GENEALOGY: Father of Dreiser brothers was Terre Haute spinner

Tamie Dehler

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Terre Haute is the birthplace of two men — brothers — who achieved fame in the creative arts. These were Paul Dresser, songwriter, and Theodore Dreiser, novelist. Both left Terre Haute and Indiana, but their early lives here shaped each man’s artistic expression.

Their father was Johann Paul Dreiser, born Sept. 9, 1821, in Mayen, Germany, in the Rhineland-Palatinate state. One researcher/descendant says Johann Paul did not know the names of his true parents. He immigrated to the U.S. in 1847, landing in New York. He moved to Ohio, and in 1851 married Sarah Maria Schneppe in Piqua, Ohio. Sarah was the daughter of Henry Schneppe and Esther Schaub, and was from a Mennonite community in the Dayton area. She was reportedly disowned by her family for marrying Johann Paul, who was a strict Catholic.

The family can first be found in the Terre Haute city directories in 1858. Johann Paul always went by his middle name, Paul. He is listed as a spinner, working for G.F. Ellis, and living on First Street between Walnut and Poplar streets. His surname is misspelled as Dresser. The next available entry is in the 1863 directory. He is a foreman at the Ellis Wollen Factory, living at 56 S. Second St.

The Dreisers had three boys who died in infancy. On April 22, 1858, John Paul Dreiser Jr. was born at one of the two above addresses, the oldest surviving child of the family. He also went by the name Paul and did not use his first name. The 1860 census of Vigo County shows the family living in the third ward in Terre Haute. Another son, “Raymond” (actually Roman), was just four months old. Also in the home was Ellen A. “Swep” from Ohio, presumably Sarah’s younger sister.

Children continued to be born. Dreiser is not listed in the Terre Haute city directories of 1868 and 1871. The family had moved to Sullivan County. They can be found living in the town of Sullivan on the 1870 census. The elder Paul was a wool manufacturer from Prussia, parents foreign-born. Mother Sarah was keeping house, now with eight children in the household: Paul, Roman, Mary, Emma, Tressa, Cecelia, Alphans and Clotilda.

By 1872 they were back in Terre Haute, living on the southwest corner of 12th and Walnut streets. When they returned to Terre Haute, they had apparently first lived at 523 S. Ninth St., because this is where their son Theodore was reportedly born. The house at 12th and Walnut streets was purchased two weeks after Theodore’s birth on Aug. 27, 1871. The city directories reflect that the family lived at 203 S. 12th St. from 1872 through 1877. Their father continued in the woolen industry as a spinner and wool sorter. During the 1870s, some of the older children began to work. By all reports, their lives were ones of poverty with so many mouths to feed. The family moved to a different home nearly
every year. In 1878, they moved briefly to Vincennes. By 1879 they were back in Terre Haute, living at 533 N. Seventh St.

The year 1880 was one of more moves, and the last year the family is listed together and in Indiana.

The 1880 city directory shows them all residing at 205 N. 13th St., but that was a brief stay. There are two nearly identical 1880 censuses for the Dreisers, one taken on June 6 with the family living at 326 N. Ninth St. in Terre Haute, and the second one dated June 23 with the family living in Sullivan County.

They had moved back to Terre Haute by 1881, and from this point on, Paul the father is the only one listed in the city directory, boarding at 128 S. First St. in 1881-2 and 118 S. First St. in 1883-4 (unless this is a typo and actually the same address). In 1888 he was boarding at the Anderson House in Terre Haute. By this time he and his wife Sarah had separated.

*This story will continue next week.*
courtesy of the Tribune-Star Publishing Company, Terre Haute, Indiana
GENEALOGY: Paul Jr. was the eldest of the Dreiser children

Tamie Dehler
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The story of Paul Dresser and Theodore Dreiser continues this week.

Paul Jr. was the eldest of the Dreiser children. Although born in Terre Haute in 1858, he spent much of his childhood in Sullivan. The family moved there in 1863 and lived there until 1871.

As a child, Paul was interested in music, carnivals, fairs and the circus. Around 1870, his father sent him to the St. Meinrad Benedictine Seminary in Spencer County to study for the priesthood. This life did not set well with Paul, and he left a year or so later, running off with a group of traveling minstrels who were passing through. He returned to Sullivan, but did not live with his family. He worked on a farm until about 1872, when he did go back to his parents. (He was 14 years old at this time.) He continued to work a number of odd jobs and attended the St. Bonaventure Lyceum Academy in Terre Haute for a year, studying music.

