

SHARON SKEEL

CATHERINE LITTLEFIELD

A Life in Dance



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To Mary Ellen Manahan, Frank Delano, and David

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In 1953, Genevieve Oswald, curator of the Dance Collection at the New York Public Library (now the Jerome Robbins Dance Division at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts), sent a letter to Caroline Littlefield asking for ephemera to document the important careers of her late daughters, Catherine and Dorothea. “[B]eyond being first-rate ballerinas, the Littlefields were dance pioneers in the real sense,” Oswald wrote. “The future, I think, will find to a greater extent than even we realize that your daughters have been a major force in the creation of an American ballet.”

I hope that this biography proves Oswald correct (and sparks additional Littlefield scholarship as well), and I am grateful to the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts and the following people who have made it possible:

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Susan Miller	Charles Littlefield Seaman
Irene Muehlbronner	Ruth Sefarbi
Hilda Noll	Robert Seyffert
Eleanor Dana O'Connell	Esther Simpson
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Betty Bowles Oakes	Bob Sloane
Edward Ohms	Josie Smith
Rick Ortwein	Danny O. Snow
Barbara Painter	Jeanne Jones Snow
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Dale Patterson	William Southwell
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solī Deo gloria!
Sharon Skeel
Gwynedd Valley, Pennsylvania
Shushan, New York

Abbreviations

AB	Ann Barzel
ABP	Ann Barzel Papers, The Newberry Library
ABTR	American Ballet Theatre Records, 1936–ca. 1967, JRDD
AD	<i>American Dancer</i>
BR	<i>Ballet Review</i>
CL	Catherine Littlefield
CT	<i>Chicago Tribune</i>
DM	<i>Dance Magazine</i>
EGP	<i>Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia</i>
FD	Frank Delano
FLP	Free Library of Philadelphia
FSFP	F. Scott Fitzgerald Papers, Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library
FTD	Florence Thoms Diary
HSP	Historical Society of Pennsylvania
JRDD	Jerome Robbins Dance Division, NYPLPA
KWF	Kurt Weill Foundation for Music
LKD	Lincoln Kirstein Diaries, Lincoln Kirstein Papers, JRDD
LOC	Library of Congress
NYHT	<i>New York Herald Tribune</i>
NYPLPA	New York Public Library for the Performing Arts
NYT	<i>New York Times</i>
ODRC	Oliver Daniel Research Collection
PB	<i>Philadelphia Bulletin</i>
PDN	<i>Philadelphia Daily News</i>
PDR	Philadelphia Department of Records
PI	<i>Philadelphia Inquirer</i>
PPL	<i>Philadelphia Public Ledger</i>
PR	<i>Philadelphia Record</i>
UVLSC	University of Virginia Library Special Collections

Notes on Sources

Personal Names

Given (first) names are used when more than one member of the same family is discussed throughout the book, such as with members of the following families: Carpenter, Doebele, Fitzgerald, Gentner, Goldsmith, Howard, Leidy, Littlefield, Pfeiffer, Pinto, Schofield, and Van Cleve.

Maiden names are used for consistency's sake. An individual's married name may appear in the notes, bibliography, and captions if cited or referred to as such by an outside source. Selected married names are as follows:

Rose Bampton—Rose Bampton Pelletier
Peggy Becker—Peggy Becker Walters Senesy
Karen Conrad—Karen Conrad Corry
Eleanor Dana—Eleanor Dana O'Connell
Doris Eaton—Doris Eaton Travis
Norma Gentner—Norma Gentner Hovde
Miriam Golden—Miriam Golden Ziegler Hailparn
June Graham—June Graham Gorton
Gwyneth King—Gwyneth King Brown
Helen Leitch—Helen Leitch Stanley
Flora May—Flora May Gillespie
Mary Binney Montgomery—Mary Binney Montgomery Wheeler
Dorothy Rendelman—Dorothy Rendelman Ginsberg
Harriet Schofield—Harriet Schofield McGlaughlin
Julie Steward—Julie Steward d'Alessandro
Mary Woods—Mary Woods Kelly

Publication Names

One name (and note abbreviation) is used consistently for newspapers whose names changed during the course of their publication histories (except in the

bibliography, where names are used as they appear in the original sources). Selected names and variants include:

Chicago Tribune (CT) for *Chicago Daily Tribune*

Philadelphia Bulletin (PB) for *Evening Bulletin, Philadelphia Evening Bulletin, Sunday Bulletin*

Philadelphia Public Ledger (PPL) for *Philadelphia Evening Ledger, Evening Public Ledger*

Quotations

Quotations from unpublished interviews have been edited for clarity's sake. Quotations from Littlefield correspondence have been edited for punctuation to aid readability.

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Introduction

“We felt we were doing something great for ballet.”

Norma Gentner

Near the end of June 1840, the French diplomat Adolphe Fourier de Bacourt paid a courtesy call to the popular Viennese ballerina Fanny Elssler at her room in the Union Hotel, where both were staying during their respective visits to Philadelphia. “Her performances in the United States are, I think, very successful and remunerative,” Bacourt wrote soon after in a letter. “She does not bear close inspection, and her smile is spoiled by very bad teeth.”¹ Nevertheless, she managed to dazzle him and others from the distance of a stage: “I was much pleased with her dancing, but what amused me as much was to see the hall crowded, and to hear the furious applause, far exceeding London or Paris, and that at Philadelphia, the chief city of the Quakers—Quakers wildly excited over the dancer Fanny Elssler.”²

Almost a century later, Philadelphians embraced another ballerina whose dancing outdid her smile. Unlike Elssler, Catherine Littlefield was one of their own, born in the city in 1905. Her technique was exemplary, but according to her partner, Alexis Dolinoff, “she was afraid to smile because she had crooked teeth. So I said, ‘Look, those people in the fifth row, they can’t see your teeth.’”³ And neither could the 7,500 people who crowded into the Robin Hood Dell one summer night in 1935 (with 1,000 customers having been turned away for lack of space) to see Catherine and her ensemble dance the third scene of *Daphnis and Chloe*, or those who gathered in the splendid Academy of Music two years later to watch her and her recently formed Philadelphia Ballet Company present the first full-length, full-scale performance of *Sleeping Beauty* in the United States.⁴ The company would again make history as the first American ballet troupe to tour Europe, where in Paris and London the ballets Catherine choreographed about farmhands, divorcées, a deacon, and a Hollywood star prompted multiple curtain calls,

warm reviews, and an extended run. Like Elssler before her, Catherine conquered halls on two continents.

