

SPRING 2012

# Meadow Brook

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Newest  
National  
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Landmark



INSIDE: Servants Rooms Restored | Inside the Vaults | Donor Report



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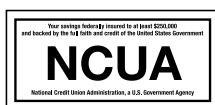
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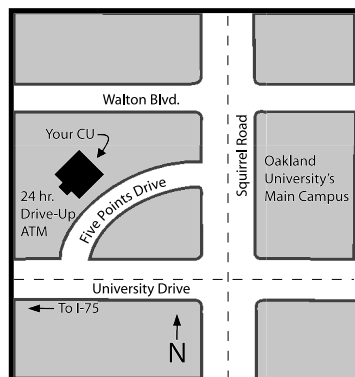
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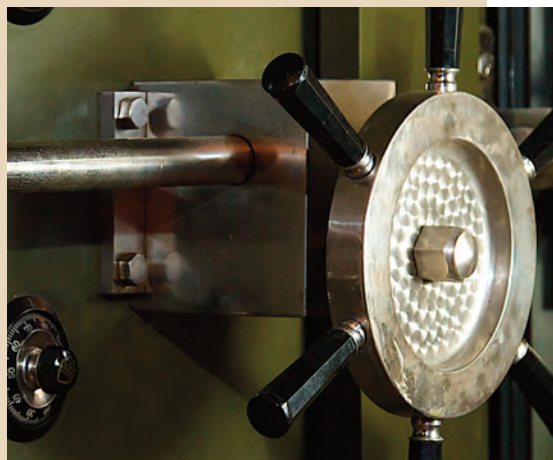
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Meadow Brook stands proud as it receives word in March of its designation as a National Historic Landmark by the Secretary of the Interior. For the back story, see the Editor's Column on page 2. *Photo by Kim Zelinski*

# Meadow Brook

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MEADOW BROOK MAGAZINE  
is published twice a year for  
friends of Meadow Brook Hall.  
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*Matilda and Alfred Wilson*

## | Editor's Column



## A landmark achievement

The old saying “Good things come to those who wait” may have been coined in anticipation of Meadow Brook’s quest for National Historic Landmark designation. While many of you reading this may have already heard the news (*see related article about news coverage on page 6*), you may find interesting the background behind Meadow Brook Hall’s designation as a National Historic Landmark by the Secretary of the Interior – the highest recognition for historic properties in the United States. The National Park Service administers the program, which includes less than 2,500 sites nationwide and now 35 in Michigan that are considered to be “nationally significant in American history and culture.”

Meadow Brook was awarded designation for its exceptional architecture,\* its grand scale of 88,000 square feet and 110 rooms and the integrity of the building as a centerpiece of a large early 20th-century country estate that still today includes 37 associated farm buildings and structures. The owners’ almost exclusive use of American craftsmen and materials and the integrity of the design of supporting estate structures were also noted.

This recognition is a testament to the achievements of John Dodge, his widow Matilda Dodge Wilson and her second husband Alfred Wilson, whose collective work ethic and vision built one of our nation’s most significant historic and educational assets. It is also a testament to the preservation and stewardship of the



property by Oakland University through the building's use as a cultural center and historic house museum . . . and to the support of hundreds of volunteers, community members and donors, including the foundation Mrs. Matilda R. Wilson Fund.

The process for applying for landmark status began in 2005, when staff at The Hall were contacted by a regional representative of the National Park Service suggesting that the building was thought to be worthy.

Shortly thereafter we began a search for a qualified writer to research and prepare the application. We found one of the best in Paula Mohr, an architectural historian who had written several similar applications and who came highly recommended. Paula made two trips to Meadow Brook from her home base in Iowa, spending days at a time in The Hall's Archives and engaging in interviews with a variety of people associated with the estate, past and present. She also consulted with national experts to get unbiased opinions of the value of the building and associated farm structures.

Two years after she began we had our first draft . . . 101 pages of historical background, critical analysis, building surveys and photographs. It was a pleasure to read and encouraging in its conclusions. The "period of significance" was set at 1915-1947. 1915 was the year that John Dodge began to add buildings to the country retreat he and Matilda had purchased in 1908, including the Tudor Revival clubhouse and, two years later, a greenhouse and guard house. 1947 was chosen as the end date for the "flourishing phase" of estate and farm activity, notably with construction of the Colt Pegasus Fountain in that year.

The draft document was submitted to the National Park Service in 2009 and a revised draft in January 2010. In February of 2011, we received a formal invitation to present our application to the Landmarks Committee of

the Advisory Board to the National Park Service on May 25 at the headquarters ballroom of The National Trust for Historic Preservation in Washington, D.C. Sixteen other hopeful properties would also present their cases over the course of three days.

Colleagues Kim Zelinski (The Hall's director of museum services and advancement) and Robin Gardner (The Hall's director of administration and finance) and I made our case to the Landmarks Committee in front of a large audience of preservationists from the public and private sectors. After the 30-plus-minute presentation complete with images and maps, the committee (made up of historians, architectural historians, archaeologists, architects and professional preservationists from around the country) asked a number of probing questions about the building, the property's history and the business model employed to support its preservation and operation.

After a dramatic pause, they voted publicly and unanimously to support the application moving to the next stage . . . a review by the full Advisory Board. Both during the presentation and afterwards we received numerous compliments about the property and the job the staff, volunteers and university were doing to both preserve it and interpret its history for various constituencies. Meadow Brook stood tall nationally on that day.

The Advisory Board approved our application in early December of last year, passing it on to the Secretary of the Interior for final designation. We were notified of the Secretary's approval on March 6 of this year. The process was long and rigorous, but unquestionably worth the effort.

Meadow Brook now joins such other National Historic Landmarks as The White House, Pearl Harbor, the Hoover Dam, the Empire State Building and the military academies at West Point and Annapolis. Michigan NHLs include Mackinac Island and the Grand Hotel, Greenfield Village and Henry



Ford Museum, the State Capitol and the Fisher Building.

The National Park Service will cast a commemorative plaque that will be dedicated at The Hall in the coming months. In fact, we have chosen Friday July 20 as a day for the community to celebrate the landmark that lives in its own backyard. You will be hearing more about this as the date approaches.

To all who have supported Meadow Brook's mission over the years, please accept our gratitude and thanks. Your interest and assistance no doubt helped The Hall attain National Historic Landmark status. I have a strong feeling that Matilda and Alfred Wilson would be justly proud of their "old house" and the place it now holds on the national landscape.

*\*The Hall was considered by peer reviewers to be the finest extant example of Tudor Revival architecture in the United States.*



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## Hall awarded State grant

Meadow Brook Hall has been awarded a grant of \$8,000 from the State of Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs (MCACA). The grant was awarded through the MCACA peer review process and was one of 233 applications to compete for MCACA fiscal year 2012 funding.

The grant dollars will directly support maintenance projects identified in a comprehensive preservation assessment.

“The support of the state’s premier cultural organization for our maintenance projects is a big boost to our efforts” said Geoff Upward, Meadow Brook’s executive director. “This grant is much needed and appreciated.”

