

# VICTOR VIFQUAIN/ CAROLINE VEULEMANS

## FAMILY/SOCIAL HISTORY

Jean Baptise Victor Vifquain and Caroline Veulemans,

A social history of the family life in Nebraska

### **1857-1902 (THE YEARS OF THE MARRIAGE)**

The information presented in this paper is not new information- it is a look at the General's life with a different perspective. I would be glad to list my sources for factual data with anyone who requests it, but would like to especially like to acknowledge Jeff Smith for the information presented in the biography given in the book The 1862 Plot to Kidnap Jefferson Davis.

The General is best remembered as a soldier, a farmer, a newspaper editor- he was also a town locator, homestead locator and general aid to the immigrants as they looked for their perfect home in the territory of NE. He was also a politician who was a loyal Democrat to the territory of Nebraska, and later the newly established state of Nebraska and represented his views at the new State capitol of Lincoln on various occasions. But he was a doer more than an orator and his various roles took him to all parts of the world on numerous occasions. But what of his role as husband, father and family man, and the role of neighbor and businessman and friend? And, more importantly, what part did his wife play in all his many social and military activities?

These questions were brought to my mind when I came across an article written by Caroline Vifquain and published in a 1923 volume of Reminiscences and Proceedings from the Nebraska Territorial Pioneers' Association.

Caroline recorded this remembrance concerning the year 1859 much later in life, but is as detailed as if she were still the 21 year old who experienced the harrowing experience the week previous. In 1859, she was living on the homestead she and Victor had moved to shortly after their marriage two years earlier. Caroline was six months pregnant with their first son, to be named Victor Emanuel. Her husband was not present; she stated that

he was in Europe visiting his mother. This is the account that she recorded.

**Early Days.**  
**By Caroline Vifquain, Lincoln, Nebraska.**

"The Indian raid you asked me to give an account of was on July 28, in the year 1859, being the second year of our residence on the West Blue in Nebraska, with no settlement of anywhere near us and the Pawnee Indians our principal visitors. Our household consisting only of a hired man by the name of Thomas Elon and a girl named Sarah Jones, my husband being away in Europe on a visit to his mother. About five in the evening, I heard the cowbell ringing. This being much earlier than they were accustomed to coming home, I was greatly surprised to find they were being stampeded by some 300 Indians on horseback, armed with spears and lances, wearing gaudy head dresses, ornamented with half dollar pieces, beaten to three or four inches in diameter, and two holes in each piece. These were fastened to their scalp locks and hung down about three feet, and glistening in the evening sun made a pretty sight.

At a signal they all dismounted, stuck their spears into the ground and threw the reins over them. The two Chiefs with an interpreter and several braves made their appearance at the door, The elder, a Kiowa chief named Yellow Buffalo, Was a heavy set man, while the other chief, being of the Comanche tribe (I have forgotten his name) was very tall and savage looking, The Kiowa chief had a big crucifix hanging from his neck. Observing this I got mine and showed it to him, he then pressed his to his breast and said, "good, very good." [believe we were spared on account of that incident, They then said they were hungry and wanted an ox. . I offered a number of sacks of flour and meal, besides several sides of bacon but no, they wanted fresh meat and plenty of it, and they then pointed out the large fat ox they wanted. His mate had been crippled by the prairie plow early in the season, and I said "if you must have one take that one", They said he was not fat enough. I told them they should give me a pony for the ox. They gave an excuse that the ponies were to bring prisoners back on. I saw there was no use to object and they took the fine ox. They could have taken them all if they had wanted to. They shot the ox and he rolled down the bank to the river edge. They had their fires already and in a few minutes they were passing the house, each with a piece of meat, and as they passed called out "Bueno, Bueno ", I did not know then what it meant. It is Spanish, being "good, very good." They brought me a choice piece and carefully hung the hide on the fence to dry, many of them, after the evening meal was over, came to the grindstone in the yard to sharpen their knives and tomahawks. They were mostly dressed in civilized clothing, and with low leather shoes.

They were going north to wipe Out the Pawnees which they did to some extent, also destroying their cornfields. Most of the Pawnees were away on a hunt; only old men and women and children being at home, About nine that evening the Comanche chief began to harangue the braves, which lasted two hours. Then the monotonous tom tom sounded and they began to dance. They were in the yard and kept the fires burning and we could see all this quite plainly from the window. This lasted for some little time, then quiet reigned, but I did not sleep that night. The next morning they feasted on the balance of the fresh meat, and at nine started north, saying they would return in ten days. So they departed quietly and in good order, leaving only the smoldering fires, and many bones from which the meat had been well scraped.

