

Chapter One

CHAPTER TITLE

In 1923 a Russian émigré named Richard Boleslavsky established what would prove to be one of the most influential theaters in America. He called it the American Laboratory Theatre. A former member of the Moscow Art Theater, Boleslavsky was a disciple of another Russian, Konstantin Stanislavsky, the father of what was then considered a radical new approach to acting called “method acting.” Its driving principle was to encourage actors to tap into their own emotions to add depth and realism to characters they portrayed.

Through his theater, which offered three-year courses in various disciplines of the acting art, Boleslavsky spread the ideas of his teacher to America. The effect would one day be profound, for studying with Boleslavsky was a young man named Lee Strasberg, who went on to found the Group Theater in New York. From this theater would emerge most of the greatest American actors of the 20th century: Marlon Brando, Dustin Hoffman, Robert De Niro, Robert Duval, Paul Newman, Al Pacino, and many others.



Boleslavsky, in 1933, wrote a book called “Acting, the First Six Lessons.” Regarded as one of the bibles of the profession even today, it has gone through 38 printings, the latest in 1994. The book is structured like the script of a play, with a would-be student asking the author to teach her what it takes to be an actor. The following excerpt is from chapter one, “The First Lesson: Concentration.”

Morning. My room. A knock at the door.

BOLES LAVSKY: Come in (*the door opens slowly and timidly. Enter a Pretty Creature of eighteen. She looks at me with wide-open, frightened eyes and crushes her handbag violently.*)

THE CREATURE: I...I...I hear that you teach dramatic art.

BOLES LAVSKY: No! I am sorry. Art cannot be taught. To possess an art means to possess talent. That is something one has or has not. You can develop it by hard work, but to create talent is impossible. What I do is to help those who have decided to work on the stage to develop and educate themselves for hard and conscientious work in the theater.

THE CREATURE: Yes, of course. Please help me. I simply love the theater....

With little modification, Miriam Wilcox Starr could have been Boleslavsky’s model for “the Creature.” Not only was Miriam a student of his at the American Laboratory Theater for a brief time in the period before he wrote the book, she was about the same age as her fictional counterpart. She also loved the theater, a passion that began while performing in amateur productions at the New York boarding school where she had lived and studied after graduating from high school. And she was beautiful

enough, by all accounts, to have incited descriptions such as “pretty creature.”

Alas, her desire to become an actress was thwarted. “I wasn’t really suited to the theater at all,” she says now. “I’d been very strictly brought up, and I couldn’t let myself go enough to be a good actress.”

Although Boleslavsky didn’t see obvious potential as an actress in her, another Russian expatriate was more optimistic. He was a former prince whose family had ties with the Russian royal family and had fled the country after the bloody revolution of 1917. His intentions toward her were less than honorable, however, and when she wrote her parents that she had met him, her father gave her a stern warning that reflected the low opinion many Americans held about Russians at the time.

“Miriam,” her father wrote in a letter, “in Russia the princes take a bath once a week; the peasants never.”

Shortly thereafter, Mr. Starr took a train to New York City to gather up his upstart daughter and whisk her back to the safety of Akron. Though she protested at the time, she now appreciates his concern and wisdom. “I discovered what the Russians were good at,” she says, “and I didn’t want any part of that. I went home rather meekly.”

If Miriam had possessed the talent or the drive to be an actress, she certainly had positioned herself at the right place at the right time, the biggest hotbed of acting in America. It was an innate skill that she was to demonstrate many times throughout her life. Who knows? If things had worked out a little differently, perhaps America would now regard Miriam Starr in the same breath as Marilyn Monroe, another Group Theater regular whom Boleslavsky indirectly influenced. Miriam certainly had the perfect surname for an actress.

Still, her brief and exotic stint in New York was to have a pronounced affect on the course of her life. She had found the Big Apple vibrant and wonderful and full of surprises, and life back in Akron, where she had been born and reared, paled in comparison. She missed New York terribly. And so she had something immediately in common with a young man she had recently met in Akron within the large circle of friends Miriam revolved in. He also had grown up in Akron, and had recently returned to the city after living in New York, where he had worked for an industrial engineering firm whose primary purpose was to help companies save money. He was waiting for reassignment when he met Miriam and discovered that she had also spent time in New York. They began to talk of their affection for the city, and how much they would like to return.

His name was Bertram Work, the only son of one of the richest men in town, Bertram George (B.G.) Work, the president of the B.F. Goodrich Tire Company.

“He was a nice-looking person and very easy to talk to,” Miriam says of her attraction to Work. “And we were both longing for New York, so we had a great bond in common.”

Within several months their conversations about the big city turned to other even bigger matters: getting married. And when Miriam and Bert Work were wed on May 28, 1927, so began her adult life, a life full of unexpected turns of events, of numberless adventures to exotic destinations, of great sorrows and great joys, of wealth beyond imagining—where luncheons she held at the local country club, as well as the birth of her first two children were noted by reporters of the New York Times—as well as times of loneliness and financial insecurity.

As she turns 100 [this year](#), Miriam joins an elite group of just 72,000 American centenarians. Her

perspective on America and the world is unique and valuable. As one small example, she has lived long enough to have learned to drive in an electric car, back when electric cars, and even hybrid gas/electric cars, were common. Today, electric cars and gas/electric hybrids are again appearing on the market, yet few except people of Miriam's generation know that this isn't a new trend.

Through it all—a century's worth of stories—Miriam has demonstrated a remarkable ability to recover her balance no matter how far she has been pushed from her center of gravity. It is perhaps one of the chief qualities that has allowed her to live such a long and fruitful life.

“Oh, yes, I'm a good recoverer,” she says. “I wouldn't let anything perturb me long.”

“She seems incredibly resilient,” says her granddaughter Hilary Culverwell. “And she also has a positive attitude. She always tries to make the best of a bad situation.”

Although on the exterior she is a demure, exceptionally polite, and unassuming lady, there is something inside her that is steely tough, uncompromising, and passionate. Her great-grandson, Johan Vimolchalo, describes that trait as “a fire that burns inside.”

This biography is an effort to fathom the origin and depths of that fire, and to find a path through the maze of her long life.

Chapter Two

CHAPTER TITLE

Traveling often—always first-class—to Europe for the concert and opera seasons, living in one of the most opulent mansions on Long Island’s Gold Coast—these were not expected outcomes for a girl who grew up in a middle-class family in Akron, Ohio, at the beginning of the 20th century. In fact, little in Miriam’s childhood would have led anyone to predict that she would deviate from the course that most of her friends took: marrying a childhood sweetheart and raising a passel of children within a few blocks of their parents’ homes.

But Miriam’s life was destined to be different.

She was born in Akron at about 10:00 a.m. on September 20, 1904. Like most babies at the beginning of that century, she was born at home, not in a hospital, a healthy nine-pound girl, a blue-eyed cherub with blond curly hair, delivered by a doctor named Morganroth. Her parents, John and Adelaide, who had been married in Tallmage, Ohio, in 1892, wanted to name her Mary, but her two older sisters, Helen and Anne, had other ideas. Miriam says they told their parents something to the effect that “if you knew all the awful girls at school named Mary, you wouldn’t call that nice baby Mary.” So the sisters researched the matter and selected an archaic form of Mary: Miriam. In Hebrew mythology, Mir-

iam was the sister of Moses and Aaron. According to biblical scholars, the name's etymology is hazy but provides clues as to its possible origins. The two most likely original meanings of the word's root are "rebellious" or "beautiful." In Miriam Starr's case, both would one day prove appropriate.



She was the third child born to Adelaide and John, a successful, middle-class Akron couple from established families, both of English descent. John was a quiet, somewhat reserved person who could also be quick tempered. Born in nearby Copley, on September 6, 1867, he lived almost his entire life in Akron. His great joy was reading and smoking cigars, and Miriam remembers him reading to her often when she was young. She soon turned into a voracious reader herself, and also mirrored his introverted personality.

John had only an eighth-grade education, but that didn't stop him from becoming a successful businessman. When he was 14 his father died suddenly, leaving the family with no means of support. His mother, Sarah, a very "strict" person, according to Miriam, "snatched him out of school and put him to work." He labored in a factory that was the predecessor of what would one day become Robinson Clay Products, a manufacturer of such things as sewer and drain pipes for the construction trades. John would work at the same company for the rest of his life, ending his career in a management position, and even coming out of retirement when the company begged him to return. Miriam says his intelli-

gence and nearly photographic memory were assets that made him invaluable to the company.

John's mother, Sarah (maiden name: Wheeler, born in Freedom, New York, in 1831), was part of the exodus of pioneers who traveled to Ohio from the East Coast after the Connecticut Western Reserve was opened for settlement in the late 18th century. The Reserve was a 120-mile strip of land that comprised 3.3 million acres on the south shore of Lake Erie, and was originally part of a much larger parcel of land owned by the state of Connecticut. The state ceded most of it back to the federal government, except for the Reserve, which was sold to an investment company that heavily promoted it to east coast residents as a promised land.

Sarah was of marriageable age, and during the long trip to the Reserve in 1852, as the family passed through Vermont, she met and quickly married Jonathan Starr. Further west, Sarah and her family also met fierce Indian attacks. Sarah's father, Benjamin Wheeler, had a mercantile bent and hoped to start a general store when he got to the Reserve. So he had in tow, besides his family, all the goods he planned to use to open his store. But disaster struck when the family reached the Cuyahoga River, which today divides the east and west sides of Cleveland, and has its source 35 miles east of the city. After loading all the valuable merchandise onto a raft, the family watched in horror as the craft capsized midstream and "down it went," Miriam says.

Fortunately the same fate didn't strike Sarah and her new husband. All the family members survived and eventually set up housekeeping in Copley, where John was one of "four or five" siblings.

Miriam's mother's family, surnamed Akers, was also of English descent. Her maternal grandfather, Alfred, was born in Kingslyn, England, in 1849, and had come to America as a young boy, for unknown

reasons. He ventured to Ohio, started a roofing business and later a company that made clay products (like the one Miriam's father worked for), and married Charlotte Cowley in 1870. The couple had five children, Adelaide being the oldest, and Miriam remembers big family get-togethers with the Akers clan at holidays. "These gatherings used to bore us to death," she says. "The uncles all smoked great big fat cigars. There were a lot of people and a lot of food."

The most memorable such gathering occurred one year on November 9, the date of her grandmother Charlotte's birthday. A freak snowstorm made all the streets impassable by car. So an uncle hitched up horses to a wagon and took everyone home.

Her Grandfather Alfred (Akers) is the oldest relative Miriam can remember. "Oh, he was a funny old Englishman," Miriam says. "He was a real character. He came to this country with a friend when he was 12 years old. He sent for a good many of his brothers and sisters. He had a big black leather chair. In back of him was a shelf where he kept several large boxes of candy. He would tease us. He'd keep us guessing. Then he would open a box and give us some candy and always say, 'Eat as many as you like, but pocket none.' " That phrase has stuck with her ever since, though its meaning remains obscure. (Miriam's son Bert remembers his grandmother, Adelaide Starr, using that expression with him and the other children, and says she meant one could eat all you want here in the house, but don't take a pocketful home with you.)

Miriam says she never quite understood her parent's relationship. Apparently there was a good deal of conflict between the two, for Miriam characterizes their marriage as "kind of an armistice."

Adelaide loved to cook, and Miriam thinks she got her own love of cooking from her. "She made

an angel food cake that practically lifted itself off the plate,” she remembers. “I can see her now whipping those egg whites, millions of them, in that huge bowl.” She was known to be exceedingly generous, in both deed and spirit, and very nice to people. Beautiful and slender when she got married, Adelaide grew heavier as the years progressed, Miriam says. Her love of sweets was responsible for some of the weight gain. “She did love ice cream,” Miriam says. “We grew up with lots of sweets. There were sweets in every room. And there was no limit on what we could eat of it. It’s a wonder we all weren’t fat as butter.”

Miriam considers herself fortunate that she has always been thin, both as a child and an adult, though her younger sister Betty (born two years after Miriam, in 1906) was always heavier. There were many other differences between the siblings. Betty had straight hair where Miriam’s was curly. Betty struggled in school while Miriam was an exemplary student. Betty seemed to always be sick; Miriam usually enjoyed robust health.

