

PRIVATE LIVES

It's easy to imagine John's exasperation with a 50-year-old sister picked up by police for dancing on tables in a New York hotel.

By Mary Luthi

with special thanks to library director Jean Schoenthaler

The Drew Archives do not reveal how the university's fifth president, Ezra Squier Tipple, heard the news. It's left to the imagination that he took a phone call, perhaps leaving a meeting in Mead Hall about cutting costs due to the deepening Great Depression. We can only guess the typically self-possessed president turned ashen, nearly dropped the phone, before finding the composure to make the announcement to the Drew community.

Ella Wendel, the last surviving heir of the multimillionaire real estate family of New York City, died March 13, 1931, bequeathing to Drew one-fifth of an estate estimated to be worth over \$100 million and the family mansion at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 39th Street.

If the size of the bequest stunned the campus, it rocked New Yorkers, who knew next to nothing about the aged, reclusive heiress who lived behind the mansion's shuttered windows. Few were aware of Tipple's regular visits with the Wendels over a 20-year period or of the ties that stemmed from the days when the Rev. John McClintock (later Drew's first president) served as the family pastor at St. Paul's Church.

Most New Yorkers knew only that Ella, her brother, and six sisters amassed millions of dollars and held title to more real estate (mostly in Manhattan) than anyone in the nation, but were listed neither in the telephone directory nor the social register.

For two decades before Ella's death, the Wendel home at 442 Fifth Avenue was known as the House of Mystery. Situated on choice real

estate, dwarfed by neighboring business high-rises, it was the only private residence south of 42nd Street. In the recent years before her death, Ella had been seen only briefly walking her dog, Tobey, in the yard behind the mansion.

Sight-seeing buses stopped regularly at the corner of 39th and Fifth so tourists could gape at the street-level windows or catch a glimpse of the aged heiress in the yard protected by a high board fence studded with nails.

As the story of Ella's death broke, the press recirculated tales, told over the years, of the family's peculiar business practices, such as an aversion to selling any properties, refusal to make repairs, and policies against tenants selling alcohol or installing electric signs.

Retelling how Ella's grandfather founded the fortune in the 1700s, taking the advice of his brother-in-law, John Jacob Astor, to buy up Manhattan real estate, the press reported how the children withdrew after the death of their father in 1876. The house on Fifth Avenue, which their father built for lavish entertaining, no longer welcomed visitors. The girls,

who once skated in Central Park, danced at cotillions, and attended concerts and operas, ceased going out.

In a frenzy of publicity, newspapers across the country and in Europe repeated stories of brother John's tyrannical control over their lives and of the women's feeble-mindedness, helplessness with business matters, out-of-fashion clothing, and preoccupation with pet dogs. Juiciest of all was the story of a strain of family madness; sister Georgiana had been confined in the



Bellevue Asylum for the Insane in 1899. As the story went, she sued her brother for \$50,000 but later dropped the charges and meekly lived out her days behind the mansion's walls.

Few of the papers balanced these reports. Even *The New York Times*, in reporting that Rebecca married Luther Swope at the age of 60 in 1903, stated, without attribution, that she was "the only sister to defy the brother's opposition to marriage based on the grounds that it would disperse an unbroken real estate accumulation of two centuries."

Largely because Ella died with no close heirs, 2,303 false claims were made to the estate. The story remained front page news during three years of litigation. *The Times* carried 67 stories about the case in 1931 alone.

Not unlike today's *Hard Copy* and *A Current Affair*, newspapers fed the public's insatiable curiosity by running tell-alls by acquaintances, trades people, and occasional hired hands. With this daily diet of sensationalism, the public came to believe most of what it read about the Wendels.

When a dentist testified to Ella's poor personal hygiene and soiled, outmoded clothing as proof of her incompetence, no one stepped forward to point out that an elderly woman living alone might justifiably struggle with bathing and wardrobe. So pervasive were the stories that several contemporary books on the Gilded Age repeat these tales of the Wendels as fact.

