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Lila and her two eldest children, Frederica and James Watson, pose informally by the portecochère.

A Country Estate Lifestyle

Life in the Big House was refreshingly informal for the time. The Webbs filled their rooms with furniture, plants, books and memorabilia, as was the fashion, yet the selections were neither for show nor boastful ornamentation. Decorative interiors were chosen from those readily available. The Webbs did not collect art.

This relaxed lifestyle was much different from the stiff one at Hyde Park, Frederick Vanderbilt's very formal French Empire Style estate, or the heavily cultural lifestyle at Biltmore in North Carolina, where brother George collected art, antiques and tapestries. It is doubtful that either of these brothers of Lila's, or other friends with country places, allowed sheep to graze the front lawn, or erected a toboggan run in front of the house during the winter. The Webbs certainly affected similar manners, dress and conduct, but the degree to which these societal mores were honored was much relaxed up north.

The turn-of-the-century America the Webbs inhabited was a place we would

hardly recognize: no income taxes, no cars, no radio or television, no vote if you were female. A father's authority to determine his family's direction was unquestioned. A wife, on the other hand, lived a circumscribed existence. She needed to be hospitable, competent in managing a large house, and supportive of her husband. Graciousness was much praised. Bearing the children was of course her responsibility, but their rearing was left primarily to nurses.

Although few letters or journals survive to substantiate the doctor and Lila's feelings about this society and their roles in it, it seems they were not discontent. Far north of their relatives and wealthy peers, yet in constant contact through letters and via the railroad, they carried on a rural lifestyle familiar yet different, elegant but relatively informal, a long way away and yet easily accessible by rail. The way they lived must have both intrigued and perplexed their friends. Ultimately, their style seemed quite their own.

In dress, the doctor affected the popular



clean-cut look, hair short and brushed back, his moustache and goatee substantial but neat. He favored tweeds for daily informal wear, and jodhpurs, a waistcoat and boots while on horseback. Photographs suggest a military bearing in civilian attire: ramrod straight, attentive, he stares directly ahead. Lila wore dresses that reached to the ground, with long sleeves and high collars. A bonnet or hat was usually perched on her long hair. Such tresses were admired by most women of her class, their maids spending hours stroking them with a brush. But they were never left free in public. For colder weather Lila had a selection of capes, muffs and coats of sable, seal and velvet.

Conduct for the Webbs and most Victorians was determined by sex. Biology was fate. Women looked pretty, dressed well, visited and occasionally wrote of their frustrations as unsettling aberrations.

One youthful visitor who had trouble with this concept of a woman's role was Lila's niece, Adele Sloan. She wrote about it in letters and a diary.

A noted beauty listed in Mrs. William Astor's famous "Four Hundred," who were the elite members of New York's high society, Adele had cultivated the typical skills desired in a Gilded Age ingenue: foreign languages, piano playing, art appreciation, before falling in love with the forester Gifford



Dr. Webb and a friend at Nehasane, the family game park in the Adirondacks



Pinchot, then twenty-six, while visiting George Vanderbilt's Biltmore estate in 1892. The young woman was eighteen.

After that she struggled with feelings few of her friends seem to have shared. She grew weary of balls and travel and declarations of love from flatulent men.

Writing to Pinchot, who had finished his work for Dr. Webb and was undertaking an American first at Biltmore, a thorough forestry plan, Adele said she didn't believe there had been any woman geniuses yet and that her life seemed to be humdrum like most others she knew. Sneaking upstairs from a party, she wrote, "I am sitting at my desk and looking idly out on the ocean, and counting the stars and wasting my time wondering what I shall do." She tells him she hates the formality and the gossip. She desires experience and real things. She wants to travel, see poverty, sickness and sorrow to see what they are like. She writes:

I have lived and seen only one side of life, and merely read and imagined the other. And it is difficult to understand and sympathize with what I know so little about... There is such selfishness connected with everything we do. Why is it that that feeling of self always seems to haunt one?

She concludes a little further on, "When one is only beginning to realize what it

means to live, life seems very serious, and not to be laughed and jested away."

Adele's private writings reveal a woman trying to make sense of why she is unhappy when she has everything. One gets the feeling a pleasure dome is cracking about the edges. Her honesty is admirable, her continued frustration and inability to relieve it disconcerting.