“I remember when I first started school, the first grade,” says Miriam. “Betty, who had not been anywhere near school, came down with scarlet fever. We were quarantined. They came and put a big sign in front of the house. We couldn’t go out and nobody could go in. For two or three weeks, usually. Then Betty got small pox. She got all kinds of illnesses that I never got.”

One of Betty’s traits that Miriam found aggravating was that she was sloppy in her personal habits while Miriam was neat as a Japanese garden. That wouldn’t have been an issue except that the two roomed together until Miriam was 12.

“Betty had discovered quite early on that if she screamed she got her way,” Miriam says. “She spent

most of her youth getting her own way, by hook or crook.”

When they were young, the two sisters played often together and with the great number of young children who lived in the neighborhood. Next door was a family with several girls about their age, Ethel, Henrietta and Alexandria. “We did a lot of play acting, making up stories and acting them out,” Miriam says. “Overturning chairs and using them for houses. Roller skating on the streets. My family bought gymnasium equipment—rings, crossbars and that sort of thing—and we all played on them. I was quite athletic and learned all sorts of things.”

In the winter, the kids sledded down the steep hill in front of their house—called Fir Hill—threw snowballs, sculpted snowmen. The hill in summer was a great place to ride a bicycle. Miriam recalls that she learned to ride on a friend’s bike next door. It was her father who gave her the last nudge before she finally found her balance and glided off on her own steam...only to fall. But after that initial success, her family bought her a bicycle of her own, a blue one.

On Saturday afternoons the children walked to the local movie theater, where for a nickel they could see a double bill, which usually consisted of a western and a short comedy. Sometimes the family would gather to play “two-handed games” such as cribbage, backgammon, or gin rummy. The Starrs were not a particularly religious family. Grace wasn’t said at the table, nor did the family attend church, though on most Sundays Adelaide sent Miriam and Betty to Sunday school. She gave them five cents for bus fare, but sometimes the temptation to use the money for other purposes was simply too great. “We took the five cents and bought candy with it instead,” Miriam says with a girlish laugh. She even remembers the kind of hard flat candy she would buy. In the afternoons, her father took the family out for a Sunday

drive, always smoking his trademark black cigar.

A great fan of card games, he and Adelaide would often invite friends over to have dinner and play hearts or some similar game, and occasionally he would go out and play poker and smoke cigars with his male friends.

Miriam's was a happy, almost idyllic childhood, with dozens of friends, parents who were strict but not overbearing, a mother who adored her children and took care of all their needs, a father who brought home a steady, ample paycheck and enjoyed spending time with his kids. Miriam's daughter, Sally Culverwell, reflecting on what she knows of her mother's childhood, was struck by how close her family was, and by the unity of the people who lived in Akron in Miriam's day.

"Five or six years ago," Sally says, "she (Miriam) and I met in Denver and flew to Akron to visit her younger sister, Auntie Bea. I was the chauffeur, and they just wanted to drive around and look at the various houses they had lived in. They remembered every neighbor's house, who had lived there, where they went to school, who had married whom, the names of their children, what they had done. I just drove and listened. It was the most fascinating day. They had always lived there (as children). It wasn't like me. I lived here and there and everywhere and I was in boarding school, so I never really knew a community."

The Starr home featured a large front porch from which the children could look out at the world. Miriam's earliest memory, when she was perhaps two or three years old, is of being on that front porch. The other is the first time she beheld a mirror, seeing her own image, and trying to crawl in and join that person in the mirror.

She also remembers, when she was about six, going to the circus with her father. He would take her

to see the animals, the carnival rides, and the shows under the big top, “but the freaks were off limits except for the Thin Man and the Fat Lady.” At night, too tired to walk home, she would ride on his shoulders and feel the warmth of his neck.

Her father played a large role in her education by reading to her at an early age, starting when she was three. “He loved books and he read very well,” she says. “Dickens was his favorite author.” She recalls that one of the first books he read to her was *Peter Rabbit*, which she heard so often that she knew it by heart (and it was the first she was able to read cover to cover). “He would read it to me and if he put in a wrong word I would correct him,” she says. “I think he would do it on purpose just to see if I was on my toes.” She also remembers two other books she adored from that era: “*The Book of Fun and Frolic*” and “*The Owl and the Pussycat*.”

Learning the fundamentals of language at an early age perhaps contributed to her superior abilities as a young student. At Spicer Elementary School, the school year was divided into two halves. Three times during those first six years, she was allowed to skip the second half of a grade level and advance to the next grade. Though she found school “very easy,” she didn’t please all of her teachers. One in particular, Mr. Snodgrass, a chemistry teacher, seemed to have it in for her. “He was my enemy,” she says. “I think I was naughty to him, I was just sort of mischievous toward him, annoying. He even sent me to the principal’s office once, but I don’t remember why.”

Not that Miriam was a troublesome child. She describes herself as being a “pretty mild youngster who was used to obeying.” Her parents raised her strictly, and rarely did she or any of her siblings get into trouble. “We were very moderate children, not very venturesome.”

Only two disciplinary incidents from this period stand out. Once, when she committed some offense (she's not sure what it was), her parents made her go out to a tree and pick a switch for them to use to spank her. "It didn't hurt that much but just the idea of going out and getting it!"

The other was when she was four or five years old. Accompanying her parents to a downtown department store, she spotted a hat that tickled her fancy and asked them if she could have it. When her parents said no, she remembers "chasing up and down the aisles wearing this hat. I had it on and I wasn't going to give it up. It had a feather on it. Everyone in the store was watching this wicked child." She was so mad that when they got out of the store her first impulse was to run away. But she only got as far as the end of the block before she came to her senses (or her parents caught up with her).

Her younger brother, Johnnie, however, was a different story. As the first boy in the family, he displayed a rambunctious wild playfulness that took her parents by surprise. "They didn't catch on to him at all." Miriam says. "We'd all been good little girls because we had to be. We didn't stray. But he was off and away. He was cute as a bug. Oh, he was a dear... He always wanted to have fun and eat good food. Lots of roast beef. That was Johnnie." ("Uncle John and I were good friends," says Miriam's son Bert, "He was an excellent salesman and was devoted to his wife and three children. He was a paratrooper in [WWII](#) and served with brave distinction as a combat line officer, fighting in the Pacific for three years....")

Miriam's first boyfriend, at an age when she was still too young to know what puppy love meant, was a neighbor boy named Lucius Seiberling, whose German family owned the Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company. One day Lucius was playing in the backyard of Miriam's house, on the gymnasium equip-

ment that her father had erected, when he fell to the ground and appeared to be injured. “I was so worried because he just lay still for a while,” she remembers. But the wind had just been knocked out of him, and he soon was able to stand. Of her love for him she says, “He never knew it. I didn’t see much of him. He was a good looking child, which always appealed to me.”

Living close to a family in the tire business wasn’t a hard thing to do at the start of the 20th century in Akron. (In fact, Miriam’s brother John, in 1934, married Anne Curtis, the sister of Mrs. Leonard Firestone). By 1915, Akron’s roster of rubber companies included the B.F. Goodrich Company, Good-year, Firestone, General Tire & Rubber Co., Miller, Kelly-Springfield, Swinehart Tire & Rubber, Stein Double Cushion Tire and Union Rubber. In the previous decade, Akron’s population tripled to more than 200,000 people, and the city became known as the “rubber capital of the world.”

Akron was founded in 1825 by the commissioner of the Ohio Canal Fund at the highest point on the Ohio & Erie Canal’s route from the Cuyahoga River to the Ohio River. The slope down to the Cuyahoga Valley is so steep that 15 locks were needed to cover less than a mile. The town (the name Akron is from the Greek word for “high”) was needed to accommodate travelers idled at the spot.

The Ohio & Erie Canal was opened between Akron and Cleveland in 1827 and a connecting canal, the Pennsylvania and Ohio Canal, linked Akron to Pittsburgh in 1840. By then, Akron was already known for its flour and wool mills.

By 1870, rails had replaced canals as the main avenue of transportation and the arrival of the railroad in Akron, along with abundant water supplies, attracted B.F. Goodrich to town.

A New York physician-turned-realtor, Goodrich and his partners set up Goodrich, Tew & Co. mak-

ing solid rubber tires for bicycles and carriages for the domestic market. By 1893, the company was doing business as the B.F. Goodrich Company and trading internationally, making rubber hoses, belts and drug sundries. In 1896, Goodrich started making pneumatic tires for a Cleveland auto maker. Soon, other rubber manufacturing companies would set up production plants and headquarters in Akron.

In 1898 Frank and Charles Seiberling founded the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Co., which would become the world's biggest rubber manufacturer. Though the company was named after Charles Goodyear, the man who invented the process—sometimes called vulcanization—that made rubber useful as a manufacturing material, he had nothing to do with it.

Harvey S. Firestone moved to Akron from Columbiana in 1900 and founded Firestone Tire and Rubber Company to make rubber tires for horse-drawn vehicles. In 1903, he shifted to making tires for the automobile market. He's credited with developing the pneumatic tire for automobiles and with developing tires that can be taken off the rim, making it possible for motorists to change a flat with a spare tire.

Employment in Akron's rubber companies ballooned to 60,000, but declined sharply in the last half of the 20th Century. After a four-month, industry-wide strike in 1976, rubber company employment in Akron was down to 28,453. Plant closings in 1982 reduced employment to 17,366.

Today, only specialty tires for auto racing are made in Akron, both by Goodyear and Firestone. Firestone is now a subsidiary of Japan's Bridgestone. General Tire changed its name to GenCorp in 1984, and sold its tire-making subsidiary to Germany's Continental Tire three years later. Goodrich's tire division merged with Uniroyal in 1986. The new company—the Uniroyal Goodrich Tire Co.—was bought

by Michelin three years later.

If the tire industry was one of the pistons in the engine that drove Akron's economy, the automobiles that used them were a scarce commodity when Miriam was a child. There were more horse-drawn carriages than cars in Akron at that time, according to Miriam. The streets were mostly unpaved and full of potholes. And automobiles were still quite expensive for most families to afford. "Nobody had a car in those days," Miriam says. You had a horse and buggy and you had street cars at five cents a ride. That's how people got around." Yet John Starr decided to buy one, and not just your average gas-engine model, which had the distinct disadvantage of requiring a person to start it with a hand crank, but an all-electric vehicle that was easier to operate but also more expensive than a gas-powered car. It was made in Cleveland by a company, long since departed, called Rauch & Lang. Miriam recalls that these cars were given an unusual nickname by the public, "Sheenie Showcase," because so many Jewish families owned them.

The Rauch & Lang Electric traced its origins from a blacksmith and wagon repair business founded in Cleveland in 1853 by a German immigrant named Jacob Rauch. By 1860, the Rauch & Lang Carriage Company was the leading wagon and carriage builder in Ohio. By the turn of the century, its carriages were recognized as the finest built in the United States.

In 1905, Rauch & Lang began production of electric-powered automobiles, introducing the first closed car body. In 1912, the Rauch & Lang Electric was America's highest priced car, at around \$2,600. Rauch & Lang concentrated on elegant, limited production limousines. Between 1904 and 1919, thousands of Rauch & Lang electric cars were manufactured, and unlike today almost all parts for the cars, including the bodies, electric motors, and controllers, were manufactured in-house.

Electric cars were popular with women because they didn't have to be hand-cranked to start, there was no smell of gasoline, and the cars operated quietly so that the ladies could easily hold conversations. The attraction to women was evident in advertising the company used to promote the car, which often featured women in large floral dresses, and in the crystal bud vase that was mounted inside the car. One such advertisement, published in a magazine in the [1920s](#), is headlined "The Richest Looking of all Cars." It goes on to state that "each Rauch & Lang body represents the work of one master craftsman for three months. That's only one reason why the Rauch & Lang Electric is the acknowledged leader in the electric class. All the power and a strong brake are controlled through one simple lever. Any woman—any 12-year-old child—can run the car safely...."