Had Adolphe Fourier de Bacourt returned to Philadelphia during Catherine's youth, he would have found that opportunities to experience dance had not radically changed since Elssler's day. Teachers usually offered an eclectic curriculum encompassing social and theatrical styles and were eager to advertise their foreign ties. Itinerant artists performed at the Academy of Music or the Metropolitan Opera House for short engagements before moving on to the next town or city. Ballet was most often an art form once removed, that is, not central but subsumed into operas, spectacles, revues, and pageants.

It was also an art form sustained and promulgated for the most part by individuals rather than institutions. While New York's Metropolitan Opera Company had established a European-style ballet school in 1909 to supply dancers for its operas, and trailblazers such as the Viennese-born dancer/choreographer Albertina Rasch operated studios to train professional dance teams in the 1920s and 1930s, Catherine's Philadelphia Ballet, along with the school she operated with her mother, Caroline, and sister, Dorotheie, provided a much-needed American ballet infrastructure through or from which aspirants could study and make their careers. Former Littlefield pupils joined not only her own company, but also the ensemble started in 1934 by her friend George Balanchine, a precursor to the New York City Ballet, and the Mikhail Mordkin/Lucia Chase enterprise that coalesced in 1940 as Ballet Theatre (now called American Ballet Theatre). Other Littlefield alumnae appeared in musicals, films, and ice-skating shows.

The emergence of American companies, combined with tours by visiting troupes such as Colonel Wassily de Basil's Ballets Russes de Monte-Carlo firmly established ballet in the United States as a distinct discipline and entertainment. Still, to many Americans in the 1930s, it remained both foreign and remote. "Americana" ballets, or those centered on familiar American folktales, historical events, and subjects, had surfaced sporadically in the 1910s and 1920s. In 1918, for instance, the Metropolitan Opera produced *The Dance in Place Congo* by American composer Henry F. Gilbert, a ballet-pantomime set in slave-era New Orleans, while in the following decade, Chicago-based dancer/choreographer Ruth Page created *The Flapper and the Quarterback* and *The Sun Worshippers* (later called *Oak Street Beach*).⁵ A second, more intentional wave of Americana

works arose in the 1930s. These not only focused on American motifs, but also deliberately showcased indigenous music, designs, and performers. While Page, Lincoln Kirstein, and others produced significant examples of “ballet Americana” during this period, it was Catherine Littlefield who first trained the full force of an established school, large professional company, and, most especially, personal ambition, on making ballets that thoroughly reflected America.⁶

Catherine’s signature ballet, *Barn Dance*, celebrated nineteenth-century small-town values, while in *Terminal*, she chronicled the comings and goings of a diverse set of passengers in a modern train station. Both pieces interspersed classical ballet with pantomime and other kinds of dancing and kept to a lively pace. They were lighthearted and easy to follow. Later, Catherine spoofed Manhattan’s beau monde in *Café Society* and offered a wry take on commercialism in *Ladies’ Better Dresses*. Drawing on her own studies and professional experiences—as a pupil of Russian Imperial ballerina Lubov Egorova and as a dancer in the shows of Broadway impresario Florenz Ziegfeld, for example—she reimagined classical ballet as a broadly popular expression of American identity. Moreover, she collaborated with like-minded musicians and designers, among them composer Ferde Grofé, best known for his “Grand Canyon Suite,” and the Philadelphia brothers Salvatore and Angelo Pinto, who painted with a bold palette and whimsical style.

The Littlefields’ school had its roots in dancing classes that Caroline Littlefield organized for neighborhood children in 1908. Most members of the Philadelphia Ballet started learning sound technique at the school as youngsters, looking to Caroline for encouragement and to Catherine for inspiration. Through their own examples, the Littlefields demonstrated that ballet was worthy of serious pursuit in the United States and that it was fun. Catherine recruited young, athletic men with no prior dance experience to take lessons and join her ranks in a bid to make ballet more mainstream. She designed works that hid their technical shortcomings and showcased their talents, such as Rudy d’Alessandro’s flair for physical comedy. His memorable turn as the inebriated gentleman in *Café Society*, for instance, included a dramatic fall off a table that finished in a somersault, enacted while he was wearing a tuxedo.

In addition to appearing in Europe, the troupe performed in Canada and throughout the United States, including forty-two different cities and small towns during a 1941 concert tour that drew well over 100,000 people.⁷ “We really did pioneer ballet from one end of the US to the other in the most

unlikely places,” recalled former soloist Norma Gentner. “We felt we were doing something great for ballet.”⁸

Indeed, during its brief existence—from 1935 to 1941—the company introduced countless Americans to classical ballet and its potential, no doubt turning many skeptics into fans. Catherine helped make it uniquely theirs. In the company’s early days, Henry Pleasants, who wrote about music and dance for the *Philadelphia Bulletin*, observed: “Today it is common knowledge that a number of Colonel de Basil’s dancers are Russian in alias only and that some of them are even Americans. But knowledge has not entirely dissipated the instinctive feeling that ballet is an art especially devised for Russians. . . . It is still heresy in certain quarters to hold that the daughter of an American business man may dance as well as the daughter of a Russian prince.”⁹ Catherine’s dancers kept their American names, and she, the daughter of an American businessman, proved that she could hold her own against the Russians, and in some ways even surpass them.

