THE CHARACTER HOUSE

1987

Orville W. Saffry

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A short story of earlier days and incidents in
the Flint Hills near Alma, Kansas.

NOTE: The Character House is one of at least two booklets that were self published, in the 1980s, by Orville Saffry. This digital copy is true to the original—edited in appearance only.

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Prologue

This little treatise may be dedicated to my sister, Olga. I had mentioned that it was regrettable that this old house and its memories of yesteryear should be forgotten forever. She suggested I write it up. It seemed to be a house of character during its life out there. It is written from memory, which was quite vivid then. No mention of names are made in the more poignant events by some of the people, so no toes will be stepped on. However, some persons who were there will remember. Happy reading.

Ye Author—July, 1987

The Setting

I remember it well. It was during the 1920's, 30's, and into the early 40's when I used to see the old house at the base of the steep hill beside the railroad tracks. A lightly-used country road, crossing the creek from the north, led up to and beyond this quaint, but intriguing old country home.

I don't know why or by whom it was built—probably in the 1860's (Civil War time) by the earlier settlers of the Alma community. These new German immigrants found the fertile bottomland soils along West Branch very attractive, no doubt, and moved into Kansas in droves at the conclusion of the war.

This old house—I call it the Character House—stood at the very base of the high hill, and was built partly into the hill; with a large old cave from inside the house which was dug into the hill and walled-up with an ornate archway at the entrance. The first floor of the Old House was at ground level, with an inside stairway which led up to the second floor. The second floor had an outside door, again at ground level farther up the hill.

A sturdy stone wall led from the top floor of the house to the south, retaining the slumping hillside, and protecting the long, narrow yard south of the house.

On the south end of the yard with all its shade trees stood the old horse barn with its stone walls. On the north side of the house, blending into the steep slope of the hill, was a small orchard with luscious, exotic cherries which we all loved!

At an easy stone's throw from the house ran the main line Rock Island railroad tracks—up and down the Mill Creek valley on their way through the Flint Hills.

Who lived in this old house during these delightful years? A very charming lady in her 60's and 70's and her bachelor son,

John. Margaret Walters, a two-time widow, who came to Kansas by way of Wisconsin and Chicago, Illinois, was everyone's favorite. She was equally at home with young or old, and found herself a hostess to a multitude of relatives on many occasions at this house.

John Krienitz, the son from her first marriage, was a highly talented musician and violin maker. When he wasn't preparing violin cases, he was giving violin lessons to many aspiring young musicians—including yours truly. Also he was a gardener with many vegetables and tobacco plants in a large plot north of the tracks.

Mrs. Walters lived in one part of the house in the winter time, and invariably moved to another part during the summer months.

The double-track railway carried exceptionally heavy traffic during those years, much to the joy of the younger set who watched and could name the "freights" and the "passengers" as they went whizzing by.

The country road followed on westward and ended about a mile up the valley at a neighbor's house.

The railroad ran westward up the valley to Alta Vista, and on to Herrington on its way across the state. In the opposite direction, the line ran eastward through Alma, McFarland, and on to Topeka—and beyond. Since the tracks were double-line, a train cam chugging by in one direction or the other, on an average of every 20 minutes.

Saturday Afternoon

Saturday was the usual day for farmers to "go to town." So we loaded up our old Model T ford and drove to Alma, as usual. After the trading was completed at the stores, our mother decided we should go see "Riley Tante" (our Riley aunt). This was our affectionate name for Margaret Walters, my mother's aunt.

We drove west out of town, then south at the Senge corner, past the Liederkranz Park and picnic grove, on across the crooked old wooden bridge which spanned the creek, and on to Margaret's house. It was summertime, and Margaret and John were living in their summer end of the house. This was their June to September custom.

As we passed their large garden, we noted all the vegetable truck and tobacco plants in the neat rows—with not a weed in sight!

At the house, after a brief visit, Mother remarked that their garden was so neat and devoid of weeds.

John replied, proudly, "Ja, und Ich habe der Garten auc schon dreimal gehackt." (Yes, and I have hoed that garden three times already.) Quite a task for a man with a hoe, and so large a garden.

