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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, to be entitled Tell Me Where All Past Years Are, about my mother's family and their former home on the Isle of Hope.

My grandparents, Mary Elizabeth Schaaf and William Henry Bischoff — Mamie and Willie to family and friends — moved to 310 Parkersburg Road in the spring of 1922. A change of address card with a photo of them seems emblematic of the life they sought for themselves and their children in moving to Isle of Hope. They sit on a bench together outside the back door, their two sunny faces smiling into the camera from under straw hats — too delighted with it all to be true country folk.

Grandmother wanted a garden and my grandfather, a frustrated engineer, wanted a workshop. And so they bought property from Perry Solomon, who had employed them both after Grandmother graduated from St. Vincent's Academy, when they were still courting. The story-and-a-half house had been built with timbers salvaged from the Benedictine Freedmen School on Skidaway Island some time after an 1889 tidal wave destroyed the mission. On the lot was a one-story cottage, once servants quarters, that could house Willie's shop. A Delco House supplied battery power for electricity. There was a woodshed where chickens had been kept. There might have been other structures on the property as well.

The house had more space than their former home on East Taylor Street, and an acre appealed to their five children, who were, in order of birth, William Henry, Jr. (Billy), Margaret (Bunch), Mary, Elizabeth (Becky) and Frances (Franny). The children played as well under the ancient live oaks in the park near the Chapel of Our Lady of Good Hope, and no doubt on the Isle of Hope School playground, although they all commuted to Marist and Sacred Heart and later Benedictine and St. Vincent's. Transportation was easy; the streetcar passed right by the house down Central Avenue. My grandfather had a car, but he often rode the streetcar to work.

It is a sad irony that the Isle of Hope firehouse now stands just across the road, for it was fire that changed my 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; Stella and Franny became lifelong friends.

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, told me that both fires

were caused by faulty electrical wiring.

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 something she could salvage as 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 that 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 serve as an epigram for my grandparents' characters. My grandfather had already survived the severest of tests: at the age of ten, he had left school and gone 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." 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. French doors opened onto the dining room. Pane-glass doors opened onto the downstairs screened porch from both living room and dining room. Identically placed doors opened onto the upstairs porch from two of the 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 coal 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 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 of the front steps they planted hydrangeas, which grew very large and bloomed a beautiful blue. A narrow brick walk in the same herringbone pattern curved around the house and ran the length of the side porch. Grandmother planted annuals and perennials 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 trees were thriving in 2007.

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

Grandmother had two 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, who never seemed to like helping in the garden, became Garden Editor of the Miami Daily News, a television personality and an early environmentalist.

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

Facing Central Avenue on the left 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 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.

Willie and Mamie Bischoff had some good years together after the building of the new house. Grandmother's talents took her into the community as a founding member and the first president of the Isle of Hope Garden Club; she belonged to the Home Demonstration Club and the Altar Society as well. In the nineteen-sixties, she would write a history of the Garden Club. My grandfather liked to come home from a day's work and go into his shop. He invented a dishwasher for Grandmother, who disliked dishwashing as much as she loved cooking. I think he also built some small pieces of furniture, and even tried his hand at turning.

The Schaafs and the Bischoffs, nineteenth century immigrants, had long since branched out to include other Savannah families — Lang, Wilkinson, Mahany, Ranitz, and Andrews — and so Willie and Mamie were host to many a large family gathering at their Isle of Hope home.

Sad to say, the good years were all too few, only about eight, before misfortune struck again. My grandfather became ill with cancer. Billy had dropped out of the University of Georgia and was a reporter for the Savannah Evening Press, but Bunch was at college in Valdosta and Mary at art school in New York. He 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 his aunt, a Sister of Mercy, 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 took over the Marion Tea Room across from the post office until the advent of the minimum wage. A blessing for so many, the new law caused her extra operating expense and she was forced to give up the 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 latter job, being beautiful and slender, and in the habit of dressing with simple elegance. It must have been a great relief when Bunch, my mother, graduated from college 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, at Quantico, Virginia. War would bring her home again just a few years later.

Early in the morning of October 20, 1942, Franny, now a grown 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 was half a world away, in the Solomon Islands. We would meet for the first time when I was two-and-a-half.

Aunt Becky came home with Georgie, nine months older than I after Uncle George left for Europe with the Army Air Corps. Together we would wait out the War. With three women, two children, the cocker spaniel Penny and her puppies, we were a lively household. There was still a goat, according to George. I don't recall the goat, and he told me 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 possession that had survived the fire in 1922; it had been left at her father's house when they moved. Grandmother played Strauss waltzes and pieces like the Intermezzo from "Cavalleria Rusticana," her favorite opera. Franny played popular songs such as "How Deep Is The Ocean" and "I'll Be Seeing You." Georgie and I liked to sit next to the pianist and, when we had our turn, bang on the keys. The piano and the dining room table, where the "least one" always sat upon a huge volume ironically called *The Unchangeable Church*, were the two centers of family life inside the house.

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

In 1945 my father returned from the South Pacific; we met for the first time at Union Station. Uncle George returned from Europe some time later. Georgie and I went our separate ways — we to Parris Island, the first of several Marine bases, and Georgie to one of the many Air Force bases in the U.S. and overseas. 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-rattin 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.

When I was seven, my father went to Korea, and Mother, my little sister Paula, and I went home to Isle of Hope once again. Mother taught at Isle of Hope School that year, and I went to Sacred Heart School with my cousin Frances and a new friend, Nancy Cunningham, who lived in Wymberly. It was a hard year in some ways, but in others one of the best years of my life.

My aunt Franny, who married Frank Hughes, never strayed from home as the others did. When Franny's family began to grow, Grandmother gave her and Uncle Frank some land to build their own house, and there they stayed. The one-story bungalow, which faced Central Avenue, is gone; I am afraid there may be a parking lot there now. I have not seen the place since 2007.

Life was never easy for Grandmother after my grandfather died, but her determination to hold on to the place never wavered. She continued to rent out the "little house," but often she was forced 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, it was Grandmother who nursed him, mounting the stairs several times a day to take him meals and hot drinks.

In spite of her relative poverty, she nevertheless 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 a 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 made the time occasionally to ride the bus to the St. Thomas Home, pick up Josie, and take her back to Isle of Hope for the day. And I'm sure she took her back in the same way. 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 back as often as we could. In the end, she spent a very short time in the county 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 at Bonaventure Cemetery alongside my grandfather.

I was just a few years out of college and working in Atlanta. I pleaded with my family to find a way to keep the property — to no avail. Why had Grandmother not just left the house to Franny instead of all five of her children? They tried renting the house out for a while, but the tenants were inappropriate and troublesome. Franny had her hands full with her own family. Franny and

Frank could not afford to buy the others out, or perhaps Frank didn't want to. And so my mother and her siblings sold it after just a few months.

Year after year I told myself I should one day knock at the front door and simply ask the new owners if they would sell me the house when they were ready to move on. I never did; I don't know quite why, except for my tendency to procrastinate. "He who hesitates is lost," the proverb goes. I live now with a consciousness of loss that does not go away. I let myself down, and perhaps others as well.

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. Write me at peggy.driggs@gmail.com .

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