The Queen of American Agriculture

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An Independent Woman Emerges
If a woman can make bread and direct some one else how to make bread, she can do the infinitely simpler thing—make hay. If she can make butter or teach another the delicate process that involves painstaking care and sound judgment, she can certainly accomplish the comparatively simple process of growing corn. If she can take care of boys and girls, how easy is it in comparison to maintain the health and promote the growth of cattle, horses and sheep.

—Virginia Meredith, Indianapolis News, 3 January 1900

The Meredith family’s famous Oakland Farm and its prized Shorthorns provided the backdrop against which Virginia Claypool Meredith would excel in life. Oakland Farm belonged to Virginia’s father-in-law, Civil War General Solomon Meredith, who was well known throughout eastern Indiana and beyond. Virginia’s connection to the general and his farm elevated her status in and around Cambridge City, provided her with important social and political connections, and equipped her with a practical education on managing a livestock farm. Solomon Meredith and Oakland Farm were the conduits that would propel Virginia Meredith to the national stage as an agriculturalist and home economist.

General Solomon Meredith (1810–75) originally hailed from Guilford County, North Carolina. As a young man of nineteen and standing six feet seven inches, Solomon and a friend, Richard J. Hubbard, decided to seek their fortunes in the West.1 They set off and arrived in Indiana from North Carolina on May 5, 1829, after walking the entire distance.

Solomon Meredith’s first job was cutting cords of wood, which earned him six dollars a month, a sizable amount considering he only had “cash capital
of twelve and a half cents” when he arrived in Indiana. During the 1830s and 1840s, Solomon bought and sold plotted lots in Cambridge City. He was frugal with his earnings, and “with the money thus accumulated, he possessed a capital sufficient to engage in other pursuits where little capital was required.”

Soon thereafter, Solomon began a journey into politics that occupied much of his time from 1834 to 1859. He was elected sheriff of Wayne County in 1834 at the age of twenty-four and reelected in 1836. It was during his first term that he married Anna Hannah from Centerville, Indiana, on March 17, 1836. Anna was born in Brownsville, Pennsylvania, on April 12, 1812. She was the daughter of Samuel Hannah, who was, at the time of the marriage, the clerk of the Wayne Circuit Court in Richmond, Indiana, and would later become Indiana’s secretary of state. Solomon and Anna Meredith would have four children: one daughter who died in infancy and three sons.

At the end of his second term as county sheriff, Solomon opened up a mercantile store in 1838 in the local community of Milton. This successful dry goods business was later located in Cambridge City in 1839. He managed the store until its sale in 1843. He also served as director and financial agent of the Indiana Central Railroad and would later become the president of the Cincinnati and Chicago Railroad Company.

Solomon Meredith was a staunch Republican. He was a delegate at the nominating convention for the Whig Party in 1840 and 1848, and served as a delegate to the 1856 Republican National Convention. In 1865, Lincoln’s funeral train made three 15-second stops at Cambridge City; one was at Solomon’s Oakland Farm to honor “a great personal friend.”

Solomon’s visibility as the county sheriff and as a successful local businessman earned him sufficient credibility and recognition, which got him elected three times as a representative for Wayne County to the Indiana State General Assembly from 1846 to 1849.

By the mid–1840s, Solomon Meredith was well connected to influential people at all levels of government. Knowing the right people in the right places allowed him to garner important political appointments. In 1849, President Zachary Taylor appointed Solomon as the United States marshal for the District of Indiana, a position he held for four years. Solomon returned to state politics as a state representative in 1855, rising soon thereafter to the high rank of chairman of the Committee of Ways and Means.

The General Assembly approved articles of incorporation for Cambridge City on February 12, 1841, and Solomon became president of the city’s first
board of trustees. Other publicly elected or appointed offices held by Solomon included Wayne County clerk (1859–61) and surveyor-general of the Montana Territory (1867–69). He seemed never to lose his connections with politicians at all levels. This was clearly illustrated through Virginia Meredith’s recollections of one trip in particular:

