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GURLEY: A Family Legacy

Sarah Dudley Hall Edwards

PROLOGUE

The family name "Gurley" is a derivation of the original French name "de Gourle". A genealogical history of the de Gourle family has been traced to the Thirteenth Century; however, for the sake of brevity we will begin in the Eighteenth Century. Two Gurley brothers, who were Episcopal Clergymen, emigrated from Scotland to America in the 1700's and settled in North Carolina. A descendent of the brothers, Jeremiah Gurley, was born in Johnston County, North Carolina on December 29, 1759. He served in the Revolutionary War in 1781 (battles of Guilford and Camden). Jeremiah purchased a large tract of land in eastern Madison County in the late 1700's or early 1800's. A portion of this land was inherited by his son, John Gurley. The Memphis and Charleston Railroad (now Southern Railway) first laid its tracks in the area to be known as Gurley in 1857 across the farmland of John Gurley. A water tank was erected there, and the settlement which sprang up around the abundant water supply became known as "Gurley's Tank". The small community prospered. The major industry was timber which was plentiful in poplar, cedar, and oak.

During the Civil War, Gurley lay helplessly in the path of invading Northern armies. On their march through the South, the town and its colonial homes were wrecked and reduced to ashes. When Captain Frank Ballew Gurley, son of John Gurley, returned from the war, he led the populace in rebuilding the area and donated one square mile of land for the town site.



Captain Frank Ballew Gurley loomed larger than life in the eyes of those of us who grew up nourished by stories of his heroism and in awe of his handsome Civil War portrait by William Frye. The first time I saw the likeness of Captain Frank was in the parlor of the Hall House — a gracious Victorian hotel with picket fence and magnolia trees, circa late 1800's. The site of the Hall House and the nucleus of the structure as it stands today, originated as the modest three room home of Captain Gurley. Generous and charismatic, Gurley was apparently a forceful man in dealings with his family. Although he never married, he raised the young orphaned children of his brother James Harvey Gurley and Elizabeth Acklin, who died in 1868 and 1866, respectively. There were several children, but his major attention was directed to my grandmother, Molly. Then to Molly and her six children. He was directly responsible for intervening in the romance of grandmother and her friend, Jack Daniel. It was said that The Captain thought Jack would not amount to much. Captain Gurley was said to have intercepted and destroyed the last letter that Jack Daniel wrote to Molly. The letter arrived on the day she married Thomas Ripley Hall. On her wedding day, December 23, 1874, Captain Frank gave Molly and Tom Hall his home.



Between 1874 and the end of the century, the home grew from three rooms into the large structure it is today. It even served as the town's hotel. The register from the early 1890's bears witness to the town's heavy traffic. It also served as home for a growing family.



My father was the youngest of the Hall's seven children and only surviving male; Molly and Tom lost their second child, a son, to pneumonia. Their children were Ernestine Hampton; Theo Rita; Annie Louise; Allie Adams; Tommie Gurley; and Frank Ballew Gurley Hall, all born prior to the end of the nineteenth century.

When Daddy was seven years old, he moved to the country with Captain Gurley whom he called Grandpa. Grandmother thought that Captain Gurley would be a good influence and allowed this. This was an education that lasted for two years. I am sure they were long years! My father's personality (the sensitivities of a poet) must have clashed with the regimented, outspoken, crusty old soldier. This stay ended when Daddy drove the Captain, Grandmother, and his sisters to Deposit, Alabama to board the train to St. Louis for the 1904 World's Fair. The horse-drawn vehicle (young Tom Hall drove) carried eight to ten people. Designed and built by the Captain, it was to accommodate his guests at war reunions held annually at his "plantation". (This home was destroyed by fire in the mid 1900's.) On his way back from Deposit, my father made a conscious decision to return home to his family and the Hall Hotel. He was nine years old.



I knew the Hall House simply as Papa Hall's. The first five years of my life I lived on Jackson Street, two houses down and across the street from Papa Hall and Aunt Tommie and Uncle John Barte. There was a steady stream of traffic between the two homes.

My favorite memories of the Hall House were in the library where Aunt Tommie read and reread to me the books of Louisa May Alcott and the Miss Minerva series. Like these beloved novels, the Hall House with its special ambiance endures.

My parents, Frank Ballew Gurley Hall and Sara Dudley, were married in 1920 and lived for a short time with Papa and Mama Hall in the Hall House. They became parents to Frank Ballew Gurley Hall, Jr. and Tommie Louise Hall. Eleven years later I arrived, followed closely by Paul William. I have been told that residents of the town would drive by our home to see if they could get a glimpse of Mother “because she was so pretty,” with her bright auburn hair and blue eyes.

Killarney

It was a warm day in June, 1940. A five year old girl was about to transition from the confines of a small Southern town to the wonderful expanse of rural Madison County — Killarney.



