FORT ERIE DAYS.

Fort Erie in 1914 was really only a village of some 1500 people and lay just across the Niagara River from Buffalo and was closely connected with the city by a ferry which ran every half hour from the foot of Ferry street. Although still only a village it was one of the first towns in Canada and it was one of the first consular posts, if not the first, we had established in that country. As time went on and activity became more thickly settled and new parts of the country were opened, new posts were established in the vicinity and in other parts of Canada. Fort Erie lost its importance as a consular post and in practically every other way. It must have been either because Washington forgot the consul there or because this post was kept up as a convenient one to which to send officers who had sufficient political influence to keep them near the American border. The office was kept up for years when there was evidently nothing to do. The village itself was unattractive although at some distance from it a considerable number of prominent Buffalo people had summer residences at Erie Beach and Crystal Beach. We were told before our arrival that there was no hotel in the village where we were to live and we therefore proceeded directly from Toronto to Buffalo where we stayed at the Hotel Marqueen, until we could find a house in Fort Erie.

My wife accompanied me on my first trip to Fort Erie and instead of taking the trip by the ferry from the foot of Ferry street, we
took the one which runs in summer to Erie Beach. From there we had to take a little railway that runs up to Fort Erie. We bumped for several miles over uneven tracks in a dirty little car pulled by a puffy little engine which seemed ready to draw its last breath at every instant, and after passing through the back-yards of the main street of Fort Erie, finally arrived at the ferry landing at Fort Erie. The last half mile of the trip was through a series of back-yards filled with empty packing cases and dirty straw, and a more desolate, dirty and discouraging scene could hardly have presented itself to a new consul arriving at his post. I dared not look at my wife and when I finally peered at her from the corner of my eyes I saw that she was in tears and I felt very much like weeping myself. When we got out of the little train and explored the town the prospect was hardly more encouraging. The consulate itself was the only encouraging feature. It was a little one and a half story building on the river front and was in some respects the best building in town. It had a little colonial porch in front and was not unattractive at all. The lower floor was all that composed the consular quarters and consisted of a fairly small room with a closet like room in the rear. I almost forgot to mention a closet under the stairway leading to the half-floor above to which I shall have to make reference.

My predecessor was a charming old man, Mr. Harvey who had been a grain merchant in Buffalo for many years and one of its richest and best known citizens. He was a plunger on the wheat
market and had made and lost several fortunes, and it was after one of these plunges in his later life that he had not the necessary courage to continue, and his friends gave him the comfortable berth as consul at Fort Erie. Here he bought a farm on the outskirts of the town and lived quietly with his daughter. They received us in a very kindly way indeed and felt no ill will towards me in spite of the fact that his resignation had been requested as the result of an inspection tour which had been made by Consul General Fuller. Just prior to my admission to the Service, Consul General Fuller had made an inspection tour through Canada and as a result of this trip six consuls were requested to resign. A new spirit was in the air in the consular service and Washington was demanding that consular officers follow their regulations a bit more closely and do at least a certain amount of work.

The first thing we had to do was to get settled and as the consular regulations required the officer to leave within the borders of his district we could not consider the plan which we had secretly cherished, to continue to live in Buffalo. We were finally able to find quite a comfortable small house not far from the ferry. It did not seem to be quite the sort of place that we had looked forward to living in nor quite the sort of place that we thought a consular officer should live in, but as it was as good as anything in the town, we knew that it would have to do. We sent for our furniture and in the meantime continued to live at the Marqueen. On my return to the
Marqueen to our apartment one day after a rather discouraging day in Fort Erie, I found in the sitting room of the apartment exactly sixteen pairs of women's shoes ranged on the mantelpiece of our sitting room. I wondered what in the world could have happened and it occurred to me that there was only one explanation and that was that my wife had been out on a shopping tour. Realizing that the apartment was costing us per day more than my salary I began to wonder what would happen to us if it was necessary to purchase shoes at the rate of sixteen pairs at a time. I felt more than ever after the discouraging day at Fort Erie that I had made a serious mistake in my profession and that I had probably better try my predecessor's business of plunging in the wheat pit at Buffalo. All was explained on the arrival of my wife who laughed at the utter dismay that could easily be read in my face. She had been lucky enough to find a sale at Hanna's where she always bought her shoes and the sixteen pairs were the very end of a cleaning out sale and had cost her little more than she usually paid for a single pair of shoes. I gained a new respect for my wife's business ability which was only deepened by the years, and I can say frankly that had it not been for her business instincts and for her ability to manage the family finances I would not have been able to continue in the consular service.

