

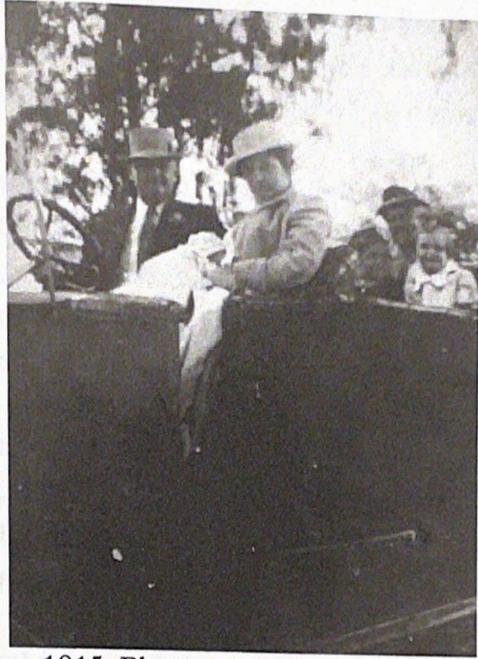


A String of Bells

Stories of a Southern Family

Nick J. Guevara, Jr.

19. Mama Mac



Papa and Mama Mac ca. 1915. Photo courtesy Fran McLaughlin Thomas

Mary Agnes Bell was the third of Julius and Elizabeth's eight children. Though she was the youngest girl in the family, Mary Agnes was ultimately the only one to become a mother herself. Since both Julius and Elizabeth died while some of the boys were still quite young, her mothering skills were required early.

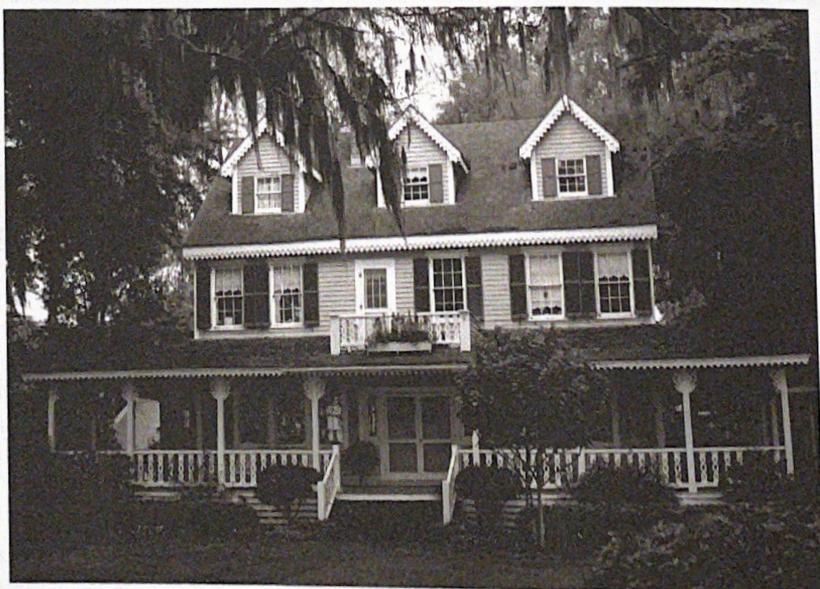
By their late teens, each Bell child was compelled to work to help provide for the family. Mary Agnes worked as a clerk for the Plant System, entrepreneur **Henry B. Plant's** collection of railways, steamship lines, and hotels.

“The Charleston & Savannah [C & S] Railroad was chartered in 1854 by a coalition of lowcountry planters, merchants, and politicians. Construction was completed just prior to the U.S. Civil War. Following the Union capture of Port Royal in November 1861, the railroad's importance became not only economic but logistical. The railroad was the objective of eight battles and skirmishes with Union forces. [It was] totally destroyed [during William T. Sherman's] march through South Carolina. All that Sherman's troops left was a right-of-way and a roadbed.”¹

Mary Agnes's father and cousins participated in a number of those battles and skirmishes to protect the C & S Railway. Toward the close of the War, the Union army destroyed railroad equipment and tore up miles of iron tracks, much of it heated and twisted around trees. These came to be known as "Sherman's Neckties."

*"With the end of the war, Southern railroads were little more than masses of junk. Henry B. Plant, a native of Connecticut, acquired control of the old Charleston and Savannah Railroad. [It was] rehabilitated within a remarkably short period, proving of incalculable aid in the physical, agricultural and financial recuperation of the South and the Southeast."*²

The chief clerk of the Plant System's Savannah office was John McLaughlin (1868-1958). John was the youngest child of 12 born to Irish immigrants, though not all lived to adulthood, and the only child born in Savannah. His father, also named John McLaughlin, was an auctioneer and Savannah city assessor for many years and quite a remarkable man himself. Young John and Mary Agnes married in 1901 at St. John's Cathedral and lived for a time with her Bell siblings on Macon Street, then later with the elder McLaughlins on Henry Street before they moved their growing family to Isle of Hope.