. . . I recall the experience of a day in Washington [D.C.] several years after the [Civil] war. My husband, Mr. Henry C. Meredith, and myself were there with his father, General Meredith. It being my first visit to the capital, sight-seeing was naturally our occupation. General Grant was at that time President. Our call at the White House was by some inopportune occurrence delayed until after the hour when the President received, but for my gratification the call was undertaken so that I might at least see the interior of the White House. Just as we were approaching the entrance a man of rather commonplace appearance, wholly unattended, came out. After an instant of attentive regard on the part of each, he and General Meredith made a quick movement toward each other, cordially grasped each other by the hand and exclaimed both at the same moment, “General, I’m glad to see you!” and then in the most informal manner imaginable, outside the White House door, my husband and I were presented to General Grant, who at once, with the most kind and insistent manner, turned and entered with us, postponing his drive until he had talked with General Meredith and shown me the East room. I congratulate myself upon the informal introduction which so auspiciously gave me so distinguished a guide to White House scenes.

That same day we took dinner with ex-President [Andrew] Johnson, who, like General Meredith, was a native of North Carolina. Their theme of conversation during dinner was their native state, its great sons, its colonial and revolutionary history—all those reminiscent lines into which men fall so naturally and unaffectedly when life has reached its zenith.9

While he was busy representing his constituents’ interests, Solomon Meredith still found time to remain involved with livestock production.

During the time he was discharging all these official duties, he found time to engage in agricultural pursuits, and has probably done more than any other man in southeastern Indiana to improve its livestock, having imported many rare breeds, particularly of sheep and cattle.10
Virginia Claypool Meredith wrote on May 12, 1897, that Solomon Meredith’s “love for farming and his interest in advanced agriculture was deep and abiding. His public spirit in importing pure bred cattle and sheep, and also in promoting agricultural fairs, was of very substantial benefit to Eastern Indiana.”

Solomon Meredith’s influence as a rancher grew in 1851 when he bought a 180-acre farm on the outskirts of Cambridge City. Purchased from the Ira Lackey estate at a sheriff’s sale, it cost Solomon $6,500, which was two-thirds of its appraised value. He named the property Oakland Farm. The farm included a beautiful Federal-style home built in 1836 about three blocks south of the National Road, the nation’s first federally funded highway. The house was described as “a very handsome red brick structure of 20 rooms with the usual farm ‘offices,’ smoke house, milk house, wood house and out kitchen with large fireplace for boiling apple-butter, rendering lard, making soap and like accessories of farm life.”

General Meredith even had his own railroad stop at Oakland Farm. One report noted, “Many persons important in the political and civic life of Indiana disembarked from the railroad coaches at Meredith’s private stop.” When the state legislature was in session, the general would often invite the legislators to attend parties at his home. Virginia Meredith would remark, “Then, and many, many other times distinguished guests graced the handsome double parlors, with double doors connecting, with very beautiful mantels in each room.”

Raising livestock on Oakland Farm was Solomon’s passion. The general purchased his first Shorthorns in 1851. In what would be a major purchase, he bought an English bull named Balco, which gave his herd great creditability among other breeders. Soon, he was pasturing renowned herds of Shorthorn cattle and flocks of Southdown sheep, and even began importing these breeds from England to improve the genetics of his own animals. He raised other animals as well, advertising them all on his letterhead: “S. Meredith & Son. Breeders of Short Horn Cattle, Berkshire Swine, South Down and Cotswold Sheep.” Solomon held his first public stock sale in 1856 and soon became quite the expert on the breeds he raised, with people from around the country seeking his advice and purchasing his animals.

Oakland Farm and the Meredith family became household names in the agricultural community, especially among those who raised purebred livestock. When Solomon sold his stock, it was recalled as a great event:
His stock sales on the farm, which attracted hundreds of people from his own and other States, will long be remembered. The sales resembled a great fair, in the beauty and variety of the animals exhibited. The feast which he prepared for the multitudes on such occasions, and the genial hospitality with which it was dispersed, always elicited the highest commendation.20

Solomon Meredith began showing his Shorthorns and Southdowns at county fairs in and around Indiana, and exhibited them at major livestock shows, state fairs, and expositions.21 He not only competed but also won prize after prize for these breeds. In fact, he started winning within two years of establishing his Shorthorn herd.22 Whether it was a local livestock competition or the highly contested Indiana State Fair, he always came back with blue ribbons, silver plates, money, other prizes, and accolades. Between 1853 and 1858, Solomon Meredith captured approximately 50 first- and second-place awards for his livestock, but most of all, he earned a reputation as a man who knew cattle and sheep.23

Solomon used his standing to further the advancement of agriculture in the east central part of the state. He was involved with the creation of a new association called the Cambridge City District Agricultural, Horticultural, and Mechanical Society, which represented ten counties in the area. The organization owned sixty acres near Cambridge City that were purchased from Solomon for $12,000.24 The general would be elected as the association’s first president.

