



John Shaw Billings

AN
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL
FRAGMENT

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1905

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April 1905

Scheme of Autobiography.

- 1 When I first realized myself, on the hill side on Tristram Burgers' farm looking over Narragansett bay at the white sails in the distance.
- 2 Life in Allensville
In the store at Rising Sun.
making boots.
The first study of Latin
- 3 Life at Miami University.
The Library. Early Reading
Robinson Crusoe Deer slayer & Pathfinder.
- 4 Life in Kentucky - The Bedingers.
- 5 Life as a Medical Student in Cincinnati. Blackman - Graham
Sister Anthony.
- 6 Washington in 1861. Med Exam Rowell
Dr Mrs Green. Union Hotel Hospital
Hammond and Settermann.
Cliff House Hospital.
West Philadelphia

- 7 With the 5th Corps, Battle of Chancellorsville
Gettysburg.
- 8 In New York, Draft Riots, Davids
Island. Draft Frank's Watertown,
Bedloe's Island. Expedition to Isle
a Vache
- 9 Med Inspector Army of the Potomac -
Wilderness - Zouls Tavern, Cool
Harbor, In front of Petersburg.
- 10 In Washington, Surg Gen's Office
Divisions of Accounts and Property
Invalid Corps.
11. Library and Museum work
- 12 Hygiene & Hospitals, Barnes Hospital
at Soldiers Home, John Hopkins
Hospital, /
- 13 National Board of Health
- 14 Building of The Army Museum -
Index Catalogue. Index Medicus.
- 15 Statistical Work, Census Work,
Sanitary Engineer Work,
Work on Ventilation.

Surgeon Generalship, Baxter &

16 Lectures at Columbia
Dept of Hygiene Univ of Penn'a

17 New York Public Library

18 Carnegie Institution

I first got a realizing sense of my own personality or individuality when, a boy about 8 years old, I was at work on a hillside on the farm of Tristram Burgess near Providence R.I. My father was the manager of this farm, and my business that sunny afternoon was to chop up and dig out by the roots all the Canada Thistles I could find in the pasture. I had read the Bible through - verse by verse, also Robinson Crusoe, Deerslayer, and the Pathfinder, and the Pilgrims Progress - but I had never done any thinking that I can remember. - But on this memorable afternoon I stood on the hillside and looked over Narragansett Bay, and wondered where all the Cat boats and Schooners with their white sails came from, and were going to. Then my thought took this turn - "The only person who can know that is God. He knows everything that has been, and is, and is to be. These hundreds and thousands of years ago he knew that I should be here to day and that each of those boats would be just where it is, and that I should be thinking of them." Then as his knowledge must have been perfect it is absolutely necessary that I,

just I am, knowing just what I know, am here at this moment, looking at these ships, which also must be each just where they are. "Then everything must be arranged and ordered to be just as it is, and no one can prevent it. Therefore I am not responsible for where I am nor for what I do."

I was surprised at this conclusion, and thought I had made a great discovery, and resolved to tell my mother about it when she was worrying about one trouble.

I did tell her about it that night, and said that there was no use in worrying any more. She looked at me in a scornful sort of way and said "Who's been teaching you about preordination?" "Nobody taught me," said I. "I found it out by myself - don't you see it must be so."

My life on the Burgess farm, from about 5 to 10 years of age, was that of an ordinary farmers boy. I ~~carried~~ drove the milk cart into Providence about 5 A.M. and left the pails and quarts with the various customers - mostly of the poorer class. I dropped four or five grains of sweet corn in the proper place in the furrow in planting time. I helped weed the little carrots and young beets, rode the horse for the horse raising of the hay crop, went to a country school for three months in the winter, made little clam bakes along the shore with my cousins William Henry and Charles Shaw, and read everything I could lay hands on. I managed to get a dollar for subscription to a little lending library in a book shop, and the first books I took out were Deerslayer, Pathfinder, and Jack o the Mill. I had for my own Robinson Crusoe, Marco Polo in the forests of Maine, Harry and Lucy, and Plutarch's lives and was quite sure that I did not want to be a farmer.

When I was about 10 years old my father moved to Indiana and established himself in a little cross roads village called Allensville, on the road from Rising Sun to Vevay. Here he kept a country store - was Postmaster, and had a small shoemaker's shop in which one man was employed. I learned something of shoemaking - had some experience in keeping store, read incessantly, came across a book - I have forgotten its title - which had a number of Latin quotations in it, asked a young clergyman (John C Bonham) how I could learn Latin - and got a Latin Grammar and reader - a copy of Caesar, and a Latin dictionary and set to work.

It was difficult - but with the aid of Mr Bonham I made good progress. Then I made an agreement with my father that if he would help me through college in the least expensive way, all of his property should go to my sister and that I must expect nothing more. I then got some Greek books, a geometry &c and went on to get myself to pass the entrance examination for the

Sub Freshman class at Miami University
Ox Bow Ohio. I succeeded in doing this in
a year - and passed the examination in the Fall
of 1882. For the first two years I kept
Bachelor Hall, living on bread, milk, potatoes, eggs
ham etc - such things as I could cook for
myself. The lessons gave me little trouble, most
of my time was spent in reading the books in the
College Library. I was omnivorous, read everything
in English as it came. Philosophy, Theology,
Natural Science - History Travel and Fiction.

Published in connection with the
JOHN SHAW BILLINGS CENTENNIAL, JUNE 17, 1965
in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of
Dr. Billings' appointment as head of the
Library of the Surgeon General's Office, U.S. Army

My dear Mr. Shaw, I received your letter of the 17th of June and am glad to hear that you are interested in the history of the college. I have been thinking of writing you for some time but have been so busy that I could not find time. I have been to the college and have seen the old building and the new one. I have also seen the library and the museum. I have been very much interested in everything and have been thinking of writing you about it. I have been thinking of writing you about the history of the college and the old building and the new one. I have been thinking of writing you about the library and the museum. I have been thinking of writing you about the history of the college and the old building and the new one. I have been thinking of writing you about the library and the museum.

Library of the Surgeon General's Office, U.S. Army
Dr. Henshaw's appointment as head of the
in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of
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