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The Fels Family and Fels-Naptha Soap

When Joseph Fels died in 1914 at the age of sixty he was as famous around the world as William Jennings Bryan and Robert M. LaFollette. The fact that he is totally unknown today, or at best associated by members of the older generation with a brand of laundry soap, is a melancholy commentary not only on individual fame, but on the way in which social movements which in their time enlisted the energies of multitudes of people can fade out of memory. Even social historians and economists know little of the link between Fels and the single-tax movement founded by Henry George.

Having begun as an itinerant salesman when still quite young, Fels made a byword and a fortune out of Fels-Naptha soap. On the strength of this fortune, and a messianic streak which was the other side of an intensely shrewd and pragmatic character, Fels devoted his life from the age of almost fifty to promoting the single-tax program on two continents. It was the zeal he brought to this cause that gave him international

prominence, and—a more important result—kept the single-tax movement from collapsing immediately after George's death. The story of Joseph Fels becomes, therefore, the story of the last period when Georgism bid for attention as a program for reconstructing society, in competition with socialism and other international reform movements. Its telling sheds light on the history of social and economic idealism in the United States particularly during the Progressive epoch early in the twentieth century, as well as on some important connections between American and British reform programs and their broader impacts.

Joseph Fels was born at Halifax Court House, Virginia, in 1853, his parents' second son and their fourth surviving child. His father and mother, Lazarus and Susannah Freiberg Fels, his brother Abraham, his sisters Bertha and Barbara, were German-born subjects of the King of Bavaria.

Sembach in the Palatinate, near Kaiserslautern, was the birthplace of Joseph's father, Lazarus Fels, while Kaiserslautern itself was the unifying point for various interrelated branches of the Fels family as far back as can be traced. Lazarus Fels, Joseph's father, was born in 1815, the year of the Battle of Waterloo and the Congress of Vienna. He was the first-born of Simon Joseph Fels and Binle (Phillippina) Kahn, and a grandson of Joseph and Reichle (Rachel) Nathan Fels. He was classified for military service, as a *conpribirten* or selectee with the 1816 age group, but received his release before his twenty-fifth birthday without being called up. His discharge read: "He will not be called, for he is unfit for convocation [induction]." Though he was a small man (only 5 feet 4½ inches in height and of slight build), his rejection was not due to any physical disability. Lazarus Fels was adjudged unfit for military

service in the royal army of Louis I Augustus, King of Bavaria, because he was a Jew.

Lazarus Fels married Susannah Freiberg early in 1842. Before the ceremony, as was the custom, they appeared before the royal notary in Kaiserslautern to conclude an *Ehevertrag* or marriage contract. Simon Fels, merchant and widower, appeared to assist his son. The prospective bride was assisted by her brother-in-law, both of her parents being dead. To Lazarus Fels, according to the contract, his father promised 400 gulden payable eight years from the day of his marriage, or roughly \$200 and £45 in American or British monetary equivalents then current, a not inconsequential amount of specie for that day. The couple were to live with the bridegroom's father until that distant day and were to have free use of the yard belonging to his house for carrying on any business for the same length of time. Simon Fels reserved to himself the right to evict the young couple in the event domestic harmony did not prevail, provided he pay them a yearly subsidy of 25 gulden for lodgings elsewhere. The *Ehevertrag* also stated that the bridegroom owned 20 shirts, 4 linen cloths, 4 tablecloths, 6 towels, 8 small pillowcases, 4 large pillowcases, 2 large square pillowcases, a black coat and trousers, 1 vest, 1 blue coat, 2 ordinary coats, 3 pairs of trousers, and 3 vests—all of which added up when appraised to slightly more than 150 gulden.

Susannah Freiberg was the daughter of Abraham Freiberg and Barbara Alexander, tradespeople of Steinbach. Susannah had made her home with her sister and brother-in-law, Joseph Sternberger, in Borrstade. Her dowry was substantial. She brought 900 gulden in cash into their marriage, 1 bed, 2 large pillowcases, 6 tablecloths, 5 linen cloths, 12 neckerchiefs, 3 napkins,

16 shirts, 2 merino dresses, 1 silk dress with collar, 5 cotton dresses, 1 baiskirt, 4 hoods, 6 handkerchiefs, 12 pairs of stockings, 6 aprons, 5 pairs of shoes, 2 silk neckerchiefs, 2 white dresses, 3 woolen neckerchiefs, and a discreetly undisclosed number of chemisettes, the whole totaling in worth a sum of over 1,133 gulden.

