



# OUT OF THE ARCHIVES



A publication of the  
*Livingston County Historian's Office*  
Amie Alden, County Historian  
5 Murray Hill Drive, Mount Morris, New York 14510



*Volume 4, Issue 3*

*December 2007*



## Christmas Past



“Christmas will  
dawn over a people  
full of hope  
and aspiration and  
good cheer.

The carping grumbler  
who may here and  
there go forth  
will find few  
to listen to him.

The majority will  
wonder what is the  
matter with him and  
pass on.” - Mark Twain

Excerpted from the  
*New York Tribune*  
on Christmas Eve, 1901.

## “The Christmas Tree”



from *My House of Life*, An Autobiography

by Jessie Belle Rittenhouse

Distinguished Mount Morris native and co-founder of the Poetry Society of America, describes her Grandparent's house in Tuscarora around 1880 all decked out for Christmas

One memory...perhaps the most vivid of my childhood, centers about the old mansion on the hill, for it was a large house of which only part was in common use, the rest being reserved for state occasions. This incident is connected with my first memory of Christmas, my first sight of a Christmas tree. Prior to this I can vaguely recall running downstairs in the early dawn to see what was left in the bulging stocking by the coal stove, but nothing stands out as particularly romantic until the night of the Christmas tree set up in the great hall at Grandfather Rittenhouse's. My father was one of seven children, all of whom were married and had families of their own, and nearly all, by a strange chance, lived within driving distance of the early home. A widowed sister kept house for the parents and conceived of the idea one Christmas of asking the various families to dinner and of having a tree set up in the front hall and decorated, without the knowledge of the old people. This plan was quite feasible, owing to the size of the house and the fact that in winter that part of it was rarely used.

My aunt had delayed the dinner, saying she thought some of the family might come home, and when one group after another began to arrive, great consternation was felt on the part of my grandmother lest the turkey should not hold out. She whisked about, rushing to the pantry for sausage and head-cheese but at this juncture proceedings were stayed by the information that each family had brought its own contribution to the feast. And what a feast it was, served at the edge of evening with lights and cheer!

We of the younger generation had no inkling that more was to follow, until the dinner over, the doors to the great front hall thrown open and we flocked in, to be thrilled by the most dazzling sight that ever met the eyes of an unsophisticated country child. The tree, blazing with candles and gay with tinsel, had been placed at the foot of the wide stair, up and down whose steps we were quickly disposed, the larger children near the bottom, the small near the top. My point of vantage was with the latter, and from the moment I saw the tree there was for me but one thing upon it - a doll, such as I had never seen before, a doll to take the very heart out of a child with longing.

This was my first discipline in renunciation, my first attempt to forego pain. I said to myself that it could not be for me, it was far too beautiful. It must be for some older girl, I could not expect to have anything as lovely as that - and the more I schooled myself against it, the more acute became the desire. My father's only brother, a large blond man and a genial spirit, was dressed as Santa Claus and distributed the presents. He frequently called my name and one gift after another was passed up the stair to me, but I could look at none, for there, at the very top of the tree, still untouched, was the doll. I began to be afraid that I should cry when it was assigned to someone else and meditated flight to the chamber beyond, but was held by a spell as Santa Claus at least reached up, took down the doll, turned it slowly over, looked well at the card, and then read out my name!

There have been gifts in life ardently desired, gifts that I feared would never be mine, but none like this. I look back upon the moment as my first knowledge that joy is made exquisite by pain.





## Jessie Belle Rittenhouse



A woman who advanced the cause of modern  
20th century American poetry

### BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

Jessie Belle Rittenhouse (Dec. 8, 1869 - Sept. 28, 1948), poet and critic, was born in Mount Morris, N.Y., the fifth of seven children, four of whom died in their early years. Her mother, Mary J. (MacArthur) Rittenhouse, was of Scottish descent; her father, John E. Rittenhouse, was directly descended from the Philadelphia astronomer David Rittenhouse. Jessie was an early reader, dedicated to English literature, but dreamed of becoming a prison reformer. After her mother became incapacitated by family tragedies, Jessie kept house, while attending a village school and Nunda Academy. In 1890 she graduated from Genesee Wesleyan Seminary in Lima.

Jessie Rittenhouse taught school in Illinois and at Akeley Institute for Girls in Grand Haven, Michigan, about 200 miles from Cheboygan, where her family had relocated. Frustrated by teaching, she began to write freelance articles, chiefly interviews, for Buffalo and Rochester newspapers. She later became a reporter for the *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*; and in 1895, moved to Chicago and returned to freelance writing. Jessie was well-received by such feminists as Susan B. Anthony, whose home attracted others in Rochester, and although her interview with William Jennings Bryan in 1895 was treated by her editor as a coup, she was anxious to write about poetry.

Ultimately, Jessie Rittenhouse was best known for such works as *The Younger American Poets* (1904), considered a groundbreaking study, and *The Little Book of Modern American Verse* (1913), an anthology that was instrumental in creating a receptive audience for new poetry. She reviewed regularly for *The New York Times Review of Books* (1905-15) and co-founded the Poetry Society of America (1910), serving for 10 years as the organization's 1st secretary. In addition she compiled *The Little Book of American Poets* (1915), *The Second Book of Modern Verse* (1919), *The Little Book of Modern British Verse* (1924), and *The Third Book of Modern Verse* (1927), all of which were both commercially successful and influential; published several volumes of her own poems, including *The Door of Dreams* (1918), *The Lifted Cup* (1921), *The Secret Bird* (1930), and *Moving Tide* (1939), which was awarded a gold medal from National Poetry Center; advanced the cause of modern American poetry in early 20th century.

In 1905 she moved to New York City. The importance she attached to conventional rhyme and meter overshadowed other qualities that distinguish great poets from lesser ones, but her attempts to give poetry more scope helped to institutionalize the poetry of her time. She aided the process further as editor of highly successful anthologies. The unusually successful sales of these works rendered them a force in defining the uses of poetry in schools and literary circles. In 1924 Jessie Rittenhouse married fellow poet and professor Clinton Scollard. He died in 1932, the couple had no children.

**Sources:** *Dictionary of American Biography, Supplement 4: 1946-1950*. American Council of Learned Societies, 1974. and *Dictionary of Women Worldwide: 25,000 Women Through the Ages*. Eds. Anne Commire and Deborah Klezmer. Vol. 2: M-Z. Detroit: Yorkin Publications, 2007. 1601. 3 vols.