

Village Voices

In Our Own Words

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11/11/11: Armistice Day

by Kathy Hoff

Those of us old enough for Pennswood were raised to revere Armistice Day. Each November 11, we schoolchildren would chant solemnly, “the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month.”

Now, since 1954, November 11 is Veterans Day; schoolchildren no longer chant; church bells no longer toll eleven times at eleven in the morning—at least I haven’t heard any for a long time. This 100th anniversary of November 11, 1918, is a good time, though, to recall *Armistice*. Teach young people the significance of 11/11/11. Sing “I ain’t gonna study war no more.” Retell the World War I stories our parents told us about the war that clouded their youth the way World War II clouded ours. These are family stories handed down to me.

In 1917, my mother’s father took leave from his college professorship, wife, and three young children to join a support service run by the American Library Association (ALA). He used

his administrative experience at his college library to set up a large base library and branches at Camp Lewis in Washington state. Subsequently, he became Northwest regional director of all military libraries. After the Armistice, he was ordered to Paris, then stationed in Coblenz, Germany, to run library services for the U.S. Army of Occupation. In a report to an ALA superior, he explains how his branch libraries serve garrisons in villages scattered around Coblenz:

For the most part, these are independent garrisons; lines are maintained about them, and soldiers can move from one to another point only on passes. The rule against fraternizing has been observed rigorously; this is from the standpoint of the soldiers one of the hardships of the occupation; it prevents all social contact and reduces intercourse to the strict requirements of business. Generally, for example, German hotels and restaurants are closed against the men, and, with few exceptions, all forms of amusement such as theatres even when these are operating, and this is rare under military rule.

Library Service

From the above it will be immediately apparent that the need and the

opportunity for library service is unique. Here are detachments of Americans isolated in small villages, cut off from normal associations with people, with very light duties and many hours of leisure every day and very little to employ that leisure. They are thrown entirely upon their own resources for recreation, or upon those of organizations such as ours. None of us has ever seen anything like the clamor for reading and study that has been about us here. Men who have never read before have literally begged for books. (E. E. Ruby, Report to Burton E. Stevenson, European Representative, ALA, 6/1/1919)

In an era before radio entertainment, TV, computers or cell phones with Internet access and email, one can imagine that base- and garrison-confined troops would indeed hunger for reading materials. The ALA made a massive response to the need. A newspaper clipping sent home by my grandfather in April 1919 states that 3,500,000 books had been sent overseas and that 1,500,000 more were on the way.

ALA staff were quasi-military. They wore olive-drab uniforms with Smokey-the-Bear-type campaign hats or overseas caps. They were required to have military passes to enter bases and garrisons. In Europe, where they were, according to my grandfather, more military than in the U.S., they wore Third Army of Occupation

patches on their uniforms along with their ALA open-book-emblem patches. My grandfather sent home fabric Army of Occupation patches for his children. He had access to the Officers Club in Coblenz. By all accounts, World War I was an exhilarating time for him.

From my mother's point of view, however, this was a difficult time. Army patches on her brothers' and her coats and letters from abroad with exotic stamps did not compensate for their father's absence or for having to give up their home and live with relatives. They were frightened and understood their mother's anxiety and stress at being left to manage alone. A generation later, my mother would speak of this to her own two children when she, like her mother before her, had to give up her home and live with relatives "for the duration," military pay being insufficient to support her family otherwise. My brother and I were frightened, too.

But her father, a non-combatant, did come home, as did my combatant father from the next generation's war.

My father's family told about a World War I soldier who didn't come home. My father's Uncle Fred served with the American Expeditionary Force on four fronts in France—Toul, Chateau Thierry, St. Mihiel, Argonne-Verdun—according to the diary that survived him. In a letter dated September 29, 1918, he wrote to his sister, my father's mother:

Mary, the more I think about this awful war I am all the more glad, very very glad that it is taking place here instead of at home. There is a woman just across the way who is insane that at one time was a very highly educated woman. Her daughter was taken prisoner by the Germans in 1914 so you can imagine all the woman has had to contend with and one cannot help but pity her.

Fred survived the battlefield only to die in France on January 13, 1919, just two months past the Armistice, in the great Spanish flu epidemic. He did not reach home until June, 1921, when his body was shipped back to his grieving family in Oregon for burial. My father, who enlisted in the U.S. Navy, World War II, after his cousin's death at Corregidor, remembered his mother's grief for her younger brother. His grandmother never recovered from losing her son.

On Veterans Day this November 11, 2018, we should have celebrated our courageous veterans and C/Os. But because this November 11 was special, marking as it did the 100th anniversary of the original Armistice Day, it is fitting also, especially in this Friends community, to remember *armistice*—truce, cessation of hostilities, peace-negotiations. Our country and the world need it.

