

HELEN DENT WRENSHALL
MRS. ISAAC HART PURDY
FORMER MRS. CHAFFEE GRANT

Interviewed by Tom Purdy

HDW: In the Town of North Salem, near the village of Salem Center was a corner lovingly called Grants Corner. It really and truly never was owned by General Grant, but it was given to his daughter; no, it was bought by Senator Chaffee, the first senator from Colorado. And he bought it from the James Libby family in 1881 and gave it to his daughter, Fannie Josephine Chaffee. At that time it was a charming, old-fashioned farm house, but it was changed by Mr. Chaffee by having Stanford White redesign it into its present architecture. General Grant spent many, happy, visiting times there with his daughter and it was a mecca for all of the family. It was one place where they could get together and just be themselves.

TLP: I should have mentioned at the start of this tape recording session that I have come over here to the home of my sister-in-law, Mrs. I. H. Purdy, the former Mrs. Chaffee Grant, to ask her some questions and discuss some of her reminiscences of the Salem Center and North Salem many years ago. She not only lived in the old Grant house for many years, at Grants Corners, and later down at the house called Turkey Hill, but now she has moved over and is living with her daughter, Jane, Jane deMcCarty, in a lovely big house on the road to Ridgefield, on Route 33, I believe it is. And I have come over here this afternoon, this beautiful Sunday afternoon in April, to interview my sister-in-law, Mrs. Purdy. And she is going to tell us something of the old Grant place. Now, Nellie, just when did you first live there?

HDW: I married Chaffee Grant in 1907 and we came directly up to the Grant place and for a year or two lived in the little white gatehouse, a little garden cottage. And then

TLP: The Craigs live there now, don't they Nellie?

HDW: I think they do, yes. And it had been the caretakers house. And then we got more ambitious and we moved up into the big house at which time it was beautifully furnished from top to bottom with perfectly lovely rugs and furniture. In later years it was dismantled and all of that furniture was shipped to California, to San Diego, CA where Mr. Grant had moved.

TLP: Well, I remember the house when I first went there, it had a huge ballroom, I believe it was. I remember parties that we had there. Now, let's see, your, both your children were born there, weren't they? Well, where were they born?

HDW: They were born in San Diego, because we had decided to go to California to live and both of my children, Jane and Jerome Chaffee Grant were born in San Diego.

TLP: But, then, there's a schoolhouse. Did you ever live in the schoolhouse? I believe the

Armstrongs now live there, between the house that the Craigs own and the large house. Did you ever live there? I know some of the family did. Tell us a little bit about that schoolhouse.

HDW: Well, I never lived in the schoolhouse. But that was where the five children had a governess and attended school regularly in that little building. And later on my daughter lived in it, for possibly a year, finding it a very comfortable home.

TLP: Well, now I just noticed it, that I hadn't turned the volume up very much on mine so it won't be too good, but we will probably do better as we go along. So, anyways, you said five children. What five children were they? Whose children were they and what were their names, if you can recall?

HDW: Well, they were U. S. Grant, Jr. and Fannie Chaffee Grant's children and they were Miriam and Julia, Chaffee, Ulysses and Fannie. Five children.

TLP: You mentioned U. S. Grant, Jr. Is he the, one of the children and the son of the General?

HDW: He's the son of the General, and the five children that I have mentioned were his children.

TLP: Oh, I understand now. Later on, I understand that it was along about 1918, wasn't it when you came back from California and where did you live then, when you first came back from California?

HDW: We lived in the caretaker's cottage, the gate cottage at the entrance because it was small and easily heated.

TLP: And then you moved up into the big house. You lived there in the summer, didn't you?

HDW: We moved up into the big house in the summer when it didn't require heating.

TLP: I remember a man that you had working for you that you used to tell me ate a loaf of bread at one sitting, about a dozen eggs a day. Do you remember him?

HDW: Oh, very well. He, his name was Dan Sullivan and he was a very well educated Irish man. And he also looked out for my children many times when I needed him. He was a helpful person in many ways.

TLP: I know there was a man, I remember, that worked for you or the Grants or someone, by the name of Dick Hunter, that lived over in a place on my farm that the Whitmans now own, Dick Hunter. Tell us a little bit about Dick.

HDW: Well, Dick Hunter was really quite a character and at the time that he was working for the Grants he had his own little cottage. Then later on he moved over onto Purdy property on a farm house that was called, we always called it the Joe Hall farm.

TLP: I remember Joe Hall, he rented it from father years later. But Dick Hunter, I thought, oh,

this Dick Hunter ?? Joe Hall, there, didn't he?

