

Moses Hoffman VanHorn

By Dorothy Davis

Serving the public is not easy. Few who do are appreciated at the time they are working. When one meets a person whom during his lifetime the old and the young, the good and the bad, the bright and the dull respect and like, he probably has found someone who has characteristics of greatness. Such a man was Moses Hoffman VanHorn who was groceryman, high school principal, superintendent of schools, college professor of mathematics and college dean.

Moses Hoffman VanHorn was born April 7, 1872¹, into a family who lived at Sheets Mill between West Milford and Lost Creek in Harrison County. As a boy Mosey, as he was known throughout his life, could visit the graves of his great grandfather and his grandfather in the Sheets Mill Cemetery² not far from his home. William VanHorn³ (May 2, 1764 - Mar. 1831), the great grandfather, shortly after he married Sarah Rudderow (Dec. 21, 1771-Je. 3, 1839) left New Jersey for Virginia.⁴ He had bought Jan. 15, 1789, from William Rice, innkeeper of Woolwich, NJ, 250 acres on the West Fork River.⁵ He and his wife would find the land, deal in land, and give birth to twelve children, one of whom was Moses Hoffman⁶, grandfather of the subject of this sketch. Moses Hoffman I (Jl. 4, 1809-Sept. 21, 1860) married Elsie Drummond (1805 -Je.7, 1877) and had seven children. William Bernard VanHorn (Sept.6, 1848-Nov. 28, 1911) who married Elsie Kennedy (Jan. 24, 1850-May 24, 1904) was one of these children.⁷

William Bernard VanHorn must have chosen to farm land which was the VanHorn homeplace for on April 1, 1877, Austin VanHorn and three other heirs of Moses Hoffman VanHorn I conveyed 299 acres at Sheets Mill to W. B. VanHorn to settle their father's estate.⁸ By this time W. B. and Elsie VanHorn had three children: Ivie who was seven years old, Moses Hoffman, five, and William A., one. A fourth and last child Ora would be born to W.B. and Elsie in 1879.⁹ As the children grew, the parents thought Moses to be less studious than the other children for as the father once said, "I do not know when Moses gets his lessons." But Moses in adulthood told a friend, "My best hour of study was usually when I did the family milking. I solved my mathematical problems largely as I sat on a milking stool. I reviewed my history as I hurried the cows back to the field. If the rain drove us from work in the fields, I usually stretched out on my back and reviewed my education up to that point and worked to some extent on my philosophy of life while others told stories and chatted about community affairs that had little meaning and less importance."¹⁰

Ivie, the oldest child, was precocious musically. The parents purchased for her a reed organ which Moses was not allowed to touch. Not to be outdone, the boy saved his nickels and pennies and bought himself a harmonica. He became expert with the instrument and helped form a kind of orchestra with those who played fiddles and drums. The group was invited to play for a dance in the community. He knew his parents objected to dancing and when his father said, "Some may come with whiskey and make a rough house. I would rather you not go," Moses stayed home. The boy had never had an overcoat and when his mother had wanted to pin a shawl around his shoulders, he refused it. The day after the dance W. B. VanHorn saddled two horses and told Moses that the two were going to Clarksburg. After the ride to town, the father left the horses at a livery and took his son to a clothing store where he purchased the lad a suit of clothing and an overcoat. Packaged separately, the suit in one saddlebag and the overcoat in another, the two rode happily home.¹¹

Mosey's statement as to study and the suit-overcoat incident tell a great deal about the boy's childhood and youth in the 1870's and 1880's. His great grandfather William was with the Seventh Day Baptists bound for Salem in 1792, but stopped with others near Hepzibah in Harrison County and formed a church which disappeared circa 1802. William VanHorn established a homeplace at Sheets Mill and April 8, 1822, made "a free donation" of 1 acre and 2 quarters to the Seventh Day Baptists in Lost Creek for a church.¹² The young Mosey would become a member of the Calvinistic church group when he reached the age of accountability around twelve years of age. The church, always interested in education, was concerned in the 1880's because so many of its young people who left West Virginia to attend the denominational college at Alfred, NY, stayed in New York after they graduated. Salem Seventh Day Baptist people led the Salem citizens who attended the Methodist Conference in the 1880's to bid for the Methodist college to come to Salem. When Salem lost out to Buckhannon by one vote because some feared noise from the trains would detract from study, the Seventh Day Baptists decided to form a college which opened in 1888, one year before Wesleyan College. Among the ninety-seven students enrolled in 1889-1890 were Ivie VanHorn and Moses H. VanHorn. W. B. VanHorn was named a member of the board of directors of the college in 1889 and continued to serve on the board until his death Nov. 28, 1911.¹³

