

THE HARNESS-MAKER'S DAUGHTER

The woman known as "Madeleva" most of her adult life was baptized on June 2, 1887, at the Church of Saint Mary in Cumberland, Wisconsin. As the priest poured baptismal water over her head, the daughter whose birth on May 24 to August Frederick and Lucy Arntz Wolff had been recorded at the Barron County Court House became "Mary Evaline." From the beginning, the Roman Catholic church sealed her identity.

Lucy Wolff saw to that. August was Lutheran, his confirmation certificate a cherished possession that hung on his bedroom wall.¹ But Lucy was an ardent Catholic, who attended daily mass in the tiny mission church when the priest was in town. She made time to launder altar linens and mend vestments for the priest, who had no other help. Once, on her hands and knees, she singlehandedly laid a heavy carpet in the sanctuary of the church. After mass on the one or two Sundays a month when it was offered, she opened her kitchen to the families who came in from the surrounding territory, fortifying them with hot coffee and toast for the rough trip home.

Lucy's immigrant parents had brought their Catholicism with them from their native Westphalia, which was at the time a province of Prussia. Even in their early years in the Wisconsin wilderness without church or priest to help them, the Arntz family had practiced their religion faithfully.²

Lucy's father, Peter Joseph Henry Arntz, and her mother, Hendrina Bernadina Schmitz, known as "Dina," had left their home near the Dutch border for the Wisconsin frontier shortly after their marriage in 1848. Seventeen years older than his wife, who was barely seventeen when they married,³ Peter Arntz had traveled widely before his marriage. As a young man, he settled for a time in Dutch Guiana, but returned to his native Germany a few years before his marriage. Something of a linguist, he spoke five languages fluently.

As his travels suggest, Peter shared the Arntz family penchant for adventure. In family lore, an older brother, Werner, was notorious

because, to avoid arrest for smuggling, he allowed himself to be bricked up for three days in a kiln on the family farm. Indeed, as a youth Peter himself probably participated in clandestine forays into France and Belgium for silk thread, an illegal activity in which the Arntz family engaged with clear conscience, despising as they did their Prussian conquerors.⁴ But if the family had ways of replenishing their dwindling resources (the profit from one such expedition had been enough to complete a new barn), they also had an inclination for living beyond their means. In his lifetime, Peter had seen the family wealth squandered and the farmstead and brickyard that supported it sold. Of seven children in the family, only the two sisters, one of whom became a nun (and, eventually, superior of her convent), chose to remain in Europe; all the males emigrated to America.

Peter's young wife, Dina, had also suffered a decline in family circumstances. Raised in comfort and given an expensive education, she had to cope with abrupt changes after her father, a retail merchant, died when she was fourteen. He left his wife with three daughters to support, of whom Dina was the oldest. Dina soon met and married Peter Arntz in her native town of Emmerich, just across the Rhine from Kleve, where Peter had gone into business after his return from South America. Most likely hoping to regain something of past prosperity and at the same time to escape worsening political oppression, the newly married couple joined the swell of emigrants, two among more than a million Germans who left their native land for America between 1844 and 1854.

Dina bore their first child three months after she and Peter arrived in Wisconsin. Over the next twenty-five years, twelve more children followed. The fourth child, Lucia, who became simply "Lucy" when she started school,⁵ was the first to be born at the family's new homestead on the Lemonweir River, a few miles from its juncture with the head of the Wisconsin River. The year before Lucy's birth on January 8, 1854, Peter built a sawmill there. The area was still mostly pine forest, sparsely populated by Winnebago Indians. For the first year and a half of their stay, Dina went without seeing a single white woman.⁶ Needing help, she employed some of the native American women, teaching them to sew in a European manner with a needle and thread.

The oldest Arntz children had only each other for companions. Eventually, however, Peter's younger brother Heinrich and his wife, Johanna, settled close by. Other immigrants came as well, some German, but most Irish. The Arntzes established close ties with their neighbors, and the younger generation eventually intermarried.