McLaughlin House, 2003. Photo by Bob Meinhard

Isle of Hope was a resort destination, a fresh-air escape from the city, and a seasonal residential area about 7 miles southeast of Savannah's historic district at the terminus of a streetcar line. Isle of Hope's Barbee's Pavilion on Bluff Drive offered animal exhibits including a terrapin farm, food, live music, dancing, and water recreation. The streetcar and Barbee's are long gone, and Bluff Drive now runs serenely along the tidal Skidaway River and is known for its tidy homes, cottages, and gardens, as well as its palms, pines, magnolias, and ancient live oaks which drip with Spanish moss.

The McLaughlins raised five boys and one girl on Bluff Drive, while John found success as a cotton factor in the John Flannery firm. The Bluff Drive home remained in the McLaughlin family until 1980, and contemporary relatives recall the sight and smell of purple-blossomed wisteria vines that once choked the house. Granddaughter **Beth McLaughlin McKinnon** wrote:

"I don't remember Mama Mac and Papa Mac coming to visit us in Macon. We always went to their home and that was fine with us. Isle of Hope was like a magical vacation. The wrap-around porch was wide enough for us to play on. A huge chest at one end of the porch held a treasure trove of generational toys."

Their only daughter **Mary Margaret McLaughlin** said that her father liked to invite people over after Sunday Mass to sit on the porch overlooking the river. He served Gin Rickeys (refreshing cocktails made with gin, lime and club soda) and called the drinks "toothbrushes." Sunday suppers were usually something simple like shrimp and grits.

Granddaughter Beth recalled, "*We could roam the island at will and swim right in front of the house. We were all good swimmers, having been taught by our good family friend **Anna Beckman** at Shell Landing.*" In her book Bluff Drive & the Isle of Hope Churches, Polly Wylly Cooper writes, "*Miss Anna Beckman... taught swimming to her kindergartners in the river out front [of the McLaughlin home]. Stepping stones led to the river as there was no dock.*" Granddaughter Beth also remembered, "*Uncle Jukey (second child **Julius Bell McLaughlin**) would take us crabbing and shrimping. He built [us] a boat.... Rowing hard against the swift current, my cousins and I used the boat for years even after the outboard motor went missing. Our many adventures on the water*

included exploring a deserted island called 'Burnt Pot,' where wild horses and deer roamed through a jungle of native plants."

There is a legend that pirate treasure was once buried on Isle of Hope. In fact, the Pirate House restaurant in Savannah dates to the early years of the Georgia colony and is mentioned in **Robert Louis Stevenson's Treasure Island**. If the McLaughlin children or grandchildren ever found the purported treasure, they never mentioned it. However, granddaughter **Fran McLaughlin Thomas** did treasure *"Mama Mac's extensive collection of miniature pitchers from all over the world. It was displayed in a curio cabinet on a wall in the parlor [and] was a source of fascination for all of the children visiting the McLaughlin home."* A portion of those prized possessions has a place of honor in Fran's home today.

"Mama Mac loved to cook," remembered granddaughter Beth. *"She and her wonderful housekeeper and cook **Delia** cooked on a wood burning stove. When, in the 30s, electric stoves became more practical Papa Mac bought one for Mama Mac. Delia would have no part of it. They kept the wood-burning stove for Delia, who was still using it the late 40s and 50s. I remember it well. I thought it was quite a novelty. Delia cooked some great fried chicken and tasty gumbo on it!"*

"I always thought [Mama Mac] was the sweetest, most wonderful person I ever met. She was happy and loving, and I never remember her scolding me... or anyone, for that matter. She was always there for me when I got cut up with barnacles while swimming in the river or some other childhood "tragedy." I remember once I got stung by a bee. Papa Mac put some liquor on tobacco and applied it to take out the sting, and Mama Mac was there with a kiss and a soft lap to take refuge in. Even though I was a very active child I was just as happy to crawl up in bed with Mama Mac after she became bedridden due to heart trouble. I would sit with her for hours, working jigsaw puzzles or having her read to me as we sipped tea, English style (with cream). I still have vivid memories of her as if they happened yesterday. And I never think of her without a tug at my heart. I feel grateful to have experienced such a great and loving lady and to have had her as my grandmother for even those few years. She will always be an inspiration for me."

Mary Agnes was listed as next of kin by her brother Theodore during his World War I service. When her brother John died

unexpectedly in 1926, Mary Agnes traveled to Atlanta, signed the death certificate, comforted his widow and young family, and arranged for his burial in Savannah. In 1940 she traveled to Augusta to sign Theodore's death certificate and brought him home for burial as well.

Mary Agnes's brother Joseph worked with John McLaughlin at the Flannery Co. for many years, undoubtedly through the influence of "Papa Mac." Joseph's eldest daughter Mary Bell Grayson spoke extremely fondly of "*my favorite Aunt Mazie*," as she always referred to her. The First Communion prayer book she received from her favorite aunt in 1918 remains in the family today. May we all make an effort to be as available to family and friends and to leave a legacy of love like that of Mary Agnes Bell McLaughlin – daughter, sister, wife, mother, grandmother, "Mama Mac," and "favorite Aunt Mazie."

With gratitude to Fran Thomas and Beth McKinnon for the photos and memories of Isle of Hope and Mama and Papa Mac.

¹ www.carolana.com/SC/Transportation/railroads/sc_rrs_charleston_savannah.html

² Glover, F.H., "The Greatest Men of Florida" *Suniland: The Magazine of Florida* February 1925, 1(5) 36-39.