In the end, it was businessmen such as theater magnate William Goldman and real estate tycoon Arthur Wirtz who most appreciated Catherine’s particular talents and mindset. Both men hired her to direct commercial shows—Goldman in the 1920s and Wirtz in the 1940s—and valued her competence and sense of theatrical glamour. Even more to their liking, she was a team player who desired to please audiences more than espouse social or political ideologies through her work. That she favored well-paying jobs in popular venues for herself, her family, and her dancers over an iconoclastic and sacrificial devotion to ballet purity is one reason she is not better known today. Additionally, her choreography, while fresh and appealing, did not rise to the level of genius, and neither did the work of the artists she commissioned. She died in 1951 in the prime of her life, her full potential left unrealized.

The whole of Catherine’s career, however, merits a twenty-first-century reckoning, as the Littlefield School and Philadelphia Ballet were foundational to the flourishing of classical ballet in the United States. This biography, which builds on writings by Ann Barzel, Doris Hering, and Nancy Brooks Schmitz, offers a portrait of Catherine Littlefield in the context of her family, time, and place, as well as her friendships with such cultural icons as Zelda Fitzgerald and Sonja Henie, providing the first comprehensive account of the vibrant life and impact of this important American dance pioneer (Figure I.1).



Figure I.1. Dancers outside of the Littlefield School at 1815 Ludlow Street in Philadelphia, 1937. Littlefield Archives.

1

“I had never had a dancing lesson in my life, but somehow, I knew I could train those other children, and I did.”

Caroline Doebele Littlefield

Catherine Littlefield had a short life but a long career. Born in Philadelphia in 1905, she was dancing on the Academy of Music’s grand stage at age three, for Florenz Ziegfeld at fifteen, and in pageants and operas before founding the groundbreaking Philadelphia Ballet Company in 1935. Later, she applied her talent and determination to Broadway and the ice, where she transformed sport into art as the choreographer for Sonja Henie’s extravagant skating shows. Before she died in 1951 at age forty-six, Catherine had created dances for stages, stadiums, rinks, and television screens. Her Philadelphia Ballet Company, composed almost exclusively of local teenagers she trained, was the first American ballet company to tour Europe, which reversed a pattern nearly as old as America itself.

Her family’s American story begins, as so many other Philadelphians’ stories did, with her great-grandparents’ arrival from Germany in the 1850s. Her maternal great-grandfather, Gottlieb Doebele, sailed to America in 1852.¹ Her maternal great-grandmother, the mellifluously named Christiana Catharina Bihl, met Gottlieb soon after she, too, arrived in the United States. They had been born a year apart in towns separated by fourteen miles in Württemberg, one of the independent states in southwest Germany. The system of inheritance in this agrarian region allotted children equal portions of the family farm on the death of their parents. With each generation, then, individual fields shrank and earning power diminished. Local storekeepers and artisans suffered too, since the farmers had less to spend all around.² During the 1852 “winter of hunger” in Württemberg, nearly 25 percent of the population required government aid.³ Such economic constraints, along with political unrest, caused massive emigration from Württemberg and

Caroline Doebele Littlefield, “I had never had a dancing lesson in my life, but somehow, I knew I could train those other children, and I did.” In: *Catherine Littlefield*. Edited by: Sharon Skeel, Oxford University Press (2020). © Oxford University Press.

neighboring areas at mid-century. In 1852 alone, 145,918 Germans came to America.⁴ Gottlieb Doebele was one of them.

Still just a teenager, Gottlieb made his way to the city of Bremen by the North Sea, the first phase of an epic personal journey. He boarded the ship *Agnes* and took his place in steerage, having with him 250 gulden, perhaps a year's salary for a master craftsman at the time. As a butcher, Gottlieb was among the skilled working class, and he no doubt hoped to secure a job in provisions once he arrived in Philadelphia, his stated destination.⁵ Certainly that hope—for an opportunity to work freely and prosper—enabled him and emigrants by the thousands to endure harsh conditions during transatlantic crossings that lasted six weeks, more or less.⁶ A fellow German, Jerome B. Arpke, recounted his own trip aboard the *Agnes* in 1847. According to Arpke, the modest sailing ship was jammed with about 400 passengers. Young men slept so closely together that they could not flip their bodies over unless all did so at the same time. Rations included bean soup, essentially “lukewarm saltwater, in which the isolated beans dashed about like a herd of wild horses on the wide prairie.” Arpke concluded: “Truly, this trip resembled more the transport of Russian prisoners to Siberia instead of a journey of emigrants to the land of freedom.”⁷

The first glimpse of this land of freedom stirred feelings of relief as well as apprehension. After passengers disembarked at one of the many wharves rimming Lower Manhattan, they faced fresh challenges, among them a language barrier, swindlers, and, for some, perilous transport over land and water as they continued their journeys.⁸ Philadelphia lay about eighty miles to the southwest, and Gottlieb, like most immigrants, probably used a combination of steamboats, railroads, ferries, and old-fashioned horsepower to get where he was going.⁹ Once in Philadelphia, he would have found a diverse German community that, as of 1850, numbered nearly 23,000 and sustained two newspapers and five singing societies.¹⁰ Many Germans gravitated to neighborhoods in lower North Philadelphia such as Northern Liberties and Kensington.¹¹ It was in this area that Gottlieb established himself, eventually buying a house at 2127 North Lawrence Street, the very house in which Catherine Littlefield, his great-granddaughter, would be born early in the next century.¹²