Somewhat more than six years after his marriage, Lazarus Fels, by then a merchant, was issued a passport by the Royal Bavarian Country-Commissariate at Kaiserslautern. Dated June 19, 1848, the passport stated: "He is accompanied by his wife Susannah Freiberg, twenty-eight years old, and his three children, Abraham five, Bertha three, and 'Babette' [Barbara] Fels one year old. He will travel via Rotterdam to New York in North America to visit relatives there." At the last moment before the Fels family left, Lazarus' uncle, Isaac Weil, attempted to dissuade him from leaving by revising his will, which already provided bequests for the three Fels children, to promise the additional sums of 100 gulden each to be paid in two portions on condition that they be residing in Bavaria at ages twenty-one and twenty-two. Any prior departure from Bavaria would cancel this bequest. Weil's pressure was unavailing, though it must surely have darkened the leavetaking.

Lazarus and Susannah Fels with their three youngsters landed in Philadelphia, most likely in late August or early September 1848. Susannah Fels was left in the care of friends in Philadelphia with her two little girls, while Lazarus and his son Abraham went southward in search of a living and a suitable place for their new home. Ahead of them there were others from the Palatinate who had already settled in southern Virginia and in north-central North Carolina. (Even-

tually Isaac Fels, Lazarus' younger brother, came to the United States and settled near him.)

Lazarus and Abraham were gone 11 months, and by the time they returned to Philadelphia they had taken up a vocation that was commonplace for Jews in America: Lazarus Fels had become a peddler of household wares. He had somehow purchased a canvas-topped wagon and team of horses and an ancient buggy and horse. In these conveyances the entire Fels family set forth slowly on a southward trek. Lazarus and Abraham (or "Burr" as he was beginning to be called) led the way in the buggy, while Susannah drove the wagon behind them with Bertha and little Babette inside.

They settled at Halifax Court House, Virginia, a county seat deep in the Piedmont's tobacco country and roughly 120 miles southwest of Richmond on the route to Danville, which was nearly 40 miles farther along the road. Typical of its time and place, Halifax had an imposing red brick courthouse, Episcopal Church, Masonic Temple, and several tiny law offices standing among tall trees on a green square surrounded by a stone wall. White-pillared homes set far back from the street among oaks, magnolias, and evergreens, and a few quiet-looking stores completed the picture. Small farms extended beyond the town limits, their fields dotted with clay-chinked log barns in which tobacco leaf was cured.

Joseph Fels was born at Halifax on December 16, 1853.

Soon Lazarus Fels moved his wife and children again, this time almost due south from Danville, to Yanceyville, North Carolina, where he took over as owner of Yanceyville's leading general store. On June 26, 1855, Lazarus appeared in Caswell County's court-

house in Yanceyville, before Judge John M. Dick of the Superior Court of the State of North Carolina, to renounce his Bavarian citizenship for that of the United States of America.

In 1861 storekeeper Fels was appointed postmaster of Yanceyville in the Confederate States of America. He had begun to accumulate real estate in small and scattered parcels, a few hundred dollars worth at a time at first, until by 1863, in partnership with Thomas D. Adkins, he could afford a tract of land in Caswell County costing \$8,597. Energetic and usually of sound judgment, he was not only keeping his store, but also acting as a wholesaler and middleman, buying and selling stone mills, ordering barrels to be constructed by the several hundred, and speculating in tobacco, pigs, and cotton.

Within the household new faces appeared in steady succession. A son, Maurice, had been born to the Fels in April 1857, Samuel Simeon in February 1860, and Rosena in October 1862. (It is believed, but nowhere recorded, that a daughter, born during this time, died in infancy, and that another child was stillborn.) Abraham, Bertha, Barbara, Joseph, and Maurice, one after another, attended classes in Yanceyville, and during the last years of the Civil War Joseph and his two oldest sisters went to a boarding school in Richmond. Tales persist of Joseph's rebellion against formal schooling, and of repeated conflicts with his teachers and the inevitable pedagogical retaliation. He apparently disliked disciplined recitation and the monotony of classroom routine, and some who knew him thought that he profited very little from his schooling. Yet he acquired during those formative years certain characteristics which remained with him—from school a basic literacy in English, from business a spirit of enterprise, and from



The Fels brothers in 1878: from left, Samuel, Joseph, Abraham, Maurice

his home the ancient traditions of Judaism as translated through the German tongue. Individualistic and compassionate from his earliest childhood, the boy in later life blended his own mysteriously private, personal instincts with Jewish humanitarianism and democratic idealism. But in his youth Joe Fels was happiest when he was engaged in a money-seeking enterprise such as the kite repair and sales shop he established at the age of fourteen in his cellar. In later years, Joe recalled his profits from this venture with great satisfaction.