MY UNCLE PAUL AND MONDRIAN

by Ella Schaap

(as told to Kay Silberfeld)

My Uncle Paul, my father's youngest brother, was very artistic. As the art editor of *Het Volk*, a daily newspaper in the Netherlands, he went to Germany and met many well-known artists. He also was sent to France where, in about 1925, he became reacquainted with Piet Mondrian, whom he had known before in the Netherlands. They became good friends and enjoyed discussions on many complex topics, such as the 12-tone scale—in use by contemporary European composers, but not yet by composers in the U.S.

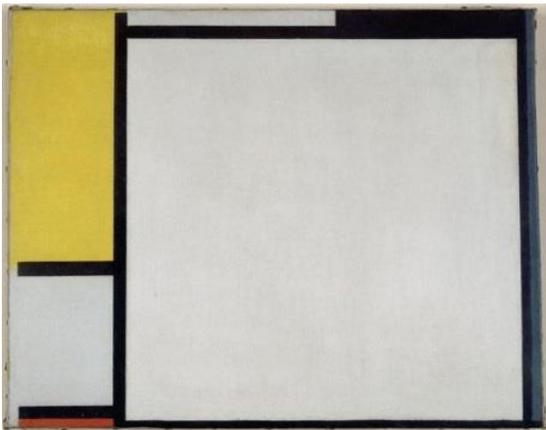
While Paul was in Paris, a widespread flu epidemic broke out. Mondrian came down with a severe case, and Paul nursed him through it. While Mondrian was still weak from the illness, they resumed their discussions, often sitting on a particular bench in the Tuileries garden.

One day, Mondrian said to Paul: "I would love to have you for dinner because I make the best *pommes frites*. But I can't have you because I have only one fork and one knife." So they went to the market, and Paul bought another fork and another knife.

Later on, Paul wrote to his brother (my father), who was a banker: "I have this

very good friend, who one day will be a great and a well-known artist, but he has no money.” So, my father sent Mondrian 100 guilders which, although a small sum to him, was overwhelming to Mondrian. He said to Paul: “I cannot just send your brother one painting to thank him, but I have to send him two paintings.” And that is how two Mondrian paintings came into our family.

After my father died, one of the paintings went to my sister and the other to me. For many years, the Mondrian hung over my desk until I decided to give it to my children.



Composition with Blue, Black, Yellow and Red, 1922

Since they could not afford the insurance, we offered the painting to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. They already owned several Mondrians and therefore didn't accept our gift. However, the Busch-Reisinger Museum at Harvard University had no Mondrians in its collection and were very pleased to

have ours. The painting had never been damaged or restored and was still in its original wood-strip frame. Eventually, my sister gave her Mondrian to the Municipal Museum in the Hague.

During World War II, while Uncle Paul was in hiding in the Netherlands, he, along with a good friend, started an underground newspaper, *Het Parool*. Coincidentally, this friend of Paul's was the father of Pennswood resident Elisabeth Kurz. He died in 1942. While Paul was visiting their house in Amsterdam to pay his respects, there was a knock on the door. Fifteen-year-old Elisabeth opened it to find two German officers. They demanded to come in and search the house to see if any Jews were hiding there. Elisabeth, with tears in her eyes, told them that her father had just died and could the officers please come back another day. Amazingly, they agreed and left. In this way, Paul's presence in the house went undiscovered. . .and his life was saved.

The newspaper, *Het Parool*, continues to this day and has the largest circulation of any newspaper in Holland.

**ABUNDANCE IN THIS
MAST* YEAR**
by Kevyn Malloy

The acorns spray downward like
waterfalls

Creating a crunchy pool beneath
the oaks

Woodland creatures eat until they
are bursting

They gather and store for later.

Delighted children cull the plentiful
pinecones

And decorate the house with tree-
shaped diamond dust

They do not thank the goddess for
the pines that will sprout

They are entitled to the plenty.

My soul is exploding with gratitude
and wonder

Nature coos to us this year and
surprises with bounty

I bathe in that fullness, feeling
sluggish and complete

Volume and beauty surround me.

Ah, but Nature has a crippling sense
of cruel humor

The goddess sends down the water in
great abundance

The human habitat floats where rivers
have not been

Twisting winds sweep clean the land.

I have been gifted and had my own
years of mast

More treasures building in piles,
stored in basement rooms

Lost and hiding, forgotten in the great
abundance

The testimonial to my gathering habit.