Lumber became the family business until the mid-1860s, when, out clearing roads for his logging teams, Peter was stranded in a fierce snow storm that froze both his feet. He spent three months recuperating; for the rest of his life, he was lame. His accident, and the end of the easy supply of timber when the area became more densely settled, caused him to devote himself entirely to farming, with hops for the brewing industry as his chief crop. About this time, he took one of his sons with him to explore the Nebraska Territory, traveling to Omaha and Lincoln, but decided against moving his growing family to a new frontier.

Well educated and used to status in the community, Peter Arntz assumed the role of leader among the other settlers. He used his teams of horses, the only ones in the area, to fetch provisions for nearby families from the closest town, forty miles distant. According to his daughter Lucy, he saw that each family had what it needed, even if it meant supplying the poorest families from his own goods.⁷ His wife, Dina, also commanded respect; she impressed those who met her as a "lady."⁸ Even in the backwoods, the couple established a home for their children marked by pious religious observance and polite formality.⁹

Along with the rest of the family, Lucy worked hard. She recalled, "I had to work indoors and out, do all the serving for a family of twelve—wash, iron, cook, milk six and seven cows twice a day, make butter, cheese, etc. In those days, we could not buy ready to wear clothing of any kind. We had to make men's underwear as well as for ourselves. Then Sunday morning we often had to walk 4½ miles to Mass by 9:30 or 10 and often fasting. Those were pioneer days."¹⁰ In the family, Lucy was famous for her bread making. She also became a surrogate mother to the youngest children, Eva Louisa and Werner Peter, born in 1870 and 1873, respectively. She later named two of her own children after her young charges.

The children from the Lemonweir community attended a country grade school, but those like Lucy who wanted a high school education had to board during the week in New Lisbon, some fifteen miles from home. Apparently, Lucy's parents were willing to sacrifice her much needed labor as well as the price of board in town so that she could attend the only secondary school in the area. After graduation, she returned home for several years to teach in the country school she had attended.

In her mid-twenties, still unmarried, Lucy took a job as clerk in Isaac Alsbacher's general store and harness shop in Mauston, eight miles cross country from home.¹¹ There, she met August Wolff. Even

though he was almost four years her junior and had little to offer except his character, they began keeping company while they worked together at the store.

August, known to those outside the family as "Gus," had come to Mauston in the fall of 1879, just after his twenty-second birthday, to practice his trade of harness making. Like Lucy, August was used to hard work. He had been making his own way since he was eleven, when his formal schooling ended and he took a job in a heading and stave mill for fifty cents a day.

August was the oldest child of Louisa Wolff, born to her on September 10, 1857, in Brallentin, Pomerania. He never knew his father and in fact, may never have known the truth of his birth—that his father was a single man whose family objected to his marrying Louisa because she was not "good enough for him," her family being "too poor" and of a "low class."¹² Three years after August's birth, Louisa had twins by a married man. She gave all three of her children her maiden name, Wolff. Reputedly, the father of the twins gave her the money that she used to emigrate after her marriage to Christian Engelke, a widower with two children of his own. Together, they had a daughter before they left Germany for Richwood, Wisconsin, in 1866. Five more children were born to them there.

The family arrived in Wisconsin knowing nothing of English, dependent entirely upon relatives to help them get started. Within a year, Chris Engelke had a job in the mill where his stepson August would later work for a time, and was able to build a house for his family on a small plot of land where they could garden. Life at home was not easy. August, who was nine years old when the family emigrated, attended school briefly, in desultory fashion, obtaining most of his education at a Lutheran Sunday school. At thirteen, he left home for good, moving to nearby Watertown, where he found work as chore boy in a hotel.

Within a few months of his arrival in Watertown, Paul Herzog, a harness maker, hired August as his apprentice. The boy worked in Herzog's shop for four years. During this time he formed a close friendship with a fellow harness maker, Gus Weitz. Both young men moved to Madison early in the summer of 1876.

Always a sober youth, August preferred hunting and other outdoor activities or, alternatively, reading and drawing, to less temperate pleasures. He particularly enjoyed sketching trees, leaves, and flowers in notebooks that he carefully preserved. The five months he spent in Madison made him "education-conscious," and the University of Wisconsin became the "single symbol of higher learning" for him.¹³ Later, he would send all three of his children there.

