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An Interview

with

MRS. MARGARET MARSHALL MACILROY

Interviewed by

Elliott Trimble

TRIMBLE: This is Elliott Trimble speaking with Margaret Percell Marshall MacIlroy, who is quite an authority on Natchez Pilgrimage. We are observing the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Natchez Pilgrimage. Mrs. MacIlroy, were you there at the time of the first Pilgrimage?

MACILROY: I certainly was.

TRIMBLE: Do you remember that first Pilgrimage?

MACILROY: Yes. I was a charter member of the Pilgrimage Garden Club.

TRIMBLE: Did you participate in the early Pilgrimages?

MACILROY: Indeed I did. I danced in Miss Treebe Poole's ballet. And I received at Landsdowne of course. I don't remember if the ballet was the first year or second. The first Tour ballet was in 1936, and I have a picture of the whole group. I think I was the oldest one, but I don't think anybody enjoyed it anymore than I.

TRIMBLE: You lived at Landsdowne then?

MACILROY: Oh, yes. George Marshall and I were married in 1926. Landsdowne was on Tour One.

TRIMBLE: Do you remember the cabaret and dances held at the old Natchez Hotel?

MACILROY: Very vaguely. If the weather hadn't been so hot, I would have rooted around in the attic for a great big scrapbook that I haven't been able to put my hands on, though I did get these clippings from a smaller one.

One reason I was so much a part of the early Pilgrimage was that Katherine Miller and I were good friends in those days. In fact, we still are. Naturally, as time goes on, you have more and more to do. Instead of slowing down, I think you get wound up more.

TRIMBLE: Let's identify Katherine Miller.

MACILROY: Katherine was a life-long friend of my husband's. Even though I

- MACILROY cont.: was born in Natchez and didn't leave until I was seven and came back on visits, I did not go to school here. So I had no crowd of my own. When I came back and married George Marshall, who was twelve years older than I was, all his crowd became my friends. Out of that crowd, the two that really befriended me and were wonderful friends always were Katherine and Helen Jenkins.
- TRIMBLE: Mrs. Miller had a great deal to do with the Pilgrimage at the very first?
- MACILROY: It was her idea. There would not have been a Pilgrimage if Katherine hadn't thought of it. I went with her on several trips to show her slides. The first time I went to Vicksburg.
- TRIMBLE: On the old program in 1932 I see the "Bal Padre," and I understand the women wore powdered wigs at this ball. Did the men wear powdered wigs also?
- MACILROY: I think it was the style for just the women to do that.
- TRIMBLE: Do you remember the afternoon parade that first year?
- MACILROY: I was in it. I have an old picture of my sister, Ann Gill, Mrs. Lawrence Gill, and myself riding on the back seat of a surrey. We are holding my two oldest children, Neville Marshall and Devereaux, Mrs. Mackenzie Noble. They are sitting on our laps. A Negro man was driving. I remember I couldn't find a high top black hat for him to wear, so I made one! My husband supplied the horse from the plantation, and we had a wonderful time.
- TRIMBLE: Were you impersonating some historical figure?
- MACILROY: Everyone who could think up a float or buggy or carriage could get in the parade. It wasn't profitable, so we only had it that one year.

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TRIMBLE: There were actually two queens and two kings the first year, a Day Court and a Night Court, wasn't there? These newspaper accounts list the following people in the Day Court: Ethel Profilet, Ella Junkin, Mary Beane, Helen Harrison, Carol Cole, Dorothy St. John, Everett Easley, John George, Morris Patterson, James Keer, Avery Cole, August Stone, and Mary Lou Register.

MACILROY: Yes, the Day King and Queen were Bill Adams and Elise Brown. The Night King and Queen were Hartman Mortiz and Carolyn Eidt.

TRIMBLE: Can you tell us something of the crowds that first year?

MACILROY: It seems to me there were about five hundred people that first year, but we thought it was enormous. We were very pleased.

TRIMBLE: Well, five hundred would have been a great number for the first year.

MACILROY: Yes, with practically no advertizing--just what little Katherine could do. But it grew in leaps and bounds every year.

TRIMBLE: How do you account for the continued interest and growth?

MACILROY: Well, I suppose word of mouth has a lot to do with it. I remember an incident, very early, maybe before the first Pilgrimage, the Garden Clubs of Virginia came here on a special train, and among the ladies was Mrs. Woodrow Wilson. She was the President's widow. I was fortunate enough to be close to the front door when she arrived, and the guide introduced her to me. So I took her all over Landsdowne and talked to her twenty or thirty minutes. She was so impressed, it made me feel like we really had something. She said, "Mrs. Marshall, we have so many beautiful homes scattered all over Virginia, but they are forty or fifty miles apart. I never dreamed there was a small area in the United States that contained so many gorgeous antebellum mansions." I thought if she was impressed, we had a good thing going!