They did not return our way, fortunately, which was a great relief to us and the three men camped near making hay for me. Those men were on their way to Pike's Peak, from Illinois, but getting bad reports, laid over for a time. One was an Englishman named Williams; an Irishman, given name Dave; and a Norwegian named Helauson, Their cattle were running with ours and they feared when the Indians returned they would take a fancy to some of theirs. Later we heard these Indians had passed some 15 miles further up the Blue on their return. At the same time these Indians visited us, the Cheyennes, being on their way to the same Indian settlement, stopped at Salt Creek and committed some depredations.

After reading this article, I realized that many of the exploits of Col. Vifquain have been told and retold, from the military point of view, but what was Caroline doing while he was accomplishing all his great deeds? What was Victor's role as family man and husband? What can I find out about the family and how it interacted with the social setting of the times? What follows is a brief account of the information that I have gathered in response to these questions.

### **Caroline Veulemans family background**

The Veulemans family came to America from Antwerp, Belgium in 1835. John Francis Veulemans was 35 years of age at the time and he brought with him his wife of 11 years, Theresa Van de Poel, and their seven children. The children ranged in age from 11 to under a year and consisted of 5 daughters and 2 sons. They moved to Natchitoches, Louisiana and during the next 5 years had two more daughters. In 1840 they moved the family to Round Tree, near Tipton, Missouri due to the poor climate and loss of 3 daughters in Louisiana. The older of the two daughters born in America was Caroline and she was only 2 when they moved to Missouri. Her

younger sister, Mary Catherine, was less than a year when they moved. This is the location where Caroline grew up, as her father built up a large livestock operation and marketed it as far as St. Louis. This is also where Jean Baptise Victor Vifquain first met Caroline. Victor was on his first trip to America in 1852 and was only 16 at the time. Perhaps he went to the Veulemans' home because they also spoke French, and he was drawn to fellow countrymen from his homeland of Belgium. Caroline had older brothers of around age 29 and 24 at the time, as well as two older sisters. But Victor seems to have been taken with the 15 year old daughter, Caroline, and would return to marry her in 1857, when she was 19 and he was 21 yrs of age.

Caroline's father died in 1853 from pleurisy. He may have met young Victor on his first visit, though he certainly could not have given his daughter in marriage when Victor returned in 1856- but Caroline did have the two older brothers who were quite probably delighted to have Caroline marry into such a distinguished (and wealthy) family as the Vifquains were in Brussels.

### **Married Life in Nebraska**

Growing up in a rural setting and around animals all her life, Caroline was no stranger to farm life and the hard work it involved. So, when the two young newlyweds set off to find their own farm, in their chosen location, it was in an isolated location further west, and she knew what her life could be like. But did she realize that Victor was a soldier and statesman as an active supporter of the democratic ideals first and being a farmer was secondary?

When Victor went to Europe to visit his family in 1859 he surely left her with hired help he could trust. But their location was very remote. The census taken in Saline County in 1860, where their homestead was located, listed only 29 people in the whole county including women and children. Victor and Caroline were the earliest settlers in the region along with James Johnson. The Czech population that settled there in great number did not arrive until 1865.

The 1860s were busy times for the young family, Victor helping the newly arrived settlers locate their homestead as well as visiting Europe again. He also had to take time away from the Saline county farm to serve his political ideals in the Union Army. Caroline's life was less glamorous. In June of 1861, Caroline gave birth to their second son, Elmer Francis, and in July, Victor left for New York to join the 53rd New York regiment.

His exploits with this unit and his attempt to capture Jefferson Davis are relayed in his account titled: To Capture Jefferson Davis. In 1862 Victor was assigned to the 97th Illinois Infantry and again, there are many accounts of his talents as a soldier and of the battles that he participated in valiantly in the South. Caroline's battles as a young mother were with the hazards of the Nebraska weather, sick animals and finding dependable help. There was also the concern for the welfare of her young children. Because of their location along a well traveled route for freighters and travelers to the West, Caroline would see many people, but not the type she could share her concerns and worries with. Caroline also had the constant fear that the Indians (Sioux or Cheyenne, or Kiowa more than Pawnee) could return and cause harm or damage to the homestead.

There were many women left to take care of the home sites while their fathers, brothers, and husbands were fighting this war, but Caroline was without family support or many neighbors in Nebraska, so she returned to Round Tree in Missouri to be with her mother and sisters.

