

## *Obituary*

### HERBERT HENRY HOSMER, JR.

When a young museum curator heard the name Herbert Hosmer, he exclaimed excitedly, 'Why, he's legendary!' Upon learning of this assessment, the irrepressible Mr. Hosmer could only agree. 'I'm legendary,' he proclaimed, gleefully punctuating his words with infectious laughter. Indeed Herbert Hosmer was just that, as are his extraordinary collections of children's books, paper games, cut-out toys, and playthings. Ahead of his time in recognizing the significance of such fragile, ephemeral material, his collections, broad in scope but focusing on the period between 1840 and 1890, have no peer. They included the partial archives of two important publishing firms, one of which resides today on the shelves of the American Antiquarian Society. No wonder that after viewing Hosmer's holdings, the chief of a renowned collection of children's literature wrote in the guest book, 'Thou shalt not covet.'

Born in Lancaster, Massachusetts, on April 19, 1913, he lived in several centuries and several worlds simultaneously. Descended from the Honorable John Chandler (1720-1800) of Petersham, Massachusetts, whose ancestors left England in 1637, Herbert Hosmer was fascinated with the history of his family and the town where he lived. The stationery on which he wrote accepting election to the American Antiquarian Society in April 1985 was headed 'The Ministerial Land.' He explained that it was 'the historic name for the land on which I live, since Lancaster's second Parsonage was built here in 1690 and the house in which I dwell contains parts from that early Parsonage.'

He received his early education in Lancaster at Miss Chickering's and the Narrow Lane schools, attended the New

Hampton (N.H.) School, and earned his Bachelor of Science degree from the Massachusetts College of Art. He taught at Rogers Junior High School in Stamford, Connecticut, the Fessenden School in West Newton, Massachusetts, and, from 1959 until he retired in 1978, at the Lancaster Memorial School; he was a member of the Massachusetts Teachers Association. In 1991 Atlantic Union College in South Lancaster conferred on Hosmer an Honorary Doctor of Letters.

His fascination with times past was fueled by his status as an only child (two sisters had died in infancy) in an extended family composed of his parents, his grandmother Chandler, and two great-aunts. They read to him, cut out cardboard castles for him, and rewarded good behavior by allowing him to handle treasured family antique paper toys. A cousin, Alice Greene Chandler, who presented him with his first books on puppetry and dollhouses, spurred him to become a master puppeteer and a collector of dollhouses. In 1935 she left to Hosmer the publishing archive of her father John Greene Chandler (1815-79), a bequest that sealed his fate as a children's book collector.

Chandler, a lithographer, wood engraver, publisher of books, games, paper dolls, and cut-out toys for children, began his career as an apprentice to the firm of Carter, Andrews in Lancaster. By 1839 Chandler had struck out on his own for Roxbury, where in 1840 he published the first American edition of a favorite old folktale, *The Remarkable History of Chicken Little*. In 1940, on its 100th birthday and John Greene Chandler's 125th, Hosmer reproduced a new version, more detailed and amusing than the first, from an unpublished manuscript in Chandler's handwriting. He issued a facsimile of the original in 1952; and in 1990 in honor of its 150th added his own original contribution to *Chicken Little* literature with a charming rendition entitled 'New Version in Verse or a Pasquinade on Poultry.' To John Green Chandler must go credit for a variety of other innovations in the arena of paper entertainments for children that inspired Hosmer to issue facsimiles. This unique archive, which included proof sheets, publication

records, original drawings, engraving tools, and examples of the output of other engravers, sparked Hosmer's curiosity regarding the entire realm of Boston publishers during the 1840-60 period. It opened for him the field of moveable books, paper dolls, cut-outs, and toys both foreign and domestic, in an era when the collecting of children's books, save for the earliest, commanded little attention or respect. He became an authority on each specialty. Herbert Hosmer did not lock away his treasures. He researched them, reissued them, published articles about them in *The Magazine Antiques* and *Yankee*, exhibited them at home and abroad and lectured about them. Chandler pioneered these paper delights in America; Hosmer pioneered an appreciation of them.

Herbert Hosmer was also a devotee of dollhouses, having seen his first at the age of three or four, complete with an elevator. The Tynietoy dollhouses and dollhouse furniture produced by the Toy Furniture Shop in Providence, Rhode Island, attracted Hosmer while a student at preparatory school. It took two months of working at a local gas station during the summer of 1933 to earn enough money to make a down payment on his first purchase, a Tynietoy Colonial Mansion. He admired the authentic, fine miniature reproductions of antique furniture made to scale. In 1976 he cofounded the Tynietoy Preservation Society and recorded the history of the company along with his personal reminiscences in the booklet, 'I Remember Tynietoy: The Story of the Toy Furniture Shop and Tynietoy.'

No account of the life of Herbert Hosmer would be complete without mention of The Toy Cupboard Theatre that opened in July 1941, and where for fifty years he staged puppet shows. The theatre, named after an old cupboard filled with family toys, occupied a long woodshed formerly used as a drying room for clothes. A show Hosmer saw as a youngster at the Clinton Women's Club mesmerized him and made him set his sights on having a theatre one day. Initially conceived to draw people to The Toy Cupboard, a small toy shop opened the previous year, it proved to be an instant success. Hosmer made his own mari-

onettes and wrote scripts based on the classic tales of Perrault, Andersen, Aesop, and the modern ones of Milne and Potter. During the half-century he performed in Lancaster and throughout New England, thousands of children and adults, sometimes several generations of the same family, became his fans.