This last sentence is particularly poignant, for Miriam learned to drive the family's Rauch & Lang Electric when she was 12 years old. It's almost as if she had somehow read the ad when she was young and decided she could drive a Rauch & Lang. She says the main reason she learned, apart from the fact that there was no minimum age for a driver nor any legal requirement for a license, was that her father was a "perfectly ghastly driver." She doesn't remember the first time she got in the driver's seat, but it didn't take her long to figure out how to make the car do what she wanted it to do. "The speed was regulated by a little handle on the left that you pushed back and forth," she says. "You steered it with a bar. It felt very natural."

Even in those days, however, it was unusual for a 12-year-old to drive. Miriam recalls only one other person her age who had driving privileges. For the first couple of years, she only drove when an adult accompanied her, and she assumed the role of family chauffeur. Driving became so routine to her that

she felt blasé about it. “I used to have to take my mother to the grocery store,” she says, “and I thought that was pretty dull.” By the age of 14, she was able to drive without an adult along, often picking up friends on the way to high school. She said the car would make the trip back and forth from school a couple of times before the battery needed recharging.

One reason Miriam’s parents may not have been comfortable driving, and the reason that her sister Anne never once drove throughout her long life (she died at 97), was that her older sister Helen, 11 years older than Miriam, was killed by an automobile at the age of 17. “Helen and Anne were walking back to school after being home for lunch,” Miriam recalls. “On this hilly street, a man lost control of his car and hit my sisters and another girl. Helen died instantly and the other girl died that night. Anne was injured.”

After the accident, Helen was brought home before being sent to a funeral home. Miriam remembers she and Betty—ages 6 and 4—going into the room where Helen lay. Both sisters touched the cold, lifeless skin, and Betty exclaimed, “Is Helen bacon?” They didn’t stay in the room long. At Helen’s funeral, large bouquets of chrysanthemums surrounded the casket, exuding a powerful odor. “Whenever I smell chrysanthemums,” Miriam says, “I immediately think of that funeral, even to this day.”

Although her parents were extremely angry with the man who killed their daughter, they weren’t vengeful. The driver wasn’t prosecuted, though he was punished in some small way. “My father said that my sister was gone and nothing was going to bring her back,” Miriam recalls. “He didn’t want to bedevil that man.”

After Helen’s death, Mr. and Mrs. Starr decided they no longer wanted to live in their current house.

Perhaps it reminded them too painfully of Helen; her presence was still there, her voice still echoed through the halls. So the Starrs hastily moved into a rental house, where they lived for two years, and then bought another house across town, on Fir Hill Street.



High school is where Miriam met the majority of her most enduring childhood friends, some of whom she would correspond with long after she left Ohio. Miriam was part of a large crowd of boys and girls that socialized together. Dating as such, with one boy going out with one girl, was rare, partly because her family frowned on the idea. But by the time she was 16 and a senior in high school, she began to go out on informal dates with boys, such as attending basketball games with James Todd, a doctor's son, or to a dance. Although she was small for her age, boys found her alluring. Her features were well proportioned, and she had a winning combination of dazzling blue eyes, pink cheeks and very blonde curly hair. Of her storied beauty, she says "I never had any trouble being attractive to boys. And I had a lot of attention later from men. It was just part of my life."

The strangest encounter with an Akron boy—it couldn't really be called a date—was so bizarre that it puzzled and frightened her for a long time afterward. It was with a boy her age whose family the Starrs had known for years, and whom she often saw at dances. Sometimes they would go to the dances together, but there was no budding romance, at least not in Miriam's heart. One night, long after a dance

she had attended was over and she was lying in her bed at home, she heard an odd scratching sound at the window. “And by George there he was!” Miriam exclaims. “He came in. He didn’t try to rape me or anything, but I was conscious that something had happened. I noticed a strange bit of moisture. He was very strong. He’d lie on top of me on the bed.” They both kept silent, though she says she was “scared to death.” Eventually she pushed him off and he left. But there must have been something about his crude fumbblings that kindled a dawning sense of her own sexuality, some early hormonal response, because she never told her parents about him, and allowed him to enter her bedroom like this “three or four times.” At the time she didn’t know anything about the sex act and wouldn’t have known what he was trying to do. When they happened to meet at school or at social functions they never spoke of these illicit meetings. The only person she ever told about them was her sister, Betty.

Miriam says the boy at her window was never drunk when he came to visit her. But many other kids her age often were, at least when they went to parties and dances. For this was during the Prohibition of the [1920s](#) and alcohol, though outlawed, was still immensely popular. “Oh yes, that was the smart thing,” Miriam says. “Everybody had a private flask of bootleg liquor. They’d go out to a dance and pull out the flask and have a drink. Boys and girls.” Miriam, however, says she never touched alcohol until years later, when she was engaged to be married. Yet alcohol and alcoholism were to influence her life in ways she could not have foretold.

If drinking on the sly was considered fashionable among her peers, other fads also made an appearance in Miriam’s teenage years, though they were usually less harmful to the body. One had the ghastly nickname of “cootie garage,” a girls’ hairstyle that involved “rattin’” it up in a sort of nest. “I could

never do it because my hair was very curly and short,” Miriam says. Another was a special way of wearing one’s galoshes: buckles unbuckled, with the top curled down a little bit. “And you walked around and clanked,” she says mirthfully. “That was very smart. By the time we got that funny hat, and that sport coat, and the galoshes on, we were beautiful.”

While Miriam admits that she never tried liquor, bootleg or otherwise, when she was growing up, she did develop a taste for another vice: cigarettes. She was 17 when she started, at a time when very few women smoked. Here’s how it happened: “My father smoked cigars, which we just hated,” she says. “My sister and I decided we weren’t going to drink any prohibition liquor, but you couldn’t just be an old prune, you had to do something naughty. So we smoked. We used to go down and smoke next to the furnace, that sort of thing.”

Eventually, they grew bold enough to openly smoke in front of their parents, who disapproved but didn’t do anything to stop them. Miriam considered it a “wicked habit,” but she was hooked. She smoked regularly for the next 28 years of her life, until she was 45. “To give it up was one of the hardest things I ever did in my life. I was in the hospital for some reason or other—I think it was for surgery—and I turned to the nurse and said, ‘Here is my last package of cigarettes, throw them away for me.’ I didn’t think I’d feel much like smoking in the hospital.” That was the last cigarette she ever smoked, though her sister never did give them up.

If smoking didn’t arouse the ire of her somewhat stern father, another incident did. It occurred at about the same time she started smoking. Miriam had graduated from high school the year before, when she was sixteen. Because of her excellent grades, she had graduated in the middle of the school year.

With time to fill before taking the college entrance examination, she decided to accept her parents offer of sending her to a boarding school in Cooperstown, New York, called the Knox School, to prepare for the exam. Returning from New York in summer, she was invited by a young man to go to a college prom. But instead of returning home after the prom, she simply hopped on a train and traveled back to the Knox School...without telling her family. Her father was livid. When he found out where she was, he fired off a “terrible letter” to her and demanded to know why she had done such a thing. “He was very worried about me, I discovered later,” she says. “It was just a little thoughtlessness on my part.”

Her rash decision to return to the Knox School was understandable. Supremely confident in her abilities as a student, she had recently taken the college entrance exam. She’d had her heart set on going to Vassar College, the most elite women’s college in the nation. “It seemed as if I’d always wanted to go there,” she says. “I had my roommate picked out and all sorts of things.” But she failed the arithmetic section of the exam. Horribly crushed, she felt she had disappointed her parents as well as herself. Since she had always been a top student, she simply expected to continue her high-achieving ways. But because so few people in those days went on to college, Miriam believes that her high school (and most Ohio schools of the day) didn’t prepare students adequately for a higher education, thus explaining her poor performance on the exam.

She decided to go to the University of Akron that fall. But it was such a huge step down from her original ambition that she couldn’t work up any passion for her studies and quickly grew bored. It seemed that no other college would do but Vassar. Feeling confused and wounded, she didn’t know what to do with her life. So when a contact at the Knox School asked her to come back as a junior faculty

member, in an unusual arrangement where she didn't actually have to teach, she thought about it for a while and accepted. For the next two years she attended the school, studying mostly English, her favorite subject, on a sort of informal scholarship. It was to be the end of her formal education, a decision she would lament for the rest of her life.

Chapter Three

CHAPTER TITLE

It was during the period that she was a quasi-teacher/student at Knox School that Miriam was introduced to theater arts. Performing in the school's summer theater whetted her appetite for further study in the field, and her parents agreed to let her go to New York City so she could decide whether to pursue it more seriously.

After her father rescued her from the clutches of an amorous Russian prince and brought her back to Akron, Miriam lived at home with her parents, socialized with her large group of friends, and accepted an invitation to join the city's Junior League. This was a recently formed organization of women dedicated to improving "social, health and education issues that affect the community at large," according to the Association of Junior League International.

The group was founded in 1901 by Mary Harriman, a 19-year-old New York City debutante, who mobilized a group of 80 other young women to help immigrants on Manhattan's Lower East Side with problems involving children's health, literacy and nutrition. Eleanor Roosevelt, a friend of Harriman's, joined the Junior league in 1903, and taught calisthenics and dancing to young girls. Soon other cities formed their own chapters. The group was instrumental in compelling school districts to provide free

lunches for impoverished children, and in working toward giving women the right to vote.

During the [1920's](#), the Junior League of Chicago pioneered the concept of children's theater. The idea was so compelling that it was taken up by more than 100 Leagues across the country, and this may have been one of the reasons Miriam was attracted to the Akron chapter, though she ended up performing other services.

"It was a kind of social organization," Miriam explains. "But you couldn't just be social, you had to accomplish something, too. People were chosen very carefully. You had to do so much for them in terms of hours or whatever. It was an honor to be asked to join it. Not everyone was asked. Back then it was mostly a social organization. I led a troupe of girl scouts. We had meetings and I'd plan events and that sort of thing."

But she didn't end up working for the Junior League long. After Miriam met Bert Work, only a few months passed before they decided to get married. It helped that their fathers knew each other from school days. Miriam says that Bert's father confided to her father that he thought Miriam would be a good match for his son, someone who could settle him down and put him on the right path. Miriam wasn't aware of this discussion until much later. Her father obviously didn't detect any red flags, or he might have tried to dissuade her from marrying Bert. He may have been blinded by the fact that young Bert was the son of one of the most prominent and wealthy families in Akron (if not the entire state), was well-educated, and appeared to have a bright future ahead of him.

When the wedding announcement hit the newspapers, it seemed as though the event would be one of the most important in some time. "More than ordinary interest," says an article in the Akron Beacon

Journal, “is attached to the engagement of Miss Miriam Starr, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. John J. Starr, 1031 W. Market St., and Bertram Work, son of Bertram G. Work of Oyster Bay, Long Island, which was made known Tuesday. Both young people are members of prominent families. Miss Starr is one of the most popular debutantes and a member of the Junior League. Mr. Work, whose father is president of the B.F. Goodrich Co., formerly lived in this city.”

(As a historical footnote, on the back of the yellowed clipping announcing Miriam’s engagement is an ad for a pain-relieving ointment called Baume Bengue, which today is known universally as Ben-Gay (the proper pronunciation of the product that originated in France and remains almost unchanged today). “The penetrating warmth of Baume Bengue goes right to the sore spot....It has relieved millions of sufferers. Every druggist sells it. Get the original.”)

Another newspaper clipping of the period discusses all the social events leading up to the wedding. “Miss Miriam Starr to be Honored Guest At Many Parties Before Marriage,” the headline reads. “Prior to the marriage, Miss Starr and her fiancé are to share honors at a series of social functions among which will be a dinner party to be given by Mr. and Mr. W.A. Johnson. Covers will be placed for 16 guests and bridge will provide entertainment. Miss Ellen Paige has invited a group of 16 friends to a luncheon at her home next Tuesday for Miss Starr and on the following Tuesday, Miss Marcia Crites is to entertain in her honor. Mrs. VanderVoort Chittenden, sister of the bride-elect, will give a luncheon for the feminine members of the wedding party on Thursday, May 26. Bridge games will occupy the afternoon. Other pre-nuptial affairs will include dinner parties with Miss Catherine Stillman and Miss Virginia Andress as hostesses on Tuesday, May 24, and Thursday, May 26, at their respective

homes. Miss Starr will entertain with a luncheon at Portage Country Club on Friday, May 27, honoring a group of 30 guests who are to arrive that morning from New York City. A rehearsal will be held at 5:30 in the afternoon followed by a dinner for the group given by Mr. Work at 7:30 at the Country Club. The wedding was held the next afternoon at the Church of Our Saviour, the nuptials being read by Reverend George Atwater before 300 guests. Thirty of them had been transported out from New York, where Bert's father lived, in a special railroad car. Bert's mother had died some time before, and Bert never mentioned her to Miriam.