In November 1876, in spite of the depressed economy that followed the Panic of 1873, August quit his job in Madison because his employer insisted he work on election day. A series of temporary jobs in Wisconsin and western Michigan followed. It was during this three-year period that he took a job with August Ruengling in Baraboo, Wisconsin. While he was working in the harness shop, so the story goes, Johnny, the youngest son of his employer, ran off with a traveling show. August later delighted in telling his family how his employer sent him and another Ruengling son to track down and bring home the delinquent teenager—who later became famous as one of the Ringling Brothers, owners of "The Greatest Show on Earth."¹⁴

August wanted a shop of his own, and after three years of steady work for Alsbacher in Mauston, he set out to find a place to establish himself and, now that he and Lucy were planning to marry, a family. After Aberdeen, South Dakota, and then Grand Rapids, Wisconsin, failed to satisfy him, he wrote a friend who had settled in Cumberland, about sixty miles north and west of Eau Claire. A brother-in-law of Isaac Alsbacher, an engineer with the Chicago, Saint Paul, Minneapolis, and Omaha Railway, had first told August about the village, which he had platted a few years before. According to all reports, it was growing rapidly as a lumbering town, thanks to the railroad and a new sawmill. August visited Cumberland, arriving May 1, 1883, judged the prospects for the harness business to be excellent, and decided to stay. He opened his shop in rented quarters on the main street three weeks later.

In 1883, northwestern Wisconsin was still logging country, although the once dense virgin forests were dwindling fast. First named "Lakeland" (and still known as the "Island City"), Cumberland occupies a small island just off the southeastern shore of Beaver Dam Lake, which connects with a chain of lakes extending some sixteen miles to the northwest. Along these lakes, Chippewa Indians lived in scattered villages. Italians brought in to build the railroad lived with their families in a colony to the south of Cumberland. Also to the south lay a German settlement, and to the east, a smaller French colony. The newly incorporated village had a population of fewer than one thousand inhabitants. Nevertheless, within its limits the year that August Wolff opened his store were twenty-four saloons¹⁵ and at least two brothels, along with several hundred frequently intoxicated woodsmen. The town's reputation in those early days put it in an unholy quartet: Hurley, Hayward, Cumberland—and Hell.¹⁶

This was the place to which August Wolff brought his pious bride eight months later. The day after Christmas, he had returned to southern Wisconsin to marry Lucy Arntz. The ceremony took place on

New Year's Day 1884, at the Catholic church in Lyndon, the town closest to the Arntz farm. Afterward, the couple traveled over the snowy roads to Mauston by sleigh, where they expected to take a train to Cumberland the same day. Instead, through no fault of their own, they spent the night in jail. They would tell the story many times to children and grandchildren. Because of the frigid weather, all train service had been canceled. Lucy's older brother Will was the sheriff in Mauston; his home, where they spent the night, was also the county jail. And so it happened that they spent their wedding night there. Their only honeymoon was the trip home, which took a full week because of blizzards and drifts along the line. That week, the temperature fell as low as fifty-two degrees below zero.¹⁷

Initially, the couple set up housekeeping in the same building as the store they rented. There on November 19, 1885, their first child was born. Julius Frederick was named for the father August had never known.¹⁸ Within three years they had bought first their own store, and then a two-story, white frame house on the property just behind it. The couple's second child, Mary Evaline, called Eva (pronounced "Eh'vuh") or sometimes "Sis," was born a month after the family moved into their new home. Two more children followed: Werner Peter (nicknamed "Vern"), on October 25, 1889, and a third son, Leo, who died soon after birth on December 23, 1892.

An early photograph of Eva shows a big-eyed baby who stares intently down the eye of the camera. She appears small, delicate, fine boned, but wiry nonetheless. Her large, pale eyes and abundant, dark hair are her most distinctive features, even as an infant. As an older child, newly confirmed, she stands straight, shoulders back, feet apart and planted solidly on the ground. Her gaze in both pictures is the same—penetrating and wary. Both record the image of an intense, intelligent, self-possessed child.

Eva spent much of her childhood with her brothers, out of doors, playing what were then boys' games. She did her best to keep pace with her brother Freddie, her favorite and constant companion even though he was a year and a half older than she. All three children were close, but in those early years a special bond formed between the first two.