His relationship with his strictly religious father had deteriorated since leaving the seminary and continued to do so. He got into trouble with the police and was sent, first, back to Sullivan to work on a farm and then to Brazil to teach music in a Catholic academy there. This was 1875. Less than a year later, he got into conflict with the priest and left.

He joined a traveling minstrel show for a while, lost all of his money, was jailed, made his way to Indianapolis, took a job teaching at a Catholic school there for a year, and then returned to Terre Haute where he frequented saloons on a regular basis and robbed two of them as his money ran low. He was arrested and served several weeks in jail. His father was embarrassed by him. This was the early life of Paul Dresser.

His musical career began for certain in 1876-77, at age 18, when he was employed as a performer by a series of traveling minstrel and medicine shows, one operating out of Chicago. It was during this time that he wrote his first songs, changed his last name from Dreiser to Dresser and marketed his music under “Paul Dresser Songster.”

The 1880 census enumerates Paul in his family’s household in Terre Haute and Sullivan (they lived both places in 1880 and got enumerated twice). His occupation is a “lightening rod agent” and an “agent of medicine.” It is doubtful that he was actually living in the household, however, because he was touring with the medicine shows.

In 1881, he moved to Evansville and began working for the Apollo Theater there. He performed out of Chicago and New York during this time, also going on tour with several plays, and returning to
Evansville in between. He was involved for many years with Annie Brace, the madam of a well-known brothel in Evansville. (Her professional name was Sallie Walker). They never married and eventually parted ways because of Dresser’s relationships with other women and prostitutes.

From 1884-86, Paul Dresser withdrew to the southern U.S. due to a mysterious illness. His career was on hold until he returned. In 1888, he moved to New York City working on Tin Pan Alley. He performed in, and wrote songs for, several acts, his performances gaining national acclaim and star quality. In 1893, he stopped performing (he weighed over 300 pounds by that time), and from then on focused solely on his song writing.

In 1894, he became a partner in a music publishing firm. He wrote “On the Banks of the Wabash Far Away” in 1897. This hit made him one of the most famous composers in the U.S. (second only to Stephen Foster). The song was the second best-selling hit of the 19th century (second only to Foster’s “Swanee River”). “… Banks of the Wabash …” alone netted Dresser $100,000 in income. With the sales of his other songs, he had become a wealthy man. This would change with the turn of the 20th century.

Continued next week.
courtesy of the Tribune-Star Publishing Company, Terre Haute, Indiana
Genealogy: Dresser’s fall in 20th century from wealthy to bankrupt

Tamie Dehler

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Paul Dresser, Terre Haute native and composer of Indiana’s state song, “On the Banks of the Wabash Far Away,” attained wealth and success in the 19th century, but it was all to change in the 20th. Then, several things converged that had an enormous impact on Dresser’s life.

First, music styles were changing. Dresser wrote sentimental songs of mother, country, and home, but the nation’s appetite for these songs was waning — and a style called ragtime was gaining popularity. Dresser, however, continued to write in the same fashion, for whatever personal reason. His sentimental songs began to lose popularity with the public. Second, he was a very poor businessman. His partnership in a music publishing firm fell apart and eventually went bankrupt. These two factors limited his income, which had been substantial. Third, his own generous and liberal nature did him in. He continued to spend and squander his money lavishly in saloons and brothels, and to give away money to family and friends. With less money coming in, he became insolvent. Finally, his health was deteriorating. He weighed more than 300 pounds.

In 1900, on the last census in which Dresser was enumerated, he appears to be living in a hotel in Manhattan, New York, at 37th and Broadway. He is listed as a lodger, age 39, occupation song writer. His birth date and age is off and both his own and his parents’ birth places are given as Massachusetts. He is also listed as married, but there is no wife in the household and number of years married was left blank. (He never married, according to biographers). Did he intentionally give this misleading information, or was it supplied to the census taker by another lodger?