Mere days after his arrival in Philadelphia, Gottlieb could have witnessed a noteworthy event in American dance history that took place at the newly renovated Walnut Street Theatre. A beloved hometown ballerina, Mary Ann Lee, had come out of retirement to open the theatrical season along with her

former partner, George Washington Smith, the country’s reigning *premier danseur*. Lee, Smith, and another Philadelphian, Augusta Maywood, who by then was performing exclusively in Europe, were America’s first native-born classical ballet dancers.¹³ Gottlieb, however, was probably less interested in seeing them and more interested in finding himself a job. And in short order, he found a sweetheart, for on July 2, 1854, Gottlieb married Christiana Bihl in a ceremony officiated by the Reverend William J. Mann, one of several pastors serving the large St. Michael’s and Zion’s German Evangelical Lutheran congregation.¹⁴ Although Mann did not mention the wedding in his diary, he did complain about the weather, and for good reason: “The heat during the last weeks has been intense. On Tuesday, the thermometer ranged between 97 degrees and 100 degrees in the shade.”¹⁵

By the summer of 1861, seven years after their union, Gottlieb and Catherine (as Christiana began to call herself) had several children, he had become an American citizen, and their adopted city was on war footing; earlier that spring, one Philadelphian observed that “most every other man in the street is in some kind of uniform.”¹⁶ Gottlieb joined the 75th Regiment of the Pennsylvania Volunteers, consisting of about 800 German men. After training in West Philadelphia, the regiment headed south to fight for the Union in America’s Civil War.¹⁷ They joined other troops at Hunter’s Chapel, just across the Potomac River from the nation’s capital, where they entrenched themselves for the winter, spending time in drills and parades, at which the Germans, many of whom had prior military experience in their native country, excelled. The showmanship irked the American-born soldiers, according to one witness who disparaged the “counts, barons [and] dukes” striding about and saluting the division commander in his splendid gold lace.¹⁸

During the winter, Gottlieb fell ill with a fever, diarrhea, rheumatism, and eye ailments. A surgeon treated him, and he was able to leave with his regiment as they departed for the Shenandoah Valley and a rendezvous with Stonewall Jackson.¹⁹ Along the way, fifty men from the 75th Regiment drowned as they attempted to cross the Shenandoah River in a ferry that capsized. According to a record of the tragedy, “This unfortunate event cast a deep gloom over the remaining portion of the regiment.”²⁰ Snow and rain and inconsistent rations also plagued the troops. “The men have nothing to eat,” lamented one colonel. “No coffee and no crullers.”²¹ They finally met the enemy at Cross Keys, Virginia. Historians still cannot decide whether it was a full-blown battle or just a skirmish, but in either case, Jackson’s Confederates

were considered the victors.²² For Gottlieb, Cross Keys proved a turning point; in the midst of combat, while climbing a fence, he fell and injured his back. He faltered on the next march and was dispatched to a hospital, where he remained for two months.²³ After his release, he was captured by the Confederates, paroled as a prisoner of war, and returned to another hospital, partially blind and still suffering from various health problems.²⁴ Finally, on March 20, 1863, he was honorably discharged. His fellow volunteers in the 75th Regiment soldiered on and by war's end had seen battle at Bull Run, Chancellorsville, and Gettysburg.²⁵

Gottlieb arrived home alive but broken. He resumed work, not only in provisions, but also as a rope-maker, potter, laborer, and driver. Perhaps pain or poor eyesight made butchering difficult. He and Catherine welcomed more children, including—remarkably—three sets of male twins. Only six of their twelve children, however, would live to adulthood: Emma, Kate, Carrie, William and John (the sole set of twins to survive), and Ella, who was born in 1875 when her mother was forty years old.²⁶ About this time, the older Doebele children began finding jobs of their own, working with hosiery and weaving silk.²⁷ In Philadelphia, nearly 1,000 different textile firms existed in the city, many of them in the neighborhood of Kensington. These firms employed approximately 12,000 people, a significant portion of whom were immigrants.²⁸ The era of skilled artisans with their own shops was giving way to unskilled or semi-skilled factory workers who contributed, probably hundreds of times per shift, their own small pieces to the final product.²⁹ With public transportation limited and expensive, these workers sought to live near their jobs, and in the six decades following the Civil War, almost 400,000 homes were built in Philadelphia, many of them in the northern industrial district and nearly all of them made of brick with white marble trimmings, two or three stories high, and standing in “interminable rows, with mathematical precision.”³⁰ By 1879, the Doebeles’ finances were stable enough to purchase one of these homes for themselves. After years of renting, they paid \$2,300 for a three-story dwelling at 2127 North Lawrence Street.³¹ For Gottlieb, it was no doubt a dream realized. But he would not enjoy it for long. A year later he would die of “congestion of the brain,” a vague diagnosis that was nevertheless attributed to the ailments he suffered in war.³²

So Catherine Doebele became a widow at forty-five. She had the house, and that house became a refuge for her and her unruly brood, which by then included her daughter Emma’s husband and infant son.³³ The lives of German women, as the saying went, revolved around “*Kirche, Küche, und*

Kinder,” that is, church, kitchen, and children.³⁴ Indeed, Catherine Doebele was deeply involved with all three. Although she and Gottlieb had married at St. Michael’s and Zion’s—“the venerable Mother Church of the Lutheran denomination in America”—they eventually changed denominations entirely, joining St. John’s Church, which had been established by the Evangelical Association, a Methodist-like sect for German-speaking people.³⁵ St. John’s stood at the corner of 6th and Dauphin streets, a four-block walk from the Doebele home, and the family became a fixture there for decades. In later years, William, one of the twins, served as superintendent of the Sunday School, led the singing, and taught a class. The Doebele Bible Class, as it was called, still met in different homes as late as the 1990s, long after the church itself had disbanded.³⁶