But the diaries, letters, account books, and photographs, safely tucked away in the Drew Archives, tell a fuller story of the Wendel children from midlife to old age. Perhaps Ella's greatest gift to Drew, these documents offer a rare glimpse into what it was like, principally, for Ella, Georgiana, and Beckie, to shoulder responsibility for one of the country's greatest fortunes.

It's true that the Wendels never installed telephones. The reason, John once said, stemmed from the day he was called to the phone on a ruse, in someone else's office, only to find himself served with a summons. He vowed then and there never to own a phone. For that eccentricity, we can be grateful.



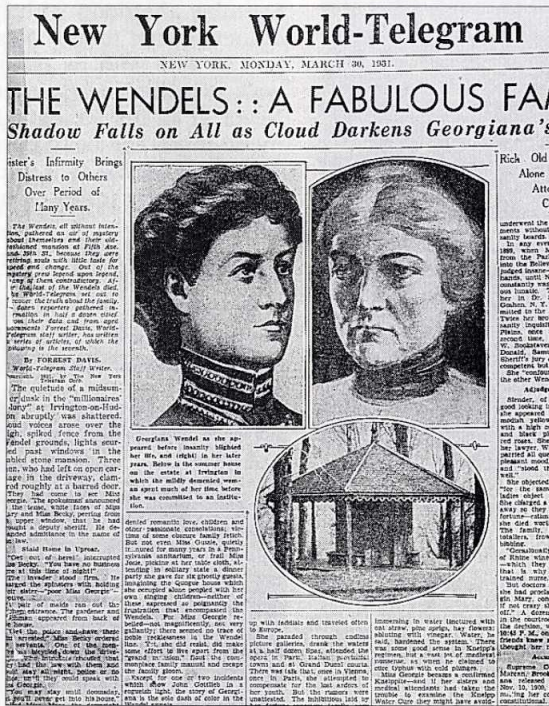
Without a telephone, the family shared news and problems through letters. And with four residences at their disposal—442 Fifth Avenue, a beach house in Quogue, L.I., a country home in Irvington,

N. Y., and Beckie's home with husband Luther Swope on Central Park West—the siblings were often apart when family issues arose.

Rather than guess about Georgiana's reported insanity, we have her own account of events in February 1899, written from a sanitarium in Goshen, N.Y., to the village justice of the peace.

"The doctor has put a latch on my door and is keeping me prisoner, but he knows that I am sane. I have not seen Dr. S. since Feb. 2 until today when he refused to let me walk to the Goshen P.O. to get a regular letter. I am out of place here as I need

Opposite page: A young Ella. Above: Ella's father, John Daniel Wendel, and sister Rebecca at 18 in Nuremberg, Bavaria. Left: When Ella died, the *New York World-Telegram* assigned a dozen reporters to gather information in a half dozen cities for a comprehensive story on this "fabulous family." The article pictured was the seventh in a series of 12.



no medical aids and have no clothes except those I wore on the eve that Dr. S. kidnapped me here from New York. He says that he has committing

Right: The Quogue, Long Island, beach house
 Below: Sister Augusta, who was confined to a sanitarium from age 35 on



papers but refuses to serve them. On the eve alluded to he ... threw me into a car and, when I called 'Police!' he threw his arms around me, put his hand into my mouth, and screamed, 'How will that do?' and 'Have you had enough?'

"He half-sat on me and ordered his nurse to close both windows. Arriving at the station, I said, 'Take me.' ... After the indignities I have suffered from his hand, I no longer wish to remain under the same roof. ... The food at the infirmary is not to which I am accustomed. I think mine was a case of mistaken identity and Dr. S. is making me a victim."

Subsequently released from Goshen to the custody of sister Ella in Irvington, we learn that Georgiana was still furious. Ella writes frantically to John in New York: "Will you not tell Mr. Koss that Georgie is beyond control. The nurses are packing up their clothes and saying they will not stay another night. We have telegraphed to Dr. Guernsey to send two others, but these will say the same. Georgie has bitten the night nurse so her arms are turning blue. Don't know what we shall do this evening. She will not have men nurses in her room. Two men have agreed to stay outside the bedroom door. Mr. Koss and Drs. Flint and Fitch can surely arrange that she be taken to Bellevue in a couple of days. She ought to go today, nurses say."