We sat in the summer living room for a time, when someone referred to the summer heat. Aunt Margaret immediately took us into the cool, cool cave a while, until we stopped complaining. I shall always remember the stone archway at the cave entrance.

Later, we went upstairs (inside passage) to let John show us the new violins he had recently completed. The workroom (and studio) reeked heavily of tobacco leaves drying in the windows. He also wanted us to see the new mandolin case he was working on, His prize violin cases were very ornate, with pink streaks

and red spots in the highly polished wood. These came from the boxelder tree which he had cut outside his window.

Next he showed us the set of eight violins he had just completed. They were all neatly placed in a row on the spare bed, from pillow on down to the front end. After our "ohs" and "ahs,' he very carefully pulled the door shut behind him.

Once back outdoors, we simply had to go down and watch the trains awhile! The freight trains always gave a shrill, high-pitched shriek from their whistles. The passenger trains carried a lower-pitched toooooot from their steam whistles. Each type of locomotive was readily distinguishable, even at a distance. We watched them as they crossed the railroad bridge over the creek, on the way to Alma. The cars always made the bridge "Rumble" when they crossed it.

"Come on now boys," we could hear our mother's voice from the yard. We knew it was now time to pull ourselves away from the tracks, and get "loaded" into the car. We finally, regretfully, took ourselves away from this fascinating place once more, and headed for our home on Nehring Branch.

Violin Lessons

My older brother and I had both been recruited by our mother to study violin music at John's studio. I was 6 and Milton was 11. He proudly received a regular-sized instrument, and I was given a small, but very cute, violin for these lessons.

No, we did not care to be saddled with music lessons for the summer, but she assured us that some of the neighbor boys were to take lessons in a couple of weeks, and we may as well join the new class. "Besides," she said, "Music lessons will teach you good discipline and rhythm—and one day you will be very glad you took them." (She was so right.)

In John's upstairs "studio" Milton took his lesson first. Then it was my turn. I had to learn to hold the small instrument properly, how to finger the strings the unnatural way, how to hold the bow, and so on, amid the strong smell of the drying tobacco plants and leaves. The names of the strings: E, A, D, and G. How they related to the notes on the music sheet he placed before me; how the time of the notes set the rhythm for the song—then proceed to finger the notes on the little violin strings, while he chanted one-two-three, one-two-three. All this in the stifling tobacco smell.

Well, I guess I must have done all right. Rather enjoyed it, in fact. The half hour always passed hurriedly that summer. And at the end of each session, I would look out the door to see Milton and the next student outside talking about everything except their music.

One day, one of the older students started down the stone stairway on the outside of the house, carrying his encased violin rather carelessly. It slipped from his grasp, went tumbling down he stone steps—the lid flying open, with the instrument finally coming to rest upside down, partly on the ground, partly

against the stone siding of the house. A most appropriate way to treat a delicate violin, no doubt. But Old John was always most patient with us.

By the end of the summer, Old John and our elders were saying that I was pretty good for one so young, and I got to play the little violin in the school program. My brother was either less interested, or too much engrossed in mechanical things to practice so diligently on his instrument.

The small violin was on loan from Old John and after the summer lessons, I had to give it up, regretfully. Therefore I was "graduated" to a regular sized instrument.

The Holidays

Many family celebrations were enjoyed among the relatives. Some in the country, some in town. Often national holidays were celebrated in this way; and often merely Sunday get-togethers.

This one was a typical family get-together at the old Character House where our Margaret Walters lived.

The Fourth of July is apt to be noisy, boisterous, too much to eat, much visiting among the adults, playing and disputes among the younger set. You bet, all of these.

Our family drove into the long, narrow yard at mid-forenoon to park among the cars already present. I can still mentally see the Model T Ford, Maxwells, a Nash, and one Cadillac with cloth top and leather straps from the top down to the front finders. There may have been a Reo among them.

As more July 4th celebrants came in and greetings were exchanged, the potluck food baskets were carried into the house and the shaded yard became filled with friends and relatives.

Just to mention a few: there were the Nehrings, the Feidens, the Redmons, the Saffrys, the Mays from Chicago, the Anderson, the Troempers, the Krienitzs…

The big holiday dinner was spread on the long tables inside the house, but many brought their loaded plates outdoors to dine under the shade trees.