In May 1872, Solomon Meredith helped organize the Indiana Short Horn Breeders’ Association, which met for the first time to discuss the importing, breeding, feeding, and exhibiting of Shorthorn cattle.25 He served on numerous association committees to select permanent officers during the first year and, in addition, helped write the rules for the association. He was also elected to the association’s executive committee and, in 1873, to its vice presidency.26 Much later, General Solomon would be inducted into the Indiana Livestock Breeders Association Hall of Fame.27

At the outset of the Civil War in 1861, Solomon Meredith formed a regiment of Wayne County volunteers. He had no military experience, but like many Civil War officers of the day, he had political connections to Indiana Governor Oliver P. Morton, high-ranking officials throughout the government, and other influential people.
There is little doubt that Solomon wanted to command men in battle. However, he indicated that if a command was not afforded him, he would still fight for the Union: “I am going to fight this war through; if a command is offered to me I will accept it; otherwise Captain Riley has reserved a place for me in his company, and I will go as a private soldier.”

Initially, Solomon made a direct request to Governor Morton to place him in command of his own regiment. Apparently, others did not think he was qualified and pressured Governor Morton to refuse the request. However, Solomon had even higher connections, so “with his usual energy, appealed to [the] President [Abraham Lincoln], who requested the Governor to appoint him a Colonel, which he did very promptly, giving him command of the famous Nineteenth regiment [of the Indiana Infantry], then just formed at Camp Morton.”

Solomon received his commission in July 1861. His regiment was assigned to the Union Army of the Potomac, where it was attached to what would become the famous Iron Brigade. The Nineteenth Regiment was involved in some of the hottest and deadliest skirmishes of the Civil War: Antietam, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, the Wilderness, Cold Harbor, and Petersburg.

The Meredith family would pay dearly for their support of the Union. The older two of Meredith’s three sons—Samuel and David—would die from wounds they received on the battlefield. Samuel died at Oakland Farm in January 1864, before his twenty-sixth birthday, from wounds received at Gettysburg. Captain David Meredith died in 1867 at age twenty-seven in Mobile, Alabama, from his Chickamauga battlefield wounds. Both sons were buried in the family cemetery at Oakland Farm. The surviving son, Henry Clay Solomon, would pass through the Civil War unscathed, serving on his father’s staff as a second lieutenant and aide-de-camp.

Solomon Meredith was himself wounded several times during the Civil War. While recuperating from a wound suffered in the battle of Gainesville in 1862, he was promoted to Brigadier General on October 6, 1862. He was the general-in-charge of the Iron Brigade at Gettysburg when the Confederates, under General Robert E. Lee, attacked at Seminary Ridge on the first day. The Confederates were repelled from the ridge but at great human cost. Nearly two-thirds of the Iron Brigade were wounded, killed, or missing. General Meredith was among the injured. According to the Indianapolis Times, “[T]he General was struck by a fragment of a shell which so shattered his nervous system that he never fully recovered from it.” These injuries took him out of service for four months.
The general took noncombatant military assignments in Cairo, Illinois, and at Paducah, Kentucky, in 1864 and 1865. At his request, he was relieved of command on May 28, 1865, to return to his farm in Cambridge City. Outside of a brief stint between 1867 and 1869 as a surveyor-general in the Montana Territory, he would spend the remainder of his life at his beloved Oakland Farm.

Solomon Meredith named his youngest son Henry Clay Meredith, because Solomon was an “active and zealous friend of Henry Clay, for whom he had an unbounded admiration.”

Born on July 17, 1843, Henry Clay Meredith received a well-rounded education, attending common schools for part of his training as well as attending Greenmount Boarding School in Wayne County and Fairview Academy in Fayette County. He would graduate from Indiana University in 1867.

After graduation, Henry became a journalist, establishing the Cambridge City Tribune in 1869. He managed the operations there until 1872, when he sold the newspaper to enter into business with his father “in breeding short-horn cattle, Southdown sheep, and several improved varieties of hogs.”