Although he did not yet hold a college degree, the board of education in Shinnston hired Moses VanHorn to be principal of its high school in 1894-1895. This was a busy year in the VanHorn family. William B. VanHorn bought a lot in Salem in October and proceeded to make plans to leave the farm and live in the house he would build for his family on Main Street.¹⁴ His daughter Ivie who had married M. Wardner Davis August 13, 1891¹⁵, had come to Salem to live and his second son William attended Salem College. Moses Hoffman was in love. He had begun

to court Metta Wilson who was a member of the first class at Salem College in 1899 and was the daughter of Hiram Wilson, one of the leading citizens of Salem. At the end of one year in Shinnston, M. H. VanHorn returned to Salem to finish his college work. The SEVENTH ANNUAL COMMENCEMENT PROGRAM of Salem College lists M. H. VanHorn as one of the speakers on June 17, 1896. Less than a month later on July 7, 1896, Moses H. VanHorn married Metta Wilson in a ceremony presided over by Theodore L. Gardiner, minister of the Salem Seventh Day Baptist Church.¹⁶ Moses VanHorn received an A.B. degree from Salem College in 1897.

Mosey VanHorn had bought April 1, 1891, a lot in Salem on the southeast corner of West Virginia Avenue and West High Street for \$800 in cash and an agreement to pay \$200 on April 1, 1896, 97, 98.¹⁷ In 1896 with a wife and plans to build a house which rose on the lot he owned, he needed money. He went into the grocery-store business with his brother-in-law M. Wardner Davis. Salem was a boom town at the turn of the century and the business prospered. On October 21, 1899, a daughter, Hallie Florence, was born to Moses and Metta VanHorn. The registry of births gives the occupation of the father as "merchant."¹⁸ even though college catalogs and college yearbooks in later years list VanHorn as having been principal of Salem High School from 1897-1901.¹⁹ He must have stayed in the grocery business until 1902 or 1903, for I heard the statement in 1931, "When I lived in Salem [circa 1901-1904] Mosey VanHorn had a store."²⁰ By 1902 the brother-in-law had left the grocery business to build and operate a cement-block factory. In 1903 Moses VanHorn decided to change the course of his life. He closed his business, attended summer terms at West Virginia University from 1903-1905 and took the position as principal of Salem High School when it moved in 1904 to the new brick building the school board had built in 1903. After two years as principal, which included part-time teaching, VanHorn in 1906 resigned and became Professor of Mathematics at Salem College. He attended Cornell University during the summer of 1907 and was awarded a master's degree in 1909.

The workday early in the twentieth century was from sunup to sundown and beyond. Stores opened at six in the morning and stayed open during the evening. People worked harder than their counterparts in the 1990's, took few if any vacations, and stopped work only to observe their Sabbath Day. VanHorn's work in the college and his church sounds like a full-time job. He was part of a male quartet as early as 1902, member of the Sabbath School Board of the General Conference of his church 1900-1904; director of Salem College 1904-1933. He held most of the offices in his church and when he was only thirty-six years old, his church elected him president of the General Conference which met in Boulder, Colorado, in 1908.²¹ He was a deacon in the Salem Church

Circa 1908 Moses and Metta VanHorn adopted as their son a boy who had been born a Simpson in Cincinnati, Ohio.²² They gave the boy the name William VanHorn. Hallie, the daughter, early showed signs of talent in music. She chose piano as the instrument she would master. Moses VanHorn purchased an automobile when the vehicles became popular and took for rides his nieces and nephews when they were children. One niece wrote: "Uncle Hoffman didn't like his first name; so we always called him Uncle Hoffman though Aunt Ivie's children called him Uncle Moses. In the order of Grandparent VanHorn's children he came between Ivie and Willie I think. There was a short stretch of concrete road leading to the Industrial Home for Girls at the West End of Salem where Uncle Hoffman used to thrill us by accelerating his car to 40 miles an hour while we squealed and Aunt Mettie shrieked from the back seat, 'Mosie, be careful!' She remains in my mind the prime example of a bossy, annoying back-seat driver. I never could see that Uncle Hoffman slowed down any. Perhaps this is the reason I don't think of either of them as being the dominant member. They were a devoted couple, very much in love."²³