By May of 1863 Victor began to hear of the Sioux massacres in Minnesota and was truly concerned for his wife and two small boys who he thought were still on their farm in Saline County. One day after the fall of Vicksburg, July 5, 1863, he demanded a 20 day leave to check on his family. This time his leave was granted and he found his family with Caroline's mother and siblings at Round Hill near Tipton, Missouri. After an examination by the local physician, an extended leave was given for Victor to regain his health. Evidently the poor conditions he was forced to live in while fighting in the south had weakened him. It is also possible that Caroline encouraged the physician to verify his poor condition so that she might keep Victor near her for a little longer time. His health seems to have improved and their third child was conceived at this time (Theresa Isabella, born in April of 1864).

Victor had returned to his regiment in September of 1863, but by 1864, word reached Victor that the Sioux were threatening NE territory and he tried to resign his commission with the military to return to his wife and three children. It is doubtful that Caroline knew of his distinguished bravery in Louisiana. She and the three children had returned to their isolated farm in Nebraska and the Sioux were causing great mayhem in the western part of the state. Caroline would be fearful that they would travel east on the busy Nebraska City- Fort Kearny road and create more disruption and damage as they were on the other westward trails past Fort Kearny. But Victor's request to go to her side was ignored in light of the necessity of his leadership in the Civil war and

further activities in Texas. He was not mustered out until October of 1865 and by then had been awarded the Medal of Honor from the US. Congress in April of that year. No doubt Caroline was proud of her valiant husband / soldier but even happier that he was home. She was now 27 years old and had three children and soon to have a fourth child. John Baptise was born in June of 1866. This is the son that is the lineage of the Vifquain branch my husband comes from, so we celebrate Victor's return from the war as well.

Even after Victor's return from the Civil War fighting, he seems to be very busy with many activities that would take him away from the family. He served as a surveyor and land appraiser, and path finder for settlers in the Republican River Valley as well as setting up a new community in Harlan County called Orleans. He also visited Europe in 1867 and went to Ireland to aid the Irish attempt to win their freedom from Britain in the Fenian Movement.

Even though Victor seems to have been away from the homestead a great deal of the time, Caroline knew she was married to an adventure seeker and soldier, and was probably well able to handle the running of the farm and family. The social setting of the time and the social background of Victor would not have been conducive for him to be as involved as a parent as is expected in America today. In 1868, when Caroline was 30 years old, Marian Blakely was born and the following year, Leopold was born. Leopold died at one day of age, which would have been a hard grief for any mother to bear. If Caroline needed consolation from her Mother at her time of grieving, she was unable to receive it as her mother died at age 67 the following July (1870). But Caroline had two older sisters, and one younger, perhaps she was able to visit and share her grief with them. Caroline was close to her younger sister (Mary Catherine). Mary Catherine never married and came to Lincoln to live with Caroline later in their lives. She lived to the age of 81 and died in 1920.

Victor had always been a vocal supporter of the Democratic ideals and had been to Omaha numerous times to represent his district in the Nebraska territory. By 1870, Lincoln had become the seat of the newly formed state government. Both Lincoln and the State of NE were recognized officially on March 1 of 1867. Victor became more involved with the politics of the day and wrote numerous editorials in the *Daily Democrat*, the local newspaper. He also continued to try to establish new communities in the area. In 1871 he helped start the community of Melrose Stockade.

Through the 1860s Caroline had continued to keep the homestead secure and had born six children,

losing one in infancy as well as bearing the grief of losing her mother. This is not the heroism of the type Victor was known for; this is the heroism that keeps a family together through difficult times. In 1872, at the age of 34, Caroline gave birth to another daughter and named her Mary Caroline. She was called Carrie and was 13 years younger than her oldest brother.

In 1873 Victor was helping to establish a settlement in Chase County and continued his activities in the Democratic party of the state, and in 1874, Victor and Caroline welcomed another son, Charles Joy. Charles would become their adventuring child who spent his adult life in Alaska and the Yukon Territory. Caroline was 36 years old and had born eight children, quite probably thinking (and hoping) her child bearing years were through. But in 1880, at the age of 42, Caroline gave birth to Josephine Gertrude. Several events occurred in 1879 that changed Victors' life and therefore Caroline's. Victor's mother had died in Brussels, and he established a Democratic newspaper in Lincoln. This was the *Daily State Democrat* and was edited with Albert Watkins in Lincoln. The paper was sold in 1884 and the name was changed to, "The Call". Presumably Victor had to spend more and more time in Lincoln, and Caroline kept the farmstead organized and operating as well as tending to the eight children who ranged in age from 21 to little Josephine of one year. These must have been trying times for the family with more separations and when Victor got a position as a diplomat to Columbia in 1886, Caroline must have found it a great opportunity to have all the family in one place.