In 1905 he moved in with a sister who lived in New York City. He died there on Jan. 31, 1906, of a brain hemorrhage. He was financially destitute at his death. There was a funeral service held in New York on Feb. 4 at the Church of St. Francis Xavier at Sixth Avenue and 16th Street. It was attended by many performers, musicians, actors and singers of vaudeville. His body was held by the Calvary Cemetery in Queens County until March 19 when the family procured enough money for his burial. He was then moved to the St. Boniface Cemetery in Chicago, where his parents are buried. A funeral service was held there in April. There was never any money for a memorial stone, and the family left his grave unmarked. In 1922, the Indiana Society of Chicago provided a marker in the form of a large boulder transported from the banks of the Wabash River and engraved with his name. This can be viewed on Find a Grave at www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&G Rid=7173419.

Dresser has been described as generous and charitable, romantic and sentimental, having no business sense, living in the here-and-now, boisterous and jovial, hedonistic and improvident, sometimes
moody and brooding, and moved by the pain and misfortune of others. His personality and character were forged in his early years living in Terre Haute and Sullivan. There, he loved music and fanfare. His father, Paul Dreiser Sr., was a German immigrant, a dogmatic and “fanatical” Catholic, self-pitying and ultimately unsuccessful at business. His mother Sarah Schnab was of Moravian descent and from a Mennonite family. She was disowned after eloping with Dreiser. Accounts describe her as hard-working, all-forgiving and controlling.

Paul rebelled against his father’s will, which dictated that he become a priest. He was always forgiven by his mother, even when he caroused with prostitutes and imbibed in saloons. His family had periods of extreme poverty, but being the eldest child who left early, Paul was not as exposed to this as his younger siblings. His optimistic and sentimental point of view allowed him to create music that reveled in home, mother and country.

Continued next week.
courtesy of the Tribune-Star Publishing Company, Terre Haute, Indiana
GENEALOGY: A little about the lives of the non-famous Dreiser children

Tamie Dehler

Special to the Tribune-Star | Posted: Sunday, November 17, 2013 5:00 am

After the Dreiser family returned to Terre Haute from Sullivan in 1871, they began to endure a life of increased poverty. Their father had lost his woolen mill to a fire in 1869 and was also injured when a beam fell on him. He was deeply in debt and not working steadily. He turned more and more to his strict interpretation of religion and became obsessive about it. Their mother, on the other hand, was a romantic optimist, always wanting to move and hoping the grass would be greener somewhere else. She was lenient and forgiving toward the children. Without money or structure, the family began to spiral out of control. The boys got into trouble — they drank, visited brothels and ran away. The girls were flirtatious and became involved in romantic liaisons.

Around 1883, their mother, the older sisters, and the younger children moved to Chicago. When things didn’t work out there, they moved to Warsaw, then back to Chicago. Most eventually moved to New York. Their mother, Sarah, died in Chicago on Nov. 14, 1890. Without her love and acceptance, the family deteriorated even more. This week will focus on the non-famous Dreiser children, who led very colorful lives in their own right.

Mark Roman Dreiser (“Rome”) was born on Feb. 12, 1860, in Terre Haute and was baptized in St. Joseph’s Church. He is listed in the 1874 Terre Haute City Directory as working for the newspaper, the Terre Haute Journal. He can be found three times on the 1880 census — twice in the households of his parents in Sullivan and Terre Haute, where he is listed as a printer, and then in a hotel in Springfield, Ohio, where his occupation is a traveling agent. It has also been reported that he was a “train butcher,” which is a vendor on the railroads. One source said that he was an alcoholic and disappeared for 20 years. I could not find him again on the census. Many of his siblings lived in New York and it appears he was there also, at least at the end of his life. He died on March 21, 1940, in Metropolitan Hospital, Welfare Island, New York, N.Y.

Mary Frances Dreiser (“Mame”) was born on July 7, 1861, in Terre Haute, and baptized in St. Joseph’s Church. It is said that when her brother Paul was arrested, she secured his release by having an affair with an influential politician. In 1879 she had an illegitimate still-born child, father unknown. She moved to Chicago with other family members, including her mother, about 1883. She married Austin Daniel Brennan there on June 12, 1897. By 1900 she can be found living in Rochester, Monroe County, N.Y., with her husband, her father Paul Dreiser Sr. (age 78), and her nephew Carl (age 12), who was the son of her sister, Sylvia. Her father died later that year in New York and the body was sent back to Chicago for burial next to his wife. In 1920 Mame was living in Manhattan with her
husband. In 1940 she was a widow living as a tenant in Queens County, New York. Her sister, Sylvia, was also with her, a widow and a tenant. Mame died on June 2, 1944 in Queens, N.Y., of cancer of the bladder.