Weddings in that period were more elaborate and showy affairs than they are today, and because of the prominence and wealth of the Work family, Miriam's was probably more involved than most. The pressures of planning such an elaborate ceremony must have been enormous. Yet Miriam, at least judging from the photographs of her that accompanied these stories, and even the wedding pictures themselves, seemed calm and relaxed. She is a lovely, soft-featured 23-year-old woman with large, soulful eyes and remarkably curly, almost frizzy, blonde hair set in waves. She even manages a cautious smile in two of the three wedding pictures published in the Beacon Journal, as she holds a large mixed bouquet of flowers. She is nearly as tall as Bert, who stands next to her. He appears rather pudgy, with a petulant mouth, his dark hair slicked down and parted in the middle.

After the wedding Miriam began her rapid inauguration into a lifestyle far removed from the one she had known. Although the Starr's were a solid upper-middle class family, the Works were several rungs higher on the socio-economic ladder. In fact, by the standards of Akron, they were off the scale. B.G. Work, though he was the president of Akron-based B.F. Goodrich (and the son of one of the found-

ers of the company), lived on Long Island in one of the most expensive and elaborate homes on the so-called Gold Coast. Miriam describes him as a “smart old duck” who, besides running one of the most prosperous and well-known companies in the United States, also went down in the history books as the man who came up with the name “zipper”—to describe a new type of closure system first applied to galoshes produced by B.F. Goodrich.

It’s an interesting tale worth retelling. According to most sources, the first recorded use of the word “zip” is from the middle of the 19th century, when it referred to the noise made by a small object moving fast through the air, or to a tearing sound, an example of onomatopoeia that could have been invented any time in the past few hundred years.

Its application to the little device called by its manufacturers the hookless fastener (and later the slide fastener), dates only from the early [1920s](#). The story of how it took Whitcomb Judson three decades to perfect the zipper, with the help of Otto Sundback, in whose name the master patent for the fully-working design was awarded in 1917, is one of determination against all odds.

But it was only in 1923 that the slide fastener got its modern name. The story goes that B.G. Work, as president of B. F. Goodrich, bought up much of the early production of fasteners to use on the company’s new line of galoshes. But he hated the name and said “what we need is an action word ... something that will dramatize the way the thing zips.” So they decided to call their line of galoshes “zippers.” It was only later that, as a result of this decision, the word came into general use for the fastener itself (it seems that neither zip nor zip fastener was ever a trade name).

According to Miriam’s son, B.G. Work also “invented the rubber-core golf ball, which radically

changed the game.”

With such a large fortune behind the Work family, it was only fitting that B.G. Work pay for his son’s honeymoon. The couple traveled across the Atlantic in the S.S. *Mauritania*, in a first-class stateroom, and when they arrived in Paris checked into that city’s most elegant hotel, the Ritz.

“Boy were we living it up,” Miriam remembers. “We were met in Paris with his father’s new car, a special-bodied Rolls Royce. His father used to go to Europe often and he kept a Rolls Royce over there. He sent a chauffeur over to be with us. But Bert liked to drive, so the chauffeur sat in back as we made the Grand Tour of Europe. We went to Geneva, Rome, Florence, we did all the things you do on a first trip. It was wonderful, except that I had never had anything (alcoholic) to drink, and Bert, I may say, was a sponge. I think I bored him to death, to tell you the truth. He had friends everywhere in Europe, and spoke fluent French. We whooped it up. I didn’t know people lived that way.”

After the couple returned to Paris, they flew to London to meet Bert’s father, who came to Europe every year to “take the cure” at a spa in Switzerland. Commercial air travel at that time was new. In fact, Charles Lindbergh had become the first man to cross the Atlantic in a solo flight just a few days before the Works were married (May 20, 1927). The flight to London was Miriam’s first airplane ride, an experience she’ll never forget. “It was a French plane that was held together with string and flapped its wings,” she says. “It’s a wonder we ever made it across the Channel. It was 1927 and was such a sensation that when I called my family they said it was on the front page of the newspaper because so few women from Ohio had ever flown.”

After Bert and Miriam visited B.G. Work in London and then returned home, something happened

that was to have a profound effect on Miriam's life. B.G., while he was in St. Moritz, Switzerland, died unexpectedly of heart trouble. While most marriages wouldn't have been affected to a great degree by the sudden loss of the husband's father, Bert was in a unique position. As the sole heir of his father's fortune, he suddenly became enormously wealthy. According to a short article about the Work will in the *New York Times*, dated September 19, 1927, Bert Jr. inherited a \$500,000 trust fund (the equivalent in purchasing power of about \$5 million today), plus the full value of his father's estate and personal property, which must have been an enormous sum though the figure wasn't disclosed. He also didn't have to work any longer, something his father had insisted he do while he himself was living. Instead of being a positive influence on his life, the sudden wealth was an unmitigated disaster, according to Miriam:

“Here was this undisciplined, spoiled young man—oh yes, spoiled; his father prided himself on it—a man who loved to drink, with no goal, and all these great houses. He was all at sea, he didn't know what to do. The result was he just sort of drank. So there we were, these two poor little creatures rambling around in these great estates with all kinds of servants.”

The pair lived alternately in a flat in New York City, at 94I Park Avenue, and at Bert's late father's 17-acre Long Island Estate, known as Oak Knoll. This residence was one of the splashiest and most valuable pieces of real estate in an area of Long Island, called Oyster Bay, known for its ostentatious mansions, including those owned by the Guggenheims, Vanderbilts, and Teddy Roosevelt. Two drawings of the Work mansion and a brief description of it appear in “The Architect & the American Country House” by Mark Alan Hewitt, Yale University Press, 1990. The home was designed by Del-

ano and Aldrich, two of the most prolific “society” architects of their time. They had designed over one hundred country houses, including one for John D. Rockefeller, before working on the Work residence. Construction on the house began in 1916 and wasn’t finished until six years later, reminiscent of the time it took for the building of Microsoft president Bill Gates’s mansion in Medina, Washington. Here’s what Hewitt wrote about Oak Knoll and the architects who designed it:

“Delano and Aldrich...established themselves as purveyors of understatement—their trademark was a kind of eclectic minimalism. As William Lawrence Bottomley wrote in praising their work: “Both in the plans and the elevations (of Delano and Aldrich buildings), whether of a façade or the side of a room, one feels a fine relationship of parts. From the point of view of decorations, there is a small amount of ornament, very telling because it is well placed and brought into strong accent by contrast with simple planes and wide wall spaces. The beautiful, high, narrow proportions of their doors and windows are another note of distinction drawn from the eighteenth century traditions.” This abstraction and restraint can be appreciated in such houses as the classical block for Bertram G. Work, president of the Goodrich Rubber Company, one of the most costly and ostentatiously elegant of their many large houses...Synthesizing such sources as the popular Petit Trianon (a building that inspired the creation of dozens of American country houses in its image) and Thomas Jefferson’s pavilions at the university of Virginia, Delano stripped away all but the essential classical detail to

produce a compact, prismatic building set amid vast axial gardens—a kind of French garden pavilion. Royal Cortissoz called the forecourt “one of the happiest strokes I know in the architecture of today...this is an austere design in more respects than one, a house with a spare, very dignified façade, rising on the north above a lordly straight terrace. Yet it is not academic or cold. The wonderfully manipulated levels, the trees and the turf, take care of that, to say nothing of the graceful proportions everywhere and the relief judiciously afforded by daintily grilled balconies.”

Bert spent much of his time drinking with friends and spending large sums of money on such extravagances as boats and airplanes and parties. He gained 90 pounds in the first year of their marriage, much of it from his prodigious consumption of alcohol. His fortune began “oozing out very quickly,” Miriam says, though she had no idea how much money Bert had inherited, nor exactly how much he was spending, because he never talked about financial matters with her. In fact he never even gave her spending money until she contacted a lawyer friend, who made arrangements for her to have a stipend from Bert.

Within several months of their wedding, Miriam became pregnant and on October 8, 1928, Miriam Wilcox Work was born. “Never was a baby more welcome,” Miriam says. “She was a fine healthy little girl.” All her adult life Miriam had wanted marriage and a family, and now her first child was born. But instead of tending to her baby as most mothers would, she was compelled by Bert to get a nurse to provide most of her care. Bert simply wasn’t interested in children and wanted the freedom to do whatever

he liked whenever he liked. And he wanted his wife to be available to do things with him.

“He didn’t want to take responsibility for children,” Miriam says. “This is something he had to face and I don’t think he liked it. He wanted to have fun. He never was a good father and when he died he never mentioned his two children in his will. That was terrible. Can you imagine that? It was as if you didn’t amount to anything. I think that was very hard on Bert Jr., and Mimi too, but she wasn’t as sensitive as he was.”

Bert and Miriam traveled “hither and yon”—went bird shooting, played golf, and generally lived it up, while a nurse and later a nanny took care of Mimi, as she was called. A year and a half after later, Bert Jr. was born. While most men would be especially proud when a son was born, Bert wasn’t thrilled by his arrival, according to Miriam. To him, additional children were an additional burden. After Bert’s birth, the Works hired a mother-daughter team to care for the two children, so that each baby would have its own nurse.

Now 74 years old, Bert Jr. remembers being cared for by a succession of nurses and nannies during his early years. When he and his sister reached school age, at six, they were sent to summer camps and boarding schools. Both children had little contact with their parents throughout their childhoods.

Although Miriam’s husband didn’t have to work to support himself or his family, he still decided to pursue a profession, in aviation, which had long been a passion of his. In 1928 he became the president of a fledgling airplane manufacturer called Ireland Aircraft Inc., which produced all-metal “flying boats,” aircraft that could take off and land on either water or land. The planes, designed by George Sumner Ireland, featured an odd-looking “pusher” engine—its propeller facing backward—mounted on top

of the aircraft, and had a carrying capacity of up to 5 passengers plus a pilot. Bert also started the first commuter airline on Long Island, Amphibions, Inc. The airline used Ireland Flying Boats, leaving from the docks of Oak Knoll every weekday at 8 and 9 a.m., to convey passengers to the East River end of Wall St. Return flights brought Long Island millionaires back to Oak Knoll in the evening.

Some idea of the importance of the business and of aviation to Bert can be gleaned from a Christmas card the Works sent out to family and friends in the early [1930s](#). It's an 8 1/2 x 11" card on which is depicted, in a cartoon-like, five-color custom ink drawing, Bert and Miriam in the open cockpit of an Ireland Flying Boat. Daughter Mimi is on one wing playing a trumpet-like instrument, out of which billows a cloud filled with the words "A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year." Infant Bert is sitting on the opposite wing happily playing with toys. Their father, dressed in a suit and tie, waves amiably as Miriam smiles. The Oak Knoll estate is down below, with a train station nearby, a fisherman reeling in a fish from a dock, and a sailboat in the bay.

When he got a little older, young Bert and his mother would do such things together as enter horse shows. In a New York Sun photo dated August 1, 1933, Miriam is holding the lead rope of a black and white pony, on top of which is her son, dressed in a white short-sleeved shirt and a dark tie. The photographer spotted them at the Brookville Horse Show on Al Davis's Long Island estate.

Miriam says her husband began losing his grip on the money he had inherited as the Great Depression wore on in the early 1930s. Oak Knoll had to be sold. The Works had only lived in the big mansion a short time before moving into a smaller house on the estate, and renting out the big house to collect income. A significant financial hit had come the year before, on February 15, 1933, when a fire

destroyed the hangar at Roosevelt Field where Bert housed five Ireland Flying Boats, two owned by Amphibions, Inc., and three by Bert himself. An article about the fire in the New York Times disclosed that Bert lost as much as \$300,000 in the accident, the equivalent of \$3 million today.