After lunch, usually a tour upstairs to view the newest violins, guitars, and even a homemade piano from John's expertise. The kids, O, they congealed into raucous-voiced games outdoors. The trees and vehicles afforded excellent hiding places for the various running contests.

Suddenly we became aware of the noisy trains shuttling buy, and the organized games ceased abruptly. The boys turned their

attention to the trains!

Some of the prized possessions of the boys were large, well-mashed copper pennies which had been run over by the locomotives on the tracks. The coins were carefully placed on the rails whenever a train was approaching. Copper was soft enough to mash into delightful size.

Then there was the problem of keeping the pennies on the rails when the engine approached. We had to select freights only, who approached slowly enough to keep from shaking the coins off the rails before they were run over. Passenger trains were n. g. for us—they drove too fast, and threw the coins out into the cinders before the wheels got to them. Thus we listened attentively for the high-pitched scream of the approaching freights—then rushed to the tracks to place our coins.

Yes, some Rock Island section men would come along occasionally to admonish us: "Keep away from the tracks—and for heaven's sake, don't put any rocks on the rails, boys!"

Firework displays following in the evening, and some especially considered it a feather in their caps if they could startle someone out of the years' growth with a firecracker. So went the day and evening.

But one of the holiday gatherings I shall never forget was on Thanksgiving Day at the Old House. Of course, the weather was much colder! The usual group of people (plus possibly a few more) was present, but activities were largely confined indoors and everyone felt more restricted.

On the farm at home we had numerous chores to do, plus some extra problems with the livestock—so our family arrived at the crowded household practically at noon.

The big Thanksgiving assemblage was inside when we arrived at the door, and all eyes were on us. My brother and I were in the middle of the room, and we felt a bit bashful (just in from the country). We took off our coats and nodded to all the

people. Mrs. Walters called, and said that the big dinner will be served right away.

Our mother called to us boys, and said we two should go outside to "make our toilet" first, so we would be comfortable for dinner. She said it a little too loudly and a trifle too plainly, we thought, in front of everybody. So there we stood paralyzed, our dignity waning rapidly. Apparently, no one seemed to notice, or to display any reaction. So we pulled on our coats again, and crawled out the door with our bruised pride.

The big dinner progressed satisfactorily thereafter. Youngsters mostly concentrated in the living room to dine, while the adults stayed in the kitchen, dining room, and what have you.

The majority of the people stayed indoors, due to cold weather. A trail of youngsters (and adults) ran all through the house—into the summer rooms, into the cave, up in the side stairway to John's quarters where they enjoyed interesting embellishments, and back downstairs again.

Finally the women-folk would slip out to the back door, one by one, to seek the outside toilet. The men, however, put on their coats in groups, and headed outdoors to the old barn at the south end of the yard.

One young adult with a high sense of humor came out a trifle later and placed himself just outside the barn door. Pitching his voice to a high female falsetto, he screamed into the barn door, "All right, you guys in there, cut that out now!"

He stood at the door a very brief moment, laughing loudly, then turned and fled. The next moment he was followed by a horde of indignant males from inside the barn, who chased him across the yard and into the roadway.

The afternoon's festivities finally ended with cold lunch and fond goodbyes. The families slowly reassembled their broods, and headed home before dark.

Poor Margaret and John must have been exhausted by then—

and settled into their beds with relief, as darkness once more crept into the Old House.

Her Stories

Margaret Walters had lived in places other than the Old House during her life in Kansas. She had also been married and lived on Kuenzli Creek, where she and her younger Chicago sister had homesteaded their farms.

Later, upon being widowed, she remarried and lived in Riley, Kansas. After several years there, she lost her second husband in a steam boiler accident during wheat threshing time. Of the three children from the first marriage, only John had remained a bachelor and lived with her in the Old House, just outside Alma. So she had adventure, travel, and always a rich store of tales to entertain us with.

She frequently walked up the tracks to town for groceries and other business, while living here. One day she told us a frightening story.

