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An Interview with Hazel Jones

Frances Robb

How did your family get to Huntsville, and how did they acquire 'The Cedars'?

My grandfather was a blacksmith and later a farmer in the community of Chebanse, Illinois. My father was born there, and about 1900, my grandfather decided to buy a farm in Alabama, to escape from Illinois' cold weather. My maternal grandparents moved here at the same time. My mother and father had grown up in the neighborhood together, and planned to marry.

My father and grandfather made two trips to Alabama to look for property. On one of these trips, my father sent a letter to his fiancée that read, "Today Pa and I saw a place that looks awful good." Not long after their wedding, all three families moved South. They rented a boxcar to ship their stock

and tools. When they arrived in Huntsville, they were met by their new neighbors -- very kind of them, very kind.

My grandfather and father grew corn, wheat, oats, and hay on the farm. Only after my grandfather died did my father begin raising a little cotton. And yes, the cedars were already here, growing along the fence rows. We lost many in the storms, especially the tornado in 1946; it took thirteen in a row, but we didn't lose a single boxwood. The maples have been here a long, long time. And I was born on the farm, in this house. I still have the record of the payment for my delivery -- \$25. Back then the doctor came to the house! And our big mastiff dog used to tree him!

The farm was purchased with my father's mother's

inheritance. Her father was Eric Nelson, who came from fishing people near Oslo. An immigrant from Norway, he came on a flatboat down the Mississippi and settled at Yorkville, Illinois, a little north of Chebanse. Eric Nelson had left his sweetheart, Ingeborg Andersdatter, behind, and he went back and got her. Her brothers made her wedding bowl of wood. It was used for a particular kind of porridge that was served on all sorts of occasions. I still have it, with her name and "1831" around the edge.

They had eleven children, and when Eric Nelson died, he left each one of the children a farm or acreage. Yes, they had worked hard, and they had prospered. Back then they sent a whole carload of hogs at a time to Chicago. The children were brought up with a sense of responsibility.

My mother was also one of a large family, the fourth

one down of a family of ten. At ten or twelve, when her father and mother went visiting, they left her in complete charge of all the children and the hired girl. Grandmother had eight sisters, and after my grandfather died in 1917, Grandmother eventually moved back to Illinois, where she lived until 1930.

Did your Illinois relatives ever visit you? What did they think of Alabama?

Yes, they would come here. To them Alabama was "furrin' country," and they never had any respect for the fertility of the soil here. Mother had a jar of black Illinois soil she kept in a curio cabinet.

Did you ever visit Illinois? Was it "foreign country" to you?

Yes, I used to visit, but it wasn't really foreign. I had heard all the stories. And

people used to exchange photographs, so I knew what they looked like.

How did you meet Walter B. Jones?

I knew Walter's brothers, one older, one younger, when I was in high school. He was taking an M.A. at the University of Alabama when I was a freshman; after teaching at the university for a year, he went on to Johns Hopkins, and spent four years there. Back then, most girls who went to college went to girls' schools. I may have been the first girl from Madison County to graduate from the University of Alabama. But it's hard to be sure. Many girls only attended in the summers, and it took a long time to graduate. I doubled up, graduating in 1921, after three years and one summer, with a degree in History and Foreign Languages, mainly French.

Walter was teaching geolo-

gy; I was taking geology. He had me doing research for him. He was planning to marry me. I wasn't sure. On Saturday nights, we'd walk the mile and a half into town to go to the movie. Afterwards, we'd stop at the Central Drug Store for a banana split. Walter knew the proprietor well; they went bird hunting. Going back we'd hurry. When it was cold, he'd hold my hand in his overcoat pocket.

Girls weren't allowed to ride in cars; you had to have a parent or grandparent with you. And curfew was at 10:30. So we'd leave for the movies just after supper in the dorm.

What was it like, living on campus back then?

Well, for two years I was a member of student government. My room, a single, was right next to the front door, and I got very sleepy trying to stay up until 10:30 to let the last ones in. There

was a stray dog on campus - we called him Sweet 'n' Pretty. He'd stay out until 11:00, and I'd have to let him in. He roomed with Dimple Moore, up on the third floor, and I could hear his little claws go clack, clack, clack up all those flights of stairs. The medical students were out after him, and we girls had to protect him.

Napoleon, a big great Dane, was another well-known dog on campus. At night, I'd walk to the Auditorium, or other places. One night my hand was swinging down at my side, and suddenly I felt his cold nose in my hand. I felt very safe with him beside me.

Tell me about your wedding.

My family sold the farm in 1919, and we lived in town for a few years. Walter got me a job with a photographer. After a few years, my father bought the farm

again, and my parents moved back. Walter and I were married in the front yard of the Cedars at 6:30 p.m. on June 30, 1924.