Organizations receiving a MCACA grant award are required to match those funds with other public and private dollars. Local support of the project included a matching grant from The Matilda R. Wilson Fund, a foundation established by Meadow Brook and Oakland University founder Matilda Dodge Wilson in the 1940s.

The MCACA peer review process allows for each grant application to be competitively considered by a panel of in-state and out-of-state arts and culture professionals. This ensures the taxpayers, who support this project through legislative appropriations, and all other visitors or residents in Michigan will have access to the highest quality arts and cultural experiences.

A complete list of grant awards around the state is available through the MCACA website at [www.michiganadvantage.org/arts](http://www.michiganadvantage.org/arts).

## A picture is worth...

### OU Student Architectural Photography Exhibit

Meadow Brook Hall featured a public exhibition this Spring in a collaborative effort with Oakland University’s Art and Art History Department. The exhibit, appropriately titled “In Focus,” showcased the artistic work of students in the department’s Advanced Photography class. Utilizing objects from The Hall as their subject matter, students were required to first pre-visualize the image and then formulate the desired lighting exposure to achieve the artistic results – all in black and white. We think they deserved an “A.”

#### Westinghouse Oven

*Braley Bullard  
13x10 in.  
5x4 in. silver  
gelatin negative,  
printed permanent  
inkjet.*



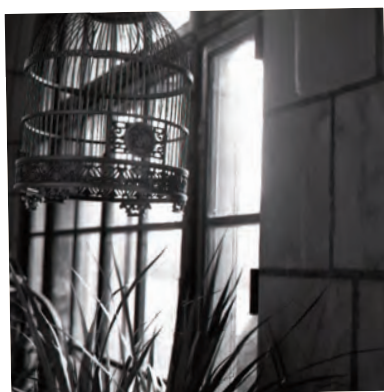
#### Garden Chairs

*Julia Wieting  
11x14 in.  
4x5 in. silver gelatin  
negative, printed  
permanent inkjet.*



#### Birdcage

*Missy Hansen  
10 x10 cm  
6x6 cm silver gelatin  
negative, printed silver  
gelatin.*









## You won't want to miss...

### HUG THE HALL

JULY 20, 12-2 P.M. | FREE

Come celebrate our new designation with a free picnic lunch, tours, family activities and a group "hug" of Michigan's newest National Historic Landmark.

### SUMMER TOUR PROGRAM

MAY 29-SEPTEMBER 2

DAILY 11:30 A.M., 12:30 P.M., 1:30 P.M., 2:30 P.M. | ADULTS \$15,

SENIORS 62 AND OLDER \$10;

CHILDREN 12 AND UNDER FREE

**Free for Meadow Brook Hall members!**

The Great Estate tour, the ultimate way to experience Meadow Brook Hall, is led by a trained interpreter and focuses on the fascinating history of the family, the collections and life in a grand manor. This summer, the tour will also incorporate architectural-themed stories and exhibits. The tour lasts approximately 1.5 hours, but leave time to browse in The Hall's Museum Store. Reservations not required.

### TWILIGHT TUESDAYS

JUNE 26, JULY 31, AUGUST 28

6 P.M.-9 P.M.

ADULTS \$10 PER PERSON;

CHILDREN 12 & UNDER FREE

Bring friends and family to experience these special evenings of self-guided house and garden tours and enjoy refreshments, scenic views and background music on the Loggia Terrace. (Wine and snacks available for purchase in the Museum Store.) Reservations not required.

### BEHIND THE SCENES TOUR

MAY-OCTOBER, EVERY SATURDAY AND SUNDAY | 12 P.M. & 1:30 P.M.

\$15, SENIORS 62 AND OLDER \$10;

CHILDREN 12 AND UNDER FREE

Explore Meadow Brook Hall "behind the ropes" in this guided tour of rarely seen areas including the servants' quarters, closets, playrooms and the secret staircase. No reservations required, but space is limited.

### NEW! ARCHITECTURE TOUR

JUNE-OCTOBER, EVERY SATURDAY AND SUNDAY | 1 P.M.

ADULTS \$15; SENIORS 62 AND OLDER \$10; CHILDREN 12 AND UNDER FREE

Discover The Hall's architectural magnificence in this new interior and exterior guided tour that highlights the fascinating design and construction process that distinguishes Meadow Brook as one of the country's finest examples of Tudor Revival

architecture. No reservations required, but space is limited.

### JAZZ IN THE GARDEN

JUNE 21, JULY 19, AUGUST 15

7 P.M.-10 P.M.

\$30 PER PERSON

Summer sizzles at Meadow Brook with live cool jazz in the garden, a summer concert series featuring local jazz musicians. The evening includes light hors d'oeuvres and a main floor tour of The Hall. Cash bar. Reservations required (248-364-6263).

### YOUTH WRITING CAMP

SESSIONS: JUNE-AUGUST (SEE WEBSITE FOR SESSION DATES AND FEES)

PRE-K THROUGH 12TH GRADE

Discover and write about secret staircases, amazing playhouses and one of America's grandest architectural structures.

**NEW THIS YEAR, Meadow Brook Writing Project is offering a class for adults!**

For more information and to register, visit [www.oakland.edu/youth-writingcamps](http://www.oakland.edu/youth-writingcamps)

### CHILDREN IN BLOOM


JUNE 23 | 10 A.M.-12:30 P.M. | \$10

This delightful morning of playing and planting flowers includes tours of the gardens and Knole Cottage (Frances Dodge playhouse), crafts, snacks and fun. This year's program will focus on how animals and bugs use nature's architecture!

Reservations are required.

Call (248) 364-6252 or email

[mbyouth@oakland.edu](mailto:mbyouth@oakland.edu)

*For additional information on touring and community events, please call 248-364-6263 or visit our website at [meadowbrookhall.org](http://meadowbrookhall.org)* 



*Servants Sitting Room.*

PHOTOS BY THERESA FINCK

# At your service

## The Hall restores the Servants Dining and Sitting Rooms to their original functional splendor



Beginning in the Fall of 2011 Meadow Brook Hall embarked on a new project to restore a portion of the east wing, specifically the Servants Dining Room, Sitting Room and adjacent service hallway. Sometime in the early 1970s these spaces had been renovated to provide a larger and more functional space for conference room rental purposes.

“The focus of much of our interpretive effort to date has been on the owners and builders of the house and their family,” Geoff Upward, The Hall’s executive director, said. “But a large portion of Meadow Brook – both in square footage and in daily life – took place in the staff quarters and

their working spaces. The restoration project will allow us to convey to our visitors and guests a more accurate and complete picture of how the estate actually worked.”

With grant funding from the Matilda R. Wilson Fund, The Hall has returned the area back to an authentic representation of its original design and function. The construction component of the project included replacement of the wall that originally separated the two rooms, removal of non-original embellishments and fixtures; restoration of original linoleum floors, wall finishes, woodwork, cabinetry and lighting scheme; and the discreet addition of climate control, supplemental



lighting and display, and communication technology capabilities.