It was a rather cold Fall day, as she headed up the tracks on foot. She was rather bundled up, with a cap and heavy coat. She had not heard the first whistle of the train behind her, and had started across the railroad bridge over Mill Creek. She heard the whistle behind her then, and looked around to see that the engine was just coming onto the bridge. She fled across the bridge as fast as she could, all the while hearing the steam brakes of the locomotive, and the wheels squealing on the rails. She was not quite at the east end of the bridge when the engine overtook her—she felt the "cow catcher" pushing her arm.

She gave a flying leap, trying to negotiate the east bank of the creek. She did not quite make it—and plunged thirty feet down into Mill Creek waters. She had landed in the deep section, and had to swim out to the shallows. Then she discovered she wasn't wearing her coat.

The train had stopped, and the train crew had her coat up on

the bank. They explained that the sleeve of her coat was caught on the "cow catcher" apparatus and she had jumped out of her coat. The crew could not linger, as another train was behind them on schedule; and they had to go onto the siding in McFarland right away. We always sat on the floor, wide-eyed, when she told her tales.

Another, a more humorous story, was told about an incident when she was married and had three children to rear. She was doing the housework and meals, plus growing an extensive garden at the time; she had no extra time during the busy season. She learned to cut corners, where possible, especially at meal time.

She picked the new pea crop, shelled them as time permitted, cooked and served them to her family along with new potatoes. The meals were always good, she reported, but her husband always objected to finding any stringy bits of hulls or stems in the potion.

"It's impossible to keep the stems out when you're hulling peas," she told him. But he insisted, strenuously that it could be done. (Actually it was possible, but she did not see that the time involved was so necessary, what with all the other jobs on hand.)

His insistence became more forceful, so when she admonished in desperation, "All right, you go ahead and hull them—and see if it can be done."

"I'll show you how to do it without a spec in the pea dish," he announced, and when back to work—and finally came away with a crock full of clean, spotless new peas. She had to concede that they were clean as a whistle. But could she afford all the time it had taken him to do the spotless job, when so many other tasks stared her in the face?

"Yes, it looks like you might be the winner," she told him. He proudly left the house then, to assemble his tasks outdoors until

lunch time.

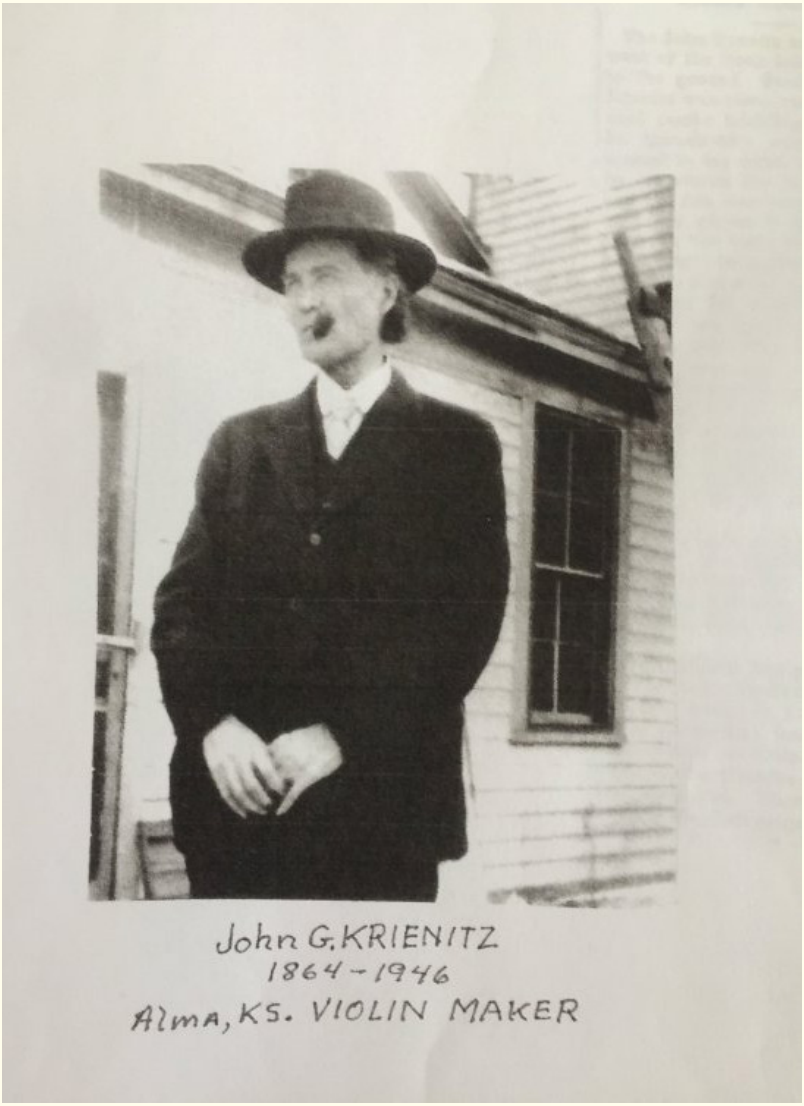
Meanwhile Margaret poured the clean peas into the pot to cook, grabbed a handful of stems and hulls and threw them into the brew also.