We were married by Walter's uncle, a Methodist minister from New Market. Walter's sister was maid of honor; two college friends were bridesmaids; and two little cousins were flower girls. My mother made pastel dresses for my attendants, and also my wedding dress, a lovely crepe de chine, beaded dress. In 1974, I wore it for my 50th wedding anniversary! Walter wore white duck pants and a blue serge jacket, and yes, he wore the same clothes for the celebration 50 years later. We decorated with Queen Anne's lace -- such a summer it was for Queen Anne's lace -- and gladioluses from the florist. We had lots of guests -- family, friends, and neighbors. A teen-aged cousin said she'd never before had enough ice cream!

Our honeymoon was spent at Walter's Army camp in North Carolina. We timed the wedding to coincide with his two weeks of reserve officers' camp; I think it was at Fort Bragg. We got there on the train.

What about life at the University in Tuscaloosa?

For a few years, until we built a house on 13th Street, we lived in several places: a one-room apartment with some old ladies for a year, then an apartment in a new house on the campus, then in the old house that became Alumni House, then a house on 13th Street, and then the one we built -- which is now an Episcopal Chapel. We raised three children on \$200 a month. Tuscaloosa was a fine place for children. Our little fellas could cruise on their bikes in safety.

The Geological Survey always had a car, at first, a little Ford that Walter name

Mandy, then a second car that Walter called "Mandy's Ghost." Later we bought our own car. When our oldest boy was a baby, we camped and fished a lot; with two small children, we camped a bit; but by the time we had three, we waited for a while until they could be left with someone reliable -- and then for only a short time.

In the late 1920s, after we had a maid to stay with the children, I worked for the Geological Survey developing and printing photographs for the Survey. My wage was fifty cents an hour. I worked in several darkrooms, including Dr. Hodges' after his retirement. Dr Hodges was official photographer for the Survey. Walter took many, many photographs, and just turned them over to me for processing. This past Christmas, the Alabama State Museum sent Christmas cards with a snow picture on them. I remember

finishing that photograph, back in 1936, the year of a very heavy snowfall.

During the Depression, under Governor B. M. Miller, state funding for the Geological Survey was cut to \$1 per year. The Survey had at least a dozen employees, black and white, and they were getting no money at all. Until the money was restored, we ran a soup kitchen to give them one meal a day. Every morning I would go down to the curb market; I'd figure how many; and Rosalie would cook them a hearty meal -- in the basement of Smith Hall.

When the boys were older, in the late 1930s, we camped a lot. It was always fun. I was the equipment chief, and toted the fossils. "Beetle" trips were very special. When Walter became State Geologist, he had met two men in Mobile, Dr. Loding and Dr. Van Aller, whose special hobby

was the study of beetles. Each year we went on a two-week camping trip in search of particular beetles for their collection -- as far away as North Carolina. We took the children, sometimes a nephew. This continued until the war, until the old gentlemen died.

During the war years -- World War II -- I came back to Huntsville with the two younger boys. Walter was a reserve officer on active duty from 1942 to 1944. Our eldest son was killed in April 1945. Not long after, we returned to Tuscaloosa.

Your husband was such a remarkable man and wore so many different hats: Director of the Alabama State Museum of Natural History, Director of the Alabama Geological Survey, and Professor of Geology at the University of Alabama. What do you think he would have considered the high-water mark of his career? Well, much of his work was

interesting, including the moment when Alabama's first oil well came in, but I think the greatest moment would be his starting the work at Moundville -- and he would be very proud that his son is continuing it. One evening, a year or so before he died, a special ceremony at Moundville was held, and Walter was given the key to the city.

What do you think was most special about Walter B.?

He was such an interesting person, an expert at all sorts of things. He could get completely engrossed in any one of his pursuits. His latest interest was in old coins and obsolete currencies; for many years he collected pipes. And, of course, in 1927, when Dr. Smith, the



State Geologist, died, Walter inherited the museum (*the Alabama State Museum of Natural History*) along with his Geology position, so he also was devoted to collecting for the Museum -- and maneuvering for collections. When Doug became head of the Geology Department, he inherited his father's old office.

Frances Robb began her educational odyssey in her hometown at Birmingham-Southern. Then she earned a Master's Degree in Medieval English Literature at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, followed by an A.B.D. in English Literature from The University of Wisconsin. Changing course a bit, Frances earned a Master's degree in Art History from Yale. Thus steeped in art, history, and literature she was associated with the National Gallery for four years and also the Yale University Art Gallery.

Frances counts seventeen years of University teaching in Texas and at the University of the South in Tennessee. Her consulting works for major and minor art museums in art and art history keeps her on the go.

She was the curator for the 1988-89 traveling exhibit Alabama Landscape Photographs funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Alabama Humanities Foundation.