For Eva, as for Freddie and Vern, the lake that encircled the village became the most important feature of the landscape and dominated the memory of her early years. About to be taken for a boat ride, two-year-old Eva surveyed the huge expanse of water and announced decisively to her parents, "I don't want to get into that big tub."¹⁹ She

FIGURE 1.1

Fred and Eva Wolff, c. 1888



Courtesy of Saint Mary's College Archives.

FIGURE 1.2

Eva Wolff, c. 1892



Courtesy Saint Mary's College Archives.

changed her mind, however, and for the rest of her life she loved to be in and on the water. At a young age, she learned to swim by using a small board to support herself as she kicked, and she soon challenged herself to swim across the narrow part of the lake and back. Almost as soon as she could walk, she learned to ice skate. She was always one of the first on the ice, certainly the first girl, often before

FIGURE 1.3

Fred and Eva Wolff's Confirmation, c. 1898. Vern is seated; Rev. Stephen Leinfelder is standing behind.



Courtesy Saint Mary's College Archives.

the ice was hard, liking best "the thrill of spinning off with the ice cracking under every stroke."²⁰

Other early memories were of the Chippewa Indians, who came often to her father's shop to sell deer hair and buckskins. Old Cutlip, the chief, particularly impressed her, perhaps because of the unsightly scar that gave him his nickname. As the only native American who

could speak even a little English, Cutlip did most of the trading for the tribe. He often startled Lucy and her children by peering through the windows of the house, looking for her husband.²¹

As children, Eva and her brothers turned their father's workshop into a playroom. The pungent smell of rolled up leather, the feel of thickly knotted rope, the crack and whistle of long horse whips, and the sounds of bells—sleigh bells, cow bells, and sheep bells—stayed with Eva for life. The children rode the horseless saddles their father had for sale and played in the empty wooden boxes in which buffalo robes were shipped.

Almost as soon as they could talk, the children learned the names of trees, flowers, animals, and birds. On Sunday afternoon drives into the country in a horse and buggy on loan from the livery stable, Lucy and August would identify the trees and growing crops that they passed; on the way home, they quizzed the children to test what they had learned. In the large yard that enclosed their house facing Back Street and the store facing Front (now Main) Street, Lucy, the farmer's daughter, had a kitchen garden that included not only vegetables but also berry bushes and fruit trees. She also cultivated herb and perennial gardens. The children helped tend these, Eva bearing particular responsibility for the asparagus bed and strawberry patch. Her special love, however, was the trees. She set for herself the goal of climbing every tree in the yard, the elms excepted. On summer mornings, Lucy would hear the voice of her second child calling from among the green leaves, "Mama, find me!"

Eva also remembered winter Sunday afternoons in her childhood, when her father would hold her on his lap in the chair they called "our big chair" and read aloud to her. He preferred poetry, which he clipped from newspapers and magazines and pasted in scrapbooks, and as Eva grew, he included editorials, which he also enjoyed. He often read cartoons and humorous sayings to her. He himself had a shy, sly sense of humor that showed itself in conversation (he told the children, for example, that other cheese was fit only for mouse-traps, but Wisconsin cheese was for men).

Sometimes August told Eva and her brothers stories of his boyhood in Pomerania—of running barefoot to the brook near his cottage to wash his dirty feet, then leaping home from one flagstone to the next to keep his feet clean; of carrying water to the workers in the field at the age of six or seven; of a trip on foot with his mother to a nearby village to visit relatives; of carrying grist to a windmill to be ground. His single relic of those days was a photograph of the thatch-roofed stone cottage where he had lived with his mother's family. He told his

children stories of his early days in Wisconsin, when the family was so poor that they had only one kerosene lamp, a great luxury, which they used so sparingly that two quarts of oil lasted an entire winter. He had seen oranges in the stores, he told them, and had heard of their wonderful taste, so when he finally got a nickel, he went to buy one. Not yet speaking English, he could only point to what he wanted. So the storekeeper gave him the fruit he had chosen—a lemon.²² As Eva later said many times, through his reading and storytelling, August stimulated his little daughter's imagination and prompted her lifelong love of language.