In April 1865 the Civil War came to an end. Abraham, released from military service, traveled north to Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York City to seek profitable contracts and to visit friends, while his father was officially pardoned by President Andrew Johnson for his services to the Confederate Post Office, within the terms of the Amnesty Proclamation of May 29, 1865.

Northern adventurers — carpetbaggers — descended upon the South. Caswell County's large population of black freedmen afforded almost unlimited opportunities for those who were determined to spell out the full possibilities of emancipation, and Ku Klux Klan activity erupted in response. Violence and hooded terror ranged throughout the countryside. Supplies of cotton were expropriated, in some instances burned to prevent federal authorities or private individuals from confiscating them as booty of war or payment for claims. Businessmen suffered serious and widespread losses.

Lazarus Fels chose almost the worst period of this time—January 1866—to enter into a partnership with his neighbor, Thomas H. Hatchett, to erect a distillery on Hatchett's land. Fels was to attend to all the outside business of the concern, while Hatchett was to look after the inside business of the distillery, includ-

ing whatever milling was necessary, and to oversee the hogs which were then a necessary adjunct of manufacturing strong liquors.

In the spring of 1866, Lazarus brought suit to recover \$65,000 for cotton of his said to have been burned, but to no avail. And by summer it was clear that the new distilling venture was a failure. Even the hogs were beginning to sicken and die. Out of his need to rescue some of his capital, if only from the bloated and rotting hogs, Lazarus Fels turned to soap-making—a scheme that also quickly collapsed. Within the year Lazarus Fels was a ruined man in a ruined land.

He moved his family to Baltimore, where Abraham had uncovered certain prospects, arriving there on the last day of 1866.¹

Fels and Company, a partnership consisting of Lazarus Fels and his oldest son, Abraham, was instituted with premises at 259 West Baltimore Street to manufacture fancy soaps. Exactly why a soap enterprise was tried again is not known. Valuable lessons had been salvaged from the Yanceyville fiasco, but undoubtedly also this second venture into the making and selling of soap owed something to the fact that only a modest amount of capital was required for it beyond an outlay for a stove and kettles, items which were ordinary fixtures of any domestic kitchen, while raw materials were obtained cheaply, and labor was a household affair.

Fels and Company prospered, and in May 1869, Lazarus Fels moved his brood from their rented quarters on North Mount Street in the Nineteenth Ward to a house he purchased via mortgage on North Greene Street at Cider Alley, just around the corner from the University of Maryland's School of Medicine

(today the site of the 12-story University Hospital). Fels and Company also transferred operations to larger quarters—on South Sharp Street—and Joseph Fels, now approaching sixteen, finally won permission to leave school and enter his family's growing business.

Then trouble struck again. In 1870 Lazarus Fels lost his business "through causes for which he was not responsible," according to a daughter-in-law. Whoever or whatever was responsible remains unknown, but the setback deprived the Fels family of their newly acquired house and lot, together with their equity in the property, and left creditors demanding payment from Lazarus Fels himself as well as from the co-partnership of Fels and Company. The family now moved to North Pine Street, where Lazarus Fels again tried soapmaking, while his son Abraham, thinking his health in jeopardy, set out for the Southwest, where for a time he worked as a carpenter (in, among other places, Kerr County, Texas, and Hot Springs, Arkansas).

Joseph Fels, now seventeen, became a commission salesman selling coffees for the firm of Fester and Sellman until he and his father became Baltimore representatives for two Philadelphia soap houses (first for William T. Marks and next for the larger firm of Charles Elias and Company), and a measure of prosperity returned to the family. When it did, in 1873, Lazarus and Susannah Fels, Joseph, and his remaining brothers and sisters moved from Baltimore to Philadelphia.

