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House, Lady, Island: Notes for an Isle of Hope Memoir

by Margaret Barton Driggs

Following are notes for a memoir I am writing about my family, the family home at 310 Parkersburg Road and life at Isle of Hope.

My grandparents, Mary Elizabeth Schaaf and William Henry Bischoff, moved to 310 Parkersburg Road in 1922. A greeting card, the kind we nowadays send at Christmas to show off our families, seems emblematic of the life they sought for themselves and their children in moving to Isle of Hope. Sitting close, their two sunny faces smiling into the camera from under straw hats — too delighted with it all to be true country folk — they challenge friends and relatives with a coy "Won't you return the compliment?"

Grandmother wanted a garden and my grandfather, a frustrated engineer, wanted a workshop. And so they bought property from Mr. Solomon: a story-and-a-half house built with timbers salvaged from the Benedictine mission on Skidaway Island. On the lot was also a one-story cottage, once servants quarters, that could house the shop. A Delco House supplied battery power for electricity before the coming of rural electrification.

The main house had more space than their former home on East Taylor Street, and almost an acre of land appealed to their five children, who were, in order of birth, William Henry, Jr. (Billy), my mother Margaret (Bunch), Mary, Elizabeth (Becky), and Frances (Franny). The children played, too, under the ancient live oaks near the Chapel of Our Lady of Good Hope, and no doubt on the Isle of Hope School playground as well, although they all commuted to Sacred Heart School in town and later Benedictine and St. Vincent's Academy. Transportation was easy, as the streetcar passed right in front of the house on Central Avenue. At some point, my grandfather bought a car.

It is a sad irony that the Isle of Hope firehouse now stands just across the road, for it was fire that changed the family forever one terrible autumn night in 1922. Bunch, my mother, was ten. The fire would haunt her and Mary for the rest of their lives. Franny, the baby, only remembered her father carrying her down the stairs. The Kronks, who lived in one of the row of houses across Central Avenue, took the family in that night.

In May, 2007 I learned from Lucille Christiansen that the original Christiansen house on Central Avenue was also built with timbers from the old Benedictine mission. That house, too, burned at about the same time as the Bischoff house.

Lucille, a veteran firefighter, says that both fires were caused by faulty electrical

wiring. I still don't know the date the old houses were built.

Early on the morning after the fire, my grandparents crossed the road and stood in the smoldering ruins of their home. The fire had consumed nearly everything they owned: furniture, china, silver, pots, pans, clothing, linens, pictures, books, toys. But then Grandmother's eyes fell on what seemed a miracle; sitting on the hearth were a perfect china cup and saucer. Here at least was a keepsake, a reminder of her wedding gifts. She bent down and put her hand out. At her touch, it all turned to powder.

I remember my mother telling me this story, and I have always been struck by the next thing she said: "And so they stood there in the ashes that morning and planned the new house." The statement could well be an epigram for my grandparents' characters. My grandfather had already survived the severest of tests. At the age of ten, he was forced to leave school and go to work as an office boy to support his mother and younger sister after his father, a Confederate veteran, died. In the years to come, it was my grandmother whose mettle would be tested time and again.

Another hint from Mother makes me believe the house was very much Grandmother's design. "She didn't want a hall down the middle," she said. And so the hall became no more than a stairwell, with the living room running the width of the house, which fronted on Central Avenue. Double French doors opened onto the dining room. Single French doors opened onto the downstairs porch from both living room and dining room. Identically placed doors opened onto the upstairs porch from the front bedrooms. There was a sleeping porch at the back of the house. All these ways to open the house to the outside air, together with high ceilings, kept the house relatively cool in summer. In cold months, the house was heated by fireplaces in the living room and dining room, and a pot-bellied stove in the kitchen.

The white frame craftsman-style house was completed in 1924. They gradually furnished it with what they could afford. In the end there were very few antiques to inherit. But Grandmother had good taste and an unerring sense of style, and her instinct for gracious living made every room right. One of my treasured possessions today is an old pine butcher's table Grandmother bought in a junk shop. With back copies of the Savannah Morning News spread across it, the table supported many a crab supper on the porch.

I never realized until it was gone how effective and subtle their landscaping was. They laid a wide brick walk in a herringbone pattern from the front steps to the brick pillars and gate at the edge of Central Avenue. On either side they planted hydrangeas, which grew very large and bloomed a beautiful blue. A narrow brick walk curved around the house and ran the length of the side porch. Grandmother planted annual and perennial beds on either side. They laid a flagstone patio at the bottom of the side porch steps; it fanned out in two directions to the driveway, under and around a pecan tree. A holly tree, too near the pecan, found a way to survive by leaning away from the pecan. Both of them are thriving today.