Through visits to her grandparents’ farm in Cambridge City, Virginia had known Henry as “a nearby farmer and childhood friend.” When Virginia Claypool married Henry Clay Meredith on April 28, 1870, it united two prominent, politically connected agricultural families. One newspaper reported it as “...an alliance between two of the old families of the state, the bride belonging to one of the oldest and wealthiest families of Eastern Indiana, and the groom being the only surviving son of Gen. Sol. Meredith, who has been prominent in state politics and a leading spirit in everything that could help to develop the resources for our own and neighboring counties, all his life time.”

The wedding, held in Connersville at the home of Virginia’s father, was quite the social affair. A local newspaper recounted the events of the day:

Rev. Mr. Holliday, of Indianapolis, was the officiating minister. The bridesmaids were Miss Annie Steele, of Paris, Ill., and Miss Mary Claypool, of this city [Connersville]. The groomsmen were Capt. A. G. Wilcox, of the Richmond Telegram, and Mr. Schultz, of Cambridge City.

The bride wore a trailing dress of white satin and looked beautiful under the bridal veil, and wreath of orange flowers. The bridegroom was attired in a plain black suit with white vest and gloves.
In an adjoining room were displayed a large variety of bridal presents, consisting chiefly of silver ware, many of which were valuable as well as beautiful. The total value of the presents was some three thousand dollars.

A splendid supper was prepared for the occasion. The table besides containing almost every variety of cake, confectionery, tropical fruits, &c., was beautifully decorated with flowers.

The ten o’clock train on the Valley road stopped in front of the residence, and the newly married pair took their departure for Chicago [and Milwaukee]. May peace and love ever be with them.

After their marriage, Virginia and Henry moved into Solomon Meredith’s home. A two-story addition to the west side of the Meredith home may have been added at this time as the living quarters for the newlyweds. As was customary for the women of prominent families of that era, Virginia was expected to help Henry’s mother, Anna Meredith, manage the house, instruct the servants, and entertain the frequent guests—including politicians and important stock breeders—who visited Oakland Farm.

Just nineteen months after the wedding, tragedy struck the Meredith family. Anna died on November 11, 1871, leaving the management of the home entirely to twenty-three-year-old Virginia. It was said in an unsigned note, “Her personality lacked the fine sensibilities and feminine touch possessed by his [Solomon Meredith’s] wife, but right then the Oakland Farm needed a face-lifting and ‘Miss Virginia’ (as she was called) was just the one to do it.” Solomon Meredith would never get over the death of his wife, but his daughter-in-law helped fill the void. She became a close companion of Solomon’s and learned much from him about raising purebred livestock, handling public sales, and establishing working relationships with the stock breeders who came to visit the farm.

In the post–Civil War years, Solomon Meredith had resumed showing his animals with great success. At the 1870 Indiana State Fair, he won first and second place for his Shorthorn bulls, heifers, and calves. Virginia Meredith would comment that Solomon and Henry “began a new period of activity. The livestock industry was resumed and the farm entered on a term of fame and prosperity. Shorthorn cattle and Southdown sheep enlisted the time and energy of father and son.”

The year 1873 brought additional changes to the Meredith entries in livestock competitions. While Oakland Farm animals were, once again, winning everything in sight, the awards were now presented to “Solomon Meredith &
Son,” indicating that Henry was taking more responsibility for the farming operations. The Merediths took first or second prizes in ten categories at the 1873 Indiana State Fair. A major win for the Meredith team was having the best bull of any age, with the animal being named the sweepstakes winner.46

Father and son would once again share the spotlight by winning a dozen or so awards at the 1874 Indiana State Fair, but it would be the last they worked together. In late 1875, Solomon Meredith became gravely ill and knew he would not live much longer. He made a final request that “the fine cattle in which he had taken so much pleasure and of which he was so proud, should be turned into an enclosure near his residence, that his neighbors and friends could see them.”47 Solomon Meredith took his last breath on October 21, 1875.

The funeral was at Oakland Farm on Sunday, October 24. Eight thousand mourners were said to have attended that day. His prominence in the community and the important role he played in local affairs were further evident on the day of his funeral, when local papers stated it “was not only the largest funeral ever known in Wayne county, but in the State.”48 Special trains carrying mourners came from around Indiana, “while wagons and carriages brought in hundreds from the country about Cambridge [City] and from the surrounding counties.”49 To honor his final request, his cattle were confined in the enclosure around his home for everyone to see.

