Once upon a Time - 1922-24

Chester is now my home but in our childhood it was known to us as the home of our maternal grandparents, a place endowed with the romance and beauty of Camelot. It was land of the bedtime story, and we were as familiar with its landscape, people, and customs, as if we had spent an earlier childhood there.

In those first days of the automobile the distance between the small lowcountry town of Walterboro and the city of Chester seemed much greater both physically and psychologically than it does today. Rough miles of sandy and rocky road constituted a natural barrier between the two sections of South Carolina and separated the cultures in a way that is hard to understand in this day of easy travel.

We were privileged because of our upcountry mother to have a foot in both camps and it was with great excitement that we undertook the yearly journey to Chester.

When the humid heat of the lowcountry set in with its attendant swarms of insects, our Mother's thoughts turned to the hills. Trunks were packed and sent ahead by train to Blowing Rock, North Carolina. Well before dawn on the appointed day children, servants, and pets were loaded into the family touring cars (an Overland and a Willis Knight) and we were off!

The cool morning air rushed through the open cars and we knew that like the friendly cow of nursery fame we would be, "blown by all the winds that blew and wet by all the showers," before we arrived in Chester for our overnight stop. The cars were equipped with curtains of isinglass but it was impossible to snap them in place should a sudden storm strike. Between Walterboro and Chester on a hot day several cloudbursts were inevitable. We took them as a matter of course as we did the numerous blow outs and punctures that plagued our progress.

The final lap of the journey we called, "The Devil's Race Track." This stretch of road between Winnsboro and Chester was so full of rocky outcroppings that no driver was skillful enough to run the full course without blowing a tire or breaking a muffler.

"The Devil's Race Track" behind us, we limped into Chester, the city built on hills, so marvelous to eyes accustomed to flatland. We greeted like an old friend the Opera House rising above the other buildings. We recalled the stories our mother told of the years when touring players brightened its stage.

Proud and lofty on the crest of the hill stood the monument to Chester's Confederate soldiers. Our great-grandfather, Captain Joseph Lucius Gaston, was numbered among them and we sat straighter as we remembered how he had died at the head of his company in the Battle of Seven Pines.

We rode at accelerated speed down the hill, past the Court House with its impressive portico, to the A.R.P. Church. Here our great-grandmother, Margaret Hemphill Gaston, worshipped. To us, the awe-inspiring initials "A.R.P." constituted one of life's mysteries. There was no such organization in the lowcountry but we knew from our great grandmother's voice when she pronounced those initials that the Methodist and Episcopal Churches of Walterboro fell far short of measuring up to the standards of the A.R.P. Church. We wondered how our mother could have been so brash as to sit on the steps of this imposing building after school eating dill pickles and exchanging girlish confidences with her teenage friends.

Situated between York and Saluda Streets was the Methodist Church with its brick towers and stained glass windows. Our grandfather, Judge George Williams Gage, was a Methodist, and to the unending astonishment of her Presbyterian and A.R.P. relatives, his bride Janie Hemphill Gaston, became a loyal Methodist, too. If we were in Chester on Sunday we worshipped at the Methodist Church. I vividly recall a Sunday school class taught by Miss Isabel Hardin. The subject matter of the lesson is lost in time but I'll never forget my admiration for the lovely young teacher dressed in pink with a rose trimmed leghorn hat.

We grew more excited as we progressed down York Street and recognized familiar landmarks. There was Mrs. Heyman's house with the small granite carriage step still at the roadside We knew it to be a perfect chair for a child.

Across the street Cousin John Stringfellow's house with its vine-clad veranda and round glassed conservatory could be glimpsed through the trees. This house always seemed huge and dark inside but we were assured of a warm welcome from dapper Cousin John, his wife, Cousin Belle (Isabelle) Hemphill, and his sister, little Cousin Janie.