Skirting the property along Central Avenue and down the Parkersburg Road side was a hedgerow of pine, palmetto, sweetgum and brambles. A wide gate stood near the mailbox. Gate and hedgerow combined to keep children, dogs and puppies — and the goat — inside.

Grandmother had two fine azalea and camellia gardens, one on the Central Avenue side and the other across the driveway by the cottage. She treasured the cedar tree near the gate because her son had planted it, a fact I learned abruptly at the age of eight, when Grandmother caught me stripping a section of bark from it with my new pocket knife. Uncle Billy, it was said, never willingly helped Grandmother in the garden. Something of her love of the land must have rubbed off, though, as he became Garden Editor of the Miami Daily News, a television personality with a gardening program, and an early environmentalist.

In mid-May, 2007, like an apocalyptic vision made manifest, smoke from the far-too-distant fires in South Georgia became the breathing air of Isle of Hope. Drought, said our scientists, made our forests tinder, and global warming caused the extremes of weather that led to drought.

Global warming was a laughable phrase to most until a year or so ago. Americans don't easily cotton to environmental issues. Sixty years ago in May, Uncle Billy, in an editorial in the Miami Daily News of May 8, 1947, quoting the scientists, warned that indiscriminate drainage of the everglades would turn that extraordinary ecosystem into a desert. Now it's common knowledge: the Everglades is a dying region. There's a restoration plan. It will take more than 30 years to construct, at an estimated cost of \$7.8 billion. Bill Bischoff's prophetic article, entitled "Flood Control District," can be seen on the Everglade Magazine web site at www.evergladesonline.com/50years/prisms.htm .

My grandparents built a stone barbecue pit and a scuppernong arbor. They planted pear and fig trees. There were already several pecan trees, the property being part of an old pecan grove on the Parker plantation.

To the left of the Central Avenue front was a large bamboo patch, where my grandfather would cut shoots for salads. A patch of ribbon grass screened the cottage from the back of the main house. I don't recall a vegetable garden in my day, except perhaps for tomato plants; Grandmother used to say she couldn't keep house without tomatoes.

There was a goat. Not long ago, my cousin Fran McLaughlin Thomas found a picture of Franny and her best friend, Gertrude Barbee, in the goat cart. I recall my Aunt Franny telling me how she used to milk it, and how for the longest time she couldn't understand why she always came away with wet feet.

My grandparents probably had some fairly good years together after the building of the new

house. Grandmother's talents took her into the community as a member of the Garden Club, the Home Demonstration Club, and the Altar Society. In the sixties, she was to write a history of the Garden Club. My grandfather liked to come home from a day's work at the Savannah Gas Company and go into his shop in the cottage. He invented a dishwasher for Grandmother, who disliked dishwashing as much as she loved cooking.

Sadly, the good years were all too few, only about eight, before misfortune struck again. My grandfather became ill with cancer. Billy and Bunch were at college. My grandfather refused state-of-the-art cobalt treatments, believing they would only cause undue expense to his family. He had worked most of his forty-nine years. Native ability and tutoring by an aunt who was mother superior of her convent had brought him almost, but not quite, to the position of vice president of the Savannah Gas Company. This brave and gentle man, whom I would give the world to have known, died at home in the summer of 1932. I missed him by only ten years.

Grandmother now had a mortgage to pay and a living to earn. One thing was certain: she would never abandon the home she and my grandfather had built together. But she had to take drastic steps. She rented out the house and the cottage, moved to an apartment in town and opened a tea room until the advent of the minimum wage. A blessing for so many, the little bit of extra operating expense it caused forced her, like so many others, out of business. She returned home and began raising cocker spaniels, a popular breed at the time. She became a Spirella corsetiere. Grandmother was perfect for the job, being beautiful and slender, and in the habit of dressing with simple elegance.

I know it was a relief and a great help when Bunch, my mother, graduated from college in 1934, and returned to live at home and teach school in Savannah. There she stayed until 1939, when she married my father, a United States Marine, in Quantico, Virginia. War was to bring her home just a few years later.

Early in the morning of October 20, 1942, Franny, now a grown young lady with a job in Savannah, cranked up the reluctant Camille, her 1939 Ford, and drove Mother to St. Joseph's Hospital, where I was born at ten. My father, half a world away, learned about my birth weeks later from a fellow Marine reading — faster than Daddy — over his shoulder. Daddy and I would meet for the first time when I was two-and-a-half.

Aunt Becky soon came home as well, bringing Georgie, who was nine months older than I. Together we would wait out the War. With three women, two children, the cocker spaniel Penny and her puppies, we were a lively household. According to pictures I've seen recently, Uncle Billy's sons Billy and Jon, a few years older than Georgie and I, must have spent a good deal of time with us during those years as well.