From subsequent letters, we learn John didn't respond promptly. For three days, Georgie abused her keepers, bloodying their arms and hands. Ella, though, refused to tie her sister to the bed and implored John and Beckie to intervene compassionately.

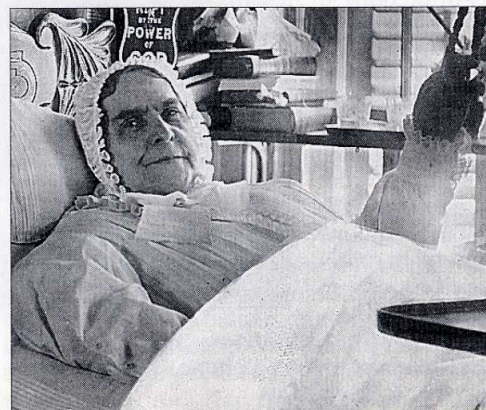
Intriguingly, the press never dwelled on the sister who seems genuinely to have been unbalanced. Augusta was an inmate of the State Homeopathic Asylum for the Insane, Middletown, N.Y., from 1880 to 1895, and of Easton Sanitarium, Easton, Pa., from 1895 until her death in 1912. Reflecting on "Gussie's" psychological condition, Ella writes to Beckie in January 1912: "I often think what a terrible life

she had. She might never have got that way if her health had been attended to when a child. Ma and Pa did not give their children enough amusement and try to divert them. I see now how other girls and boys are brought up and they turn out better. I'm thankful her sufferings are at an end."

Georgie, from all accounts, appears to have been more of an embarrassment than a lunatic. It's easy to imagine John's exasperation with a 50-year-old sister picked up by police for dancing on tables in a New York hotel. He did commit her briefly to Bellevue, but after her friends rallied to her support, he released her, freeing her to spend time and money as she saw fit. Subsequent diaries show Georgie gallivanting about Brooklyn with friends, taking in concerts, learning to ride a bicycle, and then travelling down to Florida by train, where she helped a friend capture an alligator. If nothing else, Georgie was a free spirit. That she rebelled at midlife is perhaps a family trait as Ella's and John's correspondence reveals.

Not the wallflower depicted by the press, Ella had a serious suitor at the age of 44. Other men, earlier in her life, had also vied for her hand, but she intimates in letters to Georgie (who was traveling across Europe with her mother) that those suitors were less than genuine. This 26-year-old, she admits, "is too young for me [although] he is perfectly devoted. He still continues to come three times a week, once in the evening and then in the afternoon to take me for a drive; then I go driving every Saturday afternoon with him. He has been to dinner several times. Next Sunday we expect him to dine with us again. Mary and I take a walk with him nearly every Sunday afternoon. Never in all my life have I had anyone to love me so much and be so devoted. I hope you and Josie and Mama will like him. I should not marry anyone unless John and Ma give their consent."

A month later she writes, "Be sure you return in November as we would like very much to go to Europe this fall. I will go with my sweetheart a week after Ma returns. As for a wedding trousseau, I certainly shall not let that stand in





*Ella to Rebecca:
"Don't you
remember you
told me that I
did not have to
marry a man
because he visit-
ed the house?
Seems you do!"*

the way. Delays are dangerous. I see that you do not want me to go to Europe with him but would rather I forget all about him. The world is large enough for us to live in it. I shall live on Fifth Avenue uptown and my sweetheart shall have all he wants, but we will go abroad for a year or two first. Beckie is going with us, and I would very much like to have the pleasure of your company. We will go to Spain and see a bullfight, take in China, India, etc."

Tantalizingly, the letters stop there without recording what ended the affair. One can only presume that family pressures persuaded Ella that the man was unsuitable. What is clear, however, is Ella did not rely solely on John for income. Like all the sisters, Ella had various properties in her own name, with the rents payable to her own accounts. She kept scrupulous track of these transactions, writing frequently about problem tenants and their complaints. Financially independent, she could easily have struck out on her own.

