

A man from strong and good stock



By Karen Zach, Around the County

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Montgomery County has been extremely blessed to having so many talented writers and artists, and I was recently asked about one of the latter. Yes, I had heard of the man, but couldn't really tell Bev much concerning him.

As soon as I got home, I checked my very large (320,000+) people database, mainly area ones and I had him in there with a census record or two but nothing to really give me a feel of who he really was. So, the search began and what a fun and interesting one it turned out to be. Fred Nelson Vance was a native-born Montgomery Countian, viewing his first peak at the world on a somewhat artistic date even, 8-8-80. Born to a talented artist and intellectual reader, George M. and Josephine Nelson Vance, he was the only one of their three children to live to adulthood. Sadly, since Fred had no children, the talent stopped there or perhaps there is a cousin or two still spreading beauty?

Although nice-looking (see photo from CDPL – acting in Underground Railroad scene), Fred wasn't outstanding being of medium-height – 5'7" - and weight but did have commanding dark eyes and complexion. It was his rich voice in intellectual conversation and the "vanistic" qualities he brought to his beautiful paintings that made him stand-out from not only his contemporaries but those before and after him, too.

Almost everyone reading this article has heard of Ezra Pound. Pound wrote about Fred, saying he was one of the few intellects in Crawfordsville who prompted his interest. Fred came from fine stock, some of Montgomery County's brightest families. Some of his mother's lines in the area were Hardees, Sears, Krouts and Weirs, plus Nelsons since Fred carried that as his middle name. The Vance side dates back to David who was one of MoCo's first county treasurers. His grandmother, Martha Morgan Vance was the daughter of Nathaniel and Amelia (Harrison) Morgan, Nathaniel a well-known early politician of the county but died young leaving seven children. The Morgans hailed from Hunterdon County, New Jersey and had doctors, lawyers, teachers and other intellects in the family. Fred's grandfather, Isaac M. Vance helped organize an extremely scholarly literary club and twice served as auditor of Montgomery County. Martha did at one time put into the court to divorce Isaac because of "serious rough charges" but retracted it and remained with him until his death in 1892 after having married Feb 28, 1856.

Suffice to say that Fred Nelson Vance came from some strong and good stock even knowing that every family isn't perfect. His father ran a bookstore for some time but mainly worked as a painter/wall paperer, with some extra artistic ability.

At a young age, Fred was off to study Art in Chicago for four years, then on to France remaining there for three, being the first studying artist to be blessed to decorate the interior of the Field Museum. His French culture was prompted by his Chicago professors because of his great artistic gifts. He studied under Julian, taking color study and with Jean-Paul Laurens devoted to black and white studies. While there, he was "regarded as the best draftsman ever attending!" The Julian School offered monetary monthly prizes and he won so many he came home with quite a stash of cash! While overseas, he toured many great sites, seeing all the old masters in Rome, Venice, Florence, Paris and throughout the British Channel where the rich English were greatly enthralled with our young Crawfordsvillian.

Fred and his father travelled and painted murals, the most impressive being the US Grant Hotel in San Diego where they depicted military scenes throughout the world. One scene was Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo; another Julius Caesar at the Battle of Pharsalus. All the furnishings in the hotel were also of military visions (lights encased in war drums). Likely from this one job alone, Fred was listed in the Who Was Who in American Art. His father passed away about a year afterwards in early October, 1911 (all buried in Oak Hill) and his mother, Josephine India Nelson Vance died 22 years later.

Fred continued his mural work but did over 70 oil paintings, sketches and portraits upcoming. Hopefully, soon you'll be able to view a couple of his pieces at the remodeled Masonic temple.

While teaching at an art studio in Terre Haute, he met and married a school teacher, Mary E. Sabiston on the last day of June in 1913. When the war broke out, even though he was 38 years old, he volunteered to go since they needed men who spoke French. He worked with our boys and the YMCA.

He and Mary lived in Crawfordsville, Indianapolis where they had a beautiful home at 2014 Broadway and had just built a new home/studio in Brown County, Indiana where Fredrick Nelson Vance passed away suddenly. He had been out and about that day making plans of a picture and another show when he and a fellow artist had just finished supper. He went into his room, fell and died not long afterwards. His death record stated he died of extreme indigestion but likely a heart attack took him so quickly. Mary lived in the Indianapolis home where she taught school while he worked in Brown County drawing and painting. He went to Indianapolis about once a week where he gave art lessons. She returned to Terre Haute and lived there alone, teaching and being involved in various local happenings.

His mother was obviously devastated and thus began a Fred Nelson Vance Memorial Award for Brown County artists. It continued for decades past in his honor. He was truly an amazing artist with a flare of the unusual having been quite involved in helping younger students and exhibiting at fairs, the Brown County Art Gallery, the Pettis Gallery and the Hoosier Art Salon. Who knows, perhaps at age 46, Fred may have been at the cusp of his career? Suffice to say, he is one of MoCo's best-ever artists!

Karen Zach is the editor of Montgomery Memories, our monthly magazine all about Montgomery County. Her column, Around the County, appears each Thursday in The Paper of Montgomery County.