HDW: I think so. Dick Hunter's wife, Sophie, had been a Swedish servant in the, Mrs. Grant's, General Grant's wife's family for quite a while and then she donated her to Mrs. Grant when she was through with her. After the Grants gave up their townhouse she had no need for Sophie. So, Sophie came up to the country and married Dick Hunter.

TLP: (Repeating in the background) ...he lived in the house down by the stream there, across, down next to the Titicus River.

HDW: Well, that was Fred Kirk. He was another old retainer that they had had for many years. And Dick Hunter and Fred Kirk were very staunch supporters of the family; worked for long hours with very little pay. Took good care of everything.

TLP: Now, tell us a little bit about the schoolhouse, the house that has a round tower on it that's located between the big house and the caretakers cottage that the Craigs now own.

HDW: Well the house that has the round tower, believe it or not the round tower was an ice house, and that was attached to what we called the schoolhouse, and then that house was sort of octagonal in the interior and saw dust was put down the sides of it to make the ice last through the summer and it worked very well because we would have ice to throw out when winter came to put in fresh ice. And for many years Amos Finney, a long time butcher we had in North Salem, rented it from me and my rent was to have him keep my big ice box full of ice everyday. Isn't that good news.

TLP: That's great. Well, then, that farm included a lot of land, a lot of farm land on both side of the road and south side of 121, although now a number of other places, I believe the Gillies own some property up there. But we used to cut some cedar posts, remember, and you had a pond up there? How many acres was included in the whole farm?

HDW: Well, before we began, Libby had it. I think there was about three hundred acres. And we sold it off in sort of parts. We sold some to Ellen Toby. And

TLP: She lived where Ms. Crook lived.

HDW: That's right, where Ellie Lowe lives.

TLP: Ellie Lowe lives there now and it was first, first, first I remember was Ms. Crook. Is she the first person that you remember?

HDW: No, the first person was old Travis, Burt Travis's grandfather, Edmund Travis.

TLP: His grandfather lived there. I never knew that. Then who did they sell it to?

HDW: Well,

TLP: Was that Ms. Crook.

HDW: I think they must have sold to her but I can't quite think how that worked out. But the Traverses did own it.

TLP: Well, there were two Crook sisters, weren't there?

HDW: Yes, Cornelia and Hannah

TLP: Hannah Crook. And they lived there; she started, she was one of the founders of the North Salem Improvement Society wasn't she?

HDW: Not that I ever heard of.

TLP: Cornelia Crook was.

HDW: She was?

TLP: Townsend and Howe, I know she was president of it for years. Cornelia Crook was.

HDW: I never heard that.

TLP: To get back to the Cooks, Ms. Cook's farm which is diagonally southeast, I believe, of Grant Corners. Tell us a little bit about Ms. Crook. I know that she was interested in a lot of things in town, a neighbor of yours, and she sold the place to whom?

HDW: Sold the farm to Ellen Toby. And she was really a City woman belonging to the four hundred in New York. But came out to the country; put her boots on and became a country woman almost overnight. She tended to everything on the farm; she had earrings on one day, she went out to feed the chickens. Beautiful real pearls and an earring fell off and a chicken gobbled it up before she could get it. She killed eight chickens trying to find the earring. She was never able to locate it..

TLP: How many chickens did she have? It's a wonder she didn't kill the whole flock to find the earring.

HDW: She became a wonderfully interesting country woman and was surrounded always by a batch of cats. And she used to walk from the Quick place over to the store at Salem Center. And my breadman from Ridgefield had left me my week's supply of bread on the table and also left the back door open. And I heard this growling going on in the kitchen. I came down and her seven cats were up on the table eating all my bread. So I called her up to the store there at Salem. And I said to tell Miss Crook to bring me home two loaves of bread because her cats have eaten mine. And her answer was 'well, that ought to pay for some of the corn your cattle have eaten that belonged to me.' So that's what good neighbors we all were.

TLP: Well, I remember we were all good neighbors as far as Ms. Crook was concerned because one night on the way home from picnic that we had we ran over one of her dogs.

HDW: You killed Gallagirl.

TLP: I remember we had, she had a lot of dachshunds and we eliminated one, I remember. Do you remember all the dogs that she had?

HDW: The one that you killed was her English sheepdog, Gallagirl.

TLP: I thought it was a dachshund.

HDW: No, that could be a little bit of a dog. This was a big wooly dog

TLP: Now we covered Ms. Crooks place pretty well. Let's go down the road a little ways to Turkey Hill, the farm that was owned by my father, and, that's Thomas L. Purdy, Sr., and he, I believe gave it to my brother Isaac Hart Purdy, then after you were married, I remember, I used to tease you about moving south for the winter. You used to go down the road about a mile and live at Turkey Hill. Tell us a little bit about Turkey Hill and what you, some of your reminisces there.

