

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, November 7, 2011

Southern Pines, North Carolina, 1935: Struthers Burt was a Philadelphia writer of fiction in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and as with many in his profession, it was “feast or famine.” Like Mark Twain, he had great success with his novels but soon got over-extended by following a lavish lifestyle. Probably just before the market crash in 1929, he built a modern mansion on probably 30 acres of land at the edge of Southern Pines in the sand hills of south central North Carolina, six miles from the golf, polo, and trapshooting resort at Pinehurst. The two communities were connected by one of the first dual highways in America. By 1935, Burt had to rent his estate as much as possible to stay afloat.

The Marshalls of Yorklyn lived well during the Depression years. For much of this time at Auburn Heights, my mother had help in the house in addition to Clifford Murray as an outside man. In 1935, the “inside help” consisted of a couple named Melvin and Viola Simmons. They lived above the garage (the present FAHP office) and took their meals in the kitchen of the big house. My parents liked Southern Pines, and we spent three months there in 1932. They promoted the idea of most of the Mancill family (Anna Mancill was Warren and Clarence Marshall's only sister), and the Kennett Square widows Mary Chalfant, Sara Bowers, and Mabel Horsey (Sara was the daughter of Mary, and Mabel was their live-in companion) going with the three Marshalls for about six weeks to this southern location, where a place would be rented large enough for all. There would be ten in the party, including Norman and Anna Mancill and their twin sons, Alan and Bob, age 10 (son Norman was a sophomore at Penn State). The Struthers Burt home was rented from mid-January until the end of February.

For me, it was a time never to be forgotten. Also ten years of age, I enjoyed the Mancill twins, and we got along famously. The Burt home had an entrance hall with a spiraling staircase, a music room, a large office, a library, a dining room, an antiquated kitchen, and a ballroom 30' x 42' with an operating fireplace. Upstairs there were seven bedrooms, three baths, and three small servants' bedrooms above the kitchen. A raised patio surrounded two sides of the house with an Italian fountain at one end, and the private driveway was ¼ mile long. There was an outbuilding large enough for the three Packards in which we traveled. On the second floor of this building in substandard quarters lived an elderly black man whom we seldom saw.

The three Marshalls and the three Kennett Square widows left home on January 11 in my father's 1934 Packard Twelve seven-passenger limousine, stopping at the John Marshall Hotel in Richmond to break the trip at the halfway point. The next afternoon, we checked into the Hollywood Hotel in Southern Pines and made final arrangements for the transfer to the Burt property on the 15th. With Uncle Norman and Aunt Anna Mancill driving Mrs. Chalfant's 1931 Packard Model 826 five-passenger sedan (with the twins in the back) and Melvin Simmons, accompanied by his wife, Viola, and another black lady who worked for the Mancills in Uncle Norman's 1930 Packard Standard Eight coupe, the remainder of the party of 10 plus three arrived in Southern Pines in time to move into the big house. I might relate some of the fun experiences we had during our six-week tenure in another edition. It could not have been much fun for the “help,” but those were different times.