I have divested and I am preparing for
the lean years

The years of less is more, of simple
quiet pastimes and beauty

Of space and expanded time and so
much less

Preparing for the mature mast years to
come.

*Mast: nuts (such as acorns)
accumulated on the forest floor.

THE RING
by Yoma Ullman

“And we never found it,” said my
aunt sadly. She’d just finished telling
me how a family signet ring had
vanished during her father’s lifetime.
Everyone had searched for it in the
house and garden for days.

I wasn’t thinking about the ring when
I walked up to my grandfather’s
house one summer day years later. I
was visiting a friend nearby and
decided to go see if the house had
changed.

A man was digging in a bed beside
the driveway. “Good morning,” I said.
“This was my grandparents’ house,

and I just wanted to see if it was still here.”

He put down his fork and looked at me with no welcome in his face. We exchanged a few pleasantries and then he surprised me.

“Did your family ever lose a ring here?” he asked.

I saw again my aunt’s rueful face. “Yes,” I said, “We lost a signet ring.”

“I found one,” said the man, still unsmiling.

“May I see it?” I asked. “It could be my grandfather’s.”

“Tell me first,” he said. “What did it look like?”

“It had a crest on it.”

“Tell me what the crest was.”

Somehow, I remembered. “It would be a lion rampant.”

“OK,” he said, “I’ll show it to you.”

He led me into the house. It had always been dark. It still was. No owner had reconfigured it to get in more light.

It was strange to go through the hall and into the kitchen, where my mother had once used a primitive laundry machine, and I had got engaged over doing the dishes.

“Here it is,” he said. He handed me

a gold-colored ring with an unmistakable lion rampant engraved on it. I couldn’t tell if it was actually gold.

“That’s it,” I said. “May I have it?”

“You’ll have to pay for it.”

I was shocked. What kind of man asks for money for a family ring?

“How much?”

I was taken aback at the amount he demanded.

“But I haven’t got that much cash with me. I have a check.”

“No good. I want cash,” he said. “You can go back to the ATM in town.”

“That’s miles away.”

Eventually, he took my check, and I took the ring. My aunt was no longer alive to be happy, but I was triumphant as I walked away.

The second chapter of this story took place in the pleasant courtyard of a London club where I had gone to meet my older cousin David for lunch. I was wearing the gold ring. As we unfurled our napkins, my cousin’s little finger flashed silver.

“David,” I said, astonished, “you have my father’s signet ring. How did that happen?”

“Your mother gave it to me when your father died, as the next male

heir.”

He looked at me thoughtfully. “Did you want it?”

Of course I did. “I loved that ring.”

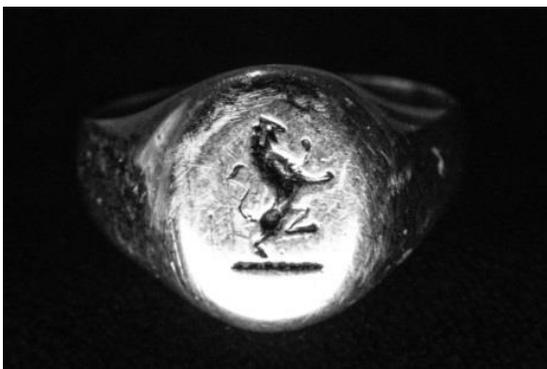
My mother dismissed it as made of inferior local silver by unskilled Burmese workmen, but to me, it was my father’s hand on the wheel inching our car safely past washouts above rivers in Assam.

“Do you want it now?”

“Yes,” I said. “But wait a moment; look what I have.”

I took the gold ring off my finger and held it out to him. “This is the one your mother always mourned as lost. It just turned up in our grandfather’s garden. Why don’t we swap?”

My father’s ring is on my finger as I write.



NOVEMBER’S SUNDROPS

by John Wood

Sundrops, how good of you
To bloom for us again
As November’s chilling wind
Blows against the uncaulked sill
And, uninvited, creeps within
To dim the rays of gold
From heaven sent
To see us through the winter’s bleak.

Evening Primrose with life-affirming
Sprightly yellow head,
That blooms for us again,
Reassures that spirit,
Ashen-gray and cold,
If dormant, is not dead
And, in Phoenix fashion,
Will rise renewed tomorrow.

SUMMER 1955

by Doug Meaker

I had many unskilled summer jobs while in school, but the year 1955 stands out not so much for the job, which was unusual in its own right, but the experiences.

I was hired by my uncle Frank, who was the only doctor for about 25 miles around Chatom, AL. I would describe Frank as a practical idealist. He knew the rural South needed doctors, so he did his residency at a hospital in New Orleans, so he would be familiar with the diseases he would encounter.

