



Youthful Years in Utica (1862–1879)

None of the other boys noticed the small set of paints that Arthur had packed with his gear as they embarked on a camping trip by horse and wagon. They were all too preoccupied, ecstatic at the thought of being allowed to go off for a week of camping and fishing on their own.

One day, toward evening, a large pair of pickerel was caught and hung from the branch of a tree like a big game trophy. While the youngsters celebrated their good fortune, Arthur dove into a tent and reappeared with palette, palette knife, and tubes of oils. His buddies were surprised at the sight of the art supplies but overjoyed at the prospect of a painting being done of their catch. At least they inquired if that was the intent. “No,” replied Arthur B. Davies, “I only want to see if I can mix colors like those in that sunset.”¹ Only then were their eyes drawn to the exceptional beauty of the radiant sky, and from that day on their chum’s nickname, “Art,” took on an added meaning.



Arthur Bowen Davies was born on September 26, 1862, in Utica, New York, the fourth of five children of David Thomas Davies and Phoebe Loakes Davies. His paternal grandparents were Welsh and grew up on adjoining farms; Arthur’s father hailed from Tynewydd, Carmarthenshire, Wales, his mother from Bluntisham, Huntingdonshire,

England. Soon after their marriage in London on March 29, 1856, David Thomas Davies and his bride emigrated to the United States, where their offspring were born between 1857 and 1866, and named Eliza (Lizzie), Thomas, David, Arthur, and Emma.²

At the time of Arthur's birth the family lived at 14 Hotel Street near the Erie Canal, and when he was five they resided at 43 Court Street. By then his penchant for art was already apparent to family members. According to Lizzie: "At the age of five he used his little [watercolor] paints to color pictures—would sit on the floor and copy from the big dictionary."³

By the time he was six, Arthur was attracted to the woodcut illustrations in a second-grade reader an older friend was about to discard, and asked that the reader be given to him. A few days later the donor visited Arthur "and there I found the Second Reader with the woodcuts showing what, to my mind, was the most marvelous combination of brilliant colors possible to look upon."⁴ The child artist had painted each of the black-and-white illustrations.

Soon Arthur's artistic bent was demonstrated beyond the confines of his home. Below the Davies' abode there stood a high board fence which he began to embellish by sketching pictures upon it with a lump of coal. Neighborhood children would line up on the curb to watch and applaud his efforts. At one point "they dug into their pockets and produced a few stray pennies, with which they purchased a collection of some colored chinks for him so the entertainment could proceed at a higher level."⁵

Arthur's youthful artistry was not limited to two-dimensional surfaces. At age twelve he produced his first triumph with a pocket-knife in the form of a miniature sailboat, which he then fully rigged. It caught the eye of a local merchant who placed it in his window display and sold it for \$25. A childhood friend named Bob Adams once recalled how Arthur built a waterwheel, a fortress, and a working fountain composed of a rain barrel with connecting shafts from the seed stalks of onions.⁶

It appears that Arthur readily accepted any challenge of an artistic or mechanical nature. When his brother David, two years his senior, expressed an interest in constructing a small rowboat for trips along the Mohawk River, it was Arthur who volunteered to build it. And build it he did. The youngster regularly tagged along with his brothers, playing a role in their mischief. Once the trio went to the

circus where they were awed by the acrobatics of a performing gymnast. Determined to duplicate his feat, they returned home and anchored one end of a makeshift horizontal bar by drilling a hole through an antique mahogany bureau.

Arthur's initial effort at oil painting occurred at the age of ten on a tiny 6-by-6-inch piece of canvas tacked to a homemade stretcher. The subject is an elderly woman dressed in black and wearing a bright red shawl. She is seated in a high-back chair drinking tea; a black cat perched on her shoulder is poised to sip from the saucer the woman holds in her hand. Adjacent to them is a still-life arrangement of a teacup, a pewter teapot, and a loaf of bread, the latter so



Figure 2. *Woman with Cat*, 1872. Oil on canvas, 7 x 7½ inches. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Niles Meriwether Davies, Jr. Photographer: Geoffrey Michael Lemmer.

close in hue to the burnt sienna background that it appears to dissolve into the color surrounding it. The composition was inspired by a black-and-white magazine illustration or a chromolithograph. However, it reveals a degree of technical proficiency unusual for a child of that age.