Two horses led the funeral procession. Forty veterans from the Indiana Nineteenth Regiment were also part of the procession.50 Solomon was laid to rest next to his wife and two sons in a private cemetery located on the Oakland Farm property about a quarter of a mile from his home.51

Following Solomon’s death, his tradition of entering and winning livestock shows was continued by his son, much to the chagrin of others who had difficulty winning when the elder Meredith was alive. During the 1876 Indiana State Fair, Henry won a handful of awards, claiming first- and second-place finishes in ten categories.52

At the 1877 Indiana State Fair, Henry again won a half dozen or so awards for his animals. In later years, Henry Meredith continued to showcase his animals, but eventually he began to focus his energies more on judging the entries in those events that he had formerly won so many times as a competitor.

Like his father before him, Henry C. Meredith took an active role in politics. In 1879, he joined the Indiana State Board of Agriculture as the representative from the tenth district, having replaced his father-in-law, Austin Claypool, in
that position. He worked hard within the organization, and soon his efforts were rewarded when he became president of the board in 1882. During his tenure, he was appointed to attend the Agricultural Convention at Washington, D.C., on January 10, 1882.53

Henry was also elected to the Indiana General Assembly in 1881. He became known for “taking special interest in all measures relating to agricultural questions.”54 He and Virginia traveled to Indianapolis in January 1881 to attend the inauguration of Governor Albert G. Porter.55

As Henry became more politically involved, Virginia was thrust into a more active role in managing Oakland Farm. Henry’s long absences from the farm meant that she would take over much of its day-to-day operations. According to the 1880 U.S. Census of Agriculture, Oakland Farm now had 115 acres of pasture and 65 acres of tilled ground. Virginia and Henry had 21 acres that produced 60 tons of hay to feed their 50 Shorthorns. They also had a flock of 84 sheep on hand that June. During the previous year, they had sold 115 sheep at auction, and their sheep had produced 51 fleeces weighing 400 pounds.56

By this time, the Merediths employed two Irish workers to help with the work: Anna Doughty, a twenty-two-year-old servant hired to take care of the home; and Thomas Fanning, a young man of twenty who was paid to take care of the stock and fields.57 In addition, Virginia had hired additional field and livestock workers at a cost of $1,040.

Virginia soon became known as an expert in her own right as she started to advertise, show, and sell her livestock.58

Mrs. Meredith welcomed them [stock breeders] graciously, talked intelligently, and in her husband’s absence was able to display the stock and pedigrees and prepare the way for sales. It was not long until she was handling all the bookkeeping, the records, and the pedigrees, and was familiar with advertising and cataloguing.59

Virginia had been taught well by the Claypools and Merediths, and her training was about to be tested.60 Her apprenticeships on the farms of her father, father-in-law, and husband would serve her well when thirty-eight-year-old Henry fell ill with pneumonia. He died unexpectedly on July 5, 1882, leaving her as the sole owner of Oakland Farm.61

At the age of thirty-three, Virginia Meredith suddenly had to “choose between returning to her father’s home or carrying on the business of farming and stock breeding.”62 She would write (in third person):
The untimely death, in 1882, of Henry C. Meredith brought in another period in the history of the old home. The widow of Henry Meredith entered a new world for women. Being familiar with her husband’s business she decided to “carry on” in the old home…63

She quickly decided that she would manage the farm, a position that would have been “unheard of for a woman in those days.”64 It was here that she would establish herself as suited to the task of managing a sizable ranch and farm. She would move quickly from being locally notable to being a nationally recognized and respected speaker and writer of agriculture. She could not have known it then, but in 1882, she was about to embark on a journey that would place her in the spotlight for decades to come.

The Meredith Family Tree

**Solomon Meredith** (1810–1875) m. **Anna Hannah** (1812–1871)

*Children*

**Samuel** (1838–1864), **David** (1840–1867), **Mary** (1845–1846)

and

**Henry Clay Meredith** (1843–1882) m. **Virginia Claypool** (1848–1936)

*Children*

Adopted **Mary Lockwood Matthews** (1882–1968) and **Meredith Matthews** (1887–1962)