

# PAST TIMES: STORIES FROM THE SHELDON'S PAST

## *Museum Offers a Look into the Life of Local Jewel, Jessica Swift*

**Jan Albers, former Executive Director, Henry Sheldon Museum**

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One of the great satisfactions of exploring history is that our lives are structured into stories. We all have a beginning, a middle and an end. I never thought I'd be one of those people who read the obituaries, but now I sometimes find myself attracted to the final stories of strangers: she was born on a farm, made wonderful pies and died in her bed; he started out stocking shelves, acquired a car dealership and died of a heart attack on the golf course. Even the simplest life ends in a drama.

Some people's stories attract more attention than others. You cannot live in Middlebury for long without hearing tales about Jessica Swift, one of the town's greatest philanthropists, who died in 1982, a staggering 110 years after her birth. I remember seeing news clippings from her funeral when I first moved here. She was an old woman for so many decades that it was hard to see her any other way.



***Baby Jessica Stewart, Collection of  
Henry Sheldon Museum. Gift of Joan***

A recent gift to the Sheldon has changed that for our community. Joan Korda and her much-lamented husband, Murray, graced the famed B & B, Historic Brookside Farm in Orwell for many years. One day last winter she phoned the Museum to say that she had sold the place and was relocating her antiques business to Bridport. She could not take everything with her, and had something she thought we might appreciate. Would the Sheldon be interested in Jessica Swift's baby portrait?

Of course we would. Who could imagine that Jessica Swift had ever been a baby? The harder it was to picture, the more intriguing the thought of seeing it became. The oil painting is an oval, showing a blue-eyed, rosy-cheeked blonde baby with the solemn,

slightly wary expression babies so often have. We know nothing of who painted it, or where it was painted, but can assume that it was done shortly after her birth in 1871. This lovely baby was a daughter of privilege, with a pedigree as blue-blooded as you could have in rural Vermont. She was the great-granddaughter of Horatio Seymour, who built the yellow brick mansion next to the Post Office which she would later donate to the town as the Community House. Her Seymour grandmother, Emma, married a young lawyer named Philip Battell. Their daughter, also Emma, was the sister of the well-known Joseph Battell, who would become Jessica's favorite uncle. Emma Battell married John Wolcott Stewart, and they were the parents of baby Jessica. The two sides of the family produced many distinguished lawyers, College trustees, philanthropists, governors and U.S. senators.

The young Jessica Stewart, as she was then, began life in the Community House, her family moving to the big white house on Stewart Lane now known as the Swift House when she was five. She and her twin brother, Robert, were the youngest of five children, and some mishap during the birth put their mother into a wheelchair for the rest of her life. Robert was also sickly, and only lived to the age of ten. When her father's high-flying career took him to Washington as a Senator, he took his daughter with him to act as his hostess in the capital. She did it dutifully, with breaks in Europe, where she was studying singing and piano.

A.J. Schillare. *Jessica Stewart (Swift)*, c. 1895  
Collection of Henry Sheldon Museum



In her twenties, she fell in love with a poor young clergyman, the Reverend J. Walter Sylvester. Her father forbade her to marry him, yet their love survived eight years through frequent letters and rare visits. When she realized that

her beloved was dying of consumption in 1908, she eloped with him so she could care for him until the end. A year later he was gone, and the prodigal daughter returned to her father's fold.

In 1913, in her early 40s, she married again, this time to a man more in keeping with Senator Stewart's wishes for his favored child. Charles Swift was from a distinguished Middlebury family, but had spent most of his career in Michigan, where he made a fortune in the mining business. They settled into his mansion there in Grosse Pointe, but Jessica's elderly father in Middlebury continued to pine for her care and company. Swift had no time for the town, but he let her come back often and was persuaded to buy her a lovely summer home on Lake Champlain, also dubbed Grosse Pointe, which is now owned by Sylvia Keiser.



*Lake Champlain Shoreline, Grosse Pointe, c.1930*  
Collection of Henry Sheldon Museum

Charles Swift turned his attention to trolley cars, and investing in the Philippines, both of which ventures turned large profits for the family. He and Jessica spent a great deal of time traveling the world pursuing his business interests. In 1929, Swift was taken ill and withdrew all of his money from the stock market in order to set up family trusts in his will. He died in June, before the stock market collapse, thereby inadvertently preserving his assets.

Jessica was now free to return to her beloved Middlebury, where she spent her many remaining decades giving her fortune to those in need. Her favorite charities included the Grenfell Mission in Labrador (she helped to start the Dog Team Tavern in its behalf), the Middlebury Fire Department, the Congregational Church, the College and many others. A Yankee by birth and temperament, she only gave to those who seemed to be making a good-faith effort to help themselves.

She continued to be an active citizen around town even after she turned 100. She was a regular at Lockwood's Restaurant, where she ate oyster stew. She sat in the Battell family pew, number 23, at the church. She wore her red Stewart tartan suit every year at Christmas. I remember once hearing former College President Olin Robinson describe seeing her on the Middlebury green during the Bicentennial celebration in 1976. He brought his son up to meet her, and she asked the little boy his age. When he told her, she said, "That's just how old I was when I played on this green at the Centennial celebration!"

When she died in 1982, Professor Stephen Freeman delivered her eulogy at the Congregational Church, relating a story about the Sheldon Museum. “She and her grandfather Philip Battell and Henry Sheldon used to have many chats together, she as an interpreter since both men were very deaf. So we understand her love for the Sheldon Museum, and her generosity in constructing a fireproof wing for its precious records.”

Many of her letters and papers remain with us at the Museum, where the public is welcome to come and see them. They document the productive life of a woman who knew what it meant to live in a community, and who devoted herself to strengthening those bonds. Now, thanks to Joan Korda, we can all have a fresh glimpse at the beginning of the long story of baby Jessica.



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