HDW: Well, Turkey Hill was a delightful home for me for many, many years. Very, very happy years. And as you all know, in villages houses were built close to the road as against the day the snows came you wouldn't have to travel so far. So we were very close to the road. And after my husband died I was afraid to stay there alone because we were so close to the road, every time anybody had a flat tire they came to my front door. So I finally decided to sell it. But I had many, many happy memories behind me when I did.

TLP: Who did you sell it to, Nellie? You sold the farm to, part of the farm to Carlo Paterno, didn't you?

HDW: Now, let me think a minute. I sold Turkey. I sold the farm, part of it, to Carlo Paterno. And he made a beautiful corner out of his holdings and his interest in black angus cattle, which made it a much more attractive neighborhood then it had ever been. And then part of it I sold to Bill Lawrence who is a developer. Who developed Lawrence Farms in Mt. Kisco.

TLP: Then, he sold, Bill Lawrence, I believe, sold the house, who are the people who bought the house, there name is Ebersole, I believe, isn't it? And then, I believe, Mr. Gardner, your neighbor further south, bought some of the property from either Lawrence or Carlo Paterno. Didn't he Nellie?

HDW: No, he didn't buy from those.

TLP: Well, Nellie, we covered Turkey Hill pretty well. Let's discuss the house that belongs now to William Randolph Hearst. That beautiful, big Victorian house that sits on the east side of 121. Do you remember who built that, or do you know who built that? Who's property that originally was?

HDW: I'm not absolutely sure but I think it was built by Gilbert Mead. And Mrs. Howe was a

Mead.

TLP: Now which Mrs. Howe are you referring to

HDW: Mrs. William Helmes Ireland Howe.

TLP: That's quite a name.

HDW: She was quite a person.

TLP: Now, was she Laura Howe Nelson's mother?

HDW: She was Laura Howe's mother.

TLP: Laura Howe Nelson's mother.

HDW: That's right.

TLP: And, who lived there? Who do you remember living there.

HDW: Well, William Helmes Ireland Howe had several sons. He had Epenetus, who was a mining engineer. And he had Thomas Howe and George.

TLP: I remember George. He lived down where Mrs. Cunnard lived, just down south on 121, I believe it is, on the west side of 121.

HDW: Well, the first Mrs. George Howe was a cousin of Cornelia Crooks; first cousin.

TLP: But then, let's get back to the house that is now owned by the Hearsts. Who lived there, I remember Mrs., when I was a small boy, Mrs. Nelson lived there, before she was Mrs. Nelson she was Laura Howe.

HDW: She was Laura Howe.

TLP: A good friend of my mother's, I know. Tell us a little bit about the people that you remembered who lived there.

HDW: Well, Laura Howe married the Universalist minister. And his, I don't remember, Frederick Nelson. And her father, William Helmes Ireland Howe, was quite a character. Terrific temper, but a very genial person. He used to have a megaphone on his porch and the blacksmith's shop was down over the hill below and he was so curious he couldn't see the person who'd come into the blacksmith's shop so he'd stand on his porch and call through the megaphone, "Eli," that was the blacksmith, "who's that you are talking to?" Which was a joke for the whole country because you could hear him all over the countryside.

TLP: Now, that blacksmith shop has long since departed, hasn't it? Now just where was that

located? In relation to the property?

HDW: Well, there's a little house in there now. I think it was built by...

TLP: It was on the other side of 116

HDW: That's right.

TLP: and a little bit north, say northwest of the large house.

HDW: Sort of across from the entrance to the big house.

TLP: I seem to remember something there.

HDW: W....was the blacksmith

TLP: Well now, then there is a house across the way that Lawrences live in now. I remember James Howe lived there at one time.

HDW: Well, James Howe was a distant cousin of the Laura Howe family. His father was a congressman.

TLP: And then just beyond that house, where the Lawrences lived, which I always remember as the James Howe place, is the house where Mr. Nelson used to live, that married Mrs. Howe. Wasn't that

HDW: Miss Howe.

TLP: Miss Howe, Miss Laura Howe

HDW: And he was the Universalist minister. He had a little house there, and had a daughter Miriam and a son Ronald. And he raised them; his wife had left him. And Laura Howe married him later.

TLP: Well, going up, going along 116, in the direction of Salem Center, there's a another very interesting person that lived along the road by the name of Close. I've forgotten his first name but I'm sure you remember. His house is now gone but he lived on the southwest corner of 116 and 124, diagonally across from the Episcopal Church. He, I remember, I used to take violin lessons from his daughter in that house. Can you tell me a little bit about him? I remember

HDW: That was Charlie Close.

