

Phoebe Elizabeth Apperson Hearst, 1842-1919 by Barbara S. Lesko

Two American women stand out as early promoters of Egyptian archaeology. Sara Yorke Stevenson (q.v.) and Phoebe Apperson Hearst were contemporaries, but their lives were quite different even if their interests coincided. If any woman could be called an American Cinderella, it is Mrs Hearst, who went from extremely modest circumstances in the backwoods of Missouri to the pinnacle of American wealth and influence, even gaining *entre* to the royal circles of Europe. She is a fine example of someone who invents herself, rising far above their origins by ambitious use of their intelligence and character.

Phoebe Elizabeth was born in St. Clair Missouri, a rural farming community, on Dec. 3, 1842 to Drusilla and Randolph Apperson who had emigrated from Virginia to farm government land grant acreage in Missouri. The family lived in a small log cabin. Phoebe Apperson received a rudimentary education by modern standards beginning in a public school to which she had to walk several miles, but also early learned from her father to manage accounts when she helped him with selling from a general store he opened. Later she spent a year at the Steelville Academy, a seminary run by the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. Called by contemporaries “exceedingly beautiful,” Phoebe was obviously very intelligent as well as ambitious. As if anticipating a totally different future for herself, she sought out, while still in her teens, a tutor for French. She would build on this in future years, continuing to read French literature, to study the language, and later living in France. Her interest in learning the language shows she had

a thirst very early for much more than the world around her could offer.

While still a teenager, Phoebe Apperson taught in the one room school where she herself had matriculated and also at the Meramec Iron Works school thirty miles from home in another county. By luck an extremely successful miner in California had his roots in the same town as she and upon returning to Franklin County in the late summer of 1860 to find a wife discovered the five foot tall Phoebe with the nice figure, grave eyes, and quiet demeanor. Doubtless she was aware of the wealth of George Hearst and saw it as a path out of the “miserable place” that she called her home and into the wider world and prosperity. Thus she accepted his proposal of marriage and obtained a pre-nuptial agreement that guaranteed her 50 shares in the Comstock Mine should he die before her. George Hearst was twenty years her senior and when he died years later in 1892 he left Phoebe the immense fortune for that time of \$20,000,000. to handle as she saw fit, hers to keep unless she remarried, which she never did.

Phoebe and her husband had little in common and after they moved to San Francisco and she bore her one and only child, William Randolph Hearst, George Hearst left her much on her own while he pursued his interests in mines and real estate along the west coast of California and Mexico, nonetheless being always willing to underwrite her acquisitions and her projects, which were many.

Phoebe, far more intellectual than her husband, soon developed her own salon, inviting and encouraging the literati of post-gold rush California. Later, when George became a U.S. Senator near the end of his life in the late 1880's and the Hearsts lived in Washington D.C., a newspaper commented that Mrs. H. was “not of the smart set” but being “ an intellectual woman, prefers the cultured to the smart set.” Her entertainments at the capital were known for their inclusion of guests chosen from the world of art and

literature and for the classical music with which all were entertained. Her interest in educating the young did not disappear. During her time in Washington, Mrs. Hearst took, with her ten year old son, an extensive trip through Europe and Russia devoted to researching innovative educational systems. It was on this trip too that she visited several archaeological museums and developed a serious interest in the field and its finds. Phoebe developed a great love for art and was an obsessive collector, a passion inherited by her son. She also enjoyed reading and collected many first editions. She founded a library for the company town of the Anaconda Copper Mine and in South Dakota built schools and churches near Hearst mines.

Already years before in San Francisco, Phoebe Hearst was an early supporter of the kindergarten movement and later helped found the National Congress of Mothers which later became the National Parent Teacher Association. She also helped found the National Cathedral School for Girls in Washington and the Y.W.C.A. Important also was her role in the development of the University of California at Berkeley, which she largely underwrote from her fortune after the death of her husband. Mrs. Hearst was the first woman to serve on the University's Board of Regents, which not only accepted her money but always consulted with her and followed her advice when it came to planning the campus, on one of the world's most attractive parcels of land designated for educational purposes. It was perhaps during this period when Mrs. H.'s "masculine grasp of financial affairs" was most noticeable.

Her actual introduction to field archaeology came about by accident in 1895 when, at the age of 53, she suffered a heart attack and was attended by Dr. William Pepper of the University of Pennsylvania. The famous surgeon and University Provost, was also President of his university's Museum of Archaeology. Through her ensuing

friendship with Dr. Pepper, Phoebe met another patient of his, the anthropologist Frank Hamilton Cushing. She was fascinated enough by his interest in early Indian settlements on Florida's west coast to underwrite his Marco Island excavations. She did not stop there, however. The University of Pennsylvania's expedition to settlements of cliff dwellers in the American South-West and, closer to her heart, the University of California's archaeological expeditions in Egypt, Peru, and in Europe were financed by her. She was especially interested in native Americans and her funds supported the professorships of Philip Mills Jones and Alfred L. Kroeber, who was recruited from Harvard and named to head the new department of Indian Anthropology. The old world was not forgotten: one professor was sent to Europe in 1901 to purchase \$10,000 worth of classical Greco-Roman antiquities and returned with an impressive collection of statuary. Rounding out this picture was ancient Egypt, which won her heart and generous support for five years.

