

The Foster Family Part 3 – From Amherstburg to Ohio

Thanks to documents at the Amherstburg Freedom Museum and the Merle McCurdy Collection at Kent State University, there is a wealth of information on George H. Foster's daughter Evelyn and her family. Evelyn Gertrude Foster, the daughter of George H. Foster and Sarah J. Smith Foster, married LeRoy Nelson McCurdy on July 20, 1907 (NOTE: Evelyn later married Clarence Cowan). The Foster-McCurdy wedding was a merging of two very historic families, as Evelyn was the granddaughter of Amherstburg entrepreneur, Levi Foster, while LeRoy McCurdy was the son of Mary Almede Thomas (daughter of George Thomas and Mariah Buckner) and George Douglass McCurdy (the son of Nasa McCurdy and Permelia Bailey). LeRoy or Roy was also the great grandson of Nasa McCurdy Sr. who was manumitted from enslavement by Rachel Kennedy in Greene County, Pennsylvania in the 1790s. Nasa's son Nasa McCurdy Jr. (Roy's grandfather) acquired land near Zanesville, Ohio in the 1840s and was known as a conductor on the Underground Railroad, making several trips to Amherstburg which is where he eventually made his home. It was in Amherstburg that Nasa assisted in the establishment of the Nazrey A.M.E. Church that is on the Amherstburg Freedom Museum grounds. This Church was a terminus in the Underground Railroad and provided a safe location for incoming freedom seekers. His connection to the Underground Railroad did not end there as Nasa McCurdy Jr. would also name his son, George Douglass (Roy's father), after family friend and abolitionist Frederick Douglass.

Roy worked on a Great Lakes ore freighter as a cook, and it was this job that caused Evelyn and Roy to move from Amherstburg to Conneaut, Ohio (a port city) in roughly 1909. Evelyn and Roy had three children: a girl who tragically was still born in 1909, Foster (1910-1978) and Merle (1912-1968). Foster and Merle attended Dean Avenue School in Conneaut,

Ohio with Merle graduating from Conneaut High School in 1931. Merle was active in high school, participating in Glee Club, the football team, Senior Boys Club and track.

Foster went on to serve in the Army during WWII, but also became politically active, pushing for labour rights and protesting racism. In 1949, he picketed outside of Judge James C. Connell's house during a labour dispute and also tried to bring Paul Robeson to Cleveland to perform and give a talk. Robeson was a strong supporter of integrating the armed forces and ending lynching in the South, in addition to a critic of President Truman who did not push for either action.

Evelyn and Roy's second son Merle McCurdy's dream was to be a police officer, but he was stricken with tuberculosis and had to spend a significant amount of time recovering at a sanitarium. Sadly, this ended his dream of working in law enforcement, but Merle worked in several occupations. Following in his father's footsteps, Merle briefly worked as a cook on the ore boats that served the dock-to-rail steel production centres of U.S. Steel. In the early 1940s he worked in real estate and operated an electric streetcar.

Merle also graduated from Western Reserve's College of Law and was admitted to the Ohio Bar on July 31, 1947. Following graduation, Merle worked briefly for Myron Huff, a friend he met while recovering from tuberculosis, but also worked for five years as a partner for Norman Shelby Minor, a well-known criminal defense lawyer in Cleveland. In 1952, Merle was appointed as an Assistant Cuyahoga County Prosecutor and was the first African American to work at the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland. Impressively, he was also the first African American appointed by John F. Kennedy to serve as United States Attorney for the Northern District of Ohio and on October 6, 1961, he was sworn in, making him the second African

American in the entire country to hold this position. While working as the U.S. Attorney, Merle also addressed the audience of a NAACP convention held in Atlanta, Georgia, which was attended by high-profile figures such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Ralph D. Abernathy. His speech discussed the significant accomplishments of African Americans and the importance of the ballot and not backing down.

In 1967, Merle McCurdy was appointed by President Lyndon B. Johnson to serve as General Counsel to National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (the Kerner Commission), which investigated racial violence and its causes during the 1960s, in addition to being appointed as the United States' first Consumer Council. Sadly, Merle passed away unexpectedly on May 6, 1968, before he could take on this role.

It was at the Hollenden Hotel that Merle met and fell in love with his wife Rosetta 'Rosie' Scott, who was operating the hotel's elevator. According to the Merle McCurdy Collection at Kent State University, it took some time for him to talk to Rosie because each time he would approach the elevator, Rosie would always disappear from sight while operating the elevator. His persistence paid off and the couple was married in 1937. The couple also had two daughters, Myrna and Brenda. In January 1964, Merle and Rosie celebrated their 27th wedding anniversary and Merle gave his wife an incredibly thoughtful gift: the elevator control from the Hollenden Hotel, where they first met and fell in love. The hotel was scheduled for demolition, but Merle was able to save the elevator control from destruction.

What we publish is not a complete history of any family and is based on the documents that are available. We welcome photos and information to fill in the gaps. See you next week for part 4.