TLP: Charlie, that's right

HDW: And he was quite a character and a very lovable one. And he had two daughters and while he was just, distinguished himself by his, he was very musical.

TLP: Used to tune pianos.

HDW: Tuned pianos. Sometimes not too well, but well enough.

TLP: Well, when you go over the hill. That was Charlie Close's house there, and that has been torn down now and I know they are considering building a little supermarket, a shopping center, I should say there. But then you go over the hill there and there is a house that used to belong to the Tragers, I believe it has been since sold. And years ago it belonged to Jim Webb. Can you tell me a little bit about Jim Webb? I know he was in the trucking business. Maybe you know who owned it before Jim Webb.

HDW: I really don't; I just barely remember Jim Webb. He was one of a large family, but I don't remember anything specially about them.

TLP: Well, we go down the way a bit and we come to the store there that I always referred to as the Grecian temple, it has the pillars out in front. It belonged to the Lobdells. Now tell us a little bit about the Lobdells. It was A. J. Lobdell that ran that store many years, then his children, there was Paul and Cornelia and, tell us a little bit about them. I know you know a lot about the Lobdells.

HDW: A. J. Lobdell's mother had been a teacher in the old Academy. And I don't remember very much about him except that he had the grocery store and the post office and he had five or six children, all of whom are dead. And

TLP: You remember their names?

HDW: Yes.

TLP: Well, what were their names? Paul and Cornelia

HDW: Well, it began with Whitney;

TLP: He was killed in the war, wasn't he?

HDW: No. Whitney was the oldest; and then Burt was the one who went to war. And,

TLP: the first world war, wasn't it?

HDW: That's right. And then there was Jennie, and Louise and Cornelia. And they are all dead.

TLP: Except Jennie.

HDW: Except Jennie. I think Jennie, the last I heard of her she was working for Norman Vincent Peale and his guideposts up in Pawling.

TLP: Well, A. J., let's give him credit for being supervisor.

HDW: For many years.

TLP: For many years. Then there's town hall, next door. Do you remember that and in any other state than it is right now? Was it ever used for any particular purpose that you remember, Nellie, back then?

HDW: Not that I remember. It was just when we voted we went there to vote. It was the old Academy and many people from round and about would go to school and I think A. J. Lobdell's mother was perhaps the teacher. But that really was quite a little ahead of my time.

TLP: Jane, you've been sitting here all afternoon while we've been chatting and I think that it would be interesting to hear some of your reminiscences. I would just explain to any of our listeners that you, Jane, are Mrs. I. H. Purdy's daughter, Mrs. DeMcCarty. Now, Jane you mentioned that you used to go to that school that has since been bought I believe by the Dodds. Could you tell us when you went there and maybe some of your classmates, where you came from, where you were living at the time?

JdM: Well, it was a very long time ago, and

TLP: Don't make it too long.

JdM: Well, I'm not going to say exactly when because that would give my age away and I'm afraid there are not too many people of the graduating class from Salem Center School. But, some people named Bruetchfel went to that school and I know that all of the country people couldn't pronounce that name because apparently it was a German name and they called it 'Wishell'

TLP: What was it?

JdM: B-R-U-E-T-C-H-F-E-L, or some such name as that. I know there was a Gertrude who sat beside me in the little seat. We sat three, two children to a seat.

TLP: Where did you live when you went to that school?

JdM: In the white cottage. At the Grant place. And in those days you had to walk to school.

TLP: You mean there wasn't a bus that picked you up?

JdM: No bus to pick you up. And there was a little troop of children that came down off the mountain and those children must have had to walk, it must be at least two miles or more. In any kind of weather.

HDW: [inaudible]

JdM: ...he really was a wonderful person then.

TLP: Was that Dan Sullivan?

JdM: Dan Sullivan. He was babysitter as much as gardener and general ???? As mother had said he was very, very well educated and he and I used to discuss Dickens because he had read all of Dickens. It seemed funny to have a gardener who could carry on that way. I don't remember very much about it except the terrible weather in the winter.

TLP: Well, the thing about some old places that have long since departed here in town. You remember the Port of Missing Men way up on the hillside on Titicus Mountain? Remember that tea house and the place up there? Remember we used to

JcM: Well I do remember when it was there because we used to ride around on those roads which were in pretty good condition then. My property goes right up to that, now. This present property goes right up and joins the Anderson, what used to be the Anderson property.

TLP: Now that's Westchester County park property.

JdM: Yes.

TLP: This is the end of the recording. Thomas Purdy interviewing Nellie Grant, also Jane deMcCarty. Over and out.