At lunch time, when the family was seated at the table, she announced that Dad had personally cleaned the peas, and it would be very nice to have such a clean potion to eat for once.

Well, the stems and sticks showed up, as she knew they would. But Dad did not say a word about it, the kids did not say a word, and the meal progressed agreeably. Dad always seemed to find work outdoors after that, she had ample time to do her chores in home and garden, and heard no more criticism from that quarter.

"It was kind of sneaky," she related, "but the man was happy from then on."

Due to her wide experience and amiable personality, Margaret could converse successfully with everyone on almost any subject. The children loved her and her cookies. They would sit on the floor and listen to her stories. The women-folk would confide in her with their most intimate female problems. And the men—yes, she could talk politics just as fast as they could! It may be said that everyone who ever set foot into the Old House always felt relaxed and "at home" when she was present.



John G. KRIENITZ
1864 - 1946
Alma, KS. VIOLIN MAKER

About John

The son, John Krienitz, was not only a violin maker and musician; he also had two "green thumbs," was a proverbial gardener and wine-maker, and tobacco smith. He was well known for his slow, easy-going pace, and the long curls which he wore to denote that he was a musician.

All the many relatives and all the people of the Alma area knew his prowess with the violins, and the music lessons he could impart.

His mother, however, began to suffer failing health later, and John had to frequently assume household duties as well.

I recall one afternoon in the Spring. We were in town on business, and Mother said we should run out to see Aunt Margaret. When we arrived at the Old House, we found the woman ill and in bed. She said she had indefinite problems, but was anxious to get well so she could participate in the Memorial Day ceremonies coming up at the cemetery. She wanted to see the American Legion crew do their stuff. She got her wish; she rallied and was in fair physical condition for "Decoration Day" at the cemetery that year—much to her pleasure. It proved to be her last.

While she was in fair health all summer (her house took on the spic and span appearance we were accustomed to for a time) that Fall she went downhill again and passed away quietly.

John had moved downstairs entirely but that time, and took over the household. Before long the house began to resemble bachelor's quarters. He continued his other work, nonetheless.

A community program in Alma, it may have been the county fair, involved Old John again. The downtown program called for an old time fiddler's contest. The older gentlemen from all the area came in with their fiddles, ready to do business. Of

course Old John was entered. I was there for a portion of the program, and did they every fiddle out the old tunes! Some very lively renditions.

Old John was there with his prize violin, and played a beautiful classical aria which kept everyone in silence the whole time. Probably everyone expected him to be the big winner. But he was disqualified; his number was not an old fiddler's tune. As I recall, a man by the name of Grunewald won first place, and our own neighbor from the country, John Seicgrist, was awarded second prize. He was much pleased with the large batch of soap and detergents he had won.

Later on, when I was married and living in Alma, I had occasions to drive out to the Old House to deliver a message or some item of goods to Old John. I always had some difficulty relating to the house. Its former orderliness and neatness were gone. Old Margaret had been gone a number of years, and you may know how bachelors keep the "bachelor status."

While still living in Alma, I had gone out to make a delivery to Old John one day. I found him downstairs where he usually stayed nowadays. I had remarked to him that I would like to climb the steep hill behind the house, and see what it's like up there—the view, etc. In fact, the idea had intrigued me even as a child.