Neither Catherine’s discipline nor the influence of a church, however, could keep all her children from stumbling. Her daughter Emma had married a tinsmith who was “drunk more than sober” and rarely home. When Emma voiced her complaints to him one evening, he replied, “I ain’t going to stay here,” then threw his keys down, left, and never came back.³⁷

More perplexing—indeed more mysterious—was the behavior of Carrie, Catherine’s headstrong middle child. On March 25, 1883, when she was nineteen years old, Carrie married a man from the neighborhood named Thomas H. Lafferty who was four years older than her and who worked as a shawl weaver.³⁸ According to family stories, Lafferty was Catholic and had some connection to vaudeville.³⁹ Catherine Doebele no doubt disapproved of both his Catholicism and his show business ties, which might be the reason the couple was married by a Baptist minister in Woodbury, New Jersey, rather than at St. John’s. Neither of the two witnesses to the ceremony was a member of the Doebele or Lafferty families (one witness was the minister’s wife), suggesting that the pair may have eloped.⁴⁰ Regardless, Carrie gave birth to a daughter in Philadelphia about a year later, on April 9, 1884, and named the girl Caroline. When Caroline was nearly two years old, she was baptized at St. John’s, suggesting some kind of rapprochement between Thomas and Carrie Lafferty and Catherine Doebele.⁴¹ Nevertheless, it seems that the Laffertys divorced soon afterwards, and Thomas disappeared from his daughter’s life altogether. As an adult, Caroline never identified her father publicly and rarely spoke of him at all, except to disparage him as a “no-good Irishman” to family members and a close friend.⁴² And if he vanished from her life, so it seemed did her mother, for Carrie soon married a man in the Navy and began traveling with him, leaving little Caroline behind.⁴³

So Caroline was abandoned by her father and her mother. But not by her grandmother. Grandma Doebele—as Catherine Doebele became known—took Caroline in, gave her her last name, and raised her as her own, surrounding her with an assortment of affectionate aunts, uncles, and cousins at 2127 North Lawrence Street.⁴⁴ Firm but loving, Grandma Doebele instilled in Caroline the value of hard work and discipline while preserving the girl’s happy spirit. Every Saturday morning, Grandma Doebele insisted that Caroline remove the heavy pots and pans from the kitchen cupboard and scrub the cupboard clean, and then, for good measure, wash the marble steps outside the front door.⁴⁵ As an adult, Caroline did not maintain such scrupulous housekeeping habits, nor did she institute similar chores for her own children, but she always demonstrated the perseverance—and the resilience—that her grandmother had modeled and encouraged.

Grandma Doebele also insisted on piano lessons for Caroline and made her practice, although the girl found the drills so boring she soon learned how to read a book while playing. She would lose herself in the story and repeat the same Bach measures over and over until Grandma would inquire from the other room, “Haven’t you played that Bach enough?” At one recital, Caroline laughed loudly at the mistake-ridden performance of the student before her, then took the stage herself, glanced at her music, shut it with a flourish, and played her own piece by heart, flawlessly. Her grandmother could not abide such rudeness and spanked her when they got home.⁴⁶ And neither Grandma nor Caroline’s aunts condoned the young girl’s developing passion for dancing, likely associating it with show business and the absent Thomas Lafferty. Regardless, Caroline would dance to the roving hurdy-gurdy player in the neighborhood streets, making sure that Grandma, her Aunt Emma, or her Aunt Kate didn’t see her.⁴⁷ Ironically, her first formal dance experience occurred at a church. At age thirteen, she directed sixty-five people in a special “church entertainment,” recalling later that “I had never had a dancing lesson in my life, but somehow, I knew I could train those other children, and I did.”⁴⁸

Although Caroline loved dancing, she excelled at music and eventually enrolled in the collegiate division of the Pennsylvania College of Music on Girard Avenue as an aspiring concert pianist.⁴⁹ The conservatory was located a few blocks west of the Girard Avenue district, a densely German area containing row homes and small workshops, the mammoth Christian Schmidt & Sons brewery, and the Mozart Harmonie, a middle-class singing society.⁵⁰ Philadelphia’s Germans were famous not only for their singing

societies, but also for their significant contributions to the city’s rich musical history, among them the opening of the first music shop (on Market Street) and the forming of the Germania Orchestra, a forerunner of the esteemed Philadelphia Orchestra.⁵¹

The Pennsylvania College of Music was not a particularly prominent conservatory, but it boasted of its twenty teachers and personal approach. Certainly a prized instructor there was the heavily mustached Henry Albert Lang, who had studied piano and composition in Stuttgart and performed throughout Europe.⁵² In 1914, in fact, Leopold Stokowski, conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra, would honor Lang by premiering his symphony *Fantasies of a Poet* in a concert at the Academy of Music.⁵³ But a decade before that, on June 9, 1904, Lang honored Caroline and her fellow conservatory graduates by participating in their final concert, during which a large crowd heard “an interesting programme of classic and modern numbers.”⁵⁴ This, however, was not the most important event of Caroline’s week. Two days later, she married James H. Littlefield in an 8 p.m. ceremony at 2127 North Lawrence Street, with 100 guests looking on.⁵⁵

Legend has it that Jim Littlefield met Caroline Doebele when he attended one of her recitals and went backstage afterwards to congratulate her.⁵⁶ Given their different backgrounds and upbringings, they seemed an unlikely couple. Jim’s ancestors had been in America for more than 250 years. His family’s patriarch, Edmund Littlefield, a clothier from Tichfield, England, sailed to Boston about 1636, a year after he was sued for failing to pay for some wool. The Massachusetts governor appointed him a dealer in liquor, urging him to be careful when selling it to the Indians. Later, Edmund established at least two towns elsewhere in New England. Less reputable in the Littlefield line, to be sure, was Edmund’s great-granddaughter, who in 1722 “appeared in court to answer charges of having [a] bastard child and was to receive seven stripes to her naked back at the post or pay fees of court.”⁵⁷