The job was to build a tamped-earth

house. He and my aunt Frances had spent many hours planning the structure to house them and their six children, which was reminiscent of the Roman villas I had seen in schoolbooks complete with various rooms around an open courtyard—pretty elegant.

The process for building in tamped earth involved filling a clamped form about 2' by 3' long and 1' wide with clay earth which was tamped down manually to make a solid block. The first course was laid on raised footings to which the form could be clamped. The form was then moved along and a second course laid atop the first and so on to make a wall. I don't recall how we constructed the corners. People suggested this was like adobe except without the straw to bind it together. We had plenty of the right sort of clay, and the construction was remarkably rain resistant. But as a finishing step, we applied concrete stucco to the structure.

We built a small building—to be a lab for Frank—to learn and apply all the elements that would go into building the house. Actually, the house never got built. The whole summer was very rainy and not suited for working. We'd dug holes for footings, but they filled with water so we couldn't lay the footings for the house. All we got done was the lab.

One of my cousins checked on

Googlemaps and thinks he can see that the building is still standing—not bad for a dirt building after 60+ years!

I didn't realize it at the time, but one of my functions was to be the “token white boss” on the project. Aside from Mr. Magdiel, the expert on tamped-earth buildings Frank and Frances had imported, the real expert who knew what he was doing was Percy, who was the local skilled handyman. The only problem with Percy was that he was black. So I now figure I was brought in to be “the boss.” We probably weren't fooling anyone, just abiding by local custom. Percy would say, “We ought to do X.” And we would do X. Brown vs. Board of Education had only been decided the year before, and its effect had not penetrated Atlanta, GA, or Selma, AL, much less Chatom, AL (pop. 600+), seat of Washington County.

What I learned about mostly was the peculiarities of the Old South—some of which still persist. One that struck me especially odd was segregation. After Frank tired of delivering babies in cold shacks in February, the town built him a small, 20-bed or so clinic. But they built it with two nurseries, both on the white ward. He, being a practical idealist, said, “OK, one is for white babies and one for colored, yes?” After they reminded him he was a damn Yankee and didn't understand local custom but they put up with him because they liked his doctoring, they made various bigoted comments. Frank, remembering that

he'd come to provide needed medical service, not to reform the world, swallowed his tongue.

First baby born was white—no problem—put in one of the nurseries. Second baby, though, was black. But Frank had a flash of genius. He gave the baby to his head nurse who had been born and bought up in Chatom. She took it and put it in the same nursery, but in the back behind a screen. When black relatives came, the baby was brought out from behind the screen to be shown. They never used the other nursery as long as Frank was there; they simply moved the screen back and forth as the balance of the baby population dictated.

According to Frank, unless you owned something or had business, you got paid \$1/hr no matter your color. With that in mind, Frank started out charging \$1/office visit until the county medical association got on his case and made him raise his rates to \$2. But Frank decided he wasn't going to dun people. He discovered that the poor people were best at paying what they owed perhaps months or years later. The people he had to dun were the business owners.

I asked Percy once why he didn't pick up and move to California where they were paying \$3-4/hr. He said, no, he'd stay here where his family was and where he was known and appreciated.

Percy was wiser than I. In California, I suspect he'd have been unemployed and living in one of the slums. I suspect with his skills, Percy got more than the \$1/hr even if it was under the table or in kind.

Frank and Frances hired Percy's wife Mattie to cook and clean house for them. Frances could tend to the children or cook or clean house; Mattie could do all three. As good a cook as she was, Mattie could not have cooked or waited on table at the lunch counter in town, nor could blacks be served there. So, Percy built Mattie a small lunch counter near their house where blacks could have a meal. The only problem was that those people didn't have money to spend on eating out. But when the white business owners learned about Mattie's lunch counter, they came in droves. The woman who could not cook or wait on white customers in town had a tidy business doing just that!

One of the things Chatom needed was a pharmacy to fill Frank's prescriptions; the nearest was about 25 miles away. So Frank set one up. It wouldn't have been good for Frank to benefit from his own business, so he set up the pharmacy in his father's name and brought in a pharmacist who gradually bought the business.

Chatom didn't have an ambulance or anything resembling it to take the very sick patients to hospitals in Mobile, about 60 miles away. So Frank installed

a chaise lounge lawn chair in the back of his station wagon and used that to take patients to the hospital.

HO, HO, HO

Village Voices will not be published in December so that the editors may freely partake of the festivities of the season.

When we resume our duties in January, we'd like to have lots of wonderful stories to edit. The Queue is very puny right now. Please send us your items.

Happy Holidays,

The Editors

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