

The Scene In South Jersey

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A Christmas gift for the ages

The tattered book, someone's long-ago Christmas gift, wasn't gathering dust. But it wasn't attracting attention, either.

I found it the other day hidden in an antique shop in the Cherry Hill Mall, of all places.

Here and There: Songs of the Land and Sea That Came to Me was written by Sara Louisa Vickers Oberholtzer and published in 1927 by the Penn Publishing Co. of Philadelphia.

A collection of poems penned by Sara beginning in 1891, it was inscribed by the author to a Mrs. Smith: "With kind regards, Merry Christmas, from Mrs. Oberholtzer, Christmas 1929."

Inside was a tiny, colorful card depicting the three wise men and a camel in the desert: "MAY YOUR CHRISTMAS BE BLESSED," signed "Mrs. S.L. Oberholtzer."

Who was Sara Louisa Vickers Oberholtzer? Well, she was old, that's for sure. The accompanying photograph shows her picture in the front of the book. But as



For The Inquirer: MARK STEIN

This 1927 book of poems by Sara Louisa Vickers Oberholtzer turned up in an antique shop in the Cherry Hill Mall.

evidenced by her poems and their footnotes, she was much more than that.

Clearly, Sara was well-to-do. She traveled all over Europe and the United States. She wrote "A Tribute" in June 1910 in Naworth Castle, Cumbria County, England, "when the guest was Rosalind, the Countess of Carlisle." Other poems were written in Germany, Austria, Sweden, Norway, Switzerland and France.

She was a woman of prominence. She read "A

Salutation" when installed as president of the Pennsylvania Women's Press Association in Philly on Feb. 26, 1903.

She fought slavery. "To the Friends of Freedom" was read at a reunion of the Abolitionists in Association Hall in Philly on the anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation.

She opposed liquor. "Auf Wiedersehen," in memory of Mrs. S.J.C. Downs, president of the New Jersey Woman's Christian Temperance Union, was read in Ocean City on July 24, 1892.

She wrote "A Comrade's Greeting" for the World W.C.T.U. convention in Chicago on Oct. 16, 1893, and "The Flower Show" at the national W.C.T.U. convention in St. Louis on Nov. 16, 1896.

She was an educator. "Six Little Girls" was written for a Philly convention of the King's Daughters in 1903, "and used by the author for thirty years as one of the stories in introducing the School Savings Banks into the public schools of the United States and Canada."

She translated Goethe, Schiller and Ludwig Uhland. She wrote songs and hymns. Her husband, John Oberholtzer, sang "An Anniversary Song" at the anniversary celebration of the Lutheran Church in Lionville, Chester County, Pa., in 1902.

Their son, Ellis Paxson Oberholtzer, was a distinguished historian.

Many of Sara's poems — one of which dates from 92 years ago yesterday, Dec. 23, 1904 — were written in Longport, Atlantic County. She mentioned the nearby Great Egg Harbor Inlet.

But of all the lovely verses in her book, I'm drawn repeatedly to one written for a friend who was celebrating her 80th birthday on May 8, 1925. It's called "To Mrs. Lucretia L. Blankenburg," and it speaks eloquently to us all: *The world is a beautiful place to be, And it has been kind to thee and me.*

*We have seen the slaves we have
plead for, free,
And women get suffrage liberty.
We have seen two war-clouds rage
and be
Loud and long and of wild degree,
With their aftermath of
perplexity;
The old stage coach, the turnpike
fee,
The horse-drawn cars, run
painfully,
Flourish and fade consistently:
The tallow candle improved to be
A blast of electricity:
Have watched the currents of air
agree
To be lines of traffic on land and
sea.
Much more than a life-time's
pedigree
Is writ on our minds and memory.
We have kept in touch with
humanity,
Sharing its sorrows, success and
glee
All these eighty years, and we,
Ignoring all thoughts of debility,
Delight in happy activity.
This world is a beautiful place to
be.
Today it is full of flowers for thee.*

Old newspaper clippings show that Sara Louisa Vickers Oberholtzer of Philly's Germantown section died on Feb. 2, 1930, less than six weeks after inscribing that book to Mrs. Smith as a Christmas gift.

I wonder if Sara could have imagined that, approaching the next century, her poetry would become my Christmas gift to you.