What was the family leaving behind in the Saline County homestead? Well first there had been the Indian scares until the Pawnee and Sioux were assigned to reservations in 1870s, then there was the occasional blizzard, like the one of 1866 and another really heavy snow year in 1873, oh, yes, the tornado in 1872 and the terrible prairie fire in 1873 that burned 3 children and their grandmother over in Pleasant Hill. The unpredictable rain and various other attacks on the crops were part of the farmer's life. But there were good things too. In the 1860s there were many interesting travelers that came through their homestead on the Nebraska City - Fort Kearny Road; some needed information, some needed goods or services, all welcomed by the Vifquain family. And then there was the new road that was commissioned by the new Saline County and Victor was appointed commissioner of that road. There was new growth in the communities close to them, providing goods and services closer than Nebraska City. There was the school that was placed on their property in 1864 to give the children a close location for learning. And there was respect from the newer community

members who understood and appreciated all that the family had done to establish the county. In 1872, the *Saline County Post* reported that a group of young people rode out to the Vifquain homestead. They came in a sleigh, bringing music and oysters, to discuss early pioneer life. And Victor was asked to be the main speaker at the first annual county fair in 1872. There were also many hours of political discussions, and yes, the split of the Democratic Party in 1875 that caused the loss of the county seat to Wilber. So with all the good memories of good friends and neighbors, the Vifquain were off to a new adventure in Columbia. This time the family traveled with their father, the children ranging in age from age 27 to little Josephine at age 7. After four years, the Vifquains returned to Lincoln in 1890, and Victor was appointed adjutant general of the Nebraska National Guard by Governor Boyd. He also received the Gold medal for helping end the Sioux Wars in 1892. But by 1893, the current crisis in Nebraska seemed to lessen and the family returned to diplomatic duty as consul general to Panama. It is unlikely that the older sons traveled with them this time, as Victor was 34 and Elmer 32, both married. Theresa was 29 but unmarried, John was 27 and had married in 1889, (he would return to work in Panama from 1908 to 1914), Marion was 25. Carrie was 21 when they traveled to Panama. But died there in 1895 and her body was later return to Lincoln for burial as her final request. Charles Joy was 19 years old, and Josephine, age 13. Caroline may have shared her husband's concern for the exploited Chinese people they found in Panama, but it was Victor who was awarded the order of the Double Dragon by the Emperor of China for aiding the Chinese subjects in Panama. After another six years of living away from Nebraska, the family returned to live in Lincoln in 1897.

Then, at the age of 62, General Vifquain re-entered active military life in 1898 and joined the 3rd NE regiment to fight in the Spanish-American War. He was commissioned lieutenant-colonel, but became a full colonel when Colonel William J. Bryan resigned. Colonel Vifquain led his unit to Cuba but by the time the unit reached Cuba, the fighting had ended. However, organization and rebuilding had to be done and Colonel Vifquain did it admirably.

After returning from Panama, Caroline had established their home in Lincoln, perhaps her sister Mary Catherine was living with her by then. Theresa was 34 and unmarried, we know her mother lived with her later in life. Interestingly, Josephine never married either and would have been only 24 when her father died in 1904. The years after the Spanish American activities were quiet ones for Victor, a time to recollect his many



activities and record some of them. Hopefully, it was a quiet time for Caroline as well, when she could be content to have her husband close at hand and unthreatened by military battles.

Caroline lived until the age of 88 dying in 1926, outliving her husband by 22 years. Her partner in adventures died in January in 1904, and her oldest son had died in 1902 at the age of 41 from Typhoid fever. Elmer died in 1917, and Josephine in 1907 at the early age of 27. Then around 1920, her sister Mary Catherine died. Caroline had lived a rich life of 88 years, bore 9 children and outlived most of them as well as her husband and companion of 47 years. Whether she saw Victor as a good husband and father is not known, but their life in a new territory and turbulent times of Nebraska as a new state was not unusual for the time period. There were many separations, many heartaches, but many grand adventures and close friends that were made as well. So I will close this brief look at the family life of the Victor Vifquain family with the death of its matriarch, Caroline Veulemans Vifquain, in 1926, knowing that there are many more generations to follow with their own family histories.

**Information compiled by: Sally Stauffer Vifquain M A**

**(Wife of Gary Victor Vifquain)**

**Presented on Aug 3, 2002- Vifquain family reunion in Estes Park, CO**