TRIMBLE: Do you recall how people came here back then?

MACILROY: Probably automobiles and trains.

TRIMBLE: Who met the trains and made arrangements for the tourists?

MACILROY: I think the Garden Club had a committee to do this. I know I'm going too far back--when I was a little girl, we used to have Ratcliff's Hacks to meet the train. He had a livery stable, and he had carriages,, and they called them Ratcliff's Hacks. I remember after I was twelve or thirteen, when we lived in Chicago, we would come back every summer on visits. We would have to change trains in Jackson and take that little train that ran from Jackson to Natchez, the Mississippi Central. We always arrived after dark, and we would take one of Ratcliff's Hacks and go clip-clopping down Pearl Street to the Towers. It was my great-grand-father's home. I was born there.

TRIMBLE: The use of the Hacks was pretty early.

MACILROY: Not so much earlier. I was twenty when George and I were married, so this was only seven or eight years earlier.

TRIMBLE: Let me ask you this. As one of the charter members of the club, did you hold an office in the early years?

MACILROY: I was President for two years in the early 1960's.

TRIMBLE: Mrs. Macilroy is showing us a picture. In that picture you were...?

MACILROY: I think we were officers of the Club. This is one of Dr. Gandy's famous pictures.

TRIMBLE: That is Dr. Gandy who makes photographs of old plates by Earl Norman.

MACILROY: This picture was taken on the steps of "Green Leaves."

TRIMBLE: This is a list of the incorporators of the Pilgrimage Garden Club in 1937: Mrs. Hubert Barnum, Mrs. Balfour Miller, Mrs. M. R.

live--MacIlroy:

TRIMBLE cont.: Beltzhoover, Mrs. J. P. Kendall, Mrs. James Ward, Mrs. Myra Smith, Mrs. J. Kellogg, Miss Theodora Marshall, Mrs. Geo. M. Marshall, you, Mrs. Frank Fauntleroy, who was my mother, Mrs. Margaret Merrill, Mrs. Lennox Stanton, Mrs. W. J. Kaiser, Mrs. R. T. Clark, Mrs. J. R. Modessit, Mrs. S. B. Laub, and Mrs. A. Y. Carpenter. That was Mrs. Agnes Carpenter of Dunleith, I imagine. That's quite interesting. You have many things in your scrapbook.

MACILROY: I have so much.

TRIMBLE: Tell me about your life at Landsdowne in the early years.

MACILROY: Well, looking through my old clippings, it seems that George and I did nothing but give parties! Your name is mentioned quite often in these clippings. You know how Renee' Fishell wrote everything anybody did.

TRIMBLE: Yes. She was Society Editor of The Natchez Democrat. How many years did you live at Landsdowne?

MACILROY: Well, I've lived here actually forty-three years, almost forty-four.

TRIMBLE: I don't think many people in Natchez can say they have lived in the same house that long. Natchez has changed so much.

MACILROY: I was gone away from here twelve years, but excluding the twelve, I've lived here forty-three.

TRIMBLE: Landsdowne has been in the same family since it was built. When was it built?

MACILROY: The family moved in in 1852. We think it was started about 1848 by George Marshall, my late husband's grandfather. George Marshall, Sr. had a gas plant, which he installed when he built the house. Natchez was the seventh city in the United States to have gas light and it had gas lights operating on Main Street in 1848. I know this for a fact.

TRIMBLE: That is interesting. I was just reading a book on show boats that went up and down the Mississippi River, stopping at Natchez and other places, and they mentioned the gas light being in Natchez about 1848 or 1849.

MACILROY: Yes. Because George would not have been able to put the gas plant down at Landsdowne if the city had not already had one.

TRIMBLE: Do you realize that this year, 1982, the Marshall family will have lived at Landsdowne one hundred and thirty-four years?

MAILROY: Well, my present husband, John MacIlroy, is a wonderful party giver, so maybe we will celebrate being here that long. And God willing, Landsdowne will not change hands, because my three children all love it, and they want to keep it in the family above everything. They wouldn't sell it if they were offered ten million dollars!

There was one thing you reminded me of, Elliott, in mentioning the cabaret. It had completely slipped my memory. I saw in one of the old clippings in The Natchez Democrat mention of a cabaret party. It said that Margaret Marshall was Lillian Russell and Hyde Jenkins was Diamond Jim Brady.

TRIMBLE: It has certainly been a pleasure talking to you, Margaret, and being enlightened on the first years of the Natchez Pilgrimage.

MACILROY: Thank you, Elliott.