Five generations later, Jim Littlefield was born in Auburn, Maine. His father held various jobs—as a grocer, potato chip maker, sheep shearer—but “was lazy and only worked when he felt like it . . . and when he wasn’t working . . . he just hung around and drank whiskey,” according to Katherine Gove, a relative. Jim’s mother compensated for her husband’s indolence by taking in boarders, working so hard that “she put herself into an early grave,” Gove claimed. Among Jim’s relatives on his mother’s side were silent screen actors Dustin and William Farnum.⁵⁸ William gained fame as Ben-Hur on Broadway, his chariot made to look speedier around the stage with the aid

of a treadmill and a painted backdrop scrolling in the opposite direction.⁵⁹ But the Farnums were not the only actors in the family. Jim's older sister by a decade, Minnie, played with the Farnum boys as a youngster and enjoyed staging little dramas of her own. "She must have been in her glory then because she could boss the life out of everyone," wrote Gove, who lived with Minnie for more than thirty years. "If there was one thing she loved, it was to dictate."⁶⁰ After high school, Minnie took classes in elocution and developed a career as a dramatic reader, but she "went from one thing to another faster than a bird can fly," Gove recalled.⁶¹ This was particularly true when it came to religion. "Minnie always belonged to some kind of a cult; she wouldn't go to a good old standard church with ordained ministers. She used to say, 'They haven't got what I want.'⁶² What Minnie wanted most was attention, and she got that in abundance after announcing she received messages from the dead, including one from President Grover Cleveland. Her first communication happened as she was "sitting rather listlessly at my desk, holding a pencil in my hand and shading my eyes with the other hand," she told a reporter. "Suddenly the hand which held the pencil commenced to move, although I was conscious that it was not my will which was guiding the pencil and the pencil spelled out the word 'Mary.'" Minnie took this to be a plea from her and Jim's dead mother. Odd rapping noises about the house confirmed to her that spirits were present and wished to be heard.⁶³

Jim shared his sister Minnie's exhibitionist tendencies, at least to some degree. Family photographs show both of them posing, Minnie for her dramatic readings and Jim in a singlet and shorts, arms crossed behind some apparatus, ready to demonstrate one or another feat of strength. Trim, muscular, and standing about 5'10", he was an exceptional athlete who relished adventure, traits that he would bequeath to his own four children.⁶⁴ He joined the US Cavalry in 1899 and was sent across the country to Fort Washakie in Wyoming, which according to one legend was the burial place of Sacagawea.⁶⁵ The cavalry—the mounted division of the US Army—roamed the frontier protecting American interests and maintaining order. While Jim never experienced a battle or even a skirmish during his three-year service, he kept busy organizing two football teams and a twenty-piece brass band. In addition, in a portent of his life to come, he gave "instruction to over half the troop in dancing," according to his commanding officer.⁶⁶ Jim's photograph album from the period suggests that he also enjoyed spending free time at Jim & Andy's Bar in nearby Lander. He rose to the rank of sergeant before his honorable discharge in 1902.⁶⁷

Soon after, the YMCA hired Jim as a physical director for its Pennsylvania Railroad Department, headquartered in a grandiose Gothic building in West Philadelphia. The PRR-YMCA, as it was known, served nearly 2,500 railroad employees and their sons.⁶⁸ It eventually added an annex downtown on Broad Street, and Jim appears to have worked in both locations. According to the YMCA's handbook, the ideal physical director was “a leader of men,” not only physically adept and knowledgeable, but also spiritually sound, organized, tactful, and well read.⁶⁹ In 1905 alone, the PRR-YMCA's physical director supervised thousands of people taking gym classes or visiting the branch's splendid athletic field, perhaps to play a game or watch the home football team, nicknamed the Railroaders, battle a squad from a local college or athletic club.⁷⁰ Jim's gusto for sport and male camaraderie suited the job, but he was less enthusiastic about administration and business details.⁷¹ Rather than manage the team, he preferred, no doubt, to play on the team himself. He left the YMCA's permanent employ after only a few years, although he maintained sporadic ties to the organization through World War I.⁷²

The YMCA's physical director, the handbook asserts, should also possess common sense, “or what is sometimes known as ‘horse sense.’”⁷³ Jim's literal horse sense—honed in the cavalry—was superb, and one day after work, he wandered into the Briggs Riding Academy at 23rd and Chestnut streets, where the owner was attempting to teach about twenty young men the art of rough riding. The owner was too old and overweight to demonstrate the moves himself, leaving Arthur Goldsmith, a student and lead rider of the group, frustrated. “A fellow was sitting in the spectator gallery and he came over to see me,” Goldsmith recalled. “‘You boys are doing all this stuff wrong,’ he said. I asked, ‘How do you know?’ and he said, ‘I just came from Wyoming. I was in the cavalry. If you want me to, I'll show you how to do these things.’” Apparently, the Briggs's owner, though somewhat envious, did not object, and Jim started instructing the class on a regular basis for free. He taught them such tricks as the monkey drill, in which a rider dismounts and remounts a moving horse, sometimes pausing to pick up a handkerchief. “When the horse was running, we would jump off. We learned to jump off in front of it. We didn't know that until Jim Littlefield told us.”⁷⁴ In lieu of payment, the riders entertained Jim at the Hotel Rittenhouse's café around the corner. “By the time Jim got through with us, most of us were good riders,” Goldsmith concluded.