Emma Wilhelmina Dreiser ("Em") was born Jan. 29, 1863, in Terre Haute and was baptized in St. Joseph Church. She moved to Chicago in 1883. While there, she ran off in 1886 with a married man, Lorenzo A. Hopkins, who had embezzled money from his employer. She married John Nelson, an architect from Sweden in 1898 in Chicago. Her children were George Kates Nelson and Gertrude Amelia Hopkins. She became a madam in New York. In 1905-06 her brother, Paul Dresser, was living with her in New York City at the time of his death. In 1930 she was in Brooklyn, a widow, with her daughter, Gertrude, residing with her. Em died on Feb. 23, 1936 in Queens, N.Y., of encephalomyelitis.

Continued next week.
GENEALOGY: Continuing to look at records of Dreiser siblings

Tamie Dehler

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This week is a continuation of the Dreiser siblings.

Mary Theresa Dreiser was born Aug. 3, 1864, in Terre Haute and was baptized in St. Joseph’s Church. She went by her middle name. Theresa moved with her mother and siblings to Chicago around 1883. There, she reportedly married Edwin Davis (I couldn’t confirm this on the Illinois statewide marriage index, though). On October 22, 1897, she was hit by a train and killed. She was buried in the St. Boniface Cemetery in Chicago, where her parents and brother Paul Dresser lie.

Cecilia Dreiser was born in 1865 in Sullivan. She was known as ‘‘Sylvia.” In the mid-1880s, her mother Sarah had moved much of the family to Warsaw to live on some land that Sarah’s father, Henry Schneppe, had left her. Sylvia was flirtatious and promiscuous, and she became pregnant out of wedlock. Her lover deserted her. In 1888 she gave birth to a son, Carl Dreiser. Carl was cared for by various family members. His uncle Theodore Dreiser often cared for him as a baby. Carl, age 12, can be found living with his aunt Mary “Mame” Dreiser Brennan in Rochester, N.Y., in 1900. He had moved to Chicago and got a job there by 1907. Carl died on March 29, 1915, in Chicago. Sylvia dabbled in song writing. She married a Japanese immigrant, Choichiro Kishima. They can be found on the 1920 federal census and the 1925 New York state census living in Manhattan, N.Y. Choichiro was a photographer and salesman in art goods. In 1940 the widowed Sylvia was living with her sister Mame in Queens, N.Y. She died on Sept. 20, 1945 in Queens of heart disease.

Alphons Joachim Dreiser (“Al”) was born January 1, 1867, in Sullivan. He married Margaret May Steinman on June 28, 1894, in Chicago. Letters in the Theodore Dreiser collection show Al living in Chicago from 1896 through 1906. In 1910 Al and May can be found living in Los Angeles, California. His occupation is a salesman/musical agent. At that point the trail goes cold. He reportedly had died by 1940 in Stevens, Skamania County, Wash.

Clara Clothilde Dreiser was born in 1868 in Sullivan. She was known as “Claire” or “Tillie.” She married Thomas Dowd, a miner, date and place unknown. They had a child who died young. Clara next married Henry V. Gormley (“Harry”), in Chicago about 1902. They were living in Schenectady, N.Y., in 1910, with a son Paul, age 7. Harry was living off his “own income.” Claire Dreiser Gormley died of cancer on May 30, 1918, in Schenectady. Harry was still living in Schenectady in 1920 with their son Paul, a 17-year-old student. The son, Paul Dresser Gormley, was born on Oct. 15, 1902, in Schenectady. On the 1930 census, still living in Schenectady, he is married to Ruth, a public school teacher, and they have a daughter Ruth. Paul’s occupation was a newspaper reporter. Paul died on
June 18, 1976, in Ventura, Calif.

The second-to-last child in the Dreiser family was Theodore. He is arguably the most famous of the family and will be discussed next week.