With the exception of a few items, the rooms' original furnishings were no longer in The Hall's possession. But through a gift from longtime Meadow Brook friends and supporters Gary and Ann Laidlaw and a grant from the Motor Cities National Heritage area, the project further addressed outfitting the rooms with 1940s period furniture, floor coverings and accessories as well as the remaining collection items that had been in storage – notably conserving and re-hanging the original draperies.

“The Wilson Fund contribution to the service rooms project, part of their challenge match for the preservation, maintenance and interpretation of The Hall, shows a contin-

uing commitment from the foundation Mrs. Wilson established in the 1940s to our efforts to preserve her legacy,” Upward said. “The Motor Cities organization continues to rally support for this icon of the early automotive aristocracy.”

“And the Laidlaws’ gift is particularly meaningful coming from an OU alum, Gary Laidlaw, who actually played cards with Matilda Wilson and fellow students on the Sun Porch.”

The Laidlaws’ gift will also fund the research and development of educational materials by an intern that will enhance the historical interpretation of domestic service at Meadow Brook

Hall. Future projects on the topic will include articles, publications, lectures and exhibits. **MB**



RCA Victor entertainment console, c. 1947.



RICK SMITH

*Project donors and Meadow Brook Hall staff came together in April to recognize completion of the servants wing project. Fittingly, they had the first meal in the Staff Dining Room (below) since Matilda Wilson’s passing in the late 1960s.*

*Above, left to right: Robin Oosterveen (program director) and David Stephens (trustee) from the Matilda R. Wilson Fund, and longtime supporters Gary and Ann Laidlaw. “For me, Meadow Brook has been the cornerstone of my Oakland University years,” Laidlaw said.*



*One of six interpretive panels hung in the Service Hallway as part of the project.*

## The Well-Appointed House

“The personality of a house,” wrote Irving Penn in 1942, “refers to the way it is seen.” At Meadow Brook Hall, the housekeeper’s personality is reflected in the way the house is seen and after the housekeeping staff is gone, the house is seen as it is. The housekeeper’s personality is reflected in the way the house is seen and after the housekeeping staff is gone, the house is seen as it is.



“The personality of a house,” wrote Irving Penn in 1942, “refers to the way it is seen.” At Meadow Brook Hall, the housekeeper’s personality is reflected in the way the house is seen and after the housekeeping staff is gone, the house is seen as it is.

HEAD HOUSEKEEPER  
HOUSE MAIDS  
PERSONAL MAIDS  
LAUNDRESS  
SEAMSTRESS  
HOUSEMEN





# The Making of a Mansion

BY KIM ZELINSKI

IT MAY HAVE BEEN THE BEAUTY OF THE SETTING, THE APPEAL OF A SECLUDED EXISTENCE OR MERELY “FOR THE SAKE OF THE CHILDREN”... BUT WHATEVER THEIR MOTIVATION, MATILDA AND ALFRED WILSON’S DECISION TO DEVELOP THE MEADOW BROOK FARMS PROPERTY INTO A GRAND COUNTRY ESTATE WOULD CENTER AROUND THE CREATION OF A MAGNIFICENT RESIDENCE THAT WOULD ULTIMATELY BECOME ONE OF THE FINEST EXAMPLES OF TUDOR REVIVAL ARCHITECTURE IN THE COUNTRY.

## FIRST OF TWO PARTS

The creation of Meadow Brook Hall – from the ceremonial groundbreaking on October 19, 1926 to the housewarming party on November 19, 1929 – was an incredible undertaking, involving the collaborative efforts of owners, architects, engineers, builders, craftsmen, designers, artists and laborers. Its inspiration was an amalgamation of architectural designs gathered from American and English prototypes, selected specifically by the Wilsons during their travels both home and abroad.

Documenting the construction process are thousands of records, including letters, invoices, memos, financial records, daily logs and blueprints. From the minutest of details to the most complex building components, it is evident that the Wilsons were deeply involved in The Hall’s design and its construction from start to finish.

Yet, the decision to build Meadow

Brook Hall on the farm property was not quickly realized. After the death of John Dodge in 1920, the widowed Matilda and her children, Frances, Daniel and Anna Margaret Dodge, would move from their Detroit home on Boston Boulevard to an elegant house on Lincoln Avenue. While Matilda debated whether to finish the Grosse Pointe mansion that she and John Dodge had started, the country farm of 320 acres she and John purchased in Rochester in 1908 would remain “home” to the family.

## Contemplation and inspiration

Beginning in July of 1924, Matilda would purchase eight surrounding farm properties, expanding her holdings from 787 acres to around 1,200 by the end of 1925, which would turn out to be pivotal year in the Meadow Brook story. The accumulation of the farm property, the sale of Dodge





*Original rendering, T.E. King, 1926.*



*William Kapp, architect of Meadow Brook Hall.*

Brothers Motor Car Company (making Matilda one of the wealthiest women in the world) and her marriage to Alfred Wilson in June came together to inspire the making of a grand country

estate... an enterprise consisting of beautiful landscapes, impressive agricultural and equestrian complexes, recreational facilities, and an incredible residence.

The first planning initiative occurred prior to the Wilsons' honeymoon trip to Europe in May, 1925. Charles Leavitt, a well-known landscape engineer from New York, was commissioned to create a master plan, modestly referred

to as farm "improvements." The inclusion of farm groups, stables, bridle paths, a large lake, boathouse and placement of a new residence would reveal the magnitude of what those "improvements" could be. This plan would also signal that the Grosse Pointe home, projected to be "the last word in residences" would not be completed.

While much has been speculated about the Wilsons' honeymoon trip to Europe wherein their architect presumably traveled with them to collect design ideas from the great English manor homes, there is no credible documentation or probable reason to support this idea. The Wilsons were months away from making

any final decision about the details of the farm "improvements," including a new residence. In fact, it would not be until February of 1926 that Fred Smith of the Detroit architectural firm of Smith, Hinchman and Grylls (SH&G) and the Wilsons would first meet to discuss the Leavitt plan, specifically the construction of the new residence.



*Smith, Hinchman & Grylls office.*





*Above: Bonnycrest, home of Stuart Duncan, Newport, Rhode Island.  
Left: Allen Lehman house, Tarrytown, New York.*



Although Fred Smith would stay involved throughout the project, it would be the company's head of design, architect William Kapp, who would manage the construction of Meadow Brook Hall. He, along with a team of up to 50 additional architects and engineers, would devote significant time over the next few years preparing the necessary drawings.

May of 1926 would prove to be an important month for the future Meadow Brook Hall. At Leavitt's suggestion, the Wilsons spent most of the month traveling to robust estates, primarily those with Tudor-Revival architecture. Accompanied by William Kapp, they worked their way from Cleveland to New York's Gold Coast to Newport, Rhode Island, visiting dozens of estate mansions. From these visits, Kapp amassed numerous photographs and architectural plans that would provide the inspiration for The

Hall's design. The following month, SH&G would commission T.E. King to create artistic renderings of Meadow Brook Hall's north and south façades, revealing for the first time what would be its grand size and incredible architecture. The illustrations would also prove to be a persuasive tool in gaining their client's acceptance.