Contemplating a trip north to Aunt Lila's in Vermont, Adele wonders if Pinchot might be at Shelburne Farms. She will go there for rounds of parties with nephews, nieces and friends. There will be winter diversions, such as fishing, tobogganing, riding. One wonders if she opened her heart to Lila, expressing her longing for the masculine, visionary forester who had worked for Dr. Webb, and if Lila, despite her traditionalism, was moved by the younger woman's loneliness and sense of constricted desperation. Pinchot, for his part, seems never to have been that serious about Adele; her expectations of seeing him at Shelburne Farms in 1893 were overly optimistic; he never came.

Most gentlemen of the times were not like the woodsman Pinchot. They had industries to run. They worked at business careers related to these industries, but seldom so zealously they could not hunt animals and travel to exotic places.

A personal code of honesty, conscientious-

ness, patriotism and family devotion was cultivated in men and women, as well as in their children. And despite the parties and travels and endless flirting, fidelity and faithfulness were cherished. Divorces and affairs were not unknown, however, and the press loved any hint of scandal amidst the ranks of the rich.

Manners were inbred. Charm, a facility with the social graces, affability and politeness were taught to children at an early age. Sullenness, being rude, and radical behavior were all discouraged, particularly in girls. Not that all the desired character traits showed up in succeeding generations of adults, rebellion against parental standards always having been a streak in the American temperament regardless of era. But genteel manners did reach an apogee in this country at the end of the 1800s.

The four Webb children, Frederica, James Watson, Seward, Jr., and Vanderbilt, who were eighteen, sixteen, thirteen, and eight respectively in 1900, spent the majority of their childhood years in the Shingle Style cottage and then in the Big House. Their lives were much different from the lives of most children, although the attitude towards their upbringing was conventional Victorian — they were seen as miniature adults, a concept that limited displays of affection



Lila (with the feather in her hat), and the four children out riding on the estate

between parents and children unless the latter were ill.

Children's lives tended to be overdramatized as well, filled with elaborate replicas of adult playthings and events, but on a smaller scale, as though little people should enjoy what big people enjoyed, but orchestrated or built to fit their size.

For instance, a dollhouse, complete with miniature furniture, a stove and a sink, as well as a more adult-sized fireplace so the nurses could keep the children warm, was erected adjacent to the house. Once they

reached adolescence, the boys had carts and gentle teams of ponies so they could travel about the estate. Before the age of thirteen, James Watson, Seward and Van each learned to hunt, trap, ride and play polo. Their instructors were men on the Webb staff and seldom their father. Frederica rode well herself, but while her brothers checked their traps for muskrat, she was expected to be reading, practicing the piano, or studying her lessons.

Frederica wore ruffles and bonnets as a little girl, her hair bunched and ribboned.

The boys frequently wore the sailor suits that Victorian parents found so adorable on their children. Knickers, knee socks, bloused shirts and caps were also popular. As teenagers the boys dressed much like their father — that is, informally, preferring loose trousers and tweed sport coats. When Frederica became a young woman, she wore the trim, attractive gowns of the era, gowns with long sleeves and with hems that brushed the ground. And she owned an array of stylish hats, of course.

Constant travel must have seemed as natural to these children as having servants. And must have occurred so smoothly as to have bordered on magic. Out-of-sight adults arranged the logistics. Rendezvous occurred punctually. One got whisked from school, or away from home, almost effortlessly. For the children of a railroad baron, possibly it seemed quite ordinary to spend so much time in luxurious quarters on rails.

All four of them went away to private schools before the age of ten. When away from school during the academic year, each was tutored privately.

The acquiring of athletic skills was part of this tutoring. And good horsemanship and marksmanship were as important in the scheme of things as were the more traditional disciplines like reading and writing.



Vanderbilt Webb's Diary: The View at Twelve

The youngest son, Vanderbilt, who would go on to be an attorney in New York, and in 1936 inherit (with his three siblings) the Big House, kept a fascinating diary in 1903 and 1904 when he was approaching that breakwater of a boy's life: thirteen. The opening entry on January 1, 1903, begins, "I had seen old year out the night before so I slept till 12 then got up & had lunch at one."