Sundays were the only days the family had together in their early years in Cumberland. Because of the large and constant demand of the lumber industry for harness, August's business grew rapidly. By the late 1880s, he employed five harness makers in his shop. Business was so good that he could help his half-brother, Chris Engelke, purchase his own shop in North Branch, Minnesota. He also set up several branch shops near Cumberland, which required him to be gone most of every week. Often, he spent only Saturday nights and Sundays in Cumberland, using most his time there to oversee the home business.²³

Lucy was left alone to run the house, to care for the children, and to deal with the shop as best she could. She also earned extra money for the family with her skill as a seamstress, sewing not only for her own family but for others as well. According to those who knew her, she coped admirably in spite of a fragile constitution. One week away from her thirtieth birthday when she married, she must at times have wondered whether she would ever have a home and family of her own, especially if she compared herself with her older sister Mary, who married at nineteen. Lucy now had a growing family and gave herself to them as energetically as her husband was devoting himself to his business.

To help with the housework and the children, Lucy took in a series of young women in return for room and board. One of them, Lizzie Tyrrell, later remembered Mrs. Wolff as one of the best housekeepers and cooks she had ever met. "The house was spotlessly clean," Lizzie recalled, and Mrs. Wolff made "the most delicious bean soup in which buttered croutons floated." She remembered, too, little Freddie and Eva, who was still using a high chair. Lizzie presented the family with a photograph of herself with her hair arranged in long, beautiful curls. Eva later loved to look at it in the family album, and wore her own thick hair similarly curled when it was not plaited in long braids.

Lizzie left when a nephew of the Wolffs came from Germany to live with them and to learn the harness trade.²⁴ He was only one of

many relatives who came to Cumberland to stay with the Wolffs in their spare bedroom off the kitchen. Two of August's half-brothers, Chris and Fred Engelke, joined the Wolff household while they learned the harness trade, and his unmarried half-sister, Amelia, came in the early 1890s to help Lucy with the household. Later, Lucy's youngest sister, Eva, moved to Cumberland for several years.

The Christmas season of 1892 imposed itself with special force on Eva's young mind. Freddie had recently turned seven, Eva was five, and Vern, three. Their mother, almost thirty-nine, had just given birth prematurely to a fourth child, hastily baptized Leo, after the reigning pope, and she and the new baby lay close to death. A nurse brought the perfectly formed infant for the children to see. They next saw him, ready for burial, in his small, white coffin. On Christmas Day, Eva caught sight of the parish priest, the doctor, and her father gathered at her mother's bedside. In the dining room, the little girl sat sobbing, unnoticed until the family's washerwoman found her and asked her what was wrong. "My mama is so sick," she answered, "I'm afraid she is going to die."

At some point during the crisis, Eva saw the priest look at her and her brothers and heard him tell the doctor: "We can't let this little woman die."²⁵ The child's perception of priestly authority as extending even over life and death was confirmed by subsequent events. Even though she was bedridden until the spring, Lucy recovered, to live past her ninety-fourth birthday. Her childbearing years, however, were over.

Another powerful childhood memory was of the forest fires that raged out of control every autumn, owing in part to the tinder-like pine slashings left in the woods after logging. A village six miles north of Cumberland was wiped out by fire in September 1894, the same day that an even larger fire destroyed the town of Hinckley, Minnesota, where Lucy's brother Ed was living. Two years later, when fire devastated the area just south of Cumberland, Lucy organized relief efforts, collecting and distributing clothing and food to survivors, an activity in which her daughter, then nine, would have taken part. On September 29, 1898, fire swept into Cumberland itself, destroying more than thirty homes and businesses. It came within fifty yards of the Wolff property.

Eva's childhood in the northern Wisconsin woods gave her a complex awareness of nature. She feared its devastating fires and storms, but she felt at home in nature, too. She knew most of the vegetation and wildlife of the region by name, and understood what could be used as food and, if need be, medicine. She also knew how

to fish and to use a gun and liked to hunt with her father and brothers. At the same time, most likely through her father's love of literature, she developed the capacity to contemplate nature with a poet's eye and ear, to see the beauty in woods and wildflowers, and to listen for the music in the cries of orioles and deer.