With Bert's raging alcoholism, his utter indifference to his children, and his open disdain of Miriam, the couple separated in 1933. She lived in a villa in East Hampton with the children, while Bert continued to live in his two residences. Then in 1934 Miriam sought a divorce from him, citing "cruelty" as the reason (In most states, cruelty is one of the legal grounds for divorce, and implies either physical or mental anguish caused by the other party. In the days before "no-fault" divorces, it was one of the most common cited reasons for divorce, the others being adultery and abandonment). Miriam didn't want to go through a protracted legal battle (divorces weren't as easy to come by in those days), so she traveled to Nevada, where the process was more streamlined and straightforward. In order to file for divorce there, she had to live in the state for three months to gain residency status.

Because the Works were part of New York's high society, their activities were often mentioned in newspaper society pages and, at least on one occasion, by a gossip columnist. His name was Cholly Knickerbocker, a pseudonym for Igor Cassini, a reporter for the Hearst newspaper chain who was the brother of Oleg Cassini, the famous fashion designer. Both were born in Russia to a family associated with the Czar that fled to the U.S. after the Revolution of 1917. He was perhaps the only gossip columnist in America with the dubious distinction of having actually been tarred and feathered by the subject of one of his mocking pieces, an experience that launched him to national fame almost overnight. But before then, while he was still an obscure junior columnist with the New York American, he mentioned

the Work's upcoming divorce in a column published on December 15, just a few days after it was announced. The Works probably wanted to tar and feather him themselves after reading this:

WORK DIVORCE IS NO SURPRISE

Although it has been expected for some time past, the Reno divorce of the Bertram Works has caused no end of chatter out on "Longuyland's" North Shore.

Everyone has known for months that "Bert" and Miriam Starr Work were about as congenial as a cat and a dog—for almost a year they maintained separate residences, the two Work "kiddies," Bertram, Jr. and "Mimi" Work, being with their mother.

Last summer, when Miriam and the children were ensconced in a villa at East Hampton, I commented upon the situation and predicted the divorce just granted to Mrs. Work in the wide open spaces of Nevada.

Just what will happen to Oak Knoll, the Work country estate at Oyster Bay, no one seems to know.

It is one of the largest and most beautiful on the North Shore. And that's saying something—the North Shore being noted for its highly-manicured country estates.

"Oak Knoll" is of Spanish architecture and boasts of such deluxe features as a swimming pool, private yacht, and airplane landings, etc. Since the separation of the Works, several occupants have had the estate under lease.

"Bert" who has grown, er—"robust," is an ardent aviation enthusiast and it was from his private dock that the commuting to town by airplane from the North Shore was inaugurated.

His father made millions in the rubber industry—but Bert is the head of his own amphibian company.

There is a report current to the effect that the Reno divorce means wedding bells will ring in the near future.”

Chapter Four

CHAPTER TITLE

Indeed wedding bells did ring in the not-too-distant future for both Bert and Miriam; both were remarried within two years. After the divorce, Miriam lived with her two children and their governesses for a year in the New York City duplex apartment that Bert owned. She received alimony from him to live on, but she says it was barely enough to cover her expenses. “I did have some pretty slim times after the divorce,” she says.

In years past, she had gone to Manchester, Vermont, every summer with the children, vacationing at a family hotel with a youthful clientele. It was there in the summer of 1935 that she met Joseph Powell.

“He was very good looking and a good dancer,” she says. The son of Joseph W. Powell, who was president of United Dry Docks, Inc., of New York and Boston, he worked for a company called Standard Brands, Inc., in Cambridge, Mass. In some respects he was similar to Bert: both loved to party and drink, both were only children, and both were named after their fathers.

Miriam and Joe were lonely due to the recent loss of their spouses, his having died suddenly, so it didn’t take long for their attraction to grow. After a brief courtship, they decided to get married, in 1936, and move to his home in Boston.

For their honeymoon, Miriam and Joe traveled to St. Anton, Switzerland, probably more for his benefit than hers, as he was an accomplished skier and she had never attempted the sport. She was willing to give it a try, however, enrolling in the ski school owned by Hannes Schneider, the famous Austrian instructor who later would come to the United States and revolutionize the teaching of skiing in this country. “I was in the booby class, of course,” Miriam recalls, “and we went up this hill and it was absolutely ice, just pure ice. There we stood and the Austrian instructor said to me, ‘Lady, working, going down.’ So down I went. I landed in a heap with my ankle underneath. I sprained it badly.”

Though she had a wonderful excuse to spend the rest of their honeymoon reading in the ski lodge, she kept taking lessons, though her ankle hurt every time she strapped on those “great, enormous wood skis and Kandahar bindings.” Joe, meanwhile, was off skiing with the women’s ski team,” she says. “But I kept on. What was I to do?”

A year later the twins, Sue and Sally, were born. Incredibly, Miriam had been anticipating the birth of just one child. Several months into the pregnancy she noticed that she was larger than normal and asked her doctor about it. “And he said, ‘Definitely not twins,’ “ Miriam remembers. The girls were born two months premature, weighing only five pounds apiece. (Sally notes that Sue, the second baby to arrive, was “often referred to as the extra dividend.”)

Although the pregnancy and births had gone smoothly, three days after the babies were born Miriam’s appendix burst, a life-threatening condition, especially in the 1930s. She lay desperately ill, struggling for life. Bacteria from her appendix had spread throughout her body, and doctors forbade her from having contact with the girls for the six weeks they were in the hospital. But thanks to a newly introduced

type of “sulfa” drugs, she survived. One unforeseen side-effect of the drugs, however, was their destructive influence on the kidneys. One of Miriam’s had to be surgically removed about five years later.

Joe Powell, in contrast to her first husband, welcomed the births of their children. He had had a son by his first wife, but after she died soon after his birth, the boy was cared for by Joe’s parents, who wanted to keep the boy. Oddly, Joe complied and had very little contact with the boy in later years. Miriam now had four children to take care of. She hired a governess named Freida for the twins, who helped her raise the girls until they were old enough to attend school.

One of Sally’s earliest memories of her mother occurred when she was three or four years old in Bronxville, New York. “I was riding my tricycle on the sidewalk,” Sally says, “and our Irish Setter, Parnell, jumped over the hedge and knocked me over. He was followed closely by my Mom, who also jumped over the hedge to pick me up.” Parnell, evidently, was the bane of Miriam’s existence, according to her son Bert:

“I’ve always carried around, at Mother’s expense I guess, a treasure of ‘Parnell stories.’ Parnell was an Irish Setter of great size and minimal intellect, whom Joe Powell brought home one day when we were living in Dedham, Massachusetts. For the three years or so he was with us he constantly struck sparks off Mother— but what a show! Parnell bringing the neighbor’s chickens home and eating them on the front steps; Parnell, in his excitement over a possible car ride, crashing Mother into the garage door; Parnell eating the butterballs off the fancy table Mother had set for guests; Parnell leaping out of the parked car at the train station and urinating on a man’s leg. Truly, Mother’s *bete noir*.”

Joe decided to change jobs in 1939 and moved the family from Massachusetts to Bronxville, New

York, where he joined the staff of a new magazine starting up in New York called *Time*. He and Miriam were good friends with the people who started the magazine, and Joe was hired to be an assistant to Roy Larsen, one of its founders. But apparently the position wasn't to Joe's liking. When World War II broke out in 1942, Joe gladly gave up his job at *Time* to enlist in the Navy. He became a Lt. Commander and secured a desk job in Florida, where he moved Miriam and the twins. Meanwhile, Bert, 12, and Mimi, almost 14, were sent to boarding school in New York.

"As far as I was concerned," Bert says, "that was the end of our normal childhood. Except for a few vacations, I didn't live with Mother again." He also never lived again with his father, whose household was made up of his second wife, Polly, and a step-son, Edward, from her first marriage. The two Berts saw each other only during vacations, often in Bermuda. On these trips the younger Bert fell in love with the tropics, to the extent that today he owns a house in Puerto Rico, living there most of the year with his wife Ginger.

By 1948, Miriam and Joe had drifted apart to the point where neither saw the point of continuing their marriage. "He was a very high strung person and I didn't really fit in at all," she says. "He was very ambitious. He'd sit still and his foot was always going like this"—she has her legs crossed and one leg ticks up and down nervously. "He said he wanted to start afresh and would I get out of the way," Miriam says.

It was a very difficult time for her, and after the divorce was finalized she had to live on what was for her a slim alimony payment, forcing her into financial struggle. She and the twins moved from Bronxville to Manchester, Vermont, where she had a good many friends. A couple invited her to live in a house on

their estate while she searched for one to buy of her own. Finding one a few months later, “a very nice house with a couple of acres that I paid \$15,000 for,” she settled into life as a single parent again.

Chapter Five

CHAPTER TITLE

A short time later, she met a man who would turn out to be the love of her long life, her “Rock of Gibraltar” and mentor, a quiet, gentle, cultivated man named Jim Dennis. She would spend the next 18 years with him.

She met Jim through friends who lived across the street from her new house in Manchester. One day in conversation they said to her, “We know you’re not interested in getting married, but we know a man who’s a widower. He’s not interested in getting married either, but we just thought we’d get together, the four of us, and have dinner.”

So the dinner was arranged at a restaurant in nearby Dorset. After the meal, the other couple having drunk to excess, Jim and Miriam “drove them home and tossed them in and we left,” Miriam says. He lived in Bennington, about 23 miles from Manchester, and the two began what she describes as a “fast courtship.” It was easy for her to fall in love with him. “He treated my children as if they were his,” she explains of her attraction to him. “Everybody called him pops or poppy. Sally and Sue took to him right away.”

Sally remembers the first time she and Sue met him. “He wanted to give each of us 50 cents,” she

says, “so he took out a crisp new dollar bill, something he always insisted on having, cut it in half, and gave us each half. He just did things like that that were interesting and extraordinary. He was a sweet generous person. You almost couldn’t even admire anything in his home because he would want to give it to you. He was a wonderful person.”

According to Miriam, Jim had a “wonderful sense of humor. He loved music, and he had a lovely quiet way about him yet he didn’t miss anything.” His mother was beautiful and very social, while his father, who probably had either an inheritance or a benefactor, didn’t have to take a job until he was in his 50s. So there was a great deal of time for the Dennis family to spend as it wished, and when Jim was growing up he accompanied his parents on frequent trips to Europe, where he had gone to school for a time in England, and learned French so well that he “spoke it like a French person.”

Jim, a graduate of Princeton and Harvard Law School, had given up the legal profession because his eyesight was poor, and instead joined a German company involved in mining and minerals. Some time before he met Miriam, Jim’s first wife, Margaret Colgate, an heiress to the Colgate fortune, had died, leaving him a considerable inheritance. He had two daughters, Peggy and Nan, and a son, David, who had been killed in World War II. David had been a soldier in the Army’s 10th Mountain Division, the famed ski troops, which encountered fierce resistance and sustained heavy casualties in its Italian campaign.

Eighteen years older than Miriam, Jim was retired when he met her, living a comfortable, prosperous life in Bennington. Before they were married, one of Jim’s friends, a “crusty old bachelor,” according to Miriam, tried to talk him out of it. He said, “She’s very nice, but don’t get hooked.” Jim obviously didn’t

heed his counsel, for he married her soon after. The ceremony took place in Manchester at the home of a friend, with only a few friends in attendance, including the county clerk who conducted the ceremony. Miriam felt that she had stolen one of Bennington's most desirable older bachelors: "I want to tell you there were a lot of ladies in Bennington who wanted to scratch my eyes out. I thought it was awfully funny."

As with her two previous marriages, Miriam and Jim went to Europe for their honeymoon. When they returned, she moved into his house in Old Bennington, which was built by the second governor of Vermont, a charming old-world house that used local marble for the mantles. It even came equipped with a live-in German cook, a live-in maid, and a full-time gardener. "It was quite luxurious for me," Miriam says.