That Philadelphia, in October 1873, should have appeared a city of opportunity to them may seem strange. The Quaker City had grown since 1865, expanding westward across the Schuylkill with the opening of the Chestnut Street Bridge, but ethnic tensions and thousands of saloons, owned and operated for the

greater part by Germans and Irish, appeared to be Philadelphia's most notable features. Politics rested not on brotherly love but upon a secure foundation of saloonkeepers and wardheelers who systematically exploited national, religious, and racial distributions. The city also had hundreds of grafters surrounding a vortex of bosses maintained by the corrupt dispensing of municipal franchises and the administration of the city gas works.

Nor was the general economic picture bright. The failure of the banking houses of Jay Cooke and Company and E. W. Clark and Company on September 18, 1873, touched off a panic that ruined a number of large banks in Philadelphia and throughout the nation. Another of the city's financial centers, the Franklin Savings Fund, which held the meager hoardings of many of the poorer citizens, went bankrupt in February 1874. This event, following as it did on the heels of the earlier catastrophes and accompanying widespread unemployment of both capital and labor, produced deep popular unrest and agitation for better conditions. More so than in prosperous times, costs of doing business had to be held to a minimum—and a superior salesman might hold the key to a business's success, or at least to its survival.

Though barely in his twenties when his family settled in Philadelphia, Joseph Fels had already acquired a seasoned grasp of merchandising, and in this highly competitive world and time he excelled; he was a superior salesman. He and his father worked for Charles Elias and Company for two more years, but in the autumn of 1875 Joseph—bridling at restraints as he had in school, and still finding the authority of superiors galling—acquired a partnership in Thomas Worsley and Company. Worsley and Company had

been manufacturing fancy toilet soaps on a modest scale in Combes Alley in Philadelphia since about 1846, though only recently with Thomas Worsley as sole proprietor. When Lazarus Fels' son bought in, Lazarus was installed as foreman in charge of soap-making at the firm's new quarters, 115 Arch Street. (A relative's dim recollection survived long afterward of the Fels boys peddling their soaps from door to door and selling fancy baskets at Easter containing soaps cut and dyed to resemble pickles, oranges, and lemons.)

The new arrangement was scarcely launched when, late in 1876, Joseph Fels bought out Worsley and took over full control of the business himself. The purchase price was \$4,000, the largest check he had ever written. Thus Fels and Company of Philadelphia, manufacturers and sellers of toilet soaps, was founded, the second such company and the third soapmaking enterprise to bear the Fels family name.

The new enterprise differed from its Baltimore predecessor in several ways. Fels and Company of Baltimore had been a partnership of Lazarus and Abraham Fels, father and eldest son. The new company was Joseph Fels' own undertaking, and at first his father and brothers were employees in it. Not until 1881 were Joseph's father and Samuel Simeon Fels, his youngest brother, elevated to junior partners. His younger brother, Maurice, who sold Fels soap for a time, graduated from the Johns Hopkins University in 1883, and went on to practice law in Philadelphia. Maurice Fels became a partner of the Fels firm in 1907 and ultimately a vice-president and director. Abraham Fels' connections with the company were sporadic and formal after he returned from the Southwest. He spent most of his remaining years in England, absorbed in

enterprises other than those dealing with soap, among them tea-merchandising and poultry-raising.

Susannah Fels died in March 1876, leaving her son Joseph, at least for a time, with a sense of irremediable loss. In 1873, while canvassing the hinterland for soap buyers, Joseph Fels had met nine-year-old Mary Fels in the little town of Keokuk, Iowa. Amalia, or Mary, Fels (her name becoming anglicized in the United States) was born March 10, 1863, at Sembach, Bavaria, where her father, Elias Fels, was a greengrocer. Her mother, whose maiden name was Fanni Rothchild, came from Offenbach in the Kingdom of Prussia. Both grandfathers were merchants. In 1869 Elias Fels brought his family to the United States, settling first in Missouri before moving to Keokuk. Mary Fels, the youngest of five children, had as sisters and brothers Bertha, Wilhelmine, Nathan, and Raphael in that order.

Keokuk, lying some 60 miles upstream from Mark Twain's boyhood home at Hannibal, Missouri, was a natural stopover for commercial travelers—such as Joseph Fels—being a steamboat transshipment point at the rapids obstructing the Mississippi River. Casual conversation with a customer had disclosed the intriguing fact to Joseph Fels that a family bearing the same name as his own lived in Keokuk, and the young man was curiously attracted. The name Fels was not common in the United States, and he set out to see these newly found relatives—for such he never doubted them to be. Before many moments of the meeting passed, his expectations were confirmed. Here lived another Fels family from the Kaiserslautern district of Bavaria. Their blood connections were unknown at the time of the meeting and were never openly conceded, but it is virtually certain that Joseph Fels had located

a cluster of his distant cousins—and among them found the child he immediately recognized would become his wife.

