

# Eccentric doctor may have known Vanderbilts

Just about everyone in Monroe County believed that Dr. John G. Earle was "the genuine article." Certainly tellers at the First National Bank were convinced that he was in some way connected to the millionaire Cornelius Vanderbilt.

In 1898, Earle cropped up in the news again. In the Jan. 22 issue of the *Bloomington Telephone* it was reported that the doctor spent a night in jail in Martinsville, charged with assault with intent to kill his wife. As the reporter put it, "He was arrested while in the act of kicking his wife, who was lying on the floor."

Going to jail was not a new experience for Earle, who was said to have indulged himself entirely too much in drugs and alcohol, both readily available to him. Explained the *Telephone*, "He has been arrested several times and pays his fines promptly."

One of Earle's more colorful arrests occurred in a church at Paragon, to which he moved after leaving the Monroe County area. "A revival meeting was in progress, and he attended one night, the session closing with a general shouting service during which Dr. Earle climbed on a bench and shouted, 'Remember the Maine!'" After paying his fine, Earle's comment was that



## Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

"such sentiments were worth paying for."

According to an article about the eccentric doctor, which appeared in the *Bloomington Evening World* on June 9, 1903, he came to Monroe County around 1880 from New York as a "tramp physician," whatever that means. At different times he lived with "Squire" James Rogers and later with Benton Welmer. Marriage records at the Monroe County Public Library indicate that Earle was not averse to getting married, but he may not have been an easy person to live with.

There are two marriages listed: to Maggie Martin on May 19, 1879, and nearly eight months later to Joella Robinson on Jan. 8, 1880. What happened to Maggie is not entirely clear.

According to the *Evening World*, Earle re-

ceived a \$300 check every month from the Cornelius Vanderbilt because he was a "boon companion" of the tycoon for many years. The *Telephone* article said that the doctor also received a pension of \$17 a month from the government on account of wounds received while serving in the navy during the late Civil war. "Monthly pension check from the government (\$17) for serving in the late war." (Curiously, the name of Dr. John G. Earle does not appear in the roster of Union and Confederate veterans of the Civil War, including the navies.)

Whatever else Earle may have been, when he called himself a Doctor of Medicine, he was not putting on an act. The *Telephone* article noted, "He is educated as a physician, and always keeps a stock of medicines at his home and gives to all applicants, but refuses to receive pay for it."

Others received tokens of his regard. The *Evening World* reported that, "Sometimes he donates a check to his lady friends." His marital status in 1903, according to the *Evening World*, was "widower."

The idlest part about Dr. John G. Earle is his supposed friendship with Vanderbilt. Was it true?

The *Evening World* informed its readers who may have been curious about the doctor, "Dr. Earle is very reticent about his personal affairs and will communicate the secret of his life to no one."

That is all except his supposed long-time friendship with Vanderbilt. Concluded the *Evening World*, "He refers to Cornelius Vanderbilt as 'Cornie,' and many people that the noted New York millionaire prefers to support the friend of their youthful days in this out-of-the-way part of the country, rather than have unpleasant family history recalled by his presence in the East."

Surely Earle wasn't fooling the First National Bank tellers. The *Evening World* article stated clearly that "The checks are signed by young Alfred G. Vanderbilt as executor of the estate of Cornelius Vanderbilt."

(To the reader: I was so intrigued by the accounts of Dr. Earle that I wrote to two Vanderbilts in the hope of getting more information. One heads up a family foundation and the other an investment firm in New York City. Both replied that they never heard of Dr. Earle.)

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