

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, August 13, 2007

Two Seamstresses of Years Ago: I knew Raymond W. Stanley (1894–1985) the last five years of his life, and he related some wonderful stories. One had to do with George Eastman of the famous Kodak company trying to buy the Stanley Dry Plate Company. Eastman had bought many small photographic dry plate companies, several of them in Maine, just before the turn of the 20th century, and for several years, he had tried in vain to buy out the Stanley brothers. He tried various methods to enlist their interest, including the purchase of several of their first steam cars, but to no avail.

As was common practice for affluent families of those days, the lady of the house would often employ a live-in seamstress who would circulate among several clients on an annual basis, staying one or two weeks at a time in the family's household. Room and board would be furnished, and she would usually take her meals with the family. During the day, she would make and alter dresses, small boys' suits, curtains, etc. for the lady of the house, in this case Mrs. F. E. (Augusta) Stanley. Since the Stanleys' seamstress was a rather attractive young woman, Eastman developed a new strategy. He hired an accomplice whose job it was to get a date with the seamstress and to glean from her the Stanleys' conversations at the dinner table. Was his financial offer discussed? Was it favorably considered? What did they dislike about it? There is no evidence that this secretive endeavor paid off, but Eastman finally bought the Stanley Dry Plate Company in 1904 for a big price, as the twins were more and more preoccupied with building steam cars and F. O. Stanley was spending much of his time in Colorado to heal from tuberculosis.

Ruth and I can relate to a wonderful local seamstress named Lizzie Grace (1870?–1955?). She worked for both our mothers and probably for our grandmothers, as well as for many other "clients" in the Hockessin-Yorklyn-Kennett Square area. Lizzie was never married, but she had at least three sisters who were. They were all born on the Grace farm at the corner of Mill Creek and Brackenville Roads south of Hockessin. One sister was married to Jack Dolan, an employee of the Yorklyn snuff mills all his life. Grace Dolan was a favorite niece of Lizzie's. Another was married to Mike Geohegan, who lived on Old Wilmington Road near the railroad and the Golding clay pit. He, too, worked at one of the Yorklyn mills and used to hitchhike home on the afternoon train by hiding on the front vestibule of the baggage car just behind the tender. Having no luck in getting him to buy a ticket, the conductor finally gave up and slowed the train enough as it passed the Golding platform so Mike could jump off. A third married a man named Lafferty, whose son James was Frank Diver's top mechanic at the Packard Motor Company of Wilmington. Jimmy Lafferty would often bring his tools to Auburn Heights to pull the cylinder head, clean the carbon, and grind the valves in one of my father's Packard Straight Eights. He never owned a car himself. The Graces in Kennett Square were cousins, and Lizzie spent vacation time visiting there. Two sisters and brother Frank lived "at home"; Frank collected tickets at the old Auditorium Theatre. Their brother Walter was an ardent trapshooter and Burgess of Kennett Square during the last six or eight years of his life, which ended in 1951.

Lizzie had a room on Madison Street in Wilmington during the last 25 years of her life. When she came to Auburn Heights about twice a year, the schedule would go like this: my father would bring her out here Sunday evening, and she would soon retire. Monday through Friday, she would be up before 7 A.M., have breakfast with the family, and go to work behind our Singer sewing machine. Stopping briefly for lunch, she would work again through the afternoon, stopping as she was called to dinner at 6:00. After dinner, she would read the Wilmington paper for a half hour and then retire. Saturday was the same, but her work week would be finished after lunch, and my dad would take her back to her apartment. She was maintaining this schedule into her early 80s. I tried every trick I knew to learn Lizzie's age, but she would never tell me.