, and now he's at Arkansas City." Another pause. "No, he's in Ponca City." Another. "Now he's in Perry — Orlando — Mulhall — he's just outside the schoolhouse door — and now he's here!" And sure enough, he was, coming down the aisle in all his proper attire, laughing, throwing wrapped pieces of candy to right and left, and saying, "Hello, everybody — I'm glad some of you were good this year, so I could come. No presents for naughty boys and girls you know — ha! ha!"

Then, as the children watched open-mouthed, Santa was calling out the presents, in familiar names of Terry's schoolmates and their parents. For quite a while Terry feared that Santa would have nothing at all for him, but finally there was the bag of candy and nuts, finished off with a red apple and a big orange, that their teacher had provided for each of them, and a new jackknife, a secret present from Mother, quite enough to make a small boy happy.

Now they were on the way home. "Did you have a nice time, Terry?"

"It was an awful nice time," he answered, picking his way along the rough road with difficulty in the darkness of the frosty night. "I wish we could go to lots of Christmas trees," he added.

"You mustn't learn to be greedy, Terry," she said. "We might not get to go to anything like this again for a long while. Just be thankful for this time." It never occurred to little Terry that the occasion had been almost as much of a treat for his mother as for himself.

Finally they were nearly home, and going up the lane. Next day they would hold family worship, and Father would thank God for the gift to men of Jesus Christ, God's Holy Son.

The literaries died out at Vassar long before the country schools themselves were abandoned in favor of town schools. After Del Black was killed by being thrown from his horse, and Sam Garner had moved away, and Nick Lester and George Hodges became too rheumatic to turn out for the literaries, much of the activating force was gone.

The young folks had their parties from house to house.

Then when films began to show in Mulhall and Coyle, all the couples wanted to go to town for their weekly entertainment.

The sober citizenry had taken over at home in large part; the great thing now was to conserve the soil and till it better, and thus to cope with insect and drought, which now made life too hard to foster the lightheartedness of the homesteaders in early days when the grass grew lush in pastureland.

# HOW TO UNDERSTAND VISHINSKY

By Robert S. Byfield

THE language barrier that stands between East and West is hurdled easily by the United Nations linguists who provide fast and exact English translations of all important Russian speeches. But certain words that constantly occur in the diatribes of Andrei Vishinsky and his colleagues don't make sense — in their particular contexts — even in translation. It has been alleged that the Communist word-smiths would have Western listeners believe that black is white, and night is day. Here is a capsule dictionary of this “Commiechat,” defining some key political words in terms of what they *actually* mean to the Communists.

**The People** • The Communists, their sympathizers or collaborators in any satellite nation or prospective satellite nation.

**Enemies of the People** • The anti-Communists, their sympathizers or collaborators in any satellite nation or prospective satellite nation.

**Traitor** • A particularly active individual among the anti-Communists.

**Slanderer** • Anyone who tells the truth about the Soviet Union.

**Reactionary** • Outside of the Iron Curtain, anyone who isn't a Communist.

**People's Democracy** • A totalitarian government, taking orders from Moscow.

**Fascist** • Anyone who believes in capitalism.

**Anti-Fascist** • A Communist.

**Progressive** • A Communist sympathizer; a fellow traveler.

**Liberation** • Conquest of a free country by Communist infiltration or force.

**World National Liberation Movement** • The power grab of international Communism for world domination.

**Aggressor** • Any person or nation opposing Soviet imperialism.

**Peace** • A condition of helplessness and indefensibility before the military might of the Soviet Union.

**Peace-Loving** • Any nation, people or individual willing to cooperate with Moscow.

**Cooperation** • “You let us do what we want and then help us do it.”

**War** • Not necessarily the physical clash of men on a conventional battlefield, but propaganda, intrigue, assassination, blackmail, economic pressure, infiltration, subversion, agitation, kidnapping and shakedowns.

**Warmonger** • Anyone who is willing to defend himself or his country, if need be by force of arms, from Soviet enslavement.

**Profiteer** • Anyone who makes a profit.

**Monopoly** • Any corporate enterprise.

**Monopolist** • A businessman.

**Imperialism** • The act of investing money abroad for any purpose whatsoever.