Both Joseph and Mary Fels in later years enjoyed telling the story of their first meeting. Nine-year-old Mary Fels was only a child in short frocks on the day that Joseph Fels first walked up the path of her home in Keokuk and entered her life. From that day on he devoted himself to her, according to her remembrance.

The young salesman easily won the interest and approval of her parents, both by the coincidence of like names and by the charm of a nature that seldom failed to make friends when it desired to. The young man found an easy way to the child's heart by showing an interest in her doings and thoughts that made him seem to her a delightful playmate. He became, in the shortest of time, someone to whom she could give her childish confidences with the certainty that he would sympathize and understand. (Her parents found him of distinct utility, she stated with mock ruefulness, "for on the not infrequent occasions when Mary Fels showed signs of wilfulness the threat that the misdemeanor 'must be told to Joe' was of rare efficacy.")

Joseph grew attached to the little girl and her family in Keokuk, and he managed to visit them once or twice each year. He wrote frequently, and he insisted on being informed of all that Mary was doing—of the books she read, of the people she saw. He was almost her only contact with the world outside of Keokuk, and his influence over her increased. Once he heralded his arrival: "The lively and pleasant young man who may visit your village as representative of Fels & Co. is not so very pretty and then again not very ugly; indeed he is rather a happy medium. Probably he is

not so gentle as the proverbial Goldsmith, for it takes a much more savage nature than his to sell soap."

When Mary was twelve Joseph sent her Frances Power Cobbe's popular book, *Duties of a Woman*. A year later he sent her John Stuart Mill's *Three Essays on Religion*, which included "Nature," "The Utility of Religion," and "Theism." Much of all this for a time must have been beyond the girl's mental level, but it was ultimately important for the shaping role Fels played in her education. There was always present in her the conviction that she ought to like *good* books, because he did.

Perhaps Joseph Fels' affection for young Mary Fels embodied his desire to create a serene and sensible refuge into which he might escape once the tasks of the day were done, for his detached realization of the salesman's materialistic and selfish aims forecast his eventual perception of himself as a paradoxical combination of promoter and reformer, and despite his zest for business, he must always have recoiled from its grossest impacts. He spoke out through his letters to the girl growing up in Keokuk. Mary read a great deal, and he chided her about the vices of bluestockings. He rebuked her gently on the sin of snobbery, and delivered the softest of sermons on making the best of things. He wrote of the wisdom of learning music, which was, he said, "the most essential part of education and the most civilizing." When she complained that her mother thought her headstrong, his reply was direct: "Tell her I wouldn't care a fig for you if you didn't have a soul of your own."

In the spring of 1879, just before Mary graduated from high school, she and Joseph became engaged; he was twenty-five and she was sixteen. She became anxious to go away to school, partly, as she recalled, to

be alone with "this wonderful new knowledge" of Joe's love, and partly because she was finding the atmosphere of her home alien to the electric excitement which he generated.

Joseph "soothed away parental difficulties" and arranged for her to attend St. Mary's Academy, a Roman Catholic convent boarding school at Notre Dame, Indiana. It is not known what reasoning prompted the choice of this particular institution, but Mary applied herself there to studies designed to stretch and discipline her mental powers: logic, German, modern history, literature, and composition. She also undertook lessons on the piano and did "fancy work," but avoided the courses offered in "wax work" and "artificial flowers." She wrote at length to her "dear Joe," telling him of the nuns who were her teachers, the books she read, and the visiting lecturers. Twenty years later Mary re-read the letters she wrote her fiancé while at St. Mary's Academy: "How stiff and precise and formal they are! And so pedantic. The way I drag in quotations from my books! I read a great deal apart from my studies those days. Books bearing on my studies in History and Literature. How happy I was in this reading, *making good the time spent at Mass, Vespers, etc.*" St. Mary's Academy was developing her mind, but the insulation provided by her Orthodox Jewish upbringing silenced the resonant message of the Roman Catholic Church.

