

You may remember that on a whim we visited Orange County, VA in the Spring of 1990 with Arnett and Mibby to explore the "land of our Taylor forebears". We were quite surprised to locate, by Judy's records, four existing Taylor homes, trespassing briefly to ogle. We had no contact with anyone other than the Orange County Historical Society (OCHS) folks who gave us orally and from their files more tidbits of Taylor history. Except, of course, the encounter you'll recall with deputy sheriff and auto locksmith.

Because we had a certificate good for one free night of a two-night stay at any Bed and Breakfast in our Shredded Wheat directory and because there were three in Orange, we planned a fun, relaxing stay, Monday through Wednesday, with the possibility of acquiring a little more info at OCHS. Jack (writing this portion of the saga) had no idea of what role, if any, was his in the research at OCHS, or how much idle time he'd have, so toted along a bag full of books and magazines, and laptop computer 'just in case'. He also insisted on taking a case of munchies/snacks to help pass the time in idle, boring moments.

Monday was spent at the OCHS where Jack became immersed in research with Judy, specializing in maps and dates and xeroxing, not one moment into his edibles or readables. OCHS staff was quite adamant that we really ought to call Mrs. Helen Marie Taylor, a cousin about as distant as one can be, hereafter referred to as HM. She insists on the double name, but we don't have to append "Cousin". She is the widow of Jaquelin Taylor (called Jack). Their ancestors about eight generations back were half-brothers, and both were brothers of one of our Taylor grandsires. Judy was quite antsy about any contact with HM. "What about the letter I had written that she didn't answer? What if our trespassing had been reported?" Jack wanted to make contact, and figuring he had been chewed out by people tougher than HM, he phoned after supper feeling there probably was nothing to lose. HM was home and was pleased with the call. Jack introduced himself as Capt. Prisley, saying he had brought his wife down as a treat, to do some research, and hoping especially to see 'Bloomsbury', which OCHS folk assured she enjoyed showing to Taylors. (It is the truly historic home of James Taylor II ca 1722.) She insisted we come by that night, in one hour, at 8:30, and that we be sure to leave by 10 PM, as she faced a long and busy day Tuesday. So, we arrived on her doorstep at the Taylor family home of Meadowfarm and the real saga began.

HM is a truly remarkable woman, 69 years old, very wealthy, beautiful, and very bright. She is described generally as an "arrogant bitch" who blasts those who get in her way. She can also be charming, outgoing, trusting, and overwhelmingly hospitable to her kinfolk. A published article about her says she is intensely disliked because she is beautiful, intelligent and very rich. People can accept one or two of those factors, but three is too much!

Her home is a museum, and we got the personal guided tour,

which she persisted in continuing until just before midnight! We saw the "missing Robert E. Lee portrait", the portrait of General Zachary Taylor painted on the battlefield in Mexico, James Madison's grandfather clock and chair which she recently bought at auction when the Smithsonian and Montpelier said they couldn't afford them, some of Dollie Madison's personal effects, numerous family portraits and other paintings and artifacts of historic value. She emphasized her wall to wall carpeting was not in keeping with the era of the house, but appropriate scatter rugs didn't sufficiently cover up bloodstains that couldn't be removed. The home was used by Generals Lee, Jackson and Longstreet as a staging area for the Battle of the Wilderness, and as a hospital for the dreadful aftermath. Metropolitan Museum offered her one cool million for her Bierstadt painting of Yosemite, but she 'lowed as how if they offered that much, she could probably get two million. They told her that Ted Turner was collecting them and would probably pay that. Her refusal was based on the fact that he would probably want to get in the house and see it, and she wouldn't have "that woman of his" (Jane Fonda) in a Taylor home!

Early on in our visit, Jack noted a present she had received from his old mentor, General Danny Graham, and when he remarked that he had worked for DG and knew him well, our 'bona fides' were established. It turns out that HM is on generally close speaking terms with Danny and has been a heavy contributor to his "High Frontier" organization. He is creator and president of the outfit to promote the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). Not all of you would want to be on her conservative bandwagon with other close associates: Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, Phyllis Schlafly, Ronald Reagan and other conservatives in and out of government.