The last and 10th surviving child of the Dreiser family was Edward Mineroz Dreiser ("Ed"), born on June 27, 1873, in Terre Haute. He married Mai V. Skelly in 1899 in St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City. Ed worked in the silk import industry. He can be found on the 1920, 1930, and 1940 censuses of Manhattan. Mai’s mother, Margaret Skelly, and her aunt, Anna Kelly, lived in Ed’s household for years. In 1945, Ed was the informant for his sister Sylvia’s death record. He was residing in Far Rockaway, Queens. Ed and Mai had one daughter, Vera Dreiser, born May 11, 1908, in New York City. Vera married Alfred E. Scott, and she died in a nursing home in Macon, Ga., in 1998. Ed Dreiser died on Jan. 29, 1958, in Queens.

Continued next week.
GENEALOGY: Theodore Dreiser born in 1871 in Terre Haute

Tamie Dehler
Special to the Tribune-Star | Posted: Saturday, November 30, 2013 10:03 pm

Herman Theodore Dreiser was born at 523 S. Ninth St., in Terre Haute on Aug. 27, 1871, and was baptized in St. Benedict’s Church. He was known as Theodore to his public and Theo to his family. He was a sickly child; homely and sensitive, a stutterer and was his mother’s favorite. Being the ninth of 10 surviving children, he was born into poverty — after their father had lost the mill in Sullivan and was injured. Because of his childhood of poverty and things he later saw as a newspaper reporter, he identified with the poor and suffering of the world. This later had a significant influence on his writings, novels and political involvement.

At age 12 (1883) he moved to Chicago with his mother and some of his siblings. There, he helped care for his sister Sylvia’s illegitimate child, Carl. A short time later they moved to Warsaw, where he attended public school but did not graduate. He left school and Warsaw at age 16 and moved back to Chicago, where he worked in a hardware store. But in 1889 he attended Indiana University in Bloomington for a year, his tuition courtesy of a former teacher who saw promise in him. However, the following year he left IU, not completing college. He returned home and in November of 1890 his mother died in his arms.

Theodore spent the next few years as a newspaper journalist. He worked for a Chicago newspaper in 1892, then moved to St. Louis in 1893 to work for newspapers there. He met Sarah Osborne White (known as “Jug”) in St. Louis. They planned to marry as soon as Theodore could get established. He eventually moved on to New York City, where his successful brother Paul Dresser had invited him. In 1895 he became an editor of a magazine, Ev’ry Month: the Women’s Magazine of Literature and Music, working for brother Paul’s publishing house. While living with Paul, he frequented the “high life” — brothels and saloons. When the magazine folded, he freelanced as a writer and began to make some good money. In 1898 he married Sarah. He then began to write a novel, “Sister Carrie,” which was based on the experiences of his sister Em. After much editing (for “obscenity”) and controversy, it was published in 1900. Another novel followed in 1910, Jennie Gerhardt, in which characters were based in part on his sister Mame, her husband, and their father the elder Dreiser. His prolific career included more novels, nonfiction books, travelogues, scientific and philosophical writings, articles and essays. Politically he championed social causes fighting for the underdog.

Theodore (writer in 1900) and wife Sarah can be found on the 1900 and 1910 census living in Manhattan. In 1910 he is a magazine editor, and residing with them is Ida T. White, Sarah’s sister, an assistant magazine editor. During his marriage to Sarah, Theodore was not faithful. He was partial to
younger women and had multiple relationships. Sources say he and Sarah separated in 1909 and divorced in 1910. Yet here she is with her sister listed as living with him on the 1910 census. The 1920 census has more ambiguous information. Theodore is living in Los Angeles with a woman named Sarah. Her place of birth — Missouri — is correct, but her age is listed as 25 (she would have been 45). In 1919, Theodore met his first cousin once removed, Helen Patges Richardson (her grandmother and his mother were sisters), who was visiting from Oregon. She was 23 years his junior. They began an affair which lasted for decades.

They moved to California in 1938, and married in Stevenson, Skamania County, Washington, in 1944. He married using his given name, Herman, possibly trying to keep the marriage private. Helen can be found living with Theodore on the 1930 census in Manhattan, where they are listed as married, and the 1940 census in Beverly Hills, West Hollywood, where she is listed as his cousin.

Theodore Dreiser died of heart failure on Dec. 28, 1945, and is buried in the Forest Lawn Cemetery in Hollywood.