We sent for our furniture and started to get settled in our little box of a home. As soon as the furniture arrived and was moved in we decided in our enthusiasm to spend the very
first night there and to obey the regulations to the effect that we should get settled in our new district as soon as possible. When night had fallen we realized that we had made somewhat of a mistake. The gas fixtures had not been properly placed and the kitchen stove had not been connected as we thought was the case. For those of my young colleagues who complain about the discomforts of the Service and its inconveniences I want to say that our supper that night consisted of a can of baked beans which I was able to heat partially over the gas flame of the hot water heater in the cellar and that we ate this sumptuous repast from the can in the midst of our unpacked furniture and then turned in as there was no way of having a light.

When Mr. Harvey had turned over the office to us and I was really a full fledged consul in charge of a post, I immediately began a thorough housecleaning, something which has been a practice with me not by desire but by necessity, ever since I have been in the Service. For at least three days a visitor to the office would not have been able to distinguish the consul from the Canadian workmen who were supposed to help to do the cleaning. We were able to clean out and to make presentable the whole place with the exception of a mysterious closet under the stairway. We re-arranged the furniture and succeeded in a moderate way to make the place look comfortable and businesslike and even cozy. When outward appearances were sufficiently satisfactory to make it possible for me to begin work I began to delve in the mysterious closet, which by way of explanation
I should say was immediately back of the chair where my predecessor had evidently passed his time. It was so located that by turning from his desk on this swivel chair he could open the door of the closet. On examining its contents I found that there was an accumulation there of letters at least four or five feet deep, some of which appeared to have been opened and some of which had not. There were literally thousands of them. I began to open these letters and found that as a rule they were requests from American firms for information concerning commercial conditions in the district. Others related to the thousand and one things concerning which people at home usually write to a consul. All of them were letters which should have been answered. As I delved further and further into the pile I found these letters dating back further and further, and my wonder grew and grew. I finally asked the clerk for information, and she naively informed me that at the bottom of the pile the letters would be found to date back probably as much as eleven years, as the closet had not been emptied since my predecessor took charge. I was deeply intrigued by this closet and after a good deal of questioning the clerk finally ventured the information that it was really unique in its use. I found that my predecessor had a most satisfactory manner of handling the mail. When it was placed on his desk he would carefully sort it over and those envelopes which he recognized as coming from the Department of State at Washington or from persons sending in invoices for certification he carefully set aside to be opened and receive attention. All
other letters he separated and opening
the door behind him with a graceful wave
of his hand he consigned them to this con-
venient closet waste basket. In the many
years which have followed I have often wished
that I could follow Mr. Harvey's example but
unfortunately our Service is now so closely
supervised that I am afraid not many months
would pass before an inspector would put an
untimely end to my career.

I was somewhat perplexed as to how to
handle this accumulation of eleven years of
unanswered mail. Practical instinct told me
that the thing to do was to burn the whole lot,
forget about it and say nothing, that it was
evident that no useful purpose could be served
by going into this accumulation. I had however
already been long enough in the Service to know
that the ways of the Department are strange
and devious. So I explained the situation
briefly and received an instruction to the ef-
fect that I should carefully open, index,
enter into the correspondence book, and then
bind all these letters. Certainly it was a
useless task so far as the government was
concerned but it did teach me thoroughly the
system used in the Service of indexing,
entering, classifying and filing correspond-
ence, and of keeping the miscellaneous record
book.