In the spring of 1915 M. H. VanHorn accepted the position of superintendent of Salem independent District Schools. He would be in charge of the high school, the elementary school in the West End of town plus the elementary school in the high school building. An addition to the high school building in 1913 had doubled the floor space of the 1903 building but still the classrooms overflowed because the glass industry which followed the petroleum boom had brought many new families to the town. It would take an organizer like VanHorn to manage the scene. The supervisor of music in the schools 1917-1920 said the teachers could tell if things were not going well with their superintendent: "If he chewed his mustache as he came up the steps of the school building which housed his office, we knew he was swamped with problems."²⁴

Moses VanHorn always wore a mustache. It was jet black as was his hair. He was probably around five foot ten inches in height and thin. He was taciturn, but like many great educators, his mere presence put him in command of a room. The few words he spoke counted because they were direct. He had the faculty of seeing the needs and the possibilities of youth and moving to open doors for them. Oscar Andre, a son of an immigrant Belgian glass worker, showed promise. VanHorn went to the boy's father and mother and persuaded them to let the boy attend the local college from which he graduated and went on to study law at the University of Virginia. Sylvia Kennedy Davis was skilled in shorthand and typing and said that despite attending lectures and musicals at the college, she knew nothing of the institution. She thought she would attend a business college. "Mr. VanHorn came to our house and talked to father and mother about my enrolling in Salem college."²⁵

In 1920 at the end of Sylvia Kennedy Davis' junior year in high school, VanHorn left public education to be dean and professor of mathematics at the college, a position he would hold through 1932. As a teacher he had the art of great teaching. "He made it easy. He would walk into the classroom, casually sit down at the desk and show us that mathematics was very simple." The

same person who made the statement and said she went to him if she had any problem for the dean always seemed "to be on my side and when I applied for a teaching position, he sent his son with his automobile to take me for an interview." ²⁶ Another former student said of his teaching: "One day I went to see the dean because I was determined to drop a course in mathematics. He listened to me attentively. I can't remember how he did it, but I left his office still signed up. He taught the course and I wound up tutoring a girl in trigonometry. I wonder how he turned me around? . . . I can see now that he was a creative listener and that he placed emphasis on the value of the individual." ²⁷

As a dean, VanHorn was in complete control. Sylvia Kennedy Davis remembers that as a student she sat one day with fellow students in the auditorium noisily chatting while they waited for chapel to begin. "Dean VanHorn appeared at the top of the stairs leading to the auditorium, stairs at the side of the room. Immediately everyone was quiet." ²⁸ Yet he operated as if he believed that the greatest sin in the world was man's inhumanity to man. If he learned a student had financial difficulties, he and the president of the college tried to work out a plan to assist the student. His son Bill once said that during his youth when he was into every kind of orneriness, his father did not reprimand him. Once his father stopped his automobile, told his son to climb in and as they drove through the streets of the town, the father said, "Son, growing up is a difficult thing to do." ²⁹ Sylvia Kennedy Davis says that when her husband Edward was hired as a young man to manage and coach all athletics, Dean VanHorn did not try to advise the coach: "He turned the department over to Ed and let him run it. He put complete trust in Ed." ³⁰ The president of the college wrote of VanHorn's regime:

"Dean VanHorn was a born disciplinarian. His experience in the public schools had improved this characteristic until he was declared one of the best disciplinarians known to the schoolmen of the state. His contribution to the large number of teachers that Salem College prepared will always be rated very high. He could settle a serious difficulty with a student or with a group of students more completely and more satisfactorily to the persons concerned than anyone with whom the writer has ever worked. He could preside at faculty meetings with teachers old and new and have very little friction. Nothing but years of experience will give to one such complete mastery of leadership. The dean's addresses to the students and faculty were always brief and pointed.

"Dean VanHorn was especially interested in athletics although he never actively participated. His first duty when he was appointed dean was to make a trip halfway across the continent to investigate the likely success of a coach for football and other sports. The college had never had a football team. The president had been corresponding with this candidate for some weeks, but the administration and the executive committee decided that no man in the employment of the school would do as good a job in judging the probable success of a coach as would Dean VanHorn. Before he returned, he had hired a man who remained four years and built up a very fine football team.

"Dean VanHorn wrote very little, but what he did write was after the mathematical formula -- -- a straight line is the shortest distance between two points. After he had solved the problem, he didn't care to put on the embellishments.