Cousin John had fought gallantly through the War between the States and had come home to operate Stringfellow's Drug Store on the hill in Chester. He was a druggist by profession, but like most southern gentlemen of his day, he farmed as an avocation. Cousin John conceived the idea of establishing a vineyard on one of his plantations and he employed a Frenchman to come to Chester to supervise the planting of the grapes and the making of wine. Before the passing of the prohibition law, wine from the vineyard could be purchased at Stringfellow's Drug Store. Long after prohibition was in effect wine was served at the Stringfellow's dinner table as a beverage and as a jellied desert complemented by whipped cream. All this we knew from hearsay, for Cousin John was now old and blind and seldom left home.

Cousin Belle Hemphill Stringfellow was for many years organist at Purity Presbyterian Church, but when we knew her she seemed an old lady always dressed in black. We felt sorry that her only son had died young and we wondered if she ever smiled.

Little Cousin Janie Stringfellow was small of statue but large of heart. After age had deprived her of sight and hearing, she maintained a cheerful loving attitude. Cousin Janie had an affinity for children and they for her.

Standing at the edge of the Stringfellow property was a white clapboard cottage so like a doll house that we coveted it. This was in fact one of the oldest dwellings in Chester and it has survived its grander neighbors to house a growing young family in the year 1975. (Jackson House)

We passed the house that had belonged to Aunt Grace Gage, our grandfather's sister, (Ross Gladden house), the Bigham house sprawling over its lot with many porches and roof angles, and at last we reached 143 York Street. The handmade brick of the home of our great-grandmother and our grandparents glowed in the light of the setting sun. In the vanguard of the welcoming committee we saw Jim Foster, our grandparents' cook and man of all work.

Jim had been born a slave in the cabin back of the Brick House. His mother, Laura, had elected to remain with her mistress after emancipation and had reared her son to take his place in the service of the family.

During our short visits to Chester Jim tried to impress us with the superiority of all things upcountry. He was ruler of the kitchen area of the Brick House. His kitchen was equipped with a wood burning stove and a butcher's chopping block for the beating of biscuits. Numerous pantries,

storage closets, and hallways separated the kitchen from the dining room, and a speaking tube extended from the upstairs hall to the kitchen. This primitive inter-communications system was a delight to us, and we whistled into the upper portion of the tube until Jim threatened us with dire consequences if we didn't stop interrupting his work. "How I'm to know you ain't Miss Margaret whistling for me?" he would grumble.

The brick house at 143 York Street

Stepping from the late afternoon heat into the cool dim hall of the Brick house was an astonishing experience. The solid brick walls three feet thick were as effective in heat control as modern air-conditioning, and we almost gasped with relief.

We ran upstairs to take our turns in the bathtub that stood high on legs and was big enough to accommodate two or three children at a time. The bathroom had a fireplace and we longed for cold weather so we could see a fire dancing on the hearth, but our visits to Chester always took place in the summer. Our father thought it was impractical to pay a winter visit to a section where there was no lightwood (fatpine). He often marveled how upcountry people managed to start fires with newspapers and coal, a task he considered impossible!

The water that filled the big tub seemed slightly muddy and smelled different from the artesian water that rose from a flowing well in Walterboro. Chester water also had a foreign taste, which we were told was caused by chemicals needed to purify river water for drinking. This taste we objected to so strongly that each child brought a jug of drinking water as part of his necessary luggage.

Clean and cool we reported to the dining room where Jim had spread a traditional family feast. He suspected that we did not eat properly in that foreign place of our abode. There was ham sliced paper-thin, fried chicken, and beaten biscuits, and for desert buttermilk ice cream. These latter delicacies were unknown in the lowcountry. They tasted strange to our uneducated palates but we were required to eat the hard, pale, cold biscuits and the sour- sweet ice cream so delightful to our elders.

After supper the family adjourned to the front porch rockers and the children scattered over the yard to chase lightening bugs. It was a treat for us to play outside after dark, a pleasure forbidden at home because of malaria carrying mosquitoes. Though the upcountry mosquitoes were present and persistent, they were only a nuisance, not a danger, and screens and mosquito netting were thought unnecessary by our grandparents.

Soon relatives and friends began to come to greet our mother and her family. We watched in amazement as she changed before our eyes into a girl we scarcely knew as she laughed and talked.