Van, as he is called, goes on to give a few details of his day. The writing is large and florid, double-spaced. The eleven year old pencils in a few sentences every day. He has a routine that varies. His activities include hunting, checking his traps, driving his ponies, playing polo in the Breeding Barn with his brothers, and just fooling around, which he does often. He reads a lot, and writes. Just as the entries get a bit repetitious he packs up and travels off somewhere.

Van Webb travels more in six months than the average American of his era did in a lifetime. He is constantly taking trains to New York City and to Nehasane in the Adirondacks, and from New York east to Groton School in Massachusetts, and then from there (he never stayed very long at school) back to Shelburne again.

Over the winter and into the spring, the

diary suggests that paternal relationships between the boy and several servants are developing. Mr. Woodgate, the steward, takes him for walks in Central Park, and plays golf with him often in Vermont. The steward seems throughout this record of their golf matches to have intimidated Van at his usually good game; he always plays poorly with the man, and frequently quits after the sixth hole to stalk home. One of the farm staff, a Mr. Stillwell, is kindly spoken of: Mr. Stillwell repeatedly takes Van for "bully" and "corking" good rides, he poles the boy up branches of rivers flowing into Lake Champlain so he can hunt birds.

Though Van studies a lot, he does not go to school very often. It is easy to see why. During 1903 he takes six round trips to Shelburne from various locations, goes to Nehasane three times, Groton School twice, travels west via New Orleans and San Antonio to California, where the family stays for a month, and then in June, steams to England on the S.S. Teutonic.

This three-month jaunt about the continent produces not only an expanding awareness and a sense of drama in the young man, but markedly improves his ability to communicate it on the written page. Entries now fill the pages in an easily decipherable handwriting that both understates and dramatizes. With his parents and Frederica,

he checks into the Carlton in London, motors around France, and wanders the streets of Paris hunting for balloons. ("Sounds foolish, doesn't it?" he writes as an aside). In Switzerland, he gets wet to the skin in an open car, and writes of water in the petrol and of repeated punctures in the



Lila and her youngest son, Vanderbilt



tires. Throughout he gives delightfully detailed and innocent glimpses of his experiences as though they were the common lot of all twelve year olds.

By the time he returns to Shelburne, the diary has taken on new dimensions: it reveals rather than categorizes. Van now seems to be almost a young man, excited with his potential, taking in gulps of life's action. On September 7, 1903, he writes:

Went over to the Breeding Barns in the four-in-hand with Watson, Sissy, Seward and Mr. Stillwell where we got on our horses and started out with the beigles [sic]. They struck the drag just behind the Breeding Barns and started out and gave us a bully gallop all through the paddocks back of the Breeding Barns and all around the Old South Drive over 15 fences and 2 water jumps [and] then [we] came back and had dinner.

He describes quiet rides as well, and rounds of golf with his Mamma, who beats him, two up. He again tries his luck on the links with Woodgate and plays "so rottenly that I was ashamed to keep score."

In October he loads shells for one of the six hunters gunning the Farms' pheasant out of the sky. Dr. Webb and Sissy join them in the afternoon. The daily total is "500 pheasants, a fox and a hawk, a record!"

He plays squash, brings his golf score

below sixty-five, rides and jumps inside the Breeding Barns in November, then returns to Groton briefly where he attends a Yale-Harvard football game, which he says with the bands, the crowd, the singing and cheering, was "awfully exciting."

Back at the house in late October, he catches chicken pox and lies on his back in bed, doing nothing. Lila reads *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Call of the Wild* to him. A doctor visits daily. He gets better and is quickly back skating, playing hockey, checking his traps with Mr. Stillwell and playing golf with Woodgate in a snowstorm that drives them off the greens. On Christmas Eve there is Japanese entertainment, which he thinks is great.

Interestingly enough, the young Van Webb doesn't tell what his Christmas gifts were. In fact, throughout the diary, in which he writes every day, he maintains a fine, understated style and never stoops to describe things he owns or has received. Two exclamation points can be found in three hundred and sixty-five days worth of entries; one when the record number of farm-raised pheasant were shot, and the second when a laborer backed his team of horses into the lake off the coal dock, drowning both the animals and himself.

That year the boy listed twenty-two titles under the heading, Books I Have Read, at

the rear of the diary. These included Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* and Robert Lewis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*.

