

## BOOK REVIEW

*A Goodly Heritage.* By ELLA CHALFANT (University of Pittsburgh Press) 1955 Octavo, 240 pp, C X11. Maps, plans, will locator, index and bibliography. Price \$3.00.

Wills have been written for more than 4500 years and they have proven of interest individually; as portraying character; supplying genealogical data often obtainable in no other way; collectively, as reflecting the changing economic condition of a community.

This book will prove of special interest to those with a background knowledge of our old families and their descendants because the oldest wills were recorded only 160 years ago. The beneficiaries of many of them could be known to present day readers so that personal knowledge or family tradition can supply more information than has ever been recorded. To newcomers they will help to create a picture of the people and events from which we derive the heritage we deem goodly.

Miss Chalfant has been a librarian for trust companies and banks for more than 30 years, so that her interest in wills is professional, and it has been from bank officers that she has received her greatest encouragement to write such a book. These men recognize the importance of her work, for already the ink of these documents has faded and the paper on which they are written has disintegrated from frequent handling. The importance of a printed record will increase with the passage of time. Today it may not be a collectors item, tomorrow it may be.

The basis of this book can be briefly described as the first three record books in which the wills of Allegheny County have been recorded. Among them are also the records of those who died intestate. These wills are not necessarily presented in their entirety for Miss Chalfant has used discrimination in what she gives. Her usual form of presentation after the name of the testator is a direct quotation from the will in italics. This high lights the noteworthy element. Date of writing and recording is given, often followed by description of the handwriting, size, and character of paper. Names of witnesses are frequently given and they are of peculiar interest as indicating the friends or acquaintances of the testator.

If this book were only a collection of wills in entirety the number would soon be boring, while as it is, the text is readable, interesting, and informative. Miss Chalfant starting with a broad knowledge of

our early history, has gone to old newspapers, biographies, family records, and cemeteries to obtain material to show who these people were and the role they played in the history of the city. She uses this material to supplement the wills, often pointing out items which might be missed by the casual reader. She frequently explains the legal phraseology which might otherwise be misunderstood. She helps the reader to grasp the salient features. She introduces a lot of history when commenting on personalities and she speculates freely on many bequests. In most cases the reader will agree with her.

The nature of a will presupposes a serious effort to list for distribution those articles cherished as of greatest value. These wills leave no doubt as to what the pioneers regarded as important. The items most frequently enumerated were: pots, copper kettles, bridles, spoons, barrels, bedsteads, feather beds, tubs, clocks, pewter, garments, spinning wheels and not infrequently, slaves. The money of more than ten countries is listed and it was hoarded because of its content, for exchange was variable and little understood until the coming of banks. Whiskey was a more reliable medium and understood better. Perhaps the physical condition of the city streets can be surmised by the infrequency with which wheeled vehicles are mentioned. Your reviewer recalls the naming of only 21½ wagons, no carriages, carts or wheel barrows.

Those expecting to find oddities among the bequests will not be disappointed: "a penny for snuff," "2 cents to the doctors for setting her crupper bone," "a surtoot coat," "a quarter of a dollar in the hope she will mend her ways before it is too late," "all my debts," "money that is at Maryland when it is gained at law," "my specktakle case," "firewood hauled to her door," "one milled dollar to prevent and put out of his power to disturb the rest of the family as to bequests made to them," "free liberty of what frute she may want," "a case of drawers in place of those which I left at Caleb Ways Tavern," "the privelege of the fire room in which I sleep," "each of them one roe of apple trees," "my umbrel." There is quaintness, humor and tragedy in such items. It makes good reading and offers wide field for conjecture.

A feature which might well be worth the price of the book is a description of the key index by which one may locate the volume in which a particular will may be recorded. The general public is not

familiar with it for it is based on a cross index, first on the letters l,m, n,r and t as they appear in the Surname and secondly on the first letter of the Christian name. These unite on a number which is that of the record book. To be sure, a clerk is there to help but one will not feel as stupid about it as when he does not understand the system.

There is a comprehensive index in the back for ready reference, in addition to a list of the wills in each of the three record books. A few of the names which appear, taken at random are: E. Denny, Jacob Negley, William Pentland, George Wallace, Conrad Winebiddle, Alex Addison, Adamson Tannehill, James O'Hara, Breton Brunot, Nathaniel Bedford, Hugh Alexander, Jane Watson, William Robinson etc. It is not inconceivable that many Pittsburghers will read of their ancestors wills for the first time, in this book. It is a book which will soon justify its position in any collection which deals with Pittsburgh or Pittsburghers.

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