In Cumberland, human nature, too, revealed itself to the young girl in all its complexity. How incongruous Eva's pious, orderly family must have seemed beside the boisterous woodsmen with whom they shared life in the small town. Living on Main Street, serving the public, the Wolffs came in daily contact with all segments of the community. Even if they retreated into their private world in the house behind the shop on rowdy Saturday nights, they could not effectively shield themselves or their children from routine drunkenness and violence. Eva grew up disliking town life; she longed to live on a farm as her mother had.²⁶

While the children were still small, the family began taking biennial trips south to visit grandmothers. (By then, Lucy's father, Peter Arntz, and August's step-father, Christian Engelke, were dead.) On the first of these trips, the family stopped overnight at a hotel in Madison. There August and Lucy had a good laugh at the independence of their little daughter, then about three. Taken to the dining room before the others by a maid, Eva promptly ordered her favorite foods, chicken and strawberries, for breakfast.

This same trip supplied the daughter, years later, with her own good laugh at the innocence of her parents. August and Lucy decided to drop in at the governor's office, where they proudly introduced themselves to the governor and received in return a guided tour of the capitol building from him while Vern, a baby at the time, took a nap on the couch in his office.

Eva's paternal grandmother still wove her own linen from flax that she had grown and spun into thread; she also turned into rugs the big balls of rag that the Wolff children helped their parents tear and sew into strips on winter evenings at home. Eva regarded the giant loom with fascination and spent hours watching her grandmother work. At the Arntz farm, their young uncles, who kept the farm going, gave the children rides on the big work horses.

On one of their last visits to her old home, Lucy took her daughter, about twelve then, to all the places she had loved at Eva's age. Together, they climbed to the highest bluff above the Lemonweir River, where they found a single pink moccasin flower growing from the rock. As mother and daughter returned home, they stopped wordlessly for one last look at the lovely late afternoon light; a

whippoorwill's call broke the silence. For Eva, that time was "the most complete" she ever shared with her mother.²⁷

As Eva came to realize, her mother's characteristic economy and efficiency extended beyond material things to her emotions and to her relationships. Lucy parsimoniously measured out praise and rarely spoke the tenderness she felt. As on that late summer afternoon walk with her daughter, others had to interpret Lucy's silence by attending to her actions. However, her harsher judgments could be swift and spoken in no uncertain terms. The children called their mother, not altogether fondly, "our little dictator," and in retrospect, Eva referred to her as "severe" and "exacting," recalling that her mother's response to her children's achievements was invariably something like "And what should I expect?" or "You should have done better."²⁸ Consequently, as she grew up, Eva pressed for perfection, convinced that she had never done well enough, no matter how others might praise her. But she also learned to accept criticism patiently, without holding a grudge.

Eva developed her mother's eye for detail, which made Lucy such a splendid housekeeper and hard taskmaster, and with it the critical acuity it generated. As Lucy said about herself, she expected value for money spent;²⁹ her daughter did likewise. Eva admired and sought to imitate her mother's "pluck," as she called it, and a certain superiority she identified as "gentility,"³⁰ in spite of the lack of anything remotely aristocratic in her mother's background. Possibly, the disparity in education and breeding between her mother and her father and their respective families as well as between her mother and most others in the backwoods community in which Eva grew up gave her the notion that her mother was somehow a class above those around her. No doubt, her mother's sense of her own superiority added to such an impression.

Even as a little girl, Eva began to manifest refined tastes. Given a choice of gifts from a maternal uncle's store, she chose Spode ware, impressed both by its beauty and by its reputation for quality. She received "six of everything, plates big enough for bread and butter service and cups for demitasse."³¹ The imaginary teas she served transported her to a world far beyond Cumberland, with its vulgar tastes and rough ways.

Eva also imitated her mother's religious devotion. On the eve of her first Communion, the child for the first time refused the glass of beer with which her German family, children included, customarily ended the day. When her father asked her the reason for such uncharacteristic asceticism and she stumbled for an answer, her mother urged,

"Let her alone, if she wants to do this." The next morning, Eva asked her mother to braid her long chestnut hair so that she might avoid any vanity on this day, which she regarded as the most important of her life so far.³²

From her father, Eva learned a different type of devotion. When his young daughter objected to feeding a vagrant who had come to the door, on the grounds that he ought to be working, August invited him into the house, sat him at the head of the table, and served him first.