Davies' skill at paint handling and copying was demonstrated again during the winter of 1873–74. He produced a replica of Winslow Homer's composition *Dad's Coming!* after it appeared as a wood engraving in the November 1, 1873, issue of *Harper's Weekly*. The twelve year old transformed the linear reproduction into the tonal medium of watercolor, carefully duplicating the proportions of two children on the seashore among beached dories, and their mother, who looks seaward for the first indication of the father's return.

Arthur had access to the finest art and literary magazines of the day, and he would sit in the parlor for long periods of time studying the subject matter and techniques of some of the country's finest illustrators. The youngster's parents encouraged his art activities, proudly covering the walls of their home with his pictures. Promotion of art and music among the children was largely credited to their mother, whom Arthur described as having "a keen sense of the beautiful." Though she was lame, this handicap did not prevent her from being "efficient and practical in the home management," as he put it, and "broadminded in her outlook."⁷

Arthur's father was a practical and successful businessman, a clothier by profession and a lay preacher on Sundays. He had learned the tailor's trade before leaving Wales, and in Utica was co-owner of a wholesale and retail men's clothing firm. David Davies' religious calling stemmed from the fact that *his* father had been a Methodist minister in Wales. Arthur's dad was licensed to preach in Wales, and in Utica joined the Welsh Methodist Episcopal Church where he enjoyed delivering as many as three sermons on a given Sunday.

Arthur once described his father as "a man of high ideals, of an intensely religious nature, generous, hospitable, a leader in the temperance movement, devoted to his family, highly conscientious and of indomitable energy."⁸ Because of his deep religious convictions, the entire household was reared to fear God. "Father was *such* a religious man," Arthur once recalled, then added, "but mother swore like a trooper."⁹

In order to advance Arthur's propensity for art, his parents decided upon private drawing lessons, choosing as his instructor the son of a fellow Methodist minister, Dwight Williams. Williams was just six years older than Arthur, which makes implausible the oft-repeated claim that Arthur was seven when he began studying with Williams. In actuality the individual instruction commenced in 1876, when Davies was fourteen and just a year after Williams had established himself as an artist and began teaching at a local school of design.

The mentor recalled his initial impression upon viewing Arthur's work:

My first introduction to him was, from my point of view, largely casual . . . [As I frequently called upon Arthur's] father in the early days at his office on Genesee Street in Utica, New York, he one day spoke to me of his son, who, he said, seemed to have a strong inclination for drawing and invited me to accompany him home to luncheon and give my opinion concerning his son's efforts. . . . Upon entering the home the lad's sketches and drawings were everywhere in evidence, some tucked in picture frames and others pinned to the walls. Instantly I discerned that his work had merit and that he had a fine and delicate sense of the value of line and form.¹⁰

Dwight Williams maintained his studio in the village of Cazenovia, some thirty miles from Utica. Although he sometimes taught Arthur at the Davies home, on other occasions the youngster rode by horse and buggy to his teacher's studio, a small lean-to built against the side of a barn. Williams' instruction included practice in drawing two- and three-dimensional objects, pencil shading, and combining or contrasting straight and curved lines. "These first principles were stimulating to the boy," Williams remembered:

In explaining problems in drawing his intuition often ran ahead of the teacher and it was rarely necessary to explain anything twice, for his active mind anticipated my suggestions. . . . there was abundant evidence of marked talent which needed only opportunity, and work would do the rest.¹¹

Student and instructor regularly sketched together among the fields and hills north of Utica, and along the banks of Cazenovia Lake. They would usually amble partway to such locations, even though this represented a physical hardship for Williams, who was unable to walk without the aid of two canes. The result of their numerous field trips was the teacher's realization that

here was a young genius of a high order. He had a wonderful appreciation of nature and all its beauties and very great capacity for selecting, combining and eliminating. . . . Naturally it was an inspiration to his teacher to have for a pupil one so quick to see and to acquire.¹²

Thanks to Dwight Williams, Arthur learned to use pastels, his mentor's preferred medium, to record the sylvan scenes of the Mohawk Valley.