One of the things that kept Jim occupied in his "retirement" was advising his ex father-in-law on how to shrewdly divest himself of one of his many Vermont properties, a hobby farm called Fairdale Farms. It was huge, taking up a whole mountain near Bennington, and stocked "every kind of animal and bird known to man," Miriam says. When the federal government started cracking down on hobby farms, which were often used by the wealthy as tax shelters and write-offs, Jim's father-in-law asked him to transform it into a real working dairy farm. That meant hiring more people and building more facilities. At one time there were up to 50 workers on the farm. But Jim's biggest project was to devise a way to sell the farm back to its employees for as little as it could be sold for without paying exorbitant taxes on it. By all accounts his handling of the affair was a "howling success." Jim's father-in-law was happy that he didn't have to pay a huge tax penalty, and the employees who bought the farm were motivated

to work harder and longer to make it prosper, because they all had a vested interest in it. (The farm was subsequently sold to one of the nation's largest dairy producers, and in 2002 was closed as a corporate cost-cutting measure.)

After the farm was sold to its employees, Jim retained ownership of one section of it, where the animal breeding was conducted, according to Sally. He spent part of nearly every day in the office with his good friend Stewart Graham, farm manager. When Jim wasn't working on some aspect of the farm, he and Miriam would take long walks with their dogs, or go bird watching, often rising at 4 or 5 a.m. to take extended excursions into the woods outside town.

But the activity that best defined Miriam and Jim's relationship was traveling to Europe on extended vacations, which they did almost every summer for several weeks at a time. Ostensibly, the reason for the many trips was to find the perfect spot to live year-round. Jim had a great fondness for the European way of life, the great comfort and ease of Europe, and the distinct lack of commercialism there compared to the United States. But although they searched high and low, no place ever quite fit the bill. "I can't tell you the number of places we went to," Miriam says. "The search was really the thing. That became it. I think if they had clubbed us over the head with the place we never would have recognized it. It's not easy when you have the whole world to choose from. We were having such a good time going to all these places."

Chapter Six

A YEAR ABROAD

 ne of the most memorable of their sojourns abroad was the year Jim and Miriam spent in Switzerland, from August of 1953 to May of 1954. The twins, who were juniors in high school, came along with them and were enrolled in separate Swiss boarding schools, also called “finishing” schools. Sally says that year was one of the highlights of her childhood. “When we arrived in Europe,” she says, “after a voyage on the *S.S. Mauritania*, we spent a month touring through France, which was wonderful: Mont. St. Michele, various cathedrals. We were driving around in the family station wagon that was almost as wide as some of the streets in those little towns.”

Miriam and Jim preferred taking a ship to Europe rather than flying there. At that time, it was the more common way to get to Europe. The long, slow voyage acclimated them to the European way of life. “It prepared you for what you were getting to,” she says. “That was just lovely. The days flew by. They had a movie every night. I remember one night on the ship they had a party, they were playing games. They put an orange between your forehead and theirs. He (Jim) picked this really pretty girl and when she went to put the orange on her forehead she said, ‘I’ve got a cold,’ and of course he just went wild because he was sensitive to colds, and he caught her cold.”

As she did on most of her European trips, Miriam kept a detailed journal. Most of the entries were written with a small Swiss typewriter, though a few were handwritten in neat cursive. She writes in a candid, no-nonsense style that sometimes approaches literary journalism, often capturing the essence of a person or place in a few carefully chosen words. What follows is an outline of her 1953/54 journal, to give some idea of her writing style, and to see how she lived during that period.

AUGUST 16: A little cooler today although still very humid...Sally and Sue are having a lovely time on board (the S.S. Mauritania) as there is a nice group of young people who are active all day long. The ocean has never been smoother although there was some fog last night...

AUGUST 30: Warmer today and beautiful. We took a picnic lunch and drove to Nemours through which flows the Loing River. We drove a little way out of town to find a nice spot for lunch and had a very good time in a shady corner along the quiet stream.

SEPTEMBER 1: ...Melvin and Josephine Hall came to the Hotel de la Poste et du Lion d'Or to have dinner with us. The hotel is very crowded, with many English people here. Melvin ordered the wine which was a 1947 Volnay-fremiets, Clos de la Rougotte (Domaines du chateau de Beaune) Boucheard Pere et fils, and it was one of the best we have ever enjoyed, light and gay. 1947 was a truly great Burgundy year.

SEPTEMBER 3: In the morning Melvin took Sally and Sue to visit the Basilique and then to La Grangeotte to look at some of his medals and decorations...Then we drove to the little village of Aunay where lives Mme. D'Aunay who is a friend of the Halls. Having phoned ahead, she and her friend (an Armenian princess) were there to receive us and we had a most interesting visit until nearly half past seven. It seldom happens that an American has the opportunity of being received in a French home, and we were exceptionally lucky to meet Mme. D'Aunay and to see her chateau from top to bottom. It has belonged to her family since the 16th century, and her great-grandfather was Vauban, the foremost French engineer and a great national hero, who is buried at Les Invalides. The chateau itself was lovely, quite austere, Mme. said, but we like its straight lines and symmetrical plan. During the war, the Germans occupied it for a few months and we saw where Mme. lived in the castle while they were there, but, since it had no central heating, they moved out when cold weather came along. Fortunately, the commanding officer made his men take care of the place, although the huge kitchen stove disappeared when they did...Jamie (the name Miriam often used for Jim) did not feel very well today so we called the doctor during the evening. It seems to be a cold and bronchitis that he has and we will not leave for Geneva tomorrow morning unless he feels better.

SEPTEMBER 4: ...As Jim did not feel very well I did all the driving today, the first time I have ever done this since we were married. However, the Chevrolet was wonderful in

its performance and I did not feel too tired. The drive was over the “Col de la Faucille,” the pass into Switzerland near Geneva. As we came up over the top and started down the other side, Sally and Sue got their first glimpse of Switzerland and it was clear enough to see Mont Blanc in the distance. Geneva looked really beautiful as we came into it today, with flowers everywhere, the boats running on the lake, the fountain on the lake playing high into the air, and people everywhere. The sun was shining brightly and I have never seen the city under such fine circumstances. We have two large bedrooms, two baths and a sitting-room at Hotel Richemond, and like it very much indeed. It is such a pleasure to see the cleanliness, order, and space after the poor little rooms in Vezelay. Jamie went to bed immediately, but the rest of us had a delicious dinner on the terrace of the Richemond.”

In September Jim and Miriam dropped Sally off at the Chateau Brillantmont, where she would live and attend the school for the next year, and Sue at another Swiss school called Riante-Rive. On the face of it, it seems odd that the girls would go to separate schools. But they had been doing so for the past couple of years in the U.S., Sally explains. Sally and Sue had gone to the same schools until ninth grade. They had attended kindergarten in Florida, first and second grades in New York City private schools, and then skipped the third grade at the behest of North Country School, where they went from fourth through eighth grades. Sue then developed symptoms of a strange, unknown disease that today is called anorexia nervosa. Because Sue had to be near her doctors in Boston, the twins began attending different schools.

“We were very, very, very un-alike,” Sally says, “so it was probably just as well.” They were not identical twins and looked quite different from one another. Their personalities were also on opposite ends of the spectrum. “She was the glamorous one, also the daredevil,” Sally remembers. “I was the goody-goody. Her idea of a good time as a teenager was to see how many different kinds of shoes she could try on in a store before they realized she wasn’t intending to buy any. To me that was horrifying. Or with friends, she would see how many bars they could get thrown out of in a night. And you see I was just the opposite.”

Later, this kind of extreme behavior on Sue’s part would have disastrous consequences. But in the fall of 1953, life was still relatively uncomplicated for the twins, and for Miriam and Jim as well.

On Sept. 14, just before the girls began school, they arranged an early birthday celebration for their mother, since they wouldn’t be able to see her on her actual birthday a week later. “They gave me a charming carved Swiss picture of a chalet, flowers, writing paper, and so on,” Miriam wrote in her journal. “They had helped Jim pick out a handsome pigskin briefcase for me, which holds my typewriter and all writing materials. A wonderful present.”

A few days after dropping the girls off at their respective schools, Miriam and Jim went on a driving trip in the Chevy wagon through Annecy, [Aix-les-Bains](#), Chambéry, Voiron, Orange and on to Avignon, where they took a room in the old Hotel d’Europe, in which Napoleon himself stayed in 1799. Alas, the building was so old that when a thunderstorm struck that night, problems arose. “...it rained harder than I have ever seen it,” Miriam wrote.” Rain, rain, rain. I have never seen the heavens so open, nor a hotel that leaked so badly. Towels were placed at the dripping points of the lobby, but still the drops

landed on the guests every so often. When the Rhone River floods, so the concierge told us, it comes right in through the town walls and floods the entire first floor of the hotel. We walked out to the river to look over the situation and it is not yet at flood stage. Let us hope.”

Eager to leave before the river flooded its banks, they departed for Nice, the weather continuing cloudy and damp. But the city didn’t meet Miriam’s expectations. “More rain, and Nice is not at all nice in the rain. It is, at best, a glorified Atlantic City with miles of large hotels and walks along the water. It was also quite windy today, but we managed to take a couple of walks between showers, and it is warm enough for a cotton dress.”

By October 3, the weather had improved considerably. They had driven into Italy and were winding down the coast toward Pisa. Their first stop there wasn’t auspicious, however, at a restaurant “swamped with several bus-loads of American sailors and soldiers who were eating and drinking everything in sight. However, the sight of the huge church and Leaning Tower made up for everything, and we were enchanted with their beauty.”

When they arrived at the Grand Hotel in Florence, a beautiful hotel where they had stayed four years earlier, Jim and Miriam had an unsettling encounter with a living, and then a quite dead, amphibian. It happened shortly after sitting down for cocktails at the hotel’s recently added bar and grill. “As we sat there the maitre d’hotel wheeled in a live, and protesting, green turtle and some large hunks of raw beef. Soon they brought out a large green turtle, cooked, with its poor nose nestling in the parsley of its tray. Jim did not like this at all, and told them how cruel they were, and we left the place. After all, one doesn’t choose to sit in a butcher shop to enjoy a cocktail, or dinner.”

Not many years had passed since the war had ravaged Florence's lovely streets and buildings, and Miriam was curious how much progress had been made in restoring them. While some bridges had been repaired, as well as many of the buildings, there was still much work left to be done, she wrote, because it was a "colossal task and expensive...We understand that only a small part of the Uffizi has been put in order, too."

The war had destroyed more than just Florentine edifices. Jim's son David lay buried in the American Military Cemetery six miles out of town, and on October 5th he and Miriam, along with their friends the O'Connors, went there to see his grave. "It was good to see that peaceful valley with hills covered with olive trees all around it. Some progress has been made since we paid a visit four years ago, but only two hundred of the permanent marble markers (crosses) have been received for the 5,000 graves and the chapel and museum are not started. But there is actually grass growing among the graves this time, and there is a good beginning towards the roads that will encircle the cemetery."

As the weather turned autumn-cool and their enthusiasm for car travel dimming, Jim and Miriam headed to Ascona, in the Italian part of Switzerland, to begin moving into their rental home. Villa is perhaps a more accurate name. It was called Casa Santa Pieta. "The place looks very inviting, although not at all beautiful, except for our superb view of the lake," she wrote upon arriving. "We can hardly wait to move in."

They settled into a tranquil domestic life. The Italian maid, Giovannina, also doubled as a chef who prepared dinner for them every night, the milk man delivered fresh milk in 10-gallon cans, the postman came twice a day in his little yellow truck. They took German lessons in the village twice a week with

Frau Greve, a Dutch woman who had lived there for 30 years. Fortunately the German man who kept the furnace tuned was most skillful, because the weather in late October turned even cooler and wetter, an omen of even worse weather ahead: “Well, well, rain and rain *and* rain! Where can it all come from? Our tiny furnace keeps the house very warm, though, and I almost think that our German furnace man, who doesn’t understand a word of English or French, is trying to cook us alive.”

Their cook was superb. She made such regional specialties as “Salmi,” rabbit meat marinated for three to four days in Chianti, spices, carrots and—the secret ingredient—bitter, finely ground cocoa.