Class members also formed a club to sponsor Saturday afternoon rides through Fairmount Park.⁷⁵ Goldsmith described his clubmates as well

educated and well connected, “a nice group of fellows.” Despite Jim’s more modest background, he had no trouble fitting in, according to Goldsmith.⁷⁶ With an easy charm and talents to offer, he was able to circumvent social barriers and insinuate himself into an elite circle. That pattern would be repeated throughout his life, and would characterize the life of his soon-to-be wife, Caroline, too.

At some point during the rough-riding lessons, Goldsmith remembers, Caroline came to observe. “Jim wanted me to meet his girlfriend,” Goldsmith said. “She’d come down every once in a while and watch the work.” She wore her glossy dark hair swept up in a Gibson-girl style that highlighted her warm eyes and round face. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* described her as “a beautiful girl, widely known in Philadelphia.”⁷⁷ At nineteen, she needed a parent or guardian’s permission to marry Jim, and Grandma Doebele gave it, identifying herself as Caroline’s mother rather than her grandmother, even though no official adoption had ever taken place.⁷⁸ The Reverend Christian C. Weber from St. John’s Church presided over the wedding at 2127 North Lawrence Street, while a carriage decorated by friends stood outside ready to drive the newlyweds to the train station. When Jim and Caroline discovered that these same friends had prepared a second carriage filled with rice bags for themselves, “intend[ing] to make the final drive to the station an exciting one,” they exited through a back door and escaped to a relative’s house. The pranksters pursued them so eagerly that one of them tripped and tore his trousers at the knees. They eventually tired of the chase, however, and Mr. and Mrs. James H. Littlefield left for their honeymoon to the White Mountains one day late, but in peace.⁷⁹

2

“The whole family was so enthusiastic and so colorful and so interesting.”

Elizabeth Goldsmith

As a young, energetic couple drawn together by similar interests and temperaments rather than ethnic, religious, or neighborhood ties, Jim and Caroline Littlefield personified American dynamism at the dawn of the twentieth century. In him, she found an audacious and convivial partner whose freewheeling ways promised a lifestyle less restrictive than the one of her youth. Grandma Doebele's reaction to the marriage is not known, but she did give the necessary permission and hosted the ceremony in her own home. Indeed, despite any differences Caroline and her grandmother may have had, they remained close until the older woman's death in 1914. Caroline's relationship with her mother, however, was much more complicated.

When Caroline's mother, Carrie Doebele, married her second husband, Frederick Augustus Van Cleve, around 1886, she erased most traces of her prior marriage to Thomas H. Lafferty. The daughter she bore by Lafferty went to live with Grandma Doebele, and Carrie was free to start a brand-new family. Frederick Van Cleve was slight and blond, the son of a Philadelphia lawyer of Dutch descent.¹ His mother died when he was five and his father when he was thirteen.² Soon after his father's death, he enlisted as a cabin boy (or “3rd class boy”) on the USS *Saratoga*, a training ship for naval apprentices.³ He was still in the service when he met Carrie. Family members recalled that in the early years of their marriage, she followed him wherever the Navy sent him. When Frederick was barely twenty and Carrie a few years older, she gave birth to their first child together, a daughter they named Edna. A son and second daughter followed, and the Van Cleves settled in West Philadelphia, where Frederick found work as a carpenter, as a bricklayer, and finally as a foreman for a bricklaying company. His grandchildren remembered a singular remnant of his Navy days—a tattoo on his left biceps in the shape of a shield, which he later had removed.⁴

Meanwhile, across the Schuylkill River, Carrie's daughter by Lafferty continued to live with Grandma Doebele. Carrie did not reclaim Caroline despite achieving some measure of stability in her own life. "There was something unhappy about that," insisted Caroline's friend Marguerite Goldsmith, the wife of Arthur Goldsmith of the rough-riding club. "Something went wrong there with her mother. I don't know what it was."⁵ Grandma Doebele was able to fill the breach, aided by Caroline's aunts, uncles, and cousins, who lived either at 2127 North Lawrence Street or nearby.

Caroline was particularly close to her uncle William Doebele, who in many ways typified a second-generation German American. He continued to worship at the predominantly German St. John's Church on Dauphin Street, married a woman of German lineage, and no doubt identified strongly with his ethnic heritage. At the same time, he spoke English fluently and assimilated non-German customs more readily than his parents ever did.⁶ In the latter half of the nineteenth century, German immigrants from his father's generation tended to be skilled workers, and often their skills involved food or drink. Gottlieb, a butcher, fit the pattern as a man whose labor addressed the basic needs of a precarious immigrant community.⁷ William's choice to become a jeweler reflected his generation's deeper roots and increasing affluence. In another indication of progress, William moved his own family from the heavily German neighborhood where he grew up to a block several miles away on North 15th Street. That block was composed of three-story homes embellished with bay windows, porches, garlands, and columns—flourishes rarely seen on the bare brick facades lining Kensington and Northern Liberties. William even employed household help. His commute to Jeweler's Row in the city's business district, where he had a workshop, required a ride on the streetcar. About that time, a local guidebook reported that by an "admirable system of passes a passenger can ride to almost any part of the city for 5 cents, or at most, under an exchange arrangement, for 8."⁸ His father, Gottlieb, could not have afforded that.