During the summer of 1926, Matilda and Alfred would turn their attention to other aspects of the estate's improvements. Two playhouses for the children were constructed, Knole Cottage for Frances and a log cabin for Danny (Anna Margaret had died in 1924). They would also begin to expand the agricultural operation with the construction of numerous barns and related facilities into an assemblage of farm groups.



## Construction

As the job site was readied for the enormous task ahead, a single steam shovel contracted through S&H

*Alfred, Matilda, Frances, Danny, groundbreaking, 1926.*

## Groundbreaking

After much speculation and contemplation, Matilda, Alfred, Frances, Danny and a few friends and family gathered on October 19, 1926, Matilda's 43rd birthday, for a ceremonial groundbreaking event. Each took his or her turn with the silver spade, recorded in the collection of family films.

SH&G would develop hundreds of blueprints and drawings, including nearly eighty that are now housed in Meadow Brook Hall's Archives. Given the aggressive schedule of a two-year completion date, blueprints were mostly submitted in intervals as the project progressed; a design-as-you-go approach. Beginning a project the magnitude of Meadow Brook Hall without finalized plans is unimaginable today, but conceivably not out of the ordinary in the 1920s.

Critical to the unique design of The Hall would be the materials and furnishings salvaged from the Grosse Pointe house. Included on a long list were lumber; stone; plumbing and light fixtures; vault doors; portions of the gutter system; bronze sashes, including those with Tiffany insets; and an Aeolian organ. The Wilsons would need to construct a 4,500-square-foot steel barn near the job site to store the materials until they were integrated into the construction.



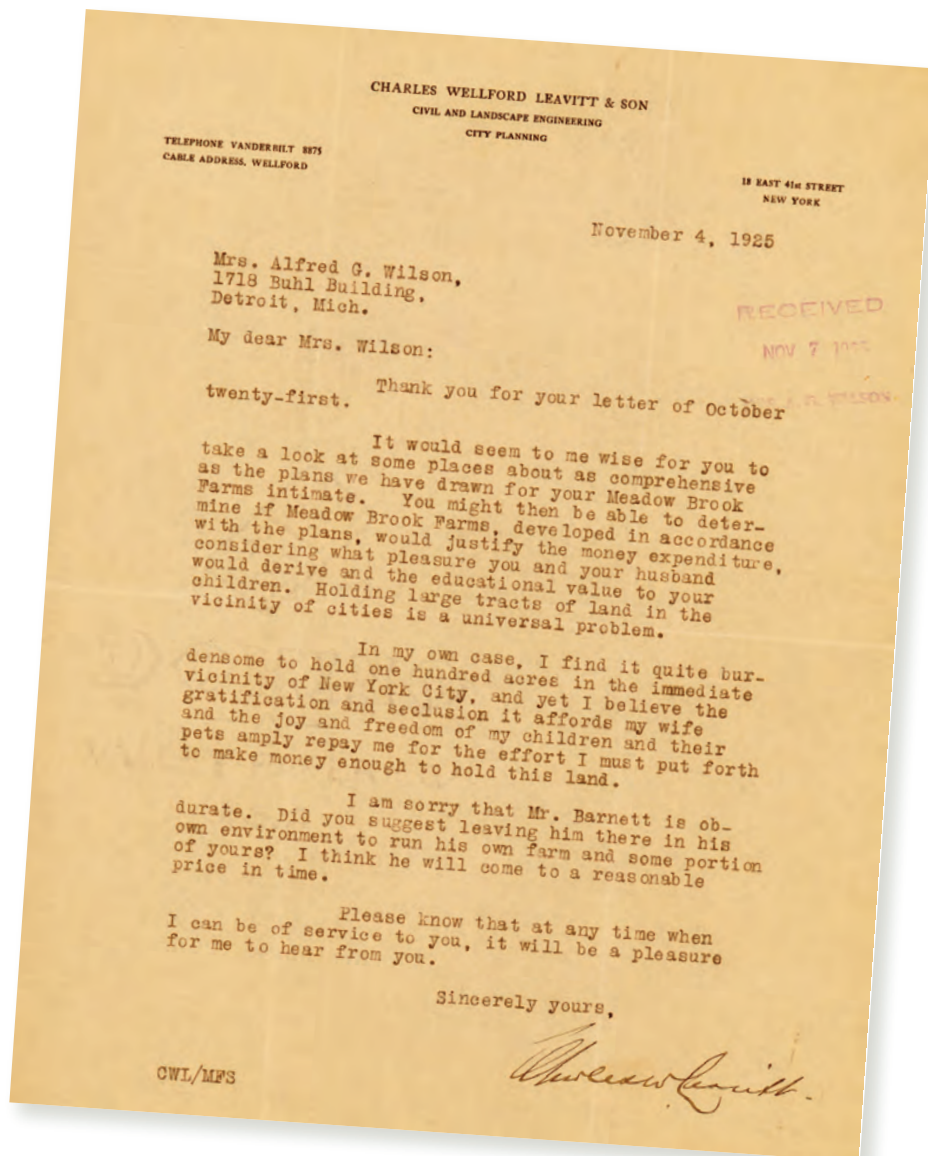


Shovel would shoulder the load of excavating continuously for the next several months, in sometimes freezing conditions, to prepare for the 470-foot-long foundation.

S&H Shovel would be one of 132 trades that Bryant & Detwiler, SH&G's general contractor, would sub-contract with over the next few years. Additionally, the Wilsons would separately contract with another 40 businesses for the special finishes of the home.

The contract signed by Bryant & Detwiler (B&D) on October 4, 1926, would specify an immediate start date, require they begin work based on "preliminary" drawings, perform the work with reasonable speed consistent with good workmanship and execute within a two-year time frame. Also contained in the contract was reference to the anticipated cost of the dwelling and attached garage of between \$1,000,000 and \$1,200,000. The project was neither completed in two years, nor at the estimated cost. In the end, it would take nearly three years to complete and the cost would more than triple. **MB**