In November, Sue and Sally sent “upsetting” letters from school. “Sally said that she was learning nothing at Chateau Brillantmont although she was enjoying it thoroughly. She is worried about falling behind her class in her work back at Emma Willard next year. Sue’s approach to the subject was a more emotional one, mostly based on not liking her teachers who are too excitable.”

Miriam wrote back that when they came to join them for the Christmas holiday the girls could decide then whether to continue studying in Switzerland or return to their stateside boarding schools. But sometime before the holiday began, the twins’ attitude changed. They both wrote to Miriam that they indeed wanted to remain in Switzerland.

On the 15th of December, Jim and Miriam closed up the villa at Ascona and drove the Chevy to Zurich, taking rooms at the luxurious Baur au Lac hotel on the shores of the Lake of Zurich. Sally and Sue arrived a few days later and occupied the room right next to their parents. After purchasing a small Christmas tree to decorate the rooms, everyone went out shopping for presents to put underneath it. Later they went to see the opera “Paganini” at the Stadtheatre, and several times the girls ice skated in

the afternoons.

Miriam thoroughly enjoyed every aspect of a Christmas in German Switzerland. “In the first place, as was to be expected, everything is done in a much more reserved fashion than in America. The store windows are restrained, but beautifully decorated and the only outdoor Christmas tree I have seen is a huge one in front of the Baur au Lac which is done entirely in clear light with no other color. One can see it from far off and it is a sensation in Zurich.”

On Christmas eve the family walked to the English church, St. Andrew’s, for the midnight Communion Service, then retired for the night. The next day, with the first sunshine in days cheering everyone’s spirits, they opened presents under the tree in their room, “but packages and telegrams and mail kept arriving all day...” On the 27th, Miriam called her parents in Akron. “It was quite thrilling, especially since the call was a real surprise to them.”

After a quiet New Year’s celebration in their rooms, with champagne just before midnight, the family continued enjoying the amenities of Zurich, taking in a couple of movies and a few more operas at the Stadtheater, with more ice skating for the girls. A heavy snowstorm on the 6th blanketed the city with snow, just before Sue had to return, by train, to her boarding school in Lausanne. Sally had more holiday vacation time than Sue, so she was able to accompany her parents to St. Anton for a week in the mountains. She remembers thinking it was a little peculiar to be going to St. Anton with Jim and Miriam, because it was where her father, Joe Powell, and Miriam had spent their honeymoon years before.

Meeting them at the St. Anton train station was Sally’s friend from school, Mary Litchfield, who was vacationing there with her mother. Sally and Mary rented skis and went off to explore the ski resort by

themselves, while Jim and Miriam occupied their time by playing bridge, wandering the streets of the village and taking walks along the river. Although they didn't ski, Jim and Miriam ordered some custom-made gear from the famed Austrian craftsmen in town, Jim a set of boots, and Miriam a pair of ski pants, both "finished in about 24 hours."

Sally reported that the skiing had not been very good for the first few days after they arrived, because it hadn't snowed for a long time and the runs were icy and unforgiving. But that changed on the 9th, when a monstrous blizzard dumped seven feet of snow over the region in a matter of a few days. "I have never seen nor dreamed of such a snowstorm and this country has had nothing like it in over twenty-five years," Miriam wrote.

The prodigious snowfall wreaked havoc all across the Alps. Avalanches, some in places that hadn't seen them in a century, devastated railroad lines and villages, killing hundreds of people. The U.S. Army was even called on to help rescue people and to bring in food and medical supplies to isolated areas. In St. Anton the laborious task of clearing the huge drifts of snow took many days, as it was done only by men wielding shovels.

Sally's planned return to boarding school was delayed by avalanches that blocked train lines, so Miriam and Jim took her along with them to Innsbruck, where they had reservations at the Iglhof Hotel. After dinner that evening, the guests were treated to a Tyrolean-themed dance performance, during which "one of the young Austrians, a tall, good-looking boy to whom the leder-hosen high white socks, and hat with a huge brush in it were very becoming, seemed to single out Sally for a partner quite often, and she was delighted, especially when he dropped the pillow in front of her and kissed her." After sev-

eral days in Innsbruck, during which Sally got in some skiing with a ski class Miriam enrolled her in, they returned to Zurich, staying at the same hotel, the Baur au Lac, where they had been at Christmas. Sally left to go back to school the next morning, six days late because of the storm.

Then Jim and Miriam set out on a serious mission: to find a Wire-Haired Dachshund to acquire as a pet. They put ads in the local and regional newspapers, and finally found a family advertising just the dog they were looking for. In their rented car driven by a chauffeur, Jim and Miriam drove out to the town of Ramsei to look at the little beast. “The puppy is nearly eight months old, and we brought him back (to the hotel) with us. His name was Bimbo, but we are planning to call him Trager. The little fellow has been extremely good and seems to understand the situation perfectly. We take him out of doors often in spite of the cold weather and he behaves like a gentleman all the time.”

When they finally got back to their villa in Ascona, the weather had turned extremely cold, in fact the coldest in recorded history. “...and the people are miserable because their houses and places of business just cannot be heated sufficiently. The suffering all over Europe, everywhere this same weather prevails, is terrible, particularly in northern France. We are fairly comfortable in our house, having an extra electric radiator which we keep going in the center of the living room...In spite of all this, we are delighted to be in our house again after so many hotels, and Trager is happy about it, too.”

A few weeks after they returned to Ascona, Miriam and Jim decided they wanted a companion for Trager, a Smooth-Haired Dachshund this time, and they acquired one by telephone from a baker near Bern whose family had a litter of them. The little fellow was mailed to them, arriving in a large basket. “He turned out to be much smaller than we expected, not quite five months old, but a fine little

fellow with lots of spirit. He is *not* house-trained...The new puppy arrived with the uninspired name of “Blackie,” also a strange thing to call a red-colored animal. We rechristened him immediately, and are going to call him “Jodl.”

The dogs took up a great deal of Jim and Miriam’s time over the next few months, as they took them on long walks and watched their antics and cavorting both indoors and out. Winter turned quickly into spring. In March, as the crocuses and camellias began to bloom, the de Wardeners, friends from the States, came for a visit. One night they all went out to Campione for dinner and gambling, and Jim managed to pocket about \$450 in 15 minutes.

Also in March, they learned a small culinary secret of the country that both shocked and dismayed them. In a butcher’s shop in Locarno, they were presented with a rare delicacy that Miriam and Jim had never thought about eating before. “On asking its name, he tried to convey the word in French, Italian and German. “Tete,” then “Tetina,” then “Zitze” quite distinctly, and finally he made milking motions with his hands. Jamie and I exclaimed “Titty” with one accord, and, “My God, we are about to eat Buttercup’s busts!” It had never occurred to me to wonder what happens to all the left-over teats when beef is processed. Now, I *do* wonder. They use every morsel of the pig except his squeal—so why not put titties into the salami?”

After a brief visit with the twins over the Easter holiday, Miriam and Jim packed up all their belongings, including the two dogs, said a tearful goodbye to their beloved Giovannina, and left for one more long driving trip, this time through Holland and England, before returning home to the United States at the end of May.

Chapter Seven

CHAPTER TITLE

Miriam blossomed during her 18-year marriage to Jim. From him she learned the true meaning of love, and grew more confident in herself than she'd ever felt before. With Jim she began to call herself Miriam for the first time, leaving behind the diminutive form of her name, Mimi. Looking now at the long river of her life, she considers Jim the person who had the greatest influence on her.

"I learned more from him than any other source," she says. "It was a liberal education. He was a very thoughtful person. How to live. How to enjoy things. He was a Renaissance man. Travel and music. He liked it as much as I did and we enjoyed that enormously. He read aloud every night. A lot of Dickens. When his eyes gave out, I did the reading—Henry James, Dickens, Joseph Conrad. He was a very cultured person and a lot of it rubbed off on me."

Sally and Sue also enjoyed him as a person and as a surrogate parent. "He was a *wonderful* step-father to Sue and me," says Sally, who in written correspondence likes to capitalize words for emphasis, as her mother does. "I can remember thinking, as a child, how lucky I was to have *two* mothers and *two* fathers."

Jim had suffered from emphysema for years, and as he grew older his illness forced him to reduce his

activity. On their European trips, they began to orient their itineraries around performances of music and opera, because it required little physical exertion. Vienna became one of their favorite destinations, especially during the city's month-long music festival that featured concerts of various types of music, mostly classical and traditional. "We would go every night," she says. "Those were just wonderful days in Vienna, just wonderful." Sometimes they would go to as many as four performances a day. When they weren't absorbed by a light opera or dining at a lovely restaurant, Jim would spend time resting in their hotel room while Miriam would go out walking alone. Throughout his steady decline, Jim never felt sorry for himself, never felt like an invalid.

Another blessing from Vienna occurred in 1955 (??) when they were visiting an opera house that had been bombed in World War II. As Jim and Miriam were standing in the lobby, a man came up to them and said he had heard them speaking English and wondered where they were from. "We said, 'Santa Barbara,' and he said, 'So am I!'" Maurice Faulkner was a professor of music at the University of California at Santa Barbara. His wife Sue would become one of Miriam's best friends, and even today the pair has season tickets to virtually every musical event in town. "We'd do things together (in Vienna)," Miriam says. "We'd take a trolley car and go out to the cemetery where Mozart and Schubert and all these famous people were buried. We'd



This is a sample caption, and this is a photograph taken in 1974 of Miriam and her four grandchildren: Wendy, Allan, Hillary and Allison.

buy flowers and place them at their graves and we'd wander around. We really had a lovely time with them."

Jim was also a great help to Miriam during some of the frequent conflicts with three of her four children. Her daughter Mimi's troubles were perhaps the most vexing, and Miriam still finds it difficult to talk about her.

"Mimi was impossible," Miriam remembers. "She certainly did just the opposite of what we wanted her to do. The second year when we went back to live in Switzerland, she got into the Sorbonne. She was quite a big girl. She never had any beaux. That was not a part of her life. Sally and Sue were in a school in Lake Placid at that time. Mimi went there for one weekend to see them with Bob Davis, whom she met at a drug store where she was working. She took these little girls out of school and went off and got married and swore them to secrecy. And bless their hearts, they never told a soul. I don't remember how I found out, but it all turned out very badly.

"And the next thing I knew she was living in this tent, a trailer sort of thing, and she had a baby (her daughter, Deanne), and these cats. I remember the cats climbing all over this baby, and it was just awful." Both she and Bert received a small stipend from their father, but sometimes it didn't prove adequate for Mimi's needs, and she would charge things she bought at the drug store in her mother's name, without her permission. Her husband, Bob Davis, was a "perennial sophomore" who was always going to school to learn a trade, only to give it up after a short trial to pursue another. All during this tumultuous time it was as if mother and daughter were locked in combat. "I don't know why but it always seemed to me we were in a rivalry," Miriam observes. "Now I'm not a very competitive person, but with her it was

always a competition. It was always difficult with her, always. I was so thrilled to have Mimi when she was born. I remember her hearing some music on the street once and she danced to it; she was so cute.” (Mimi died in 2000 from leukemia. “What was really kind of sad about that (her death) was that she was the one who never drank, never smoked, it was really kind of unfair,” Sally says. “She had lived a very clean life in that respect.”)

Bert Jr. had his share of youthful troubles as well. “He drank too much at times,” Miriam says. “Living in New York, of course they had to go to private schools. Then we had to put them in boarding schools. Bert finally went to Exeter. But he did very badly there, got into all sorts of trouble. I think they expelled him. (Bert says he wasn’t expelled but “resigned happily in the hope the rest of my childhood would be normal.” While he didn’t care for the elitism of the school, he actually did well there, contributing to the school’s literary magazine, writing for the school paper, winning a writing prize, and acting in several plays.) Bert didn’t want anyone telling him what to do. He would do the opposite thing, no matter what. He made an awful mess of things for a while.” (Bert later went to civilian flight school, following the example set by his father, whom he visited occasionally after his parents were divorced. For 20 years Bert Jr. was an airline and corporation pilot, before switching to a teaching career until his retirement. He and his wife Ginger now divide their time between homes in Maine and Puerto Rico.)