To a small child, the large stone structure of a house and barn to its side were, at the same instant, formidable and inviting. A strong sense of curiosity and the potential for grand adventures for myself and younger brother, Paul William, was irresistible and far outweighed any sadness at leaving our home “downtown”.

Since 1940, Killarney has been the home of Frank Ballew Gurley Hall and Sara Dudley Hall. Killarney, a dignified, stone "English cottage" sits at the center and foot of Gurley Mountain just north of the town of Gurley. The house and barn were completed in 1919 by the original owners, John and Ernestine Bogenshott. Daddy's sister Ernestine was heir to a portion of Captain Gurley's estate on which the house was built. Building Killarney was a special project of John Bogenshott. A man of many interests, Bogenshott was a building contractor; co-owner of the Stanley-Bogenshott Hotel for Men in Chattanooga; a farmer; a raiser and racer of thoroughbred horses; and a well-traveled individual.

The carpenter, H. P. Wright, a local artisan, used stone cut from virgin limestone indigenous to Gurley Mountain to construct the house. The stones on the four front columns are set in an identical pattern. The imported red, tile roof was installed by Oscar Dregger (Father of Alvin Dregger). Mr. Dregger commuted daily from Huntsville by train. The house was state-of-the-art technology for urban America, but most unusual for a Southern rural area in the early 1900's. It was wired for electricity, but was not accessed until the 1940's. At that time, Killarney was supplied by three sources of water: a 90 foot bored well with pump which pumped water to a tank on the mountain above the house in order to have the convenience of running water in the house and barn lot. During the wet seasons, a natural mountain spring also filled the tank. A 40 foot long and 6 foot deep cistern under the west patio collected rain water for special purposes. Heat was provided by a coal burning, forced air furnace in the basement with auxiliary heat provided by a fireplace on the main floor (living room) which burned four foot logs. Memories of logs burning and winter evenings bring other reflections of Daddy smoking his pipe and reading while Mother, Paul, and I would cuddle on the love seat for bedtime stories.

The farm animals and approximately 40 acres of land were tended and farmed by Walter Robinson and his wife Mary Alice Robinson. I was taught to call him "Uncle Walter." He was a kind, dignified black man in his late fifties

when I met him. The produce that came from his labor was cotton, corn, and hogs. Uncle Walter cultivated the land with mules. The first summer at Killarney, Mother asked me to take Uncle Walter's lunch to the screened-in porch. I thought this strange. I questioned why Uncle Walter would not eat at the kitchen table. Mother's response was "... that is just the way it is." This was not the first time my Mother had used this answer on me. We call it "a cop out" today. My solution to negotiating or coming to terms with the answer for this occasion was to take my plate to the porch and lunch with Uncle Walter. I have always been indebted to my Mother for her silent consent. I like to think that it encouraged a sense of fairness.

Uncle Walter and I became good friends. He allowed Paul and me to ride to town on the tail of the wagon and bought us R.C. Colas and moon pies. He taught me to milk a cow, but never told anyone that I could! I learned to ride on his mules which were farm animals but also served as his transportation. We graduated from riding mules to ponies and finally to the Tennessee Walker which Mother laughingly called her "baby sitter." She put me on Snow White when I was nine years old and I got off when I was thirteen! The mare was bred to Midnight Sun, Tennessee Championship Walker, and produced a colt — Queen May. Both horses are buried in the front area within the circular drive.



The barn that housed the horses also housed Mother's cattle. Daddy gave her the first calf, Bawley. From this Jersey calf she developed a herd of about forty cows which has expanded and shrunk and expanded over the years. To this day she still has a descendent

of the original calf, Cocoa. The barn built in 1919, retains its original and unique loft oak flooring and sash windows. The barn was renovated in the early 1950's. This included a new roof and concrete foundation, and replacement of the areas used to store farm machinery.

Further improvements include land management. Mother was privileged to have grown up on a plantation in South Alabama. her father was a master farmer and a gentleman engineer. This background was instrumental in her planning skills. She recognized the need for soil conservation and developing terracing and contouring. She cleared an additional ten acres.

Mother's interest in the Huntsville chapter of the Ikebana Club, International (based in Tokyo, Japan), culminated in the construction of a mountain rock garden enhanced by a 25 foot oriental moon bridge and two natural limestone fishponds.

EPILOGUE

My family has always considered Huntsville a part of home. Mother and Daddy have been members of The Church of the Nativity for an average person's lifetime. The children were christened at Nativity. I especially remember when Mother and Dad dressed (in vogue) to attend the Reveler's Club at the Russel Erskine. We were all attracted to a variety of social activities. I attended The Irene Jones Studio of Dance. Mother belonged to the Music Study Club, and Ikebana. When Paul and I reached high school age, we attended Huntsville High School. Of course, we all enjoyed the Post Office and Central cafes and what would be a Saturday without the Lyric Theater!

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*Frank Ballew Gurley Hall and Sara Dudley Hall,
THEN
and
NOW.*



Portraits of John and Ernestine Bogeshott in the background.