

Foreword

Several years ago, in transferring personal Watson family papers to the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Archives, I carefully looked for the first time at the contents of some 30 file folders that became mine after Dad died during the summer of 1968.

Most of Dad's file folders were filled with articles clipped from newspapers and magazines about long-admired writers of literature and liberal politics. Several more personal files, however, caught my serious attention. One contained some 30 letters he wrote back to his family while in 1918–1919 wartime service in France. Another contained descriptions of some 15 bird walks he made to observe the beginnings of the spring migration during the late winter and early spring of 1914. Then he was a junior at Lyon County High School in the Chicago suburb of LaGrange, some 15 miles southwest of Chicago's Loop. Likely also of importance to Dad was an essay exam for his freshman bible class at Oberlin College. What he then had learned likely converted him from the Episcopal faith of his parents to being an agnostic for the rest of his life. Other folders contained diary pages on which he wrote down details of his regular sea journeys abroad after my mother Jean died in the spring of 1957. Particularly revealing are his near end of life impressions of the fellow guests he spent several winters with in a small upper-middle-class resort south of Sarasota, Florida. The genteel world that he had been born into was then not at all what he wanted from life.

In finding that Dad had been a natural, high-quality writer since his high school days, I first considered preparing a small private book containing most of his writings for distribution to Watson family members.

Soon, however, I realized that Dad's documents would become much more useful if I wrote accompanying sections that described my father's activities during successive stages of his life. Originally I saw the need for five such chapters. By now there are nine, each enriched by personal details about key intellectuals he knew through their writings or teachings or through personal contact. The educator, Robert Hutchins, first came into Dad's life when they were both Oberlin College freshmen.

Most rewarding for me to put together has been Chapter 1, which I start in Springfield, Illinois. My own branch of Watsons there put down their first solid Midwestern roots. The homes of William Weldon Watson and his son, Benjamin, were located in close proximity to Abraham Lincoln's for more than 20 years. The first Springfield-rooted Watsons were exceptional frontier entrepreneurs who took great risks to give themselves and their families' children the opportunity to aim for the top of late-19th-century Midwestern life. To give his and his father's "Watson & Son Confectionery" sufficient capital to grow, Benjamin A. Watson saw no alternative but to join the California Gold Rush of 1848–1850. In so doing, he left behind his pregnant wife Emily and their year-old son William Weldon Watson III. I would not now be putting together this book if he had not come back sufficiently cash-flush to also let him subsequently build the Midwest's first post-Civil War truly grand mineral springs resort nestled in Perry Springs near the Illinois River between Springfield and St. Louis. Nor would his first son, William Weldon Watson III, have opened on Dearborn Street Chicago's first French restaurant in 1882. Already by then WWIII was proprietor of the Whiting House, the then-great resort on the shores of Wisconsin's Lake Geneva, just across the Illinois border and then-preferred site for wealthy Chicago residents to escape the blistering heat that dominated most of Chicago summers. WWIII with his wife and six children lived outside of town on a farm that let them continue to think of themselves as part of the frontier.

Dad's later more cautious approach to risk taking is easily explained by his having no desire to repeat his father's disastrous failure to find gold on the penny stock market. Equally important may have been the calming influence of his conservative, churchgoing mother, Nellie Dewey Ford, whose grandparents' oil portraits have long dominated our Cold Spring Harbor home's front hallway. Their stern faces suggest that life was rough and tough for those new frontiersmen and -women carving out permanent existences on the lands where prior Indianan bands never themselves had ever seen fit to put down their own roots.