*END OF PART ONE Up next (Fall 2012): A colossal construction project*



*Early construction, winter 1926-1927.*

## BRYANT & DETWILER COMPANY

### GENERAL BUILDERS



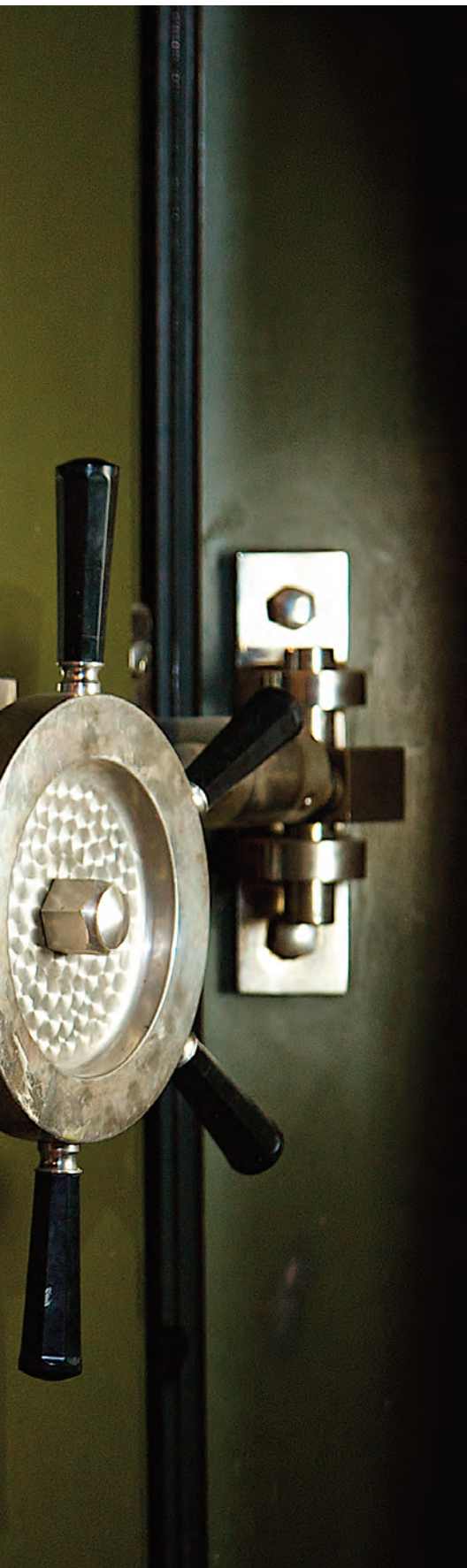


# SAFE & SOUND

BY KIM ZELINSKI







## SAFES AND VAULTS HAVE BEEN SYMBOLS OF SECRETS, WEALTH AND MYSTERY FOR CENTURIES. BUT WHAT WAS SO VALUABLE THAT DROVE MATILDA AND ALFRED WILSON TO INSTALL MORE SAFES THAN MOST COMMERCIAL BANKS?

**I**ncluded on a lengthy list of extravagant amenities incorporated into the design of Meadow Brook Hall are a number of room-sized wall cavities protected by massive steel doors, accessed by a single, and in one case a double, combination lock. In all, 15 safes and vaults of varying type, size and purpose are scattered throughout three of The Hall's four floors.

Evidence can be found in the most likely places: the vaults themselves. Several still contain some of their original contents, silver, jewelry, china...and keys. Eleven, including four vault doors, one floor safe and six wall safes, were cannibalized from the unfinished home Matilda and John Dodge were building in Grosse Pointe. Yet, apparently 11 still came up short, as the Wilsons installed an additional three vault doors and a safe.

Given the lavish lifestyle of the Dodge and Wilson families and the magnitude of valuables needing safekeeping, the number and capacity was probably about right.

But here's a question: Where was the "safe" place that Matilda kept the combinations to all of these safes and vaults? No doubt, her best kept secret.

### MORNING ROOM VAULT, DIEBOLD

The most impressive of the 15 safes, the triple-door system on this vault included a dual custody combination lock. Such locks are typically configured so that both must be dialed open at the same time for the door to be unlocked. Ideally, no single person is given both combinations, requiring two people to cooperate to open the door. If such a door is configured so either dial will unlock it, lessened security is the trade-off for convenience. This vault housed the estate's key inventory and included built-in filing cabinets and shelves for important documents, financial records and most likely, cash.







## FUR VAULT, DIEBOLD

The Fur Vault, located on the entertainment level, was equipped with a cooling system that regulated temperature and humidity levels, preserving both Matilda's furs and Oriental rugs.



## LINEN ROOM VAULT, YALE

Cleverly concealed in the Linen Room's wood cabinetry and almost hidden from sight, this large double-door safe was used for the most "valuable" linens. Many of the linens were custom made for Matilda's many tables, most of which included an embroidered monogram ("MRW").



## WALL SAFE, YALE

One of six wall safes brought from the Grosse Pointe home and installed in each of The Hall's guest bedrooms. These guest wall safes were a gesture of hospitality and respect for their guests' valuables.





Theresa Finck



## SILVER VAULT, YALE

Installed in the Butler's Pantry, this small room stored the silver service pieces. The vault was accessed only by the Butler and only for special occasions. The collection contains over 150 pieces.



## JEWELRY SAFE, SHAW WALKER

Tucked away in Matilda's dressing room closet, this safe housed the jewels of Meadow Brook, including this Marcasite filigree cameo necklace.