In 1899 Mrs. Hearst included Egypt in one of her grand tours and became convinced that she should support archaeological work there too, with an eye to increasing the collections of the University of California. Her son soon followed her to Egypt and was also swept up enthusiastically by the opportunity to gather together a major collection of antiquities. He noted critically the "treasure hunting" attitude prevailing in the country and wrote to his mother:

"If we, while excavating and hunting for things, still try to preserve the monuments and benefit the museum people, we will be on a different plane and will, I am sure, be put in the way to get really important things such as no museum in America has."

His mother did have plans for a major museum in San Francisco to house all of the archaeological artifacts acquired by purchase and excavation by Berkeley's

Department of Anthropology, and William's enthusiasm goaded her on to make a real commitment to support archaeology in Egypt. A young American working for the Museum of Antiquities in Cairo, George Andrew Reisner (1867-1942), was introduced to her, although he had no real field experience at the time. Reisner's first excavations conducted with Hearst support were at Deir el-Ballas in Upper Egypt where Arthus Mace and Albert Lythgoe, men with some field experience, completed Reisner's team. The next season at Naga ed-Deir was followed by work in the more spectacular site of Giza, at the cemetery of the Great Pyramid. Here Reisner would remain for decades, making his name by conducting systematic studies of the mastaba field as well as of the pyramids. He practiced the most careful and advanced methodology of the age, keeping a daily journal, including sketches and measurements of objects found each day, photographing every stage of the work, and keeping an object register in duplicate, where every object or fragment was given a number and entered with a description, measurement and photograph in most cases. Maps and plans of the site and individual structures were also made. From the mastaba field at Giza, Reisner was then able to send back to Berkeley huge quantities of antiquities. He also purchased with Hearst funding Greek and Demotic papyri manuscripts from the Fayum and one of the oldest medical treatises, which became known as the Hearst Medical Papyrus. Phoebe journeyed to Egypt to witness the excavations at Giza first hand in 1905. She toured the country from her private boat, going up river to Aswan and to Abu Simbel where she observed the young painter Joseph Lindon Smith at work on his first Egyptian subject at the beginning of what would be a very long career painting Egyptian monuments. She immediately acquired all of the paintings he had done and later introduced him to Reisner, who then hired Smith as his archaeological artist and maintained a life-long friendship with him.

Mrs. Hearst seems to have relished expedition life, putting up with the inconveniences of Reisner's camp and describing herself as being "more excited than anyone" while watching the opening of a mastaba chapel and the uncovering of two statues, while hanging over the side of the shaft.

Years later a curator of the anthropology museum at Berkeley (once named for Professor Lowie in a building called Kroeber Hall but today renamed the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology where a marble portrait bust of Phoebe adorns its lobby) wrote of this benefactor: "What set her apart from many other benefactors of her era was her determination...to provide the substance and impetus for research by contemporary scholars in anthropology and related studies. The effect of such advanced thinking by an assured and capable person upon a then comparatively small academic institution on the Pacific Coast is incalculable."

However, in spite of her delight with Reisner's expedition, the 1904-05 season was the last Phoebe felt she could support financially. Indeed, the year 1905 saw her withdrawing support from most of her interests, even though just two of her mines had yielded over \$10,000,000. a year in gold during the first decade of the Twentieth Century. Even her beloved University of California, which had come to rely perhaps too much on her beneficence and constant interest, suffered cutbacks, although these did not effect the Department of Anthropology. Nonetheless, the expedition at Giza was dropped from her support, and Reisner then joined the staff of Harvard and Boston's Museum of Fine Arts and worked on at Giza, maintaining the Harvard-Boston expedition until his death. Mrs. Hearst left the United States to reside in Paris for three quarters of the year, having offered to resign from California's Board of Regents, an offer that was refused. She was in Paris during the great San Francisco earthquake in 1906 and eventually

returned to California to reside at the splendid Hacienda which her friend the architect Julia Morgan had built for her in the hills above Pleasanton.

Although she had sole authority over the Hearst wealth, Phoebe was indulgent of her son's ambitions to build a newspaper empire and his acquisitions and debts drained off much of her money. Her own interests continued to be wide—supporting scholarships at the University of California, ensuring the preservation of Mount Vernon, funding substantially the YWCA and Traveler's Aid, contributing to building the campus at Mills College in Oakland, participating in the Suffragette Movement, and chairing the Women's Board of San Francisco's World's Fair of 1915, the Panama and Pacific Exposition, in which she was, for years, deeply involved in the planning and production. In response, the Fair honored her as “one of the world's most distinguished women” along with social reformer Jane Addams and Dr. Zelia Nuttall, the American archaeologist Phoebe admired.

As her biographer Judith Robinson has pointed out, the problems Phoebe Hearst concerned herself with were often the problems industrial development brought to America: employment dislocation, housing, education, urban centralization, immigration, women's rights, and race relations. Her commitment to improving the lives of her fellow human beings gives important evidence of what can be achieved by the private sector. Unfortunately, this intelligent, energetic and generous American succumbed to the Spanish Influenza epidemic of 1919 at the age of seventy seven.

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Mrs. Hearst is known to have published one article: “California as a Field for Women's

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