It did not take long to learn that there
was really very little to do at the post. The
district was very small and there was a consul-
ate at Niagara Falls not more than twenty miles
away. There were no exports from the district
to speak of, so invoices were few. American
business men had long since learned that the district was small and easily covered from home so commercial inquiries were few. The multiple duties which a consular officer has as a rule to perform did not come up at Fort Erie. But all this proved to be an excellent thing for me. I had literally nothing to do and I therefore set myself to the study of the consular regulations and to read thoroughly and widely on the career in which I had decided to cast my lot. Some days for a whole morning I would find myself undisturbed. This opportunity to study the regulations was in many ways a wonderful thing for me, and when in later days some of my colleagues used to remark about my apparently thorough knowledge of the regulations it was easily explained by the fact that I had had so much leisure to study them. In fact I must confess that I had so much leisure and read so widely that neophyte as I was it was easily to be seen that the regulations were sorely in need of revision, and in order to occupy my time I had the presumption after less than a year's work in the Service and no practical experience to speak of to attempt a revision of entire chapters. These never went further than my own private desk, but I shall never cease to be grateful for the leisure hours which at Fort Erie gave me the opportunity to get a thorough grounding in the fundamentals of consular practice, even though it may be on a theoretical rather than on a practical basis.

The war was on and we were just across the border from Buffalo. Scores of adventurous youths from Buffalo and from all parts of the country found their way through that city and
crossed the ferry to Canada where attracted by the glamour of army life they joined the Canadian forces. Most of these boys had run away from home and some of them were under fifteen years of age. When they were patently very young the Canadian officers refused to enlist them, but hundreds of them were taken into the army and no doubt many of them are resting today in European soil, principally in the vicinity of Ypres. I began to be deluged with letters from anxious parents whose children had left home and in many cases we were able to find the boys in the Canadian army. In the beginning a simple request of mine to the Canadian military authorities accompanied by proof of the young man's citizenship and of the desire of the parents to have him return was sufficient to bring about his release, but later when war began to levy its deadly toll, when volunteers were no longer so numerous and when men had to be looked for it became increasingly difficult to secure the release of these young runaways. In every single case however which I had to handle the Canadian authorities finally released the young men, although in some instances the boys themselves were most unwilling to leave the colors. In more than one case the boys were delivered by the military authorities under guard at the consulate and were delivered under guard on the ferry boat in mid-stream to the police officials in Buffalo. Some of these experiences were quite heart-rending and were my first intimate touch with what war really meant, a touch which was to become far more painful and closer as the days went on.

Our social life at Fort Erie was quite
pleasant in spite of the smallness of the
town. Although Buffalo was just across
the river and we did not fail to use these
opportunities to go to the theatre, which
we both loved, we felt that it was our
business to make our friends in the community.
Instead therefore of looking for our friends
in Buffalo where it would have been easy to
find congenial friends and associates of the
type we had been accustomed to know and move
among, we deliberately put all this aside and
during the year and a half that we were at
Fort Erie our social life was confined almost
entirely to the people of that town and of
its neighbor Bridgeburg. Our visits to Buffalo
were confined to the trips to the theatre and
to an occasional visit to our broker, for
even in those days we had already begun to
realize that our meager salary in the Service
would not suffice to meet our living expenses
and that we would have to increase whatever
personal resources we might have.