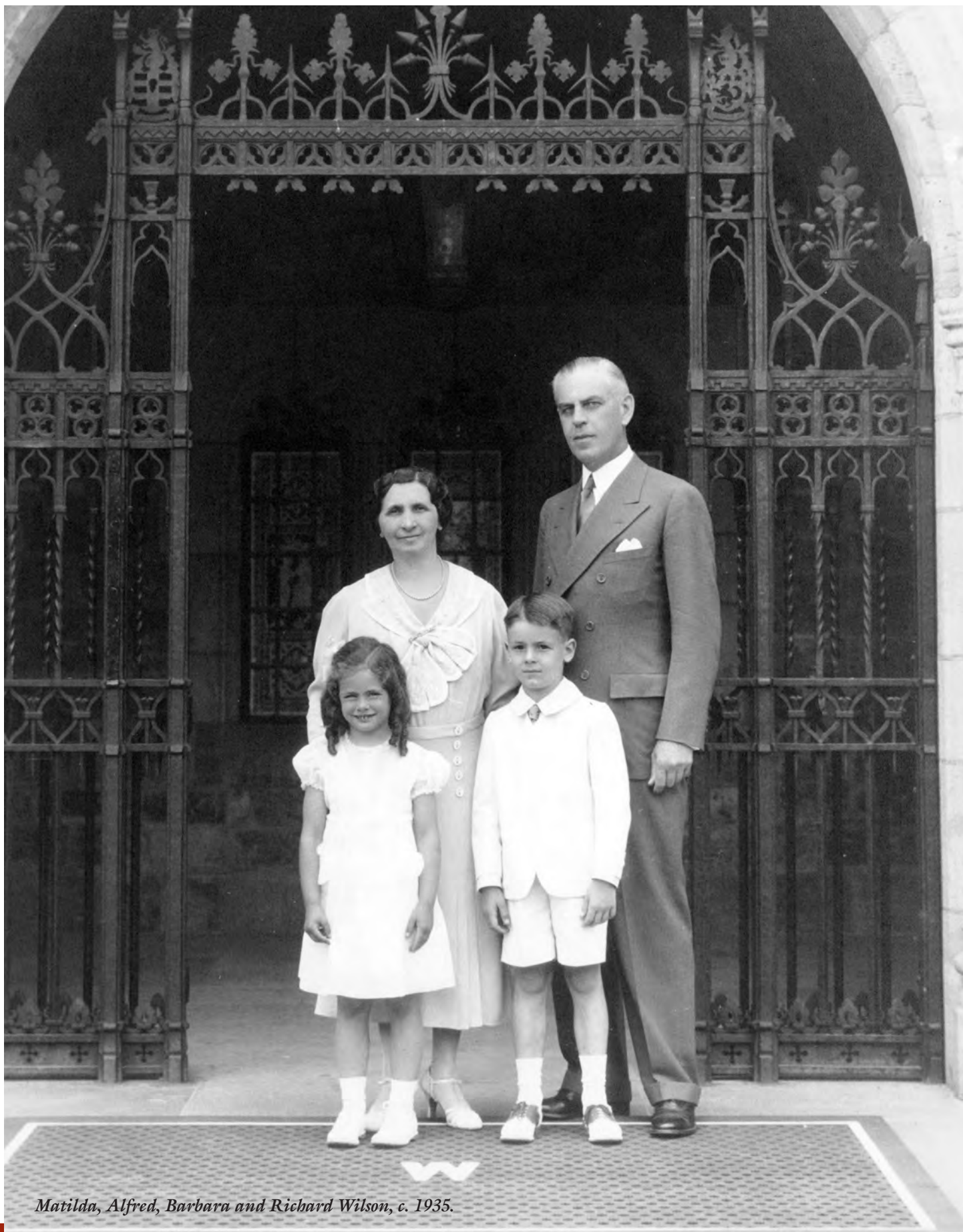
## CHINA VAULT, YALE

Matilda Wilson stored her numerous sets of china in the center section of a trio of side-by-side vaulted rooms on the entertainment level. In the memoir of Beatrice Whitaker, Meadow Brook Hall's head maid, Mrs. Wilson and her personal maid, Mary Mathews, personally brought the china service up the family elevator on a teacart, always followed by Ming Toy, Matilda's champion Pekingese. Beatrice noted that it took three men about three days to inventory and appraise all of the table settings.

## DINING ROOM VAULT, DIEBOLD

The butler could access this vault, which was used to store everyday china and special porcelain centerpieces for the smaller-sized dinner parties held for family and friends. **MB**





*Matilda, Alfred, Barbara and Richard Wilson, c. 1935.*



# “We didn’t have television back then...”

## *A conversation with the Wilson children, Richard and Barbara*

*Second of Two Parts: Matilda and Alfred Wilson’s children and longtime residents of Meadow Brook Hall, Richard Wilson and Barbara Wilson Eccles, are a rich source for stories of the times and characters of the estate’s heyday. Richard (now 83) was adopted in 1930 and Barbara (81) in 1931 by Alfred and Matilda Wilson from the same orphanage, The Cradle, in Chicago. Their lives were markedly different from the lives of the two living children from Matilda’s first marriage to automaker John Dodge, Frances and Dan Dodge, who were already teenagers when the Wilson children came to Meadow Brook. Richard and Barbara graciously allowed MEADOW BROOK MAGAZINE to interview them in August of 2011 on a variety of topics, many of which are shared on these pages as well as in the Fall 2011 issue. Part I covered going away to school, friends, chores and growing up on the estate during the Depression and World War II. Editor’s notes of clarification are shown in italics. – ed.*



**MBM:** Since Meadow Brook was out in the country, what was your family life like? What did you do as a family?

**BWE:** We’d play bridge or canasta or backgammon or checkers, whatever, usually after dinner in the den. And then we’d play croquet out by the Rock Garden off the sun room during the summer. Dad and I would partner and Dick and Mother would partner. And it went that way through cards and everything.

Cards gave us something to do. You have to remember that we didn’t have television back then. Dad had a radio in the den (*Alfred’s study*) and we’d listen to the radio

and play cards maybe for an hour and then Matilda’d go to bed because she had to get up and go to her office in the Fisher Building in Detroit the next day. (*Matilda Wilson was the second tenant in the*

*Fisher Building after it was built.*) We were all in bed by 9:30 or 10:00.

We’d listen to “The Shadow,” “Inner Sanctum Mysteries,” “Gang Busters,” “The Lone Ranger,” “The Green Hornet” . . . all of those shows. They were on Sunday afternoons and evenings. And of course there were “Tin Pan Alley” and “Fibber McGee and Molly” during the week. “The Bob Hope Show” was on occasionally. But that was the first time I heard serials. Dad used to drive to Detroit and he’d be listening to “Stella Dallas” and



he'd get very involved in it.

**RW:** On Sundays, the governess took us to the Congregational Church in Rochester and later Christ Church Cranbrook. When we got a little older, we went with our folks to the Presbyterian Church in Detroit, where they were both elders.

Once in a while on the way home we would eat at Hedge's Wigwam on Woodward in Royal Oak. But, usually we would eat at home and have the same old chicken, potatoes and peas and then go for a drive. We'd stop at the different farms that made up



*Richard, c. 1938.*

Meadow Brook Farms – my folks continued to call each farm by the name of the people they had bought it from – and we'd look at this, look at that. Everybody did it all together and it was always fun. Alfred would drive and then they finally let me drive a little.

**MBM:** Did you have your own cars?

**RW:** No, but I would borrow one. I got an old Plymouth when I was about 16. My favorite thing to do was drive between the stables and garage, where the road dipped left and right, about 60 miles an hour. But I got all that from my brother Dan (*Dodge*). I was 8 or 9 when he died. He'd take you out and do things like that. He was a nut . . . in a good way.



For my graduation from Culver, I picked out a pea-green Dodge convertible. Soon afterwards, a couple of friends and I went 10,000 miles in 28 days. We left Detroit, drove to St. Louis, up through Minnesota, up through the Badlands, down the coast. We stayed at my cousin Dennis Morgan's in Hollywood for three days. He was a movie actor, and was in "God is My Copilot" and "The Desert Song" and a lot of

others. He showed us all around and even took us to lunch at Riviera Country Club. He was my father's sister's boy from Wisconsin. We came back through Phoenix, New Orleans, St. Louis, where I had a girlfriend, and back to Detroit. Quite a trip in my little green convertible.

**MBM:** Barbara, how about you . . . did you have a car?

**BWE:** (*Laughter*) C'mon, remember I was a girl!

**RW:** Well, we did have our own horses, though. I rode almost every day and really liked it. I had a Shetland pony named Sunny Boy and Barbara had Sunny Girl. We each had three-gaited horses. Barbara's was Mistletoe and mine was Dusty Maid. We used to show them at the Bloomfield Hills horse show, the Grosse Pointe show and the Northville Fairgrounds. Our sister Frances said to me one time, and remember she was the best horse-woman in the country, "I'm going to teach you how to ride five-gaited." So, she taught me and she said to our mother, we're going to the horse show at Madison Square Garden (*in New York City*). My mother didn't know I was going to be in the ring with a five-gaited horse. There were three of us in the class. I took third of course.

Frances took first and second was Mary Fisher, Frances' biggest rival. I must



*Barbara, c. 1939.*

# *Richard and Barbara*





*Frances, c. 1936.*

say, I put on a great performance. I was 13 or 14, before I had started attending Culver.