George claims there was still a goat. I don't recall any goat, but George tells a story, too typical to be really convincing, of seeing it ram our unsuspecting grandmother, who was cutting roses, into

the thorny bush.

Grandmother's piano was the one thing that had survived the fire in 1922. It had been left at a relative's house in town during the move. Grandmother played classical music from Everybody's Favorite Piano Pieces. She played Strauss waltzes and pieces like the Intermezzo from "Cavalleria Rusticana," her favorite opera. Franny had sheet music of the popular songs like "How Deep is the Ocean." Georgie and I liked to sit next to the pianist. When we had our turn, of course, we banged on the keys — not the best thing for the piano, but I suppose Grandmother's tolerance ultimately helped make a musician of me. The piano and the dining room table, where the "least one" always sat upon a huge volume with the ironic title *The Unchangeable Church*, were the two great centers of family life in the house.

Outside, Georgie and I had a well-equipped playground, with sand box, seesaw, swing set and a tea table. Many a morning, put out to play on our swings or in the sand box, we knocked on the cottage door to say hello to our first friend in the world, Rehette Stein. Rehette sometimes took us to Skidaway Island where her husband Luke was overseer to Modena Plantation. Looking at pictures now, I wonder if it was Lukey, the only man on the place, who made all our play equipment. He and Rehette, as handsome and lovely a couple as I've ever known, should have had children of their own.

A favorite outside game of ours was to go into the hedgerow and pretend we were little lost children, and then burst out into the sunlight of the lawn jabbering about how we were safe again at last.

In 1945, Daddy returned from the Solomon Islands, and we met for the first time at the Central of Georgia train station. Uncle George returned from Europe some time later. Georgie and I went our separate ways, we to Parris Island, the first of many Marine bases, and Georgie to one of the many Air Force bases in the U. S. and overseas where his father's career would take them. We returned for holidays and summers as often as we could. For me, Grandmother's house was home. Wherever I lived with my parents, except when we lived on the West Coast, and even then sometimes, I was an island child in the summer, sharing the joys of river ratting and ranging freely all over the island with my cousins, my sister and friends. Wherever I went in the world, my heart was there at Isle of Hope, at home with Grandmother.

My aunt Franny, who married Frank Hughes of Savannah, never strayed from home as the others did. When Franny's family began to grow, Grandmother gave her some land to build her own house, and there they stayed. The one-story house, fronting on Central Avenue, has now departed; plans call for replacing it with a large parking lot.

Life was never easy for Grandmother after my grandfather died, but she never wavered in her determination to hold on to the place. She continued to rent out the "little house," but often saw no other alternative than to take someone into her own house as well. Once it was the new young

Baptist minister. When Mr. Bray came down with a terrible case of bronchitis that winter, it was Grandmother who nursed him, mounting the stairs several times a day with meals and hot drinks.

In spite of her relative poverty, she practiced her own brand of philanthropy. When a young woman in the neighborhood lacked the means to go to hairdresser school, Grandmother somehow found a way to pay the girl's tuition herself. Riding the city bus one day, she befriended a little girl who was being taunted by some boys, her fellow orphans. With seventeen grandchildren of her own, Grandmother nevertheless after that found the time occasionally to ride the bus to the St. Thomas Home and take Josie back to Isle of Hope for the day. She probably returned her to the Home with another round trip bus ride. Grandmother reasoned this way, I'm sure: there was no better house than her hard-won, cherished home, nor was there a better place than her beloved Isle of Hope, for such a little girl to visit.

She was hard of hearing and she suffered terribly from chronic bronchiectasis. Still, Grandmother held on to her home. And we still came home as often as we could. In the end, she spent only a few weeks in a nursing home. She died in February, 1967 at the age of seventy-nine. At the rosary, the Goette's Funeral Home director remarked that he had never seen so many young people at the funeral of an old person. She was buried, of course, from the Chapel of Our Lady of Good Hope.

I was just a few years out of college and teaching in Atlanta. I pleaded with my family to find a way to keep the property, to no avail. My mother and her siblings sold it after just a few months.

No one who has lived at Isle of Hope for more than five years need inquire about the recent history of the Bischoff house. It has been all too apparent. Now there are many who are concerned about its future.

I would be grateful to hear from anyone who remembers the Bischoffs or would like to share memories of life at Isle of Hope in the 20th century with me. Write me at chariot@goeaston.net, peggy.driggs@gmail.com or 27040 Rigby's Lot Road, Easton, Maryland 21601, or call 410-820-6176 or 410-310-3008.

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