Romance in later life even came to John. At the age of 63 he corresponded avidly with a woman in California, sympathizing with her aches and pains and showering her with affection. Again, letters fail to reveal why the couple never married; there is no indication that John considered her a fortune hunter.

Perhaps the best insight into how the family viewed the institution of marriage comes from Ella's letters to Beckie in 1903, advising her against marrying at the age of 60. "How is it that you did not consult John about marrying Mr. S?



He feels badly that you think of leaving him and all of us. ... How *can* you for a stranger you know little about? Don't you remember you told me that I did not have to marry a man because he visited the house? Seems you do! All your life you have thought no one was good enough for you. ... It's not too late to change your mind."

Ella adjusted, nevertheless, to Beckie's married state, even suggesting that her sister consult her husband for financial advice. Perhaps because of Beckie's status as a married woman,

Sightseers gawk at the House of Mystery at 39th and Fifth, top. Rebecca, foreground, and Mary on the grounds of the Irvington, N.Y., country home, above.

*Wendel business maxims:
No property for sale; never mortgage anything; tenants make their own repairs.*



Top: Ella holding Tobey.
Above: Jude the poodle and Punch the pug in 1890.
Opposite page: At the pyramids in Egypt, Luther and Rebecca Wendel Swope astride camels and Ella on a donkey

her sisters pressed her into making the public appearances when John died in 1914.

Beckie made quite a splash in the press the day she showed up at the lower Broadway offices. Impressing reporters with her decision to ride the "L" train downtown rather than take a taxi, she then confidently dispelled rumors that the Wendel estate was without direction. Asked who was in control, she said, "I am." Fielding questions about who would deal with the day-to-day headaches, she patiently explained that competent clerical help under the direction of an office manager would keep the sisters' accounts up-to-date.

Still, the antiquated business office impressed reporters more. In a widely reprinted article, a feature writer describes the rooms as "depressingly plain. No mahogany trim or plate glass, no rugs or hardwood furniture, nothing but well-worn linoleum and the battered old-time desks and chairs of another day—but plenty of safes."

The writer continues: "The office might be

Dickens visualized. ... They hadn't stenographers or typewriters, male or female. ... You even pause instinctively to hear the scratching of the goose-quill pens, and you glance about for the sandbox and the farthing dip."

But while the Wendels were clearly old-fashioned, they were not unworldly. The sisters travelled widely well into late middle age, keeping track in diaries and account books where they went, who and what they saw, and how much it cost.

In 1885, at the age of 26, Georgiana boarded the *U.S.S. Jupiter*, bound for Trieste, Jerusalem, Suez, and Cairo. In 1890, at the age of 48, Beckie did Paris in 10 days, recording her impression of climbing to the top of the newly built *La Tour Eiffel* as "breathtaking." In 1909, 66-year-old Beckie and 55-year-old Ella went to Egypt with Beckie's husband, commemorating their trip with a picture of themselves astride camels and donkeys in front of the pyramids. A year later, Beckie went to Alaska, intriguing Ella with accounts of "real life Indians."

None of the Wendel children doubted that New York gossiped about them. Caring little for people's opinions, John posted his business maxims for everyone to read: Never mortgage anything; no property for sale; remember that Broadway moves northward 10 blocks a decade; tenants must make their own repairs.

Ella, too, ignored gossip but, contrary to later speculation, she read her own press. Writing to Beckie in 1911, she notes: "We have a clipping about the Wendel estate. It tells how we 'hold on to property for dear life when we could get four millions for it. The property cannot be sold until the last one of two elderly sisters die. The brother is unmarried, and he has not the right to dispose of it.' That is as near as they have it. Will let you see it sometime."