The diary loses his attention, unfortunately, once he is back at Groton School in the Fall of 1904. The entries dwindle to repetitive phrases: School. Football. Evening School. School. And cease completely on October 20. Van Webb, the only Webb to be both raised in the house and to live a good portion of his adult life in it, was thirteen.

During these early years of the 20th century, when the Farms promised agricultural breakthroughs and a hackney in every farmer's harness, times were lively and fast paced. Frederica lived at home, as did Seward, Jr. and Van when not at Groton School. James Watson was off at college. Dr. Webb was testing the political turf with thoughts of making a run for governor (he withdrew eventually, unwilling to campaign aggressively for the nomination). These were the years when vice-president Teddy Roosevelt visited, and Admiral Dewey, a Vermont native and the hero of Manila in the Spanish-American War, rode beneath the porte-cochère aboard a four-in-hand driven by Dr. Webb, an awaiting crowd cheering heartily.

A typical day started then with breakfast in the Tea Room. Afterwards, Lila saw to



In front of the Breeding Barn, three riders and a pack of hounds await the start of a fox hunt

special house duties with Mr. Woodgate and went over the lunch and dinner menu with the cook. Dr. Webb took care of business from an office in the rear of the servants' wing, where he had a direct telegraph line to Wall Street. In mid-morning, he might ride over to the Farm Barn to check with

the manager, or visit the Breeding Barn. The Pheasantry, Poultry Barn and Boat House routinely required the presence of the master of the estate as well.

Lunch was served in the Marble Room by the butler and liveried footmen.

Afternoons were for enjoying the many

sport and pleasure offerings Shelburne Farms made available to family and guests.

If it was spring, these included hunting, horseback riding and golf. In the summer there was yachting, tennis, croquet, more golf and riding. In the fall polo and hunting broadened the already numerous options. With snow came ice boating, skating, tobogganing and coasting. Throughout the year one could fish or go for carriage rides. Later there would be the Shelburne Farms Hunts,

Some of the ladies had side saddles.
I remember them, watching them,
their skirts on the outside,
going by the door.

— Armande Boisvert,
resident of the Farms since age ten.

where men and women on horseback chased foxhounds who chased a fox all over the farm acreage and the acreage of adjoining farms. There was a squash court in the annex, and a billiard table in the Game Room. Games of chance and mental skill were also popular: dice, marbles, Parcheesi and the old mainstay, checkers.

Shelburne Farms Links, the estate's nine hole golf course and the third such construction in the country, meandered for three



A bird hunter on the lakeshore near the house

thousand and ten yards between the pleasure grounds of the house and the functional landscape of meadows and greenhouses. Par was thirty-six strokes. The locker room in the house led to the first tee. One drove past Edward Saxton's remaining apple trees and played the fairways east towards Lone Tree Hill. Lila was an avid golfer, and hired caddies from the village. She and her friends wore long dresses and hats on the links, parasols shading their faces when the summer days were bright and hot.

In the autumn, hunters came to the house with their entourages. They quickened life there, as their servants quickened life in the servants' wing. Beaters were retained, valets compared their skills at loading shotguns, the lakeside air rang with gunfire. When the hunters departed, the refrigeration rooms were stocked with birds.

Dr. Webb enjoyed hunting more than the other options. Lila preferred golf. All four children loved to ride horses. Skating and hockey and polo received their share of attention. During winter holidays, when as many as thirty guests occupied the bedrooms, the toboggan run built between the house and the lake attracted all ages in all manner of warm attire. The thrill of each ride down the ramp and then down the hill depended, as always, on the nature and accumulation of the snow.



The Steam Yacht *Elfreida*

Steam yachts were both sport and pleasure showpieces in the Gilded Era, and the Webbs could provide their guests an ideal location for taking full advantage of these sumptuous mechanical toys. The story of Dr. Webb's yachts also illuminates the man's competitiveness and need to have the best.

On moving to Vermont, he brought his hundred and four foot long *Sappho* from New York, a steam yacht capable of thirteen miles per hour. A boathouse for the craft and its crew of eight, and a dock, were built on Quaker Smith Point during the construction of the original Victorian cottage.