Discipline was strict at St. Mary's. No uncensored letters were to be sent, nor were any to be received. Nevertheless, after "a little argument," Joseph's persuasiveness assured the privacy of his and Mary's letters to each other. But no visitors were welcome at the institution except immediate relatives, and this proved to be the breaking point. One snowy day in a

jangle of sleigh bells, young Joseph Fels came to the convent to visit his "Mollie." Mother Superior Angela was adamant: visitors were not admitted outside the immediate family, most particularly male visitors. Mary had seen Joe's arrival from a window. She rushed into the anteroom "in an agony of impatience," and flew to Joseph extending her hands—to the extreme discomfiture of the prefect of discipline. Joe refused to take her hands until his right to be there was conceded, fearing Mary's expulsion otherwise. He went to the mayor of the village for advice, who sent him to Father Sorin of the Order of the Holy Cross to which the academy was attached. This sympathetic and kind man told Joseph to return to the convent the next day, whereupon he was able to visit Mary, though not alone.

Unwilling to endure separation any longer, the young couple decided to get married. She was very young, and he had only begun the building of his fortune, but they seemed convinced of their love for each other, so on November 16, 1881, at her home in Keokuk, Iowa, they were married. Joseph Fels was twenty-seven; his wife, eighteen.²

For the next year and a half, the newlyweds made their home in Philadelphia with Joseph's father and his family. They lived on Franklin Street some distance north of Market Street between Eighth and Ninth in a three-story, red-brick house resembling all the other houses nearby, with steps of white marble leading down to the red-brick sidewalks and the cobblestoned roadway. Shouting peddlers crying their wares, children running and shrilling loudly at play, and the staccato clatter of horsedrawn wagons and carriages rumbling and creaking over bricks and stones filled the air with a din that began before daybreak and continued until after dark. The neighbors included

a good many industrious folk of older American extraction, with a noticeable leavening of Germans and German Jews from across the sea. Some ambitious Irish lived in the neighborhood also, though the Irish were mainly concentrated on the city's south side where the first influx of impoverished Russian Jews was beginning to intrude.

Before long the young bride grew discouraged. She was, in her own sharp labeling, "an inmate" of a household not her own. Her husband was at work all day and sometimes away on business for weeks at a time, and she was homesick, though refusing to admit it, and also wanting to resume her studies. But Lazarus Fels' home was governed more by the semi-automatic routine of men of small affairs than by any encouragement of intellectual pursuits or other novelties, and except for the broader range of Joe's interests, and the Fels brothers' traveling for business purposes, the family's universe was defined within the span of a few blocks where they worked and lived along both sides of Girard Avenue in central Philadelphia. For Mary, whose horizons for almost a decade had been immensely extended by Joe, it was as though the curtains surrounding her life were lowered once again.

In the fall of 1883, Mary and Joe moved into their own house not far away from his father's house, and here Mary gained some independence. In the following July she gave birth to a son named Irvin S. Fels, but in less than six months the infant fell ill and suddenly died.

The death of their son was a crisis for Joseph and Mary Fels. Mary announced she would never again endure childbirth, insisting that she was unable to bear another child. This was apparently a deliberate choice on her part, since infant mortalities were com-

mon in the nineteenth century and it was unusual for a bereaved mother to take so adamant a stand to ensure that sorrow would not come again. (Her recollections introduce further complications, as do those of an intimate friend, Elizabeth Kite, for Mary later wrote that she and Joe, though very deeply in love, had married "*with reservations* as to the conduct of their united life. They were lived up to, those reservations, and he remained her lover, inspired thereby to the last," while Elizabeth Kite claimed that Mary had confided to her in 1893 that she flatly refused to have any more children after the death of her son, and even added that her only child had been unwanted by her. She insisted upon complete independence and freedom ever afterward, and her husband acquiesced.)

After the death of her son, Mary Fels transformed the Fels' home into a salon to attract artists, poets, musicians, thinkers, and doctrinaires. Her husband Joseph left no record of his own feelings on the death of his son, though Mary wrote: "Of so intimate a thing as this it is naturally impossible to speak in detail."³

It should be remembered that even in a happy wedlock at the close of the last century, it was thought best to suppress sexual desire in order to avoid physical damage or the evils of excessive sensuality and thus to contribute to moral, mental, and spiritual achievement. Joseph Fels seems to have always maintained an idyllic vision of his home as a sacrosanct haven where Mary reigned. His only son had died and his wife was repudiating her entire childbearing role; the underlying factors in his personality struggled to reach the surface, and surely he must have felt great anguish. As Walter E. Houghton writes:

the Industrial Revolution created a psychological and

amoral atmosphere for which an idealized home with its high priestess offered a compensating sense of humanity and moral direction. . . . And still, to all that must be added the parallel impulse to exalt the feminine nature and find a "divinity" in love which springs from the needs of the baffled intellect.⁴

Whether the cause for the new direction of their lives lay primarily with Mary or with Joseph, or, as seems more likely, somewhere within the annealed compound of their intimate relationship and feelings for each other, remains unknown, but the new direction ultimately had its consequences.