A visit to the theatre included a puppet show and refreshments, balloons, and a tour of his museums. On special occasions, such as an anniversary of the Toy Cupboard Theatre, the show included birthday cake, surprises, and 'a gala evening performance with the grounds and houses illuminated.' Herbert Hosmer the man-child delighted in all celebrations including national holidays, and observed a number of his own, such as the birthday of John Greene Chandler and the anniversaries of the publication of *Chicken Little* and Fanny Gray, a paper doll with a wardrobe and a booklet recounting her adventures.

In 1964 a portion of yet another archive of a venerated children's publishing house came Hosmer's way as the result of a letter he had written fourteen years earlier to Ruth Miller, daughter of Charles Miller, an executive vice-president of McLoughlin Brothers. In 1950 the firm was liquidated by the Milton Bradley Company, which had purchased it in 1920, and Miller received part of the company's archive. Hosmer ultimately bought all of it, almost 2,000 books—1,500 by McLoughlin, the others by their English and American competitors over whom they kept close watch—and almost 750 original drawings by such notable artists as Palmer Cox, Justin Howard, and Ida Waugh, more than half in watercolor, the rest pen and ink.

In 1978 he presented his unparalleled acquisition of McLoughlin material to the Society. Undoubtedly, it ranks as the finest and largest group of its kind in any institution. What makes the collection unique is that the books are publisher's copies in pristine condition, many with editorial comments offering directives about printing quality and stock for future editions. Furthermore, the enterprising McLoughlin firm, more than any other publisher of the period, stood on the cutting edge of printing technology

and continually experimented with various methods of color reproduction. Available for comparison are successive runs of the same title in the same series with identical illustrations but reproduced by different methods. Thus the archive not only reflects the children's book scene and the advances in color technology under McLoughlin's leadership but provides an overview of the vast changes in printing in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Hosmer delighted in the bookplate designed to identify his gifts which featured an illustration of *Chicken Little* taken from the John Greene Chandler engraving. In 1979 he was named honorary consultant on children's literature and, when the Society sponsored a Collector's Weekend highlighting 'Books at the AAS for American Children' in 1988, he spoke on 'McLoughlin Brothers and Their Competitors.'

Hosmer's collections and theatre jostled for space within a trio of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century buildings on his property. Hosmer took pride not only in the treasures within but in the building itself, thought to have been part of the original quarters of the Lancaster publishing company Carter, Andrews, to which John Greene Chandler was apprenticed in 1830. The John Greene Chandler Memorial or Little Book House Museum contained much of his book and paper doll collection, also a reference library. His dollhouse museum, the Racketty-Packetty House, a name borrowed from Frances Hodgson Burnett's story about dollhouses, took over the lower level of the house. He also found space for a Toy Cupboard Theatre Museum which focused in the 'preservation and study of theatrical toys, cut-outs, toy theatres, old and foreign puppets and other similar toy material relating to the entertainment world or the performers connected with it.' His enthusiasms knew no bounds. Hosmer's museums showed up on national and international lists of research collections and put South Lancaster into the guidebooks. His residence, warm and inviting, held an eye-catching, eclectic array of fine china, furniture, miniature portraits with books, toys, games, or family papers covering most surfaces.

Not surprisingly, Herbert Hosmer and his family had a long association with the Lancaster Town Library. A board member of the Library during its centennial year, Hosmer initiated the Chandler Book Talk in memory of John Greene Chandler and his daughter, who had served as the first librarian when it opened in 1862. The speakers were distinguished individuals associated with the field of children's literature—authors, illustrators, poets, publishers, and librarians.

Hosmer had a prodigious storehouse of memories and a well-deserved reputation as a raconteur. An ardent preservationist, he had an enormous knowledge of Lancaster history and an ability to recall events of the past vividly. Hosmer served on the board of the town's Historical Commission, as President of the Historical Society. It is almost impossible to open a book on any of his interests without finding a reference to him or his collections. Maurice Sendak, influenced by Hosmer, paid him a singular tribute in his award-winning picture book, *In the Night Kitchen*. Along with other ingredients for making a cake—shortening, baking soda, and eggs—placed on the floor of the night kitchen, sits a box of sugar bearing an arcane brand name. Its label reads, 'Hosmer's Free Running Sugar. It Pours. Product of South Lancaster.' And along its base can be found the words, 'Chicken Little.'

With a chuckle, Hosmer would tell his friends how barren their lives would have been without him. In truth, countless individuals have had their lives enriched by their contact with Herbert Hosmer—by his generosity, wit, good humor, buoyant spirit, and his contagious and perpetual enthusiasm for the collections he assembled, preserved, and promoted. He opened new worlds to those who attended his puppet shows and viewed his exhibitions. He demonstrated his astuteness as a collector by gathering noteworthy items previously overlooked and fostering an appreciation of them. He made collecting an exhilarating adventure and in doing so, inspired many.

Herbert Hosmer died on November 23, 1995. He held out for Thanksgiving Day, his favorite holiday, with good reason. It was

Sarah Josepha Hale who fought to have Thanksgiving declared a national holiday and who persuaded President Lincoln to make it so. And it was the same Sarah Josepha Hale who gave John Greene Chandler's *Remarkable History of Chicken Little* a glowing review in 'The Monument.' Hosmer wrote, 'It is very possible that Chandler had known Sarah J. Hale from his early years at Carter and Andrews Company in Lancaster, Massachusetts, for in 1830, they advertised the publication of "The Ladies Magazine" and Mrs. Hale as editor in Boston, Massachusetts. In January 1855, in Godey's book, Mrs. Hale reviewed the boxed paper doll Fanny Gray as a suitable gift for the holidays.' Herbert Hosmer remained true to his Chandler family heritage in death as in life.

Linda F. Lapidés

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