"Dean VanHorn was a community man. He became a charter member of the Salem Kiwanis Club. He served as its president and continued active work in the organization to the end of his life. His work in this club did much to advance community projects. As an official of Salem High School, the dean was respected by all who knew him. He had a rare and discriminating judgment." ³¹

The statement that Dean VanHorn was "a community man" and a charter member of the Salem Kiwanis Club does not mean he joined all organizations in the town. In the early twentieth century the two most popular orders in Salem were the Independent Order of Odd Fellows and the Masonic Order A.F.&A.M. M.H. VanHorn would join neither because it was against his personal code of conduct to belong to a secret society. ³²

In the summer of 1933 Dean VanHorn resigned his position with Salem College and signed on as supervisor of high schools for the Harrison County School System. He had worked in the position four months and was looking forward to a wonderful Christmas. His daughter Hallie who had married Homer May June 3, 1926, had given birth to a son Lewis Hoffman May November 28, 1928. ³³ The dean had purchased a watch for the boy who at five years old would be great fun at Christmastime. M. H. VanHorn had a cold but was not thought to be seriously ill. He died at age sixty-two of a heart attack on December 24, 1933. ³⁴ His funeral was held in the auditorium of Salem College December 27, 1933, followed by interment in the I.O.O.F. Cemetery in Salem. His widow lived until March 26, 1944. ³⁵

FOOTNOTES

1. Harrison County, WV REGISTER OF BIRTHS, 1, p. 189.
2. Also called the VanHorn Cemetery.
3. William VanHorn was the son of Philip VanHorn who was a merchant in New York City and later a judge in New Jersey. Francis M. Marvin, THE VANHORN FAMILY HISTORY, pp 118-19.
4. IBID.
5. Harrison County, WV, DEED BOOK 5, p. 314.
6. Grace VanHorn Genealogical Papers.
7. W. Guy Tetrick, CEMETERY RECORDS; Harrison County, WV, REGISTER OF DEATHS, 3, p. 4; 4, p. 209.
8. Harrison County, WV, DEED BOOK 61, p. 435.
9. William Austin VanHorn died in Salem May 28, at the age of 23 after he developed blood poisoning following a kick from a horse. Harrison County, WV, REGISTER OF DEATHS 1, p. 203; REGISTER OF BIRTHS 2, pp. 27, 57.
10. Dr. Sirius Orestes Bond, THE LIGHT OF THE HILLS, p. 216.
11. IBID., 217-18.
12. Harrison County WV, DEED BOOK 15, p. 312.
13. S. O. Bond, pp. 70-3, 432.
14. Harrison County, WV DEED BOOK 93, p. 449.
15. _____, MARRIAGE RECORD 6, p. 79
16. IBID., 8, ppp. 8, 248.
17. Harrison County, WV, DEED BOOK 95, p. 283.
18. _____, REGISTER OF BIRTHS, 4, p. 41.
19. HISTORICAL AND INDUSTRIAL REVIEW OF THE CITY OF SALEM, W. VA., 1905 states: "The principals who have since then [the high school opened in 1898] had charge for successive years were W. M. Blair, who left the public schools for work at the college; J. N. Davis, now a justice in Clarksburg; Joseph Rosier, for some year past superintendent of the public schools of Fairmont; and M. H. VanHorn, the present efficient principal, who should be promoted to the superintendency of the city schools, and not required to devote much time to teaching, but to securing the most efficient work in all departments."
20. Bertha Holden Upton to Dorothy Davis, 1931.
21. SALEM COLLEGE COMMENCEMENT PROGRAM 1902; S. Orestes Bond, pp. 219-20, 432.
22. Grace VanHorn Genealogical Papers.
23. Virginia Bond Spicer, "My Uncles and Aunts", copy of manuscript in the possession of Dorothy Davis.
24. Mildred Lowther in a conversation with Dorothy Davis circa 1955.
25. Sylvia Kennedy Davis in a conversation with Dorothy Davis September 27, 1992.
26. Mary Randolph Hulin in a conversation with Dorothy Davis September 27, 1992.
27. Virginia Bond Spicer.
28. Sylvia Kennedy Davis.
29. William VanHorn in a conversation with Dorothy Davis circa 1955.
30. Sylvia Davis
31. Sirius Orestes Bond, pp. 220-2.
32. Edward Davis, M.D. to Dorothy Davis circa 1938.
33. Harrison County, WV, MARRIAGE RECORD 41, p. 204; REGISTER OF BIRTHS; 14, p. 155.
34. _____, REGISTER OF DEATHS 10, p. 270-A.
35. IBID., 13, p. 270-D.

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 Mary Randolph Hulin, Aug. 27, 1992.
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 William VanHorn, circa 1955.