Fort Erie is one of those old towns that
has never grown and in spite of its unattractive
exterior there were some very charming people
living there. From the very beginning they
received us into their homes, inviting us to
dinner and to tea and to their bridge parties.
The Fort Erie winter was rather long and dis­


tinctly cold, and to go out in winter to these
parties was sometimes a real expedition, wading
either through a sea of mud or through deeply
drifted snows. When it thawed, the road
leading from our house to the river front and
up the river road where our friends lived was
a sea of mud. We had no car and no taxis were
to be had in those days. If real winter weather
prevailed we made our way usually through a thick snowstorm in hip-boots and with an extra pair of shoes and stockings in our pocket. But the cold bracing air was delightful and the starlit skies magnificent and the swift flowing Niagara was always before us. It was nevertheless a pleasure to get into a warm house, remove unwieldy wraps, and to look into the kindly faces of our hosts. The social life was very simple but very wholesome and genuine. Sometimes some of our Canadian friends laboring under the stress of the war and just in receipt of bad news concerning the loss of relatives or friends, would make rather unkind and what seemed to us ungenerous remarks concerning the abstention of the United States from the war. At first I tried to explain our attitude, but I soon found that our Canadian friends did not require explanation but friendly and sympathetic treatment. Their ungenerous remarks were as a rule only the hasty expression of that peculiar temperament aroused in the mind of a nation at war and I am glad to say that we have conserved after all these years very friendly touch with some of the simple and kindly people who were so good to us in their homes during the Fort Erie days.

In return for these courtesies we received them in our own home for dinner, at tea, and for evening parties, always keeping our entertainment as simple and within our means. We made no effort to make a display but we did endeavor to make our life fit into that of the people among whom we were living and whose lot we were to share during our stay at the post and to give a dinner in Fort Erie was not a very simple matter. We had only one servant, a
half-witted colored girl which was the best we could get and this did not make things any easier.

The first dinner which we gave was in honor of my predecessor, Mr. Harvey, and his daughter and took place shortly after we had become partially settled in our new home. We had been married just before I entered the Service and our good friends had given us more silver of all kinds than we could use at a post such as Fort Erie. Nevertheless for our first dinner we felt that we must do proper honor to Mr. Harvey and so we used a good number of our treasures for the first time. After our guests had departed we found that the girl had washed most of the dishes but that she had disappeared leaving our treasured silver piled high and unwashed. I think that I shall never forget my first experience in washing silver which had never been washed or cleaned before, and I wonder how many of my colleagues in the Service have had to do it. Suffice it to say that it was not an easy task and it was 3:30 in the morning before we got through with it. More than once during those hours I wished that our friends had not been so good to us or had given us porcelain instead of silver.

Neither my wife nor I had had any experience whatever in cooking and as during most of the time that we were at Fort Erie we were without a servant we were compelled to learn or starve. I specialized on meats and fish, and in a comparatively short time could broil a Lake Erie white fish to a turn, broil a mackerel, or prepare a salmon or sturgeon, and I even learned
to turn out respectable fried Maryland chicken. My wife specialized on the vegetables and started to turn out wonderful Spanish omelettes and other appetizing dishes. What we learned at Fort Erie turned out to be a wonderful help in later years, and my kitchen training I think was as useful as the training which I got in the consulate, for one of the things that every consul should know is to learn how to entertain on limited means.

I shall never forget the first afternoon that I came home to find my wife in tears over a towel, the first one that she had endeavored to iron. She had been working on this towel for over half an hour without success. When I think of these experiences in our first home I realize that in some respects they may not have been very different from those of any other young married couple but I do believe that they were very different from those of a good many of my colleagues at their first post. If at the office I learned something about the consular regulations and a little about theoretical consular practice, in our home we learned how to give a dinner, how to entertain our friends at it, or how to give an evening party, and to give good food to our guests and yet to do it in a moderate way at a moderate cost and within our means. As time has gone on and I have heard so many of my colleagues complain concerning the cost of entertaining, I have found that I could have but little sympathy with those who state that they could not do this or that because of the cost — and that their salary did not permit them to do what was obviously their duty in the way of social
relationships.