Jack tried to break just before 10 PM as directed, but she brushed that off and went on to show us something else - and something else - and something else. She was a most elegant and gracious hostess, proud and knowledgeable about the background of house, furnishings and Taylor connections.

The home (Meadowfarm) was built by the Zachary Taylor line in the 1800's on the grounds of a former Taylor homesite which burned. It has oaks and walnut trees which were there when Judy's ancestors lived, as well as some 200+year-old boxwoods, now 40 feet+ high and much healthier looking than most of Williamsburg's. There is the tree - doctored and pampered - that General Lee always tied Traveller to. There is a Taylor family cemetery beautifully maintained. Also swimming pool, gardens, lawn, guest houses, an operating dairy farm (99 acres+) and more. HM bid us goodnight with the requirement that we visit her basement offices in Meadowfarm the next morning while she was out of town and go through her two file cabinets of Taylor data, and also xerox Judy's Taylor family notebook to add to her files. (OCHS staff noted later that she had never invited them to use her files.)

Her farewell gesture, with plans to meet again on Wednesday, was to hand Judy her bound volume of the Francis Taylor diary, saying to enjoy it till we next met. Jef Fall, more than anyone else, will appreciate the impact of that statement that should be followed by !!! The Filson Club had not taken kindly to Judy's examination of and questions about their identical copy. HM owns the third identical volume in her Richmond home - a 300+ page typescript (about 1910) of the original (1783-99) handwritten set in the Richmond State Library. It's said that Colonial Williamsburg is only recently aware of same and is ecstatic. With a hug, HM said the diary had only been out of her hands one other time, when she lent it to the current owner of the diarist's old home place of Midland, there in Orange.

Tuesday AM, we spent at Meadowfarm in the basement office where HM's three-person office staff was briskly - nay, even frantically - employed. Jack photocopied our Taylor notebook while Judy went through the file cabinets, without finding a great deal of new info, she adds proudly. By this time Jack was so familiar with names, dates etc. that he effectively searched files also, noting that he had not done any reading or snacking yet!

After lunch we returned to OCHS planning to spend the balance of the day on more research. BUT, we mentioned aloud that HM had suggested we call the present owner of Midland. The staff picked up on that, adding their insistence, even to making the call, then putting Jack on the phone. It was meant to be! Jeanne Detwiler had just walked in the door, having been all day in Richmond for a funeral. So we met another truly wonderful person. She is not a Taylor by any blood, but surely is by association - overwhelmingly caring and interested in the history of her home, and open and giving to Taylor relatives who evince interest. Nothing would do, but that we get over there right then (about 3:15 PM Tuesday). She put her groceries away, burned her husband's chicken dinner and met us at the door. She walked us around outside, showing how the home had been added to since it had been built in the mid-1700's, then took us all through the downstairs, and showed us her artifacts of Taylor family interest. Things such as the first insurance policy on Midland, showing the layout of the original house and its out-buildings, and a sketch of the original exterior. She then insisted that we see the Taylor family cemetery at the fourth Taylor home in Orange - Greenfield. This was the burial ground of our most direct forebears. The home is about a mile away, and like Meadowfarm, was built in the early 1800s on the site of the earlier Greenfield after it burned. This was where some of James II children lived, when many were all in Orange. She let us go about 5:30PM, to stagger back to the B&B, about done in by kindness and history.

Wednesday, we spent the morning at the OCHS to get back into intended research. By now, Jack was hopelessly entangled in what

he termed a beautiful example of what intelligence work is all about - taking bits and pieces of data and trying to correlate them all and produce a coherent story or picture. We went back to Meadowfarm as instructed at 1:30PM Wednesday, to meet HM to go see Bloomsbury. Our schedule called for us to leave Orange about 3 to be home in time for unloading, mail-reading, supper and for Jack to go to an important vestry meeting on the budget. HM had another schedule for us. We waited about 45 minutes while she attended to business, then another half hour in her company on the veranda while she signed a portfolio full of checks for the farm - all the while talking about Taylor family and Meadowfarm history.

