

IMAGES

... then and now

From The Indian Hill Historical Society



Remembering Louise and Will Semple

The lives of former village residents Louise and William Semple had an immense impact upon Cincinnati and their lifework furthered the understanding of ancient history. For almost 40 years the couple's home was located on Shawnee Run Rd., then called Silver Poplar Farm and later renamed Mt. Olympus.

Born in 1882, Will Semple, a Missouri native with a Princeton Ph.D, came to Cincinnati in 1910 as a UC professor of Greek and Latin. After publishing his dissertation he married Louise Taft in 1917. Louise was the daughter of Charles Phelps Taft (publisher of the Times Star) and Annie Sinton Taft – founders of the current Taft Museum of Art. In 1925 Dr. & Mrs. Semple purchased their Indian Hill home and 23 acres, later increasing their holdings to over 70 acres. They engaged architect Standish Meacham to create a Greek Revival style home around the existing 19th century farmhouse. The house had a double staircase, 2 living rooms, a dining room, library, and upstairs living quarters. It was spacious, luxurious, and welcoming. There was swimming pool with bathhouse and a large barn nearby. The pool was always open to UC students; and many youths frequented it. The Semples encouraged cordiality, nurturing productive interaction between faculty, students, and their friends.

In 1920 Dr. Semple became Head of the Classics Department – a position he held for over three decades. Semple's philosophy was holistic and interdisciplinary; he viewed history, archeology, and linguistic and literary cultures as part of an entire spectrum of classical studies. The Semples sought to make UC's Classics Department the finest in the USA; and with this mission and Louise's fortune, they endeavored to accomplish this mutual goal. Distinguished professors moved to Cincinnati, and Classics classes expanded in their scope and number of offerings. Carl Blegen was hired in 1927. Previously the Assistant Director of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens, he had a reputation as a scholar of prehistoric Greece and was an experienced excavator.

With funding from the Semples and the 1931 approval of the Turkish government, Blegen organized a UC expedition to Troy to resume the study of its past. Made famous by Homer's Iliad, Troy was the site of nine settlements, the earliest dating back to the Neolithic Age. The Semples, Professor Blegen, UC Classics students, and invited colleagues and friends traveled to Troy for seven consecutive summers on archeological excavations to explore the evolution of culture and civilization in the area. During their digs, homes, cemeteries, and deposits of pottery, terra cotta, bone and stone were uncovered, as well as intact funerary urns containing ashes, bones, and small decorative ornaments. The Cincinnati team identified distinct strata at the Trojan Mound and established ties between mainland Greece and Troy, providing scientific evidence of the Trojan War of epic poetry.



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Remembering Louise and Will Semple – Cont'd.

The archeologists followed the same basic pattern each summer. They traveled by ocean liner from New York to the Mediterranean, stopping in Rome and then Athens, where Blegen and Will Semple caught up with archeologist friends with whom they had shared previous digs.

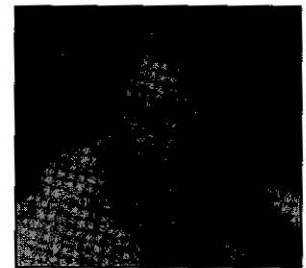


Upon arrival in Turkey, diggers were assigned areas for research. Each of the 10 -12 archeologists had a group of about 5 natives to direct, and Dr. Blegen oversaw the entire operation. With small shovels and brooms, dirt was removed. Carefully measuring, mapping, photographing, recording, and dating each item, the band of diggers unearthed various artifacts. They wore hats, mufflers, goggles, and long sleeved clothing to minimize exposure to the constant wind and the sand that nonetheless permeated hair and clothing. The group was aided in their

routine by about 100 native helpers who liked the work and returned to assist the Cincinnati expedition for all seven years.

They lived in a portable prefabricated home that had been shipped from the US and contained everything except electricity and a refrigerator. Food was brought in daily from the nearest town 20 miles away. Turkish natives staffed the house, doing housekeeping and cooking. The team ate their meals together and occasionally played cards for entertainment. The work was demanding and exhausting, but there was time for celebrations. Once on their anniversary a banquet was given for Dr. and Mrs. Semple along with humorous "Doctor of Digging" decrees. One graduate student received his Ph.D in Troy the same day his classmates in Cincinnati were attending commencement exercises. The UC expedition also discovered a 300-foot wall with bas-relief, the earliest proof of culture in the Aegean area. These important archeological findings were documented in publications; and all discovered objects remained in Turkey.

When Louise Taft Semple died in 1961, her estate provided for charities and community organizations. She made a magnificent bequest to UC promoting the study of Classics -- the largest single gift ever made to the university. Rare paintings were given to the Taft Museum of Art, objects of antiquity and art went to the Cincinnati Art Museum, and significant donations were made to Christ Church, Children's Hospital, and the Cincinnati Symphony. These gifts reflected her strong interest in the educational and cultural life of Cincinnati. In 1950, when Dr. Semple retired from UC after 40 years, he received the honorary title of Professor Emeritus. He died at age 80 in 1962, praised for his classical scholarship and excavation accomplishments, and the role he played in cementing the reputation of the UC Classics Department as top rate.



Because of the Semples, the UC Classics Department is internationally recognized for teaching and research. The Classical Library is among the finest in North America, and attracts numerous visiting scholars. The department offers generous fellowships and supports a rich program of research and excavation.

Known for her gracious smile, Louise Taft Semple, and her academic husband, William, were an enthusiastic couple whose patronage nourished significant archeological research while they were alive and whose endowment helped the UC Classics Department become world-renowned.

Photographs courtesy of the Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati
Special thanks to Margo Tytus for assistance with this article.