On one occasion my wife and I felt that we should do something in the way of a dinner for the Canadian army officers stationed at Fort Erie and vicinity with whom I had so much to do in the way of securing the release of young men who had run away from home. These officers had been unfailingly kind and courteous and considerate in handling my requests. We invited twelve of them, two generals and the rest of them colonels and majors, at our home for dinner. Both of us spent ourselves in getting ready and in preparing the food as we could get no one to help our inefficient maid. It was a stag dinner and my wife remained in the kitchen all through it and I can still see the enormous quantities of food which disappeared that evening. We knew that we were undertaking a big order when we were endeavoring to feed twelve officers whose meals were ordinarily taken in an army mess but their appetite exceeded even our most sanguine expectations. Fortunately the food held out and as to the liquor, there was no question as ample provision had been made. The little dinner was worth all the trouble that we went to for the men thoroughly enjoyed it and if before they had been courteous and considerate and helpful just because they were gentlemen, they afterwards anticipated my wishes because they were human beings and had pleasant recollections of a well filled stomach and fairly well defined hopes of another invitation.

My conscience began to hurt me when I realized I had so little to do and that there
was little prospect of anything more turning up so I wrote a despatch to the Department suggesting discreetly that it might be advisable to close the office as it was no longer needed. I knew that I might be lifting myself out of a nice comfortable post for we had learned to like our environment, but my conscience did not let me keep silent. My despatch evidently had no effect as I got no reply of any kind, but when later I went to Washington on leave for the first time and personally exposed my reasons as to why the office should be closed as a measure of economy and efficiency and also leave an officer available for assignment to some other place where he might be needed, I found that the problem had received some attention. I was told that the Department was familiar with the situation and had been for years but that it was feared that the closing of the office might interfere with the comfort and convenience of a few powerful residents at Buffalo who made Erie Beach their summer home, and that they might raise a political disturbance over the closing of the office. I was in a position to assure the Department that not one in Buffalo was sufficiently interested in the matter to raise any fuss over it and that the most which would happen would be a paragraph in the Buffalo papers about the inconvenience to Buffalo merchants and that then the matter would be forgotten. The Department was inclined to accept this point of view and informed me that they would close the office when the opportunity occurred and actually thanked me for my initiative in the matter.
The only opportunity which I had during my entire stay at Fort Erie of a year and a half to in any way distinguish myself or bring myself to the Department's attention was through the unfortunate shooting of an American in the Niagara River. There has always been a good deal of smuggling going both ways across the Niagara and this is usually done under cover of night in small boats. It so happened that two Buffalo men were fishing in a small boat in the river and came close to the Canadian shore. They were hailed by the Ontario provincial police and told to row into shore. Instead of doing so they behaved in a manner which seemed suspicious to the Canadian police and turned their boat towards the American side. Under the impression that they had to do with a law breaker of some sort, one of the Canadian policemen fired and killed one of the two men. The affair led to an investigation which I had to conduct and this led to an exchange of notes between the two governments. Quite a good deal of feeling was raised over the incident and for my part I endeavored to handle it in such a way as to calm this feeling and to pave the way towards a settlement. It was evident that a mistake had been made by the Canadian police as well as by the two men in the boat, and my suggestion was that the matter would be settled through the payment by the Canadian Government of an indemnity to the family of the deceased, accompanied with an expression of regret by the Canadian Government over the incident. This latter they were somewhat loath to do although entirely prepared to pay the indemnity. A representative of the Ottawa Government, as Canada was not yet at that
time represented at Washington, finally arranged the matter with Mr. Lansing, who was then Secretary of State, on the basis just mentioned.