"O, it's just a big hill with a lotta trees and stuff, he replied, eyes very gray as he looked up there. "Go ahead, climb up there—and tell me what you think when you get back down."

Yes, I did. For a long time I had wanted to do this. It was a steep climb upward through a bevy of trees and bushes. Finally I broke clear above the "tree-line" and found a ledge of limestone outcropping there. Above the limestone was another knoll, very grassy and clear. Finally atop this bluestem knoll, I got the view which I was wondering about for so long. The breezes were blowing lustily—Kansas style.

O yes, the view. To peer north and east, I could see Mill Creek valley and Alma. In shifting my gaze eastward, I could see the confluence of West Branch and South Branch Mill Creek with all the big timbers. And the farms down there.

I looked back over my shoulder to the west. There was West Branch valley, the railroad line, and Matthew's house where the little road ended.

After a time, I reluctantly began the long climb back down the hill towards the Old House. Over the limestone outcrop, downward through the "tree-line" again, and I could see the House down below with Old John standing down beside the house. He waved as I started down again.

When I finally returned to his side, he asked, "Well, did you see it from up there?"

"Yes I did," I replied; and waxed enthusiastically about all the views I had gotten from up there.

His gray eyes twinkled. "I knew that was up there—but no one except you was ever interested in it." His eyes twinkled again. Then suddenly his eyes changed expression drastically. He suddenly looked very pained—open mouthed, and agitated.

I wondered what was happening to the man. Was he becoming ill? Was he having a heart attack?

He was looking at my feet then so I followed his glance downward.

"Get outta that patch!" he rasped. I suddenly saw that I was standing on a very young growth of new strawberry plants in the yard.

So that was it! We had always romped in the yard with our games among the cars and shade trees before this—and it was a great surprise to see a garden out there. (I got out of there in a hurry.)

That was Old John. I saw him several more times after that. I was employed by the Kansas Highway Department then, and

they presently moved all of our crew out of Alma and into Ellsworth County and later into Republic County on subsequent assignments.

World War II had begun in earnest by then, the U.S. was in the war, and I was drafted into Service with the 17th Airborne Division at Camp Mackall, North Carolina.

Sorry

The Old House burned down one night during the War. I understand that Old John had walked to town that evening. Someone saw the fire from the road and rushed in with some other motorists to rescue most of the violins and other equipment from upstairs. Old John was moved into town, where he had passed the bulk of his violins to his near relatives except for one or two prizes which he kept for himself through his last years.

A new road now leads out to where the Old House had stood. Just to the south of it, a new home has been erected—right in the Old Yard. If you are ever out that way, do take this new road to this spot. You will still see the old foundation, and the cave-entrance into the steep hill. The ornate archway can still be seen, but the Character House can only liven in memory now.

Editor's Note

Margurete Meier Krienitz Walters was born on January 18, 1841, in Wurtemberg, Germany. In 1861, she was married to Gottlieb Krienitz, and in 1875, they moved from Wisconsin to a homestead farm in Wabaunsee County, Kansas. The farm adjoined that of Margaret's sister and brother-in-law, Christian and Ursula Troemper.

Gottlieb and Margaret were my great-great-great-grandparents. To my great-aunts, who recalled her fondly, she was "(great) Grandma Walters." Margaret's sister Ursula, was the author's grandmother—and so to him, she was a great-aunt.

"Old John" was born in Port Washington, Wisconsin, in 1864. He was 9 years old when the family moved to Kansas and 18 when his father, a veteran of the Civil War, passed away. It

was 1900 when John and his mother moved into the Character House.

I have two of John's violins. One came to me by way of my grandfather—the other was a generous gift from my friend Virginia Czirr. My father has a violin, and a really neat little ukulele that John made for my grandfather—when they were "all the rage" during the 1920s. I clearly recall, for reasons unknown, my grandfather pointing out a stump and telling me that he had helped to fell the tree—and that some of the wood was used to make violins.

Orville Saffry was 75 when he penned this recollection. He passed away 3 years later.

Mark Feiden, 2024

An interesting sidenote: In childhood, Margaret lost a brother. He disappeared while working in the fields one day and was never seen again. It was assumed that he had been carried away by indians.