While Ella was not as insulated from the real world as people believed, neither was she as inactive. Aside from traveling up and down the East Coast from Saratoga Springs to Jacksonville, she remained physically vigorous through her 50s and 60s. At age 58, she writes to Beckie from Long Island about "sailing alone to the buoys at the Post Beach, where I floated on my back, as I cannot swim." At age 60, she apologizes to Beckie "for always being out when you come. Mary and I are on the go all week to a dog show and to the opera."

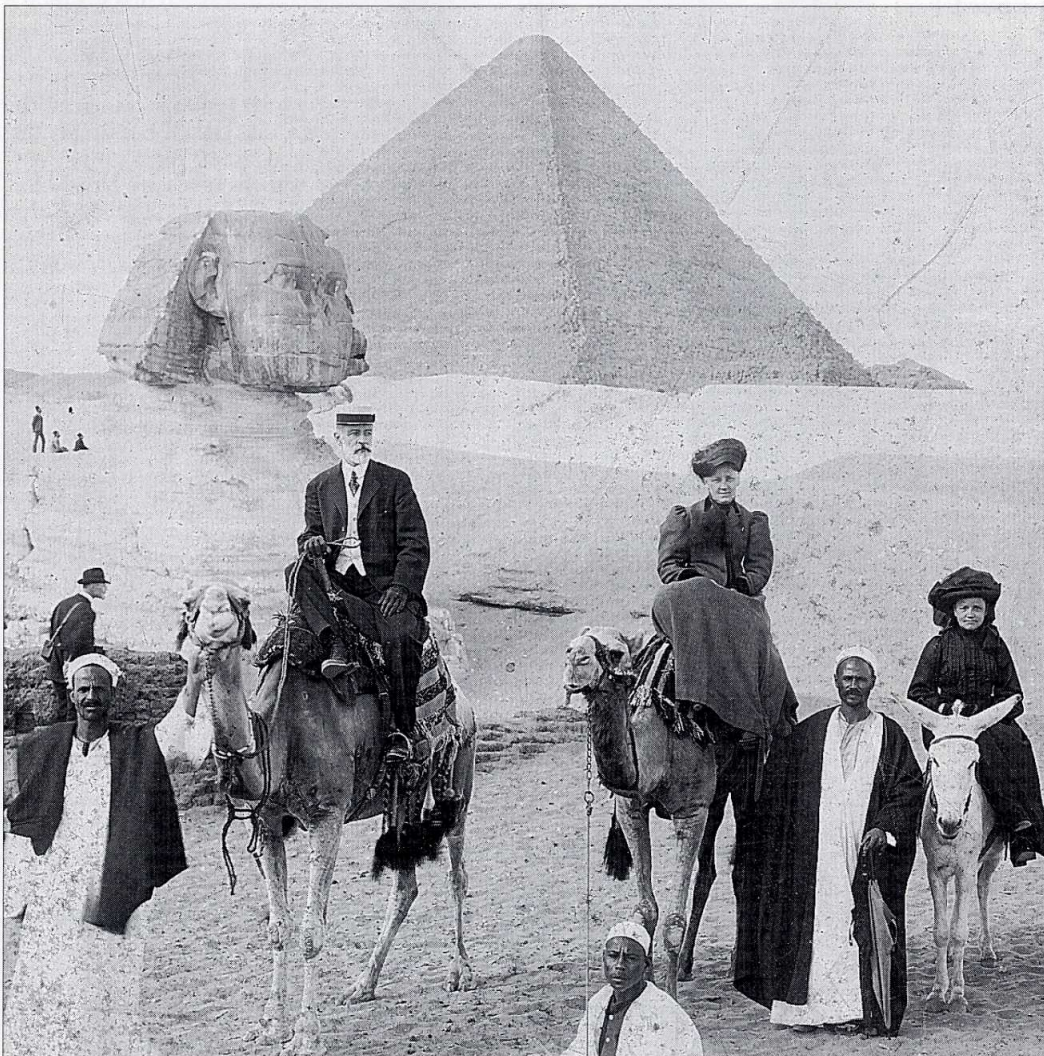
Still, as Ella and Beckie inched into old age, their letters became increasingly focused on the

problems of domestic help, vegetable gardens, and the family dogs. Mourning the death of Punch, Ella spent weeks arranging for a suitable headstone for the pet cemetery at the Irvington house.