In 1888, a Major W.B. Wetmore challenged the doctor to a race on Lake Champlain, the course running from Schuyler reef buoy to a point inside the breakwater. Dr. Webb accepted and Wetmore proceeded to soundly trounce the newly arrived Vermonter's *Nymph*, a yacht that had replaced the *Sappho*. The doctor blamed his defeat on damp coal and the resultant poor head of steam and decided he needed a new yacht.

So in 1889 he had Harlan & Hollingsworth of Wilmington, Delaware, make him the *Elfreida*, an impressive craft for cruising inland waters. Manned by a captain and a crew of fifteen, this steam yacht was schooner rigged. She had a steel hull, an

engine capable of fifteen miles per hour, and two breech-loading cannons for saluting fellow yachtsmen.

To deliver the craft to Lake Champlain, the crew sailed around the Maritime Provinces, down the St. Lawrence River, and then up the Richlieu River to the Chambly Canal, a distance of approximately two thousand miles. The longest boat ever brought through the canal, the *Elfreida* measured a hundred and seventeen feet from stem to stern, five feet more than any of the locks. Consequently, her bowsprit and aft rail had to be removed (they had been built accordingly), and her ballast lifted out. Then the Chambly Canal crew chief pumped extra water into the first lock, so the *Elfreida* just cleared the bottom, and twenty men and six teams of horses hauled the hundred and twenty-two tons of yacht into the next lock. Repeating this process through all the locks, they lifted the *Elfreida* seventy-four vertical feet, and Dr. Webb sailed her out onto the lake.

There, *Elfreida* not only carried an impressive load of sail on sixty-six and sixty-four foot masts, but protected the preferred Victorian pallor of fifteen guests beneath an awning running the entire length of the deck. For overnight cruises three staterooms, all done in mahogany, provided guests with accommodations. Each state-

room bath had a mosaic marble floor and walls of quartered cypress. Moved to take a moonlighted look at the lake and mountains, the men in their whites and ladies in their dresses could climb to a brass-railed roof deck above the captain's semi-circular chart house and enjoy the view.

At the outbreak of the Spanish-American War in 1898, Dr. Webb donated the *Elfreida* to the United States Navy, and ordered a duplicate built by Harlan & Hollingsworth. Subsequently, both the naval hero of that war, Admiral Dewey, and Teddy Roosevelt, who led his Rough Riders up San Juan Hill, visited and stayed at Shelburne Farms. Roosevelt, who came as vice-president in 1901, steamed from Burlington to Isle La Motte aboard the second *Elfreida* to address the Vermont Fish & Game League. Hardly had he left the rostrum when word arrived that President McKinley had been shot in Buffalo, New York.

On this dark occasion, E.F. Gebhardt, a man whose presence on the Webbs' staff resembled that of chief master sergeant in charge of just about everything, was on board the *Elfreida*. Taking charge, Gebhardt ordered Roosevelt steamed straight to Burlington, the president-to-be muttering this memorable sentence to an enquiring *Free Press* reporter on board: "I should admire this beautiful sunset...but I am in no condi-