Then she took us on tour, the dreamed-about culmination of our first little jaunt to Orange. Dressed in her floaty afternoon frock, wearing medium heels, carrying her camera, she walked us around her home grounds, then boarded us in her 4-wheel drive Jeep Wagoneer (circa 1989), and off we set on a grand tour of many of the 13,000+ acres of Orange County which she now owns. Donna, part of it was reminiscent of driving the Charleston islands with Mrs. Ravanel. On the main road we proceeded at less than 40 mph while her left arm in its filmy full sleeve waved about and pointed out landmarks. Drivers behind didn't seem to take kindly to such behavior, but she graciously ignored them as they gunned by. We rode literally over hill and dale, through meadows and pastures. One doesn't ask Cousin Helen Marie many questions. She doesn't leave space for them. Two ears and one mind are not enough equipment to absorb all she has to say. It's an intense experience to be with her, though not to be confused with "tense" or "stressful".

We saw the barn she is restoring, which was written up in the Smithsonian Magazine in 1989 (we have a copy). It is some 250+ feet long, includes a 0.1 mile indoor dirt track for exercising horses, over 2200 individual panes of glass, and other noteworthy features. We lingered there for her to direct her workman in further earth-moving, grading and erosion control. We saw the four 1920's Sears and Roebuck mail-order barns she has restored of which two are in use for dairy cows and two are being readied for thoroughbreds. Here she waded through knee high grass to direct the two painters and show us the interiors. This barn venture, though for her own use, ties in with the Smithsonian encouragement of the national "barn again" project that says homes and furnishings aren't the only parts of our heritage to cherish.

We saw the knoll above the barns where she said Governor Spottswood and his "Knights of the Golden Horseshoe" encamped enroute West for the Shenandoah Valley about 1716. James Taylor II was on that trip and saw the land he was able to obtain (13,000+ acres originally) in 1721, which is now most of Orange County VA. Finally, about 4:30, we arrived at Bloomsbury, and went through this original home of James Taylor II, which he built there in 1721-1722. Williamsburg said it was the first home built that far "west", and the first to have a porch as an integral part under the

house roof. HM and her husband restored this building, much of it by his personal labor and much by a huge expenditure of funds and effort to insure the historic accuracy of the work. It has been filled with authentic period antiques from floor coverings to silver, pewter, candlesticks, chandelier, double violin case, miniature secretary to fit under the eaves in the second floor bedroom, trundle beds and all. A true personal museum, which it is legally classified and insured as. She only opens it for relatives and very special functions. By the time we got back to Meadowfarm and bid HM goodbye, it was after 7 PM and dark. Somehow, we made it back here in one piece, having taken a 'time machine' trip back 200 years, and received a fire-hose three day briefing. This was "Orange County Revisited". Oh, Jack never did unpack his readables or eat a single snack!

An anticipated highlight of the trip - staying at a B&B - fell flat in comparison to other adventures. The innkeepers fell short of the graciousness they aspired to; the furnishings were tacky Victorian; the breakfasts contained more calories and cholesterol than were even appetizing.

Another trip is imminent. Jeanne Detwiler urged us to come down Saturday Nov. 7th for the annual Montpelier races. We're not acquainted with the steeplechase variety and in deference to Dick Francis and his horsey mysteries we enjoy, we feel compelled to go. Besides, we had to establish with Jeanne an opportunity for transfer of shared Taylor materials. Jack's professional protegee, Kate, a "horsey" person herself, and her live-in will go with us.

Then yet another trip must be planned for the OCHS work we never were able to finish. In that brief Wednesday morning time, Jack took the Burrus family (one married an early Arnett) back to 1623. Judy took the Brockman family (one married a Burrus, hence the Arnett, then Taylor connection) back to 1500 in England complete with transcription of a will of that date. Yes, an obsession, an addiction acknowledged! Judy chortles over Jack being even more Taylor-ed than she is. Jack's inquiring mind looks for answers and explanations Judy would never think of. We both learn a lot more hands-on interesting history than we ever knew we might want to know.

It is with much wistfulness that we realize we "had it all" and it should have been shared with Mibby and Arnett, who had the brainstorm and daydream for the first Orange jaunt, but perhaps this written saga can give some of the flavor.