When I was in Washington on leave of absence shortly after this incident I called on Mr. Lansing to pay my respects and to my great surprise was admitted and he received me very kindly. I was sufficiently surprised at being received because customarily the Secretary had little time to receive consuls, particularly from such an unimportant post as Fort Erie. To my great surprise he spoke very flatteringly of the work which I had done in connection with this shooting case. The incident taught me a great lesson. I had no idea that the painstaking work which I had done had come to the attention of the Secretary or if it had I certainly had not the least notion that it would leave any trace in his memory. I have always been grateful to Mr. Lansing for his reception at that time, not because of the flattering things which he said but because it left me with the distinct impression that it is the business of a consular officer always to do everything that comes before him just as well as just as thoroughly as is possible, and that work well done usually will come to the attention of one's chiefs and recognition finally come about.

The recollections of Mr. Harvey, my predecessor, will always be most pleasant. He was in some respects a typical consul of the old days in the service when examinations did not exist and when entrance was entirely based on political considerations. He was a man of
education and refinement and he was accustomed to enjoy money and do things on a large scale in business and otherwise. When he entered the Service as Consul at Fort Erie he looked upon it as a quiet retreat for his later years and on his small salary, for he had lost everything else, he lived very comfortably on his farm on the outskirts of the town. He visited his office faithfully every morning and did such business of a routine character as absolutely had to be done. Although the post was a quiet one and there was in reality very little for him to do, he nevertheless made no effort to familiarize himself with real consular work simply because he conceived it to be totally unnecessary for him to do so. He was simply a product of the then existing order of things rather than neglectful of his duties. His leisure time, which was naturally ample, he spent in looking after his farm but for the most part in fishing in a small boat in the Niagara River in front of the consulate. His figure in the boat was a familiar one to all residents of that section of Fort Erie off the river and even in the coldest days of the cold Fort Erie winter he spent many hours every day fishing in the rapid waters of the Niagara.

He had a horse and wagon and two or three times a week he could go across the river on the ferry to Buffalo to market his eggs and farm produce which he personally delivered to some customers in the city. When he did not have a load sufficiently large to warrant a trip with the wagon, he would take a huge basket on his arm filled with butter and eggs. Carefully placed on top of this basket would be the
envelope containing the triplicates of the invoices he had certified for the collector of customs at Buffalo and he would deposit these latter himself at the Custom House.

One cold winter day while I was shivering in the consulate in spite of the warm fire, a man came in very much excited to tell me that Mr. Harvey was ill and was lying in a shack by the river's edge. I went down and found that he had been fishing in the river with the temperature at least six degrees below zero. He had been overcome by the cold and his boat had been brought into shore by the current where it was noticed by a passer-by. We took him to his home but he died immediately after we got him there. I have often thought that after all his end was a happy one, for he literally died doing the thing that he liked to do most, fishing the rapid waters of the Niagara.

But our stay at Fort Erie was drawing to an end. I had been expecting a telegram that the consulate was to be closed but as it did not arrive my wife went home to see her family in Delaware. She had not been gone more than an hour when a telegram arrived stating very succinctly that I was to close the consulate at Fort Erie, send the archives to Niagara Falls and proceed to Curacao as soon as practicable. Now Curacao meant several things to me, neither of them very real. I knew that it was the name of a liquor that came from a West Indian island but just where this island was and what it was like I had not the least idea. I remembered vaguely having seen the name Curacao in a number
of Commerce Reports and the name always had a certain attraction. A few days before a two-line notice had appeared in a Buffalo newspaper that there had been an earthquake there. My first step on getting the telegram was to go to the public library at Buffalo to find out where Curacao was and what it was like.

I interpreted the Department's telegram "to proceed as soon as practicable" literally and within ten days the consulate had been closed, the archives and furniture were in the hands of the consul at Niagara Falls, and our own treasures were on the way to our own home in Delaware as I had been unable to find out enough of Curacao to determine whether we would send our own things there or not. My inexperience led me to interpret the telegram so literally that instead of stopping at my home on my way to Washington I immediately proceeded there. When I took the ferry for the last time to go from Fort Erie to Buffalo I saw Fort Erie fading away with a regret which a year and a half before I would have said it was impossible to feel on leaving this little town.