North 15th Street, where William lived, paralleled a northern portion of Broad Street, the major north-south thoroughfare that bisected the city.⁹ While residential enclaves many blocks to the south remained the most fashionable sections in which to live, self-made men built opulent mansions along North Broad Street, and polyglot businesses, clubs, houses of worship, and cultural institutions sprang up there at the turn of the century.¹⁰ Along North Broad Street, not far from William's new residence, for example, stood an opera house, a German brewery, a universalist church, and a synagogue.¹¹

The new rich, like the old rich, learned proper etiquette and social dancing from professional dancing masters, several of whom opened studios in this lively area. Among them were members of the extraordinary Carpenter family. The family’s patriarch, David L. Carpenter, began teaching quadrilles and waltzes (as well as some theatrical dancing) to Philadelphians beginning in the 1830s.¹² At his death, he was eulogized as “the most famous dancing master of this city. . . . The receptions and balls given by the old Philadelphia families were not considered complete without his name as master of ceremonies.”¹³ All six of his sons, whom he named after Roman rulers, became dance instructors, too, the most prominent of whom was the oldest, Constantine.¹⁴ It was Constantine’s son, C. Ellwood Carpenter, who would introduce Caroline to the city’s music and dance culture in a formal way. It was perhaps on a visit to Uncle William that Caroline first became acquainted with the Carpenter family and their lofty position in Philadelphia’s dance community. “Probably no other family attained the prominence of the Carpenters in the field of dance instruction here,” boasted one family member in 1927.¹⁵ By that year, however, the Carpenter reign was waning, and a new first family of dance—named Littlefield—was ascending.

The early period of Jim and Caroline’s marriage provided only glimmers of that future success. The couple moved in with Grandma Doebele after returning from their honeymoon, and it was in her house that their first child, Catherine Minnie Littlefield, was born shortly before 4 A.M. on September 16, 1905. The new baby and Grandma not only shared a given name, they shared a birthday (Figure 2.1). Catherine was christened on Thanksgiving, and her first laugh, duly noted in her baby book, occurred two days after Christmas.¹⁶ But the following spring, the young family moved out of Grandma Doebele’s home and into a rental house in Ambler, a small town about fifteen miles northwest of the city where Jim had taken a job as an insurance collector.¹⁷ It was the first of many such upheavals the Littlefields would experience in their first decades as a family.

When Jim, Caroline, and baby Catherine arrived in Ambler, its most famous resident was Richard V. Mattison, who, together with a partner, had established a large asbestos manufacturing business there, transforming Ambler into a classic company town. Mattison, equally reviled and beloved, not only had built himself a European-style mansion on 400 acres, but also a row of ornate residences for his top executives as well as blocks of smaller homes for lower-level employees. He electrified the streets, constructed a water system, and founded a library.¹⁸



Figure 2.1. The Doebele family, circa 1905. Front row from left: Caroline’s half-sister Edna (holding child), Grandma Doebele, Caroline (holding Catherine), and Mommie’s half-sister Kathryn (holding child). The back row includes: Aunt Emma (third from left); Aunt Ella (fifth from left); Caroline’s mother, Carrie (sixth from left); Uncle William (seventh from left); Aunt Kate (eighth from left); and Jim Littlefield (far right). Collection of George French.

Like many of Ambler’s citizens, the Littlefields had direct ties to Mattison. They rented one of his houses and, for a time, Jim worked as a gym teacher at the massive church the tycoon had erected in memory of his daughter, who had died of typhoid fever at the age of four. Jim directed one class there for women and girls and another for men and boys.¹⁹ In his spare time, he pitched for Ambler Athletic Club’s baseball team (“opponents could do very little with his delivery”) and sang a solo—“Fear Not Ye, O, Israel”—during a mortgage-burning ceremony at the local Methodist church.²⁰

Both he and Caroline loved music and theater and fortunately for them, Mattison had built one of the finest opera houses to be found in the area. The hall featured boxes with decorated, curving fronts, a wide stage, and outstanding acoustics.²¹ Novelist Willa Cather once noted that the “theatre in

every little Western town was then called an opera house.”²² Indeed, Ambler’s opera house, although not in the West, served as an all-purpose community auditorium. The Littlefields could have enjoyed a variety of amusements there, ranging from a children’s Christmas cantata to Lyman H. Howe’s “Lifeorama,” which was essentially a silent motion picture presentation enhanced by live music and sound effects.²³

Despite Ambler’s small-town charms, Caroline likely felt isolated living there. She was separated from her Doebele relatives for the first time in her life and no doubt missed their presence when little Catherine took her first steps and endured a bout of whooping cough.²⁴ Preoccupied with caring for her baby, Caroline had fewer avenues than her husband did for meeting people and making friends. The sole personal item that survives from this period is a postcard addressed to Grandma Doebele and Aunt Kate bearing a small photograph of Catherine in a white frock alongside the note: “Momma and I are coming to see you Thursday morning.”²⁵

The Ambler interlude ended as abruptly as it began, and by early 1908, the Littlefields were back in West Philadelphia. Jim was rehired by the PRR-YMCA, this time as a Boys’ Work Director, and he, Caroline, and Catherine moved into a modest first-floor apartment with a front porch across the street from the division’s headquarters. Two- and three-story homes dominated the immediate area, much as they did in Grandma Doebele’s neighborhood, but in general, West Philadelphia, with its eclectic architecture, wide streets, and open spaces, felt more suburban than North Philadelphia did. A French-style chateau stood on the corner of the Littlefields’ block, for example, and just a short distance away, in a leafy enclave called Powelton, a number of Pennsylvania Railroad executives lived in elaborate Victorian mansions.²⁶

For the young couple, the bustling PRR-YMCA provided not only an income, but an outlet for their many talents and outgoing personalities. Lectures and shows were held every Friday evening (often in the building’s large auditorium, which featured a \$5,000 pipe organ) and bands played in the garden in summertime. Jim would have eagerly reconnected with his favorite sports teams. The sprawling complex also contained a ladies’ parlor, library, five bowling alleys, and a barber shop.²⁷ It was all so close that Catherine, then a toddler, could have grasped her mother’s hand and walked there.

And this was when—and probably where—Catherine first began to dance. Caroline, who was increasingly distancing herself from her grandmother’s strict mores, arranged dancing classes and shows for local children, among