**BWE:** Yes, when Dick and I were growing up, we were assigned ponies and then horses, but nobody else rode them. We had to exercise them; if not, they'd hook them up to a carriage and exercise them that way. My dad had his horse, Matilda had hers because she rode side-saddle, and you had to have a special horse for that. She didn't ride very often, but occasionally she'd go to the side door, use the mounting block, ride around the house and then get off and come back in. She didn't ride in the rings and she didn't exercise her horses like we did. She never rode in a show, but she drove ponies in shows. She was always competing with Frances. Frances did all kinds of things that Matilda tried to do, but couldn't.

**MBM: Tell me about Frances.**

**BWE:** Frances was 17 years older than me. I didn't really get to know her until I was a teenager, and I used to accompany her to the horse shows and we had a lot of fun. She was one of those people who hated to be alone. So, I had no problem because I didn't care to be alone either. We did a lot of things together. She was one of the sweetest, kindest people I've ever known. Incredible, really. I can't say

enough nice things about her.

**RW:** All-time sweetheart. She was the nicest, most considerate woman in the world . . . misunderstood by a lot of people because she was shy. At an early age, given her place in society and with an over-protective mother, she never really knew who liked her just be-

cause of her money. And, she was always warned to be careful because of the threat of kidnappings. So, she had it tough. But, she was a super person.

In her adult years, every Christmas at Castleton Farms (*purchased by Frances in the 1940s and developed into one of the country's finest Standardbred horse farms*) she would send out a letter to her employees telling them to pick out both something to wear and a toy for each of their kids. If they put down a bicycle, she'd send them a bicycle. She'd spend thousands of dollars. They started asking for more all the time, but she never said no.

**BWE:** Frances would bring a horse to the front door and into the living room at Meadow Brook for Christmas, usually giving it to Matilda as a present. Frances had the nerve that nobody else in the family did. She had a wild air about her. She had a sense of humor and sometimes she was just plain fun.

**MBM: What was Danny like?**

**RW:** I was 9 years old, so I don't remember him that

much. He was a fun guy to be around, just driving around with him in a convertible and having him spin it. He was so smart. He put a diesel engine in a car. He moved a motor from the front to the back of a car when he was only 16. I mean, he was a whiz, just like his father (*John Dodge*). And, in fact, he had just purchased an interest in a diesel engine company before he passed.

**BWE:** Well, he was a boy! He was very outdoors-ish. He liked to hunt, fish and all that kind of stuff. He liked to prank us and kid around with us. We had very little other contact with him because he was dating age. Then he would go up to his place on Lake Huron and do his thing. So I didn't see him because he was a boy. I saw Frances because she was here with the horses and that was a huge part of her life.

Danny would prance around the house banging on a gong that was

*Danny, right, with friends, c. 1937.*







*Richard, c. 1944.*

used to announce meals. He'd upset Matilda and she'd get hysterical. He did all kinds of things just to annoy her. And she reacted the way he wanted her to, so he kept doing it.

**MBM: How about your mother and father?**

**RW:** When they got married, my father had about \$500,000 and he was the most eligible bachelor in Detroit. And they all said what a good-looking, fun guy he was. And he was, and he had a good sense of humor.

Mother wasn't quite the sweet little old lady that everybody's made her out to be. After Dan died (*in 1938*), she changed completely. And then when she got sued by Dan's wife, she really changed and didn't trust anybody.

**BWE:** I rarely saw her. You have to realize that back then things were very stuffy, and also that Matilda was 48 or 50 when she adopted me. That's grandparent age. Her family was half grown by the time Dick and I showed up. John Dodge had had three kids from his first marriage that she helped raise, and she had three of her own with him (*Anna Margaret died at age 4 from the measles*). Frances was 17 years older than me and Dan 15 years. But Dad had never married and had

never had children, and here was his opportunity to have a couple kids. 48 or 50 is a little late, but he was great. He was the one to put us in school, who came to our rescue when we got into trouble. He was always there to help.

He was a tennis player and he had fun doing it, as well as being a very average golfer. And, of course, he was in the lumber business. He provided a lot of the wood for cars when cars were made out of wood. And, he found the suppliers for all the materials in The Hall. He used to tell us at the dinner table where it all came from. He doesn't get the credit for it, but it was all him.

**RW:** Alfred was fun to be around. He was strict and Presbyterian and very strait-laced, but once in a while he'd crack some off-color joke. He was smart and had a college education.

I remember going around with him to buy cattle at auction, cheap. We'd dress really bad. He'd get an old car to drive. He was a lot of fun. He took me to my first baseball game at Briggs Stadium in Detroit. Dick Bartell gave me a baseball and we sat right on the first baseline. I went to one of the first Lions games with him at the old U of D stadium. He was a good guy. Of course, fathers tend to get along with daughters and mothers with sons. My mother and I always played Barbara and him in bridge, beginning at ages 8 or 10, and we'd play every night. Mothers and sons . . . I wasn't quite as close to him as Barbara. He was probably the one who, with Frances' urging, got us to Meadow Brook. He was a little more kindly, even though he was strict. She made the rules and he had to be the bad guy.

**MBM: Did your folks entertain a lot?**

**BWE:** Not really. Matilda entertained Salvation Army and

women's groups, but it was usually for tea in the afternoon in the summer. The only time I knew them to entertain in the winter was for New Year's Eve. They always had the same sets of couples. There were three sets of four, 12 people, and they played bridge. They'd usually have a lobster dinner and a midnight supper. Some of them would go home if the weather permitted; or they'd stay the night if it didn't. Most of them came from Grosse Pointe; only one set came from Birmingham.

**RW:** When they did have parties, like Barbara's debut or Frances' 25th birthday, they never put up a tent outside or things like that. They had the ballroom downstairs. For Frances' surprise 25th birthday in 1939, they got Tommy Dorsey to play. He owed my folks a favor . . . they'd flown him somewhere. They had bands in the Rock Garden for Barbara's debut . . . remember Barb? Frances' wedding in 1938 was in the living room and down the staircase. I wasn't here for Dan's wedding in 1938; I was at summer camp. Dan's funeral was here that year, too. The casket was on the staircase landing.



*Barbara's debut, 1947 with Dad and Mom.*





*Matilda, Frances, Barbara, Richard, c. 1959.*

Mother had a big fund-raiser out here for Madame Chiang Kai-shek and the nationalist Chinese war relief, who were our allies at that time. She supported all those things, like the USO in Detroit. They also had a fund-raiser for Wendell Willkie's campaign for president against Roosevelt in 1940. I had a blinking sign in my bedroom window that said "WW."

**MBM:** When did the two of you leave Meadow Brook for your "life after?"

**BWE:** I married a man named Tom Eccles, who was from New Jersey. His father was a banker. His sister was a very close friend of mine. I dated Tom for six or seven years before we were married because he was in the Korean War. He was also three-and-a-half years older than me, so he was graduating from college as I was getting out of high school. Then he went into the ROTC and then the service. We dated on and off when we could. When I got out of college, I went back to New Jersey and worked as a dietician in my school for a year before I got married. We married when I was 22, in 1953. And that was it; I didn't expect to

come back to Meadow Brook. After a few years, Tom went into real estate and real estate prospects at the time were in the Scottsdale, Arizona, area. I've lived there for 50 years. I love it. That's home for me.