When Beckie became blind in 1920, Ella was left essentially to cope with the world alone; her letters don't mention Georgie, although she lived with Ella until her death in 1929. Beckie died in July one year after Georgie, Ella the following March.

The Wendel sisters' greatest transgression may have been that they minded their own business. In an era when upper-class women measured their worth by their social standing, the Wendel sisters busied themselves with the complex tasks of managing domestic staff and upkeep on four separate homes. At a time when women left balancing the checkbook to the man of the house, the Wendel sisters kept track of over 120 different real estate properties after their brother John's death.

That Ella grew increasingly reclusive in her



DREW CONNECTIONS

1850

The Rev. Randolph Sinks Foster (Drew's second president) baptized Georgiana and Josephine while he was pastor of the Mulberry St. Methodist Church, N.Y.C.

1857-1867

The Rev. Dr. John McClintock (Drew's first president) was the family pastor at St. Paul's Church, N.Y.C.

1894

The Wendels donated \$10,000 to Drew in memory of Mary Ann Dew Wendel, a tradition maintained for 30 years upon the anniversary of the death of each Wendel.

1903

The Rev. Henry Anson Buttz (Drew's fourth president) married Rebecca Wendel and Luther Swope.

1925

Rebecca donated \$28,000 to Drew

1931

The Rev. Ezra Squier Tipple (Drew's fifth president) conducted the funeral service for Ella Wendel.



70s is hardly surprising. The world had passed her by. Her family home had become an affront to fashionable, trendy New York. The more curious the public, the more she withdrew. In the end, she closed off most of the rooms and herself.

After protracted negotiations, Drew and the other 14 major benefactors (all charitable organizations, including the A.S.P.C.A., New York hospitals, and the Methodist Church) consolidated the scores of real estate parcels and other holdings into the Wendel Foundation. The disposition of funds dragged on through the Great Depression and the Second World War, reflecting the vagaries of the real estate market and the disrepair into which many of the properties had fallen over a decade. Drew's final share was \$5 million, considerably less than anticipated.



an alcove between a clothing store and the Republic National Bank of New York hangs a large bronze memorial to the Wendels, Drew's grateful acknowledgement of their generosity.

As to the furnishings and fittings, Drew bought most of the items at a public auction held in 1933. Oddly enough, unsold pieces were delivered to campus in 12 truckloads the following spring. The choicest family heirlooms were displayed in the Wendel Room in Mead Hall, the rest stored in the Drew Archives behind a specially constructed cage.

Today, few of the Wendel possessions remain. While some of the furniture burned in the Mead Hall fire, much of the fine silver, china, and crystal has simply disappeared over the last 60 years.

And, too, the Wendels are largely forgotten. Perhaps they would prefer it that way. As Tipple said in his eulogy at Ella's funeral, "There is a kind of tragic irony, a measure of inescapable fate, that good people of simple tastes, shrinking from anything like publicity, and to whom notoriety of any sort was abhorrent, should be dragged into the fierce light of relentless sun and subjected to the torture of millions of prying eyes. What had they done to merit such treatment? Nothing, so far as I know, except their desire to live their own quiet life in their own way."



The Wendel Room in Mead Hall before the fire of 1939; the last article in the World-Telegram series on the Wendels; and a Daily Mirror clip noting Ella's death

Finding the mansion at 442 Fifth Avenue too costly to maintain, Drew razed the house in 1934 and negotiated a long-term lease on a nine-story high-rise with the S.H. Kress department store. The university eventually sold the property, but Drew's connection to the family can still be found there today. In

Monday, March 16, 1931

DAILY MIRROR

Ella Wendel, Last of Clan, Buried in Ancient Vault

Last of the Wendels Goes to Rest

Oak Box for Heiress to 100 Million

By JANE FRANKLIN.

As dusk settled over Trinity Cemetery, 153rd St. and Broadway, the last of the Wendels was laid in her place in the family vault.

And the door of the vault was