Among the visiting relatives were Mr. and Mrs. Vance Davidson, neighbors and dear cousins of our grandmother. Kate Gaston Davidson was my grandmother's first cousin, twenty years younger than she but always congenial. "Mama Kate," as we called her, was a favorite of all children. She was pretty and told the most enchanting stories which she composed on the spot. After a year's anticipation of hearing again a particular story we would find that Mama Kate had no recollection of

that story - an acute disappointment. However, she always redeemed herself in our eyes by serving up a new one quite as exciting. I often wish that she had written a book for children. At one time she wrote for the Ladies Home Journal under a nom de plume, but these stories I never read.

Kate Gaston Davidson's conversation was as fascinating to me when I was a grandmother as it was when I was a child. Her wit and wisdom are legend in Chester where she spent her entire life. Her two sons, Robert Franklin and Chalmers Gaston, became educators of note, and her only daughter, Mary Buford, while at Winthrop College established a world record in discus throwing.

Mary Buford remained in Chester working in the law office of her cousin, David Gaston. She was the joy of her mother's declining years and worked with the young people of Purity Presbyterian Church. She especially enjoyed teaching her Sunday school pupils to drive. A familiar sight on Sunday afternoon was Mary B seated beside an earnest boy or girl who aspired to a driver's license. I suspect that payment for the lessons was made by memorizing the catechism.

Cousin Arthur Gaston, brother of Kate, his son David and little daughter, Sarah, came to greet the lowcountry kin. Cousin Arthur had been married twice and both lovely wives had died young. Our family spoke with sorrowful affection of "beautiful Virginia," mother of David, and "darling Dolly," mother of Sarah. The tie between Cousin Arthur and the occupants of the Brick House was strong, for it was here that he was nursed back to health after contracting typhoid fever during the Spanish American War. Jim Foster always claimed credit for saving "Mr. Arthur's" life.

Our cousin, Alice Gage, dressed in blue with every shining curl in place, came to.join the lightning bug catchers. Her parents, Robert and Mary Smith Gage, took their places on the porch.

George and Elise Wannamaker Gage and their small son, George, drove in from the country, and Mr. and Mrs. Jim Davidson joined the gathering at 143 York Street.

Fanny Abell Davidson was a pioneer in the restoration of antiques in Chester County, and influenced many citizens to preserve old furniture instead of replacing it. She knew all the best methods of refinishing and was generous in sharing her time and talent with collectors. She renovated the Brawley House on the corner of York and Walnut Streets. As her home this old house became a place of beauty and gracious hospitality.

Dr. W. L. Davidson and his wife, Nell Purvis, walked up York Street, and we were surprised to see the "Bill Lee" of our mother's reminiscences a dignified gentleman with a wife who wore delightful perfume and a rose at her belt. Bill Lee and Mary Lindsay were featured in so many Chester stories that we expected them to remain in a Peter Pan-like state of arrested development.

Many years later my youngest son attended Chester's Foote Street School where Miss Mary Lindsay was principal. I always felt a special bond with her. She had a most delightful sense of humor and contributed greatly to the educational system of Chester throughout her long teaching career.

Cousin Sally Brice, widow of Ashbel Brice, and sister of Governor Miller of Alabama, came from her house on the corner of Walnut and Saluda Streets. Cousin Sally was an impressive lady of indeterminate age, always decorated with many beads and bangles. She overflowed with conversation and enthusiasm for various causes and projects. A musician and an ardent clubwoman, Cousin Sally had traveled abroad. It is said that she once rearranged a tour of Europe to ensure her presence at the fall meeting of The Up-to-Date Club in Chester.

As the hour grew late visitors began to say good night and to stroll homeward along the darkened streets. Now we each had a man's handkerchief filled with lightning bugs, giving out a pulsating light like magic lanterns. My lantern was especially beautiful for I always requested my grandfather's handkerchief. It was made of cream colored silk and the light showed amber through its fold.