**RW:** In those days, if you were a strict Presbyterian, you never dated or married people who were Jewish or Catholic, and that was strict. Well of course, they weren't going to tell me what to do. I had Catholic girlfriends, and I married a Catholic girl. My father first of all said you're disowned; you're out of the house. In fact, we want you to change your name. My best man was here at the house from St. Louis. We put on our tuxedos that morning, shook hands with my folks, walked out the door and that was it. They didn't come to the wedding. Frances came, with her husband, but not them.

My wife and I bought a two-bedroom house near the corner of Square Lake and Woodward in Bloomfield Hills. I worked for Sinclair Oil Company, Ortho, Acme Quality Paint and Ford Tractor. All the time I was also working at night at local racetracks.

I then got involved with Frances, who was so good at the horse business, and worked my way up. I worked all over the country in racetrack management and finally retired in 1996.

**MBM:** What are your favorite memories of each other?

**RW:** Barbara was very protective of me, even though she was younger. I remember sitting on the steps of the main stair one time and she and I got into something. We were probably 10 and 12. I stood up and stomped on her hands and she started yelling. Alfred was going to whip hell out of me, but she started grabbing and fighting with him and said, "You can't touch him!" So, that was good enough. And, I'll let my sister have the last word.

**BWE:** Dick and I had a lot of competitions and we had parties and gatherings with our friends, but it wasn't often. He and I always came back to Meadow Brook for vacations in the summer and at Christmas. We hung out together when we could, but it's hard to explain because we were separated most of the time. But we sure shared a lot, too. **MB**



**The Wilsons have graciously offered to answer Meadow Brook Magazine readers' questions about life on The Great Estate. Send your questions to the "How to Reach Us" contacts on page 2 and we'll pass them along. Make sure you include your own contact information. — ed.**

*Richard and Barbara*





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## Housemen at the “red”y

It’s a good bet that the people visitors see in red Meadow Brook shirts are the housemen and women who set up and tear down equipment for events, provide safety for guests and the Hall, clean, and provide assistance to virtually every department. Five of these doing such yeoman work are currently students at Oakland University.

Eric Zimmerman (Communications major) was originally hired as a gardener. It wasn’t long before he helped set up for a wedding, and sensing potential, facilities manager Nikki Thomas offered him a houseman position. According to the two-year veteran, his first surprise was the size of the building. “It looks big from the outside, but once I explored the inside, I realized how much bigger and more extravagant it really is,” Eric admitted. “I get to see places most people don’t. One of my favorites is the 4th-floor balcony.”

“When the weddings are outside we interact more with the guests because we’re a bit more visible,” houseman Billy Rogers (Exercise Science) explained. “It’s amazing to see how weddings keep getting more and more elaborate. Like the Indian wedding last year where the groom arrived on a baby elephant.”

What Dylan Hunt (Business Accounting) likes most about working at Meadow Brook is “...meeting new guests. Every event is different,” he said. “At one wedding the officiate was 30 minutes late. When the organist started running out of songs to play, the decision was made to start the cocktail hour, so the guests wouldn’t realize anything was wrong. I’m always impressed how quickly the staff



**THE STUDENTS:** Left to right: Eric Zimmerman, Billy Rogers, Dylan Hunt, Nick Ventimiglia, Tom Fietko.

responds and adapts so that when a problem arises the guests never know.”

At Meadow Brook for a year, Nick Ventimiglia (Nursing) likes the working atmosphere. “It’s relaxed despite the ridiculously busy schedule.” Nick’s favorite event is “Dinner and a Movie. The crowd is easy-going, and we get to sneak a peek at the film being shown.”

The newest student to join the staff is Tom Fietko (Sociology). “I discovered the Hall when I was a freshman,”

he explained. “The best things are the history and the atmosphere.” Tom’s main focus is security. “If there is a problem during an event, it’s my job to help calm everyone, get the situation under control and restore the balance to reassure the guests.” His favorite room in The Hall? “Alfred Wilson’s bedroom. It has a hidden staircase and a cool multi-head shower.”


As Matilda Wilson no doubt would have noted, many hands make light work. — Lisa Drummond

### THE PROS

Meadow Brook’s full-time veteran housemen, Ken Booker and Roderick Amos, echoed the students’ assessment of Meadow Brook’s positive, cooperative working environment. “We look out for each other, communicate and help each other, and do little things for each other,” Ken says. He especially enjoys the teaching aspect of training the student housemen. “School work comes first,”

Ken asserts. “But when they’re here, I try to explain things so they understand, so they can do the job. Because when we work together, it makes all our jobs easier.”

“This is a good opportunity for students to learn something other than the field they are studying,” Roderick Amos adds. “Physical work isn’t for everyone. And it isn’t as easy as some people might think it would be.” His favorite time of year is wedding season. “I love the set-up part. And I take pride in my work. That’s something the students need to see.”

Roderick Amos has worked at Meadow Brook since 2002; Kenyatte Booker since 2003. — L.D. 



Ken Booker



Roderick Amos



September 20, 2012

# Wild Michigan

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## *Hats off* to Meadow Brook

In the 1920s it was the “cloche” and the “toque” that were all the rage. Just as the “snood” made a fashionable comeback in the ‘30s, it was the “pillbox” that was the fad of the ‘40s. And, although the ‘50s revived the trusty “turban,” it was the precariously perched feathered “fascinator” that took center stage, once again, in the 1960s.

These stylish headdresses appropriately named for their form and often embellished with ribbons, feathers, jewels and flowers, are well represented in Meadow Brook Hall’s costume collection – a collection that includes some 75 hats and accessories worn by Matilda Dodge Wilson throughout her 60 hat-wearing years.

This summer, The Hall will “unveil” The Architecture of the Hat, with the assistance of Southfield based milliner, Luke Song, who gained international attention for his felt bow hat worn by Aretha Franklin during her performance at President Obama’s inauguration.

The exhibit is partially funded through a grant from The Village Woman’s Club Foundation of Bloomfield Hills; a charitable organization that Matilda Wilson was affiliated with for many years. 



# *Weddings at The Great Estate*

Theresa Finck Photography

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Be part of this year's Tudor Revival theme and celebration of Meadow Brook's National Historic Landmark designation with merchandise from The Hall's own Museum Store. The Store offers a number of items displaying the house and its architecture, several pictured on this page. Stop by or shop online at: [meadowbrookhall.org](http://meadowbrookhall.org) (click on the "Shop" button) or call 248-364-6206. Gift certificates are available.



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Prints of 6 of the 12 Zodiac stone corbels seen on the exterior of the Sun Porch by artist Ken Taylor. (Leo pictured). 11"x14" (reg. \$29.95 each, on sale for \$22.45).