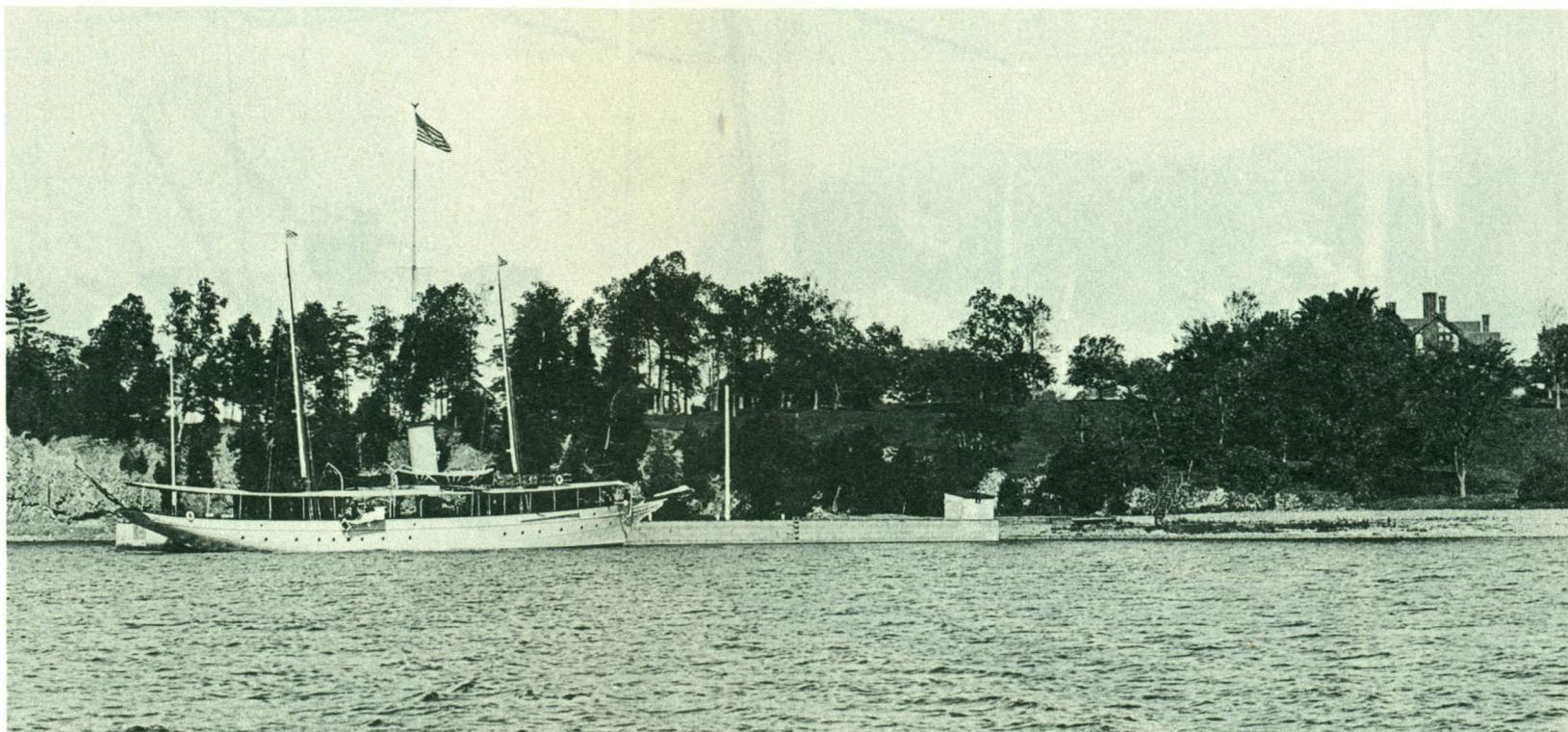
tion to enjoy it now.”

This second version of the yacht served family and guests for years. Cruising out on the lake aboard such a craft had to be a memorable experience even for visitors jaded from prolonged exposure to Victorian excess. In 1905 the yacht functioned as a

floating hotel for guests at the marriage of Frederica Webb and Ralph Pulitzer.

This marriage of the doctor's only daughter proved to be a glorified incident of wealth and power for New York society. Private Pullmans lined up at the station. Yachts anchored in Shelburne Bay. Eighteen

carriages bedecked with footmen took guests from the house to Trinity Church in Shelburne. Frederica pledged her troth while kneeling on a pillow of diamonds that Lila had knelt on when marrying Dr. Webb. After the ceremony the bride and groom were driven to the house in a coach drawn



Schooner rigged and with two cannons with which to salute fellow yachtsmen, the Elfreida measured a hundred and seventeen feet from stem to stern. Here, she docks off Saxton's Point, the house in the background.



Drawn by four white horses, the coach returning the newlyweds from the church enters the porte-cochère. James Watson and Seward, Jr., dressed in scarlet jackets trimmed with gold braid, white breeches, top boots and black skull caps, ride the near mounts.

by four white horses, her gleeful younger brothers James Watson and Seward, Jr., riding the near mounts.

At the house a dining tent decorated the lawn. After the meal the newlyweds departed in a shower of rice aboard the coach,

then transferred to the *Elfrieda* which steamed to the yacht club in Burlington. The couple boarded a private car on a special train for Montreal. Several hundred guests, including Vanderbilts and Pulitzers and much of the upper crust of New York

society, partied in the house and aboard both the *Elfrieda* and the steamer *Vermont*, which the Webbs had rented to expand their accommodations for the occasion.