Growing up, Eva Wolff absorbed her parents' complementary and sometimes contradictory qualities: her father's light touch and capacity for play along with his humble, childlike charm and sweet gentleness; and her mother's shrewd intelligence, steely determination, and profound reserve.

I GO TO SCHOOL

I seek a teacher and a rule . . .

—Sr. Madeleva, "I Go to School"

Eva was prepared for the sacrament of Holy Communion, which she received with tightly braided hair, by Father Stephen Leinfelder. He had studied in Rome before being sent to the Wisconsin missions, and his facility with languages particularly impressed the child, who grew up understanding German but unable to speak it fluently. Not only did he say the mass in Latin but he also read the Epistle and Gospel and made announcements to his parishioners in English, French, German, and Italian. His European education served him well as he ministered to his congregation of immigrant families.

Because Cumberland shared its priest with numerous other villages, formal religious instruction was infrequent and, at best, minimal. Catechism classes for the children were held only occasionally.¹ Nevertheless, Father Leinfelder made a special effort with the first communicants. Making use of the only space available to him, he sat the children on the kneelers in the church and had them use the pews as desks. As he dictated, the children, most of them no older than seven, copied down the essentials of Eucharistic theology, which he told them to transcribe in ink at home and then memorize. As did each of the others, Eva dutifully recited what she had learned before the next dictation. This, and the instruction that preceded her confirmation at age eleven, was the only religious training she received as a child except for what her mother could provide, aided by textbooks ordered from Chicago.

Hungry for more, Eva tried to read copies of the *Homiletic Review*, which the priest had stored in the Wolffs' attic, but she could make nothing of them. Disgusted with herself, the eight-year-old child wondered whether she would ever be able to read anything without illustrations and dialogue.²

On the whole, Eva found her secular education more satisfying, even though it began badly. At six, when she started first grade at the only school in Cumberland, a small public school a block from home, she was more than ready to begin. According to her mother, Eva, like her brothers, had been “book and pencil crazy” from her earliest years.³ However, she later remembered that first day of school in September 1893 as both frustrating and humiliating, if not without humor.

As she told the story later, the day began well enough, with a worried mother entrusting her frightened son to the care of the self-assured, although younger and smaller, Eva. She was no sooner assigned her seat in the classroom—second row, third seat from the back—than she tackled what was clearly the first assignment, printed on the board and ready for copying, without waiting for instructions. She could already read and understand it: “The cat is black.” She took up her chalk in her left hand, which she naturally favored, and carefully, neatly, copied the sentence on her slate, starting from the right, with the “k,” and moving to the left. But instead of the praise she anticipated, her teacher, Miss Williams, reversed the child’s expectations: “Yes, but now, dear, suppose we take the pencil in the other hand and begin at the other side of the slate and the other end of the sentence.”⁴

To the little girl, the experience must have been something akin to Alice’s passage through the looking glass. It dawned on her that “[t]he cat is still black, but I must say so with my right hand, traveling horizontally from left to right.” Even in old age, the woman who had been Eva Wolff found her mind returning on sleepless nights to this first experience of learning. Her sense of the world had been subtly but essentially altered. The world itself might remain the same, but Eva’s relationship to it had changed. The obvious, the natural, and the spontaneous were subtly undermined. Perspective became relative. An authority outside the self must be appeased if not internalized.

From the time she started to use a spoon, Eva’s preference for her left hand had been obvious. The “feud,” as she put it, between left and right was one she first associated with the dinner table. Her mother insisted she eat with her right hand. School settled the matter; she learned to write with her right hand, although from then on she became ambidextrous—in her words, “equally awkward with both hands.”⁵ She could sew with either hand, but could use a scissors only with her left. In any emergency, she reverted to the use of her left hand.

The child adjusted to a turned-around world. School became a source of stimulation, adventure, and delight for her. Years later, she