Soon we were called to release our captives and come to bed. We passed the grandfather clock now on the stroke of ten, its tone sharp and bell like. We climbed the stair with triangular steps where it curved to the second floor bedrooms. All the heat of the day seemed to be trapped under the roof and we stretched out on fresh white sheets that were warm to the touch. Sleep seemed far away as we listened to the creaking and popping of the old house in which our mother and grandmother had grown up. Down at the Walnut Street station we could hear the trains shifting and moving. The lonesome whistle of incoming or departing engines filled the night. Chester, with three railway systems, the Seaboard, the Carolina and North Western, and the Southern, was a railroad center, and all night long the sound of trains colored our dreams.

Like the birds in the huge elm tree outside our window we were up with the sun, chattering with excitement and exploring this extension of our kingdom. In the upstairs hall we found the remembered gray toy wheelbarrow. We never knew what child left it there, but we were not allowed to carry it home, and we must always handle it with care. Soon tiring of being careful, we trooped out on the upstairs porch. The air was cool this early and we listened to the clop-clopping of horses hooves on the paved street in front of the house. In Walterboro hoofbeats were muffled by sand, and we loved the novel sound the farm wagons made coming into Chester town.

We gazed across York Street to Mr. S. M. Jones' house with its glistening white clapboard and massive round columns reaching from ground floor to roof. Its many chimneys shone in the morning sun, and we thrilled to the knowledge that in the parlor of that house were golden chairs - wonder of wonders!

Jones House – 144 York Street

Time pressed, so we stole downstairs through the library where book-filled shelves extended from floor to ceiling and Grandma Gaston's portrait reigned. We paused in the parlor long enough to make sure the miniature wicker doll furniture still occupied a shelf of the whatnot in the corner, and then made for the front door and the freedom of the barn. The barn faced Walnut Street and its dim interior was redolent of hay, horses, and saddles. Dust motes danced in the rays of the early sun. Before we could climb the ladder to the loft the bell rang for breakfast and we hastened back to present ourselves in the dining room properly washed and brushed.

Breakfast was a formal meal at our grandparent's and each member of the family was expected to be in his place on time and suitably dressed for the day. The table was laid with a white linen cloth and set with silver and white china decorated with miniature blue and rose-colored flowers. Oatmeal was always the first course, lightly sugared by our grandmother and drowned in heavy cream. We were never asked if we wanted oatmeal; it was routine in this Scotch-Irish household and the child who didn't eat it forfeited the eggs, bacon, and batter cakes which were to follow.

Well fortified for the second day of the trip to Blowing Rock, we were bundled into our cars with bulging lunch baskets and many admonitions to drive carefully. The parting was not sorrowful because we knew that in a few days our grandmother would move her household to Gage Hill, where we all summered. Long cool days of unorganized play lay ahead, and we began to count off the miles to Blowing Rock.

When the goldenrod and asters bloomed on our hill and the butterflies grew lazy and slow, trunks were repacked, and our cars turned once again toward Chester.

At the foot of the mountain the air was thick and hot. The roads leading to Chester were dusty, and wayside grass had been browned by summer sun. The fields of Chester County were white with cotton and filled with brightly garbed negro pickers. They laughed and talked as they filled the huge sacks tied to their waists.

We passed a gin; its yard crowded with wagons delivering loose cotton and departing with tightly bound-bales. A holiday spirit prevailed as this "Southern Gold" was hauled from field to gin and from gin to market. The low hanging trees that lined the streets of Chester were festooned with wisps of white snatched from wagons piled high with cotton, and the steady clop-clop of the mules' hooves vied with the insistent sound of July flies as they proclaimed summer's end.

As we reached the Brick House the late September heat hung like a pall. We raced for the haven of the hall where Jim Foster served us tall glasses of cool muscadine juice saying, "Drink up 'cause there ain't no milk. The cow got in the bitterweed again!"

The lovely tart purple juice tasted like autumn and comforted us for the loss of summer. Our thoughts turned to the delights of loaded grape arbors, boiled peanuts, and reunion with ponies and school friends. Suddenly we were homesick for flat sandy land and moss hung live oaks. Tomorrow we would re-enter the lowcountry and Chester would again become for us the land of the bedtime story, our window on the past.

Harriet Howell Stringfellow