Following nearly two years' tutelage, the youngster amassed a collection of pencil drawings, pen-and-inks, watercolors, and pastels—many accomplished on his own. There is a carefully rendered horse's head complete with bridle and reins dangling rhythmically around an unkempt mane, dated July 15, 1878. Many of the sketches are quite small, with the largest measuring only 2½ by 8 inches. The subjects are varied, from an incredibly beautiful head of a cat to rosebuds, a carnation, and sailboats. The teenager now considered his role as an artist with sufficient seriousness to take a page from *Harper's Weekly* and practice various ways of signing his initials "ABD" around the margins, incorporating ascending and descending curlicues with block letters to create artistic monograms.

In 1878 Davies witnessed a major art event, one which would have a lasting effect upon him. That year the Utica Art Association sponsored an exhibit of nearly 250 works by contemporary artists whose canvases were brought there from New York City. The display was held at Carton Hall on Genesee Street, just a block from his father's place of business, and the show served to fire Arthur's imagination. There were the glories of the Hudson River School painters, spelled out in such compositions as Jasper Cropsey's *On the Hudson* and Sanford R. Gifford's *Autumn Woods*, and the near-exotic scenery of L. M. Wiles' *A Foothill of the Sierra Nevadas*, Albert

Bierstadt's *On the Pacific Coast*, and Frederic E. Church's *Scene in the Andes*. And Davies was surely impressed by four works in the exhibition by his own teacher, all of Cazenovia Lake or its environs in sun or snow. Yet it was two oils by George Inness simply titled *Landscape*, with their special qualities of warm earth tones, blurred edges, and a seemingly mysterious light, which would have the most lasting effect upon the youngster as evidenced in his later work.

Inness' influence upon the impressionable youth was double-barreled, for during the run of the show an article concerning the artist's theories on painting appeared in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, a publication which was received at the Davies household. There Inness wrote that a work of art is

simply to reproduce in other minds the impression which a scene has made upon [the artist]. . . . Its aim is not to instruct, not to edify, but to awaken an emotion. The highest art is where has been perfectly breathed the sentiment of humanity. Rivers, streams, the rippling brook, the hill-side, the sky, clouds—all things that we see—can convey that sentiment if we are in love of God and the desire of truth.¹³

Inness' spirituality had been strengthened when it came under the influence of the preacher Henry Ward Beecher. Initially Arthur was likewise strengthened by his father's influence. Yet Reverend Davies' strong, fundamentalist beliefs were something his son would eventually turn against and abandon.

Inness had further been moved by the philosophy of Emanuel Swedenborg, who was to influence Davies as well. The eighteenth-century Swedish mystic believed that God communicated through nature, resulting in a spiritual significance within everything on earth. If nature served as an extension of God's spiritual realm, it logically followed that the artist should strive to produce paintings emphasizing this unity, the harmony of the universe that signified God's presence. The dark, old master appearance of Inness' oils, with their indefinite silhouettes of hills and trees, seemed to capture this ideal. It appealed likewise to Davies.

During the winter of 1878-79, sixteen-year-old Arthur B. Davies was beginning to think about selecting a college in further pursuit

of his art career. However, early in the new year his father suffered business reverses so plans for Arthur's further education had to be abandoned. His two older brothers were sent to Chicago to contact friends and obtain employment prior to a possible move there by the entire family. Their sister Lizzie wrote them on February 6, 1879, asking "the result of your conference over pa's letter" about whether to go ahead with the move:

... pa has come to the opinion that we ought to go [to] C[Chicago] anyway. And really boys it does seem the best... Never mind if we cannot have as nice a house or live as well as you would like, still we will all be together... if we do not go this spring, I do not think we will ever come. For pa is very anxious to go in business for himself if we stay here [in Utica] and that will involve new perplexities for both him and us.¹⁴

Why Chicago? Job opportunities seemed more promising there as the city recovered from the Great Fire of a few years before, when one-third of it had been destroyed. There was a great rebuilding effort and Arthur's father imagined this as an appropriate site for his own fresh start as well.

On March 25, 1879, eighteen Utica businessmen signed a letter recommending David Thomas Davies "to the favorable reception and confidence of all those who may form his acquaintance in his new & future home" of Chicago. The testimonial indicates that he, "of the late firm of Davies & Jones," had been a manufacturer and dealer in men's clothes in Utica for fifteen years, "the reverses of Business & fortune having recently overtaken him."¹⁵ For Arthur, the move would mean an opportunity to further his art studies and to experience his first real love affair.