Joseph Fels' absorption in business intensified after the death of his son. "At home and in his office," Mollie Fels remembered of this time, "he schemed and planned and organized," and each succeeding year his company's sales and profits figures surpassed those of the year before. When Fels and Company was flourishing in larger quarters at Girard Avenue and Third Street, Joe and Mollie moved to Philadelphia's outskirts to live. Their new Tioga neighborhood afforded them the serenity of a small town and a partial asylum in summer-time from Philadelphia's oppressive heat and humidity, but even so, in 1900 they moved back into the city's center, to Chestnut Street between Twenty-first and Twenty-second streets.⁵

The soapmaking enterprise that Joseph Fels had launched at twenty was still a comparatively small business scrambling for its share of the market among scores of competitors. A soapmaker had to ferret out customers over far-flung territories, while at the same time he manufactured his products by means of an unsophisticated technology. Fels and Company produced no fewer than 107 different soaps in 1890, including



Joseph Fels, the young entrepreneur, at twenty-two years

“toilet,” “castile,” “transparent,” “glycerine,” “medicinal,” and “shaving” kinds. Each had to be packed in attractive wrappers inside exactly the appropriate boxes, and the entire assortment had to be engagingly displayed and persuasively advertised. And though it was thought that kinds could not be allowed to become stereotyped, both salesmen and dealers clamored for some exclusive variety that would satisfy a demand believed to be waiting for exactly *the* right product. Margins of profit were narrow and ever-increasing competition and the mercurially fluctuating condition of the soap business both caused concern. Fels and Company hoped, as did its competitors, to discover *the* single soap with which to stabilize the enterprise.

For many years housewives, laundresses, and manufacturers had been attempting to improve the grease-cutting properties of laundry soaps. (Adding a few drops of kerosene to the family wash was a widespread practice, especially if the tubs held coal-stained, oil-spattered, or mud-begrimed garments.) An obscure Philadelphian, Charles Walter Stanton, had succeeded, by trial and error, in introducing a naphtha or benzine solvent into ordinary laundry soap. Stanton’s business affairs were sadly mismanaged, however, and he faced disastrous losses instead of the rewards his process deserved—until the day he met Joseph Fels. Fels investigated all aspects of Stanton’s process and became persuaded that it was technically sound. At Joseph’s urging, the Fels family purchased an interest in Stanton’s company in 1893. One year later they bought out Stanton and his partners, absorbing Stanton’s business altogether into Fels and Company of Philadelphia, and adding Fels-Naptha Soap (the spelling of *naphtha* simplified for commercial convenience) to their company’s assortment.⁶

The first advertisements extolling the virtues of Fels-Naptha appeared in August 1894:

Be quite sure to procure Fels-Naptha Soap. For your own benefit, at once make trial of Fels-Naptha Soap, the wondrous new cleaner. Washes everything washable.

A mystic source of hidden force in Fels-Naptha Soap evolves a new power for cleaning anything cleanable. Yet perfectly harmless to hands and clothes.

Be thou wise and economize with Fels-Naptha Soap. True economy consists in the intelligent use of the best methods of doing work with the least effort, least wear, least worry. Wise women will clearly see on the first use of FELS-NAPTHA soap that it is in the end the cheapest just as it is certainly the best.

A yellow laundry soap with a fresh, pungent aroma and remarkable solvent powers, Fels-Naptha quickly captured the popular fancy. Sales increased phenomenally—a remarkable achievement considering the generally depressed conditions of business following the panic of 1893—and within a few years the brothers Fels (their father died in October 1894) discontinued their other kinds of soaps to concentrate exclusively upon Fels-Naptha. They moved into a larger factory, this time located where Stanton's company had manufactured its soaps, at Seventy-third Street and Woodland Avenue in Philadelphia and there Fels and Company in time became a landmark in the city's business affairs.⁷