From the time Sue first showed symptoms of anorexia and bulimia (eating disorders of which little was known at the time), in junior high school, she was a troubled child who caused continual distress and concern to her mother. In describing the differences between the personalities of the twins, she says: “One was very quick and alert and she could do anything (here she’s referring to Sue). The other was a

little slower but she could go just as far just by plugging along (Sally). The one who was so bright, the Lord just handed things to her. She never really got over (the anorexia). It did something to her mind. So she became very unreliable and we had a bad time with her. Jim was awfully good and patient and he would interact with her father so I didn't have to."

The last year they went abroad was 1966. Jim and Miriam were still on the hunt for a place to live, at least for part of the year. They had already moved from the East Coast to Santa Barbara, California, (in 1959) to take advantage of the drier, warmer climate there, which was conducive to Jim's health. In retrospect, Miriam thinks they shouldn't have gone to Europe that year; the climate was too cool and the village they ended up in was too remote. They were visiting a small village ski resort near Zurich when Jim collapsed at breakfast. An abscess on one of his lungs had burst, causing the lung to collapse. He died in the local hospital, and Miriam had him cremated and carried his ashes home to Santa Barbara.

After Jim died, Miriam felt bewildered for a long while, but she had plenty of friends in Santa Barbara who helped her come to grips with her grief. "They were awfully good to me," she says of them. And then, with characteristic resolve and fortitude, she adds, "You just go on, that's what you have to do."

Sue and Maurice Faulkner invited her to go back to Vienna with them and Miriam did, several times, but it "wasn't so much fun (without Jim)," she says. "It was so different."

Jim's absence was also keenly felt when a great tragedy struck Miriam in 1968. Sue, an art teacher at a Catholic School in New Jersey, was found dead in her apartment on August 8th. The official cause of death was pneumonia, but Sally says that "we knew it was alcoholism, anorexia, and bulimia. The

woman who lived downstairs said that she heard banging and thumping upstairs. I think she was drunk or something or that she had fallen. Anyway, it was convenient that the official cause of death was pneumonia. There were definitely extenuating circumstances.” Miriam, who was traveling in Europe at the time, got an urgent phone call from Sally telling her about Sue’s death.

“It was terrible,” Miriam says. “It was awful.” Miriam blamed herself at first, but gradually came to see that there was nothing she could have done.



Loneliness was part of what drove Miriam to marry her fourth and fifth husbands. She was financially secure, thanks to the inheritance of much of Jim’s estate. Miriam’s fourth husband, Otto Reimer, was a lifelong family friend whose first wife was Sally’s godmother. After she died, he asked Miriam to marry him, though the marriage lasted only a few months. Her marriage to Jim Platt was almost as short-lived, lasting a few years.

Sally observes that her mother simply didn’t like being alone. “She made an interesting comment not long after the fifth husband was no longer in the picture. She said, ‘I’ve finally decided that I don’t have to be married.’ I guess that before she felt like she always had to be.”

Miriam, about her last two husbands, says “of course they were terrible mistakes. I was lonely. Because I had had such a lovely life with Jim, I thought you could do it. I thought if you really wanted to you

could do it (be happily married). But it wasn't possible. It just didn't work that way at all. So I didn't bother. I didn't try to make the most of a bad thing. I just got out."

Sally says, only half in jest, that even today Miriam, at her age, could get married again. "We all say if she decided that she wanted to be married she'd probably have 20 candidates lined up around the block."

Chapter Eight

CHAPTER TITLE

Today Miriam lives in an upscale retirement community in Santa Barbara called Samarkand. She lives alone in her own apartment. Though she is required to pay for one meal a day, she loathes the institutional food served in the dining hall and almost never eats there. Instead she prepares her own meals or eats out.

She never thought she'd end up in such a place. "I always pictured myself in the country in a nice old house, with a lovely fireplace and a couple of dogs," she says. "You realize that you have four children, and you have to provide for them too. I came here really for that reason, so they wouldn't have to take care of me."

She describes herself now as "a rather tall, very skinny old girl." She is a little shorter, by about an inch and a half, than she once was; barefoot, she stands about five-foot-five. Her hair is pure white and still retains its natural curliness. And her eyes have retained their brilliant blue color, which people still comment on occasionally. "She looks younger than she is," Hilary says. "And she moves around younger than she is. She's really in phenomenal shape for her age."

When I spoke to her on the phone in June, she was in the apartment sitting at her desk, which came

out with her from Vermont when she and Jim moved to California in 1959. It's a simple wood desk in two parts, but it has a long history: It was originally built for the second governor of Vermont, a man named Isaac Tichenor.

Nearby are some of the magazines she loves to read, which bear witness to the passion for learning that she has always shown since childhood. Among the journals are copies of *Smithsonian*, *National Geographic*, various health magazines, and *Friends of the Earth*. Some are on the mystical side, such as a magazine called *Shift*, published by the Institute of Noetics Sciences, an organization that studies “consciousness, how to help people, awareness, and how the brain works,” she says.

On the wall are two Japanese prints that she purposefully placed in a shady spot to keep them from fading. Yet they're starting to fade anyway. The bookshelf holds some of her favorite books, including the collected works of both Charles Dickens and Joseph Conrad, and poetry by such authors as Emily Dickinson, one of her favorites. There's also a number of reference works, including a Bible dictionary. And last but not least: cooking books of every stripe and persuasion, “because I just enjoy reading them.”

Cooking has always been one of Miriam's great joys, a passion she inherited from her mother. In years past she reveled in the preparation of such dishes as *Taflespitz*, an Austrian beef dish with lots of onions and a wonderful sauce, and *Rosti*, a Swiss potato and cheese dish that has been known to make grown men swoon. But now, because of the size of her kitchen—“it's more of a closet”—she doesn't cook as much as she would prefer. “I don't like to even think about it now,” she says. Miriam still delights in a beautifully cooked meal, however, which she'll savor occasionally at home or at one of the

restaurants in town, usually in combination with a concert outing. One of the best things about living in Santa Barbara, she says, is the frequency of concerts held at the local music academy. “I’m out most nights at a concert,” she says. “The students and faculty give concerts and they are very good. They teach master classes and bring in world famous artists. Marilyn Horn (the opera singer) was there. She’s as wide as she is tall. I have a sheaf of tickets that would stagger you!”

Five years ago Miriam decided not to drive any longer, to “give it up while I was ahead,” as she puts it. She misses it awfully, and now relies for transportation on the bus and friends. Every week or two she hires a man who runs a fleet of limousines to drive her around town, when she needs to go to the dentist, to get her shoes shined, or to shop. He jokingly refers to their outings as “driving Ms. Daisy,” a reference to the movie of the same name.

Because reaching the age of 100 is such a rare occurrence, people often wonder how Miriam has been able to reach this milestone. Pet theories abound.

“Moderation in all things,” says her great-grandson Johan. “She knows exactly how much she can endure and never pushes herself beyond that point.”

“I think it’s because of a lack of stress and not worrying about where your next meal is coming from or whether you can pay the next bill,” Sally says. “She’s also always been very careful with her eating. She followed a macrobiotic diet for a long time. Everything is organic. And she’s always looked after herself. Walked. Even now even if she only goes as far as the mailbox, which is only a five-minute walk, she gets out every day. She does her stretching exercises. I remember her telling me once that 10 or 15 years ago she was at a ladies’ lunch and they were going around the table and everybody was saying what pills

they took to stay looking young, or creams, or whatever it was they did, and finally somebody looked at her and said, ‘Well, Miriam, what do you do to stay looking so young?’ and she said, ‘I picked the right parents.’ I think genetics plays a strong part in it.” Laughing playfully, she adds, “That and not abusing yourself. As I keep saying, the only thing she’s done in excess is husbands.”

Hilary mirrors her mother’s views on this subject. “It doesn’t seem like she does anything in excess,” she says, “anything at all, which is pretty amazing. If you read her journals, she describes getting up in the morning and having a glass of champagne with her breakfast at these five-star hotels in some fill-in-the-blank European city. But I never got the impression that she ever went overboard. I think she liked her alcohol but she knew how to handle it.” Hilary also credits Miriam’s carefully controlled, nutritionally sound diet for her current health, but adds a humorous footnote, an anecdote that she had been too embarrassed to reveal—until now.

Visiting Miriam once for Thanksgiving many years ago, Hilary and her mother sat down in Miriam’s dining room, dreaming of turkey and mashed potatoes and all the usual Thanksgiving cuisine. But instead she served them “a couple pieces of seaweed and a couple pieces of other little things,” Hilary recalls mirthfully. “And my mom and I were like, ‘This isn’t enough,’ so we snuck out afterwards and went to MacDonald’s.”

Yet today, ironically, Hilary watches her diet almost as carefully as Miriam does, eating mostly organic foods, and limiting her consumption of saturated fats. And she wouldn’t dream of eating at MacDonald’s now.

When Miriam came to visit the Culverwells, which happened about once a year on average, her arrival

would cause a bit of a stir in the family. “Before she came to visit us,” Hilary remembers, “we’d always have to practice our table manners, because you had to have the napkin on your lap and your elbows off the table, and the polite stuff, and we would literally have to practice the night before she would arrive in town. My mother would make us. She was kind of mortified having her mother see us as the heathens we were.” Hilary laughs heartily at this memory.

When Miriam visited, Sally would always prepare a dish called *choucroute a l’Alsacienne*, which both had savored when Sally was growing up. “It got so that when I would announce that “Gram” was coming for a visit,” Sally says, “my four children would say in unison, ‘OH NO, SAURKRAUT!’ That love was obviously not passed along.”

It was Hilary and her older sister Wendy who instigated the effort to record Miriam’s life story. They were thumbing through some of Miriam’s travel journals and thought they were valuable records of her life that should somehow be kneaded into a biography. But they weren’t sure exactly how to go about it.

“I think they’re really curious and interested in some of her lifestyle they didn’t see,” Sally says. “It was so unlike the one they had.”

When she was growing up, Hilary always enjoyed visiting Miriam either in Santa Barbara or Dorset, Vermont (where she had a second home for a number of years), and receiving letters from her. Yet she never really intimately knew her grandmother, who always remained a little distant, somewhat formal in her manner, and was introverted as well.

“I don’t have really strong memories of time spent with her because it was usually fairly limited,” Hilary says. “I have no doubt that she loved us and cared about us, but it wasn’t really expressed in tradi-

tional ways. She would say ‘I love you’ in letters and she was always happy to see us.”

Now, as an adult, Hilary says she and her grandmother have become much closer, which has been extremely gratifying to her. “She’s gotten a lot warmer as she’s gotten older,” she says. “In the visits that my sister and I have made down there (to Santa Barbara), she’s been a lot more emotional with us, and really genuinely happy to see us. It’s been really touching to me because it wasn’t really there when I was a kid.”

Hilary says that family members have often commented on how much she resembles her grandmother when she was the same age, in both her stature and facial features. But there’s another more profound legacy that Miriam has bequeathed to Hilary, as well as to her daughter Sally, and several others in the family as well. It was an introduction to a place so important to their lives that Sue, when she died in 1968, was buried there. “It was one of the greatest gifts she has ever given me,” says great-grandson Johan. “It totally impacted and changed my life, and my career direction and who I am,” says Hilary. “That place meant the whole world to me,” says Sally.

The seeds of that gift were planted long before, when Miriam’s daughter Mimi was attending a private school in New York called the Brearley School. One of Mimi’s teachers there was married to a man who wanted to start a new school, which eventually was called North Country School. It began as a summer camp, to which Miriam sent Mimi, and the experience was so rewarding that Miriam later sent Sue and Sally to both North Country School (for five years) and to Camp Treetops (for three years), and then later paid for several grandchildren and great-grandchildren to attend Treetops. Miriam eventually became friends with Walter and Leo Clark, the school’s founders. “He (Walter) was way ahead of

his time,” Miriam says. “The way he fed children, the way he treated children. The whole atmosphere was so positive and so good. That place has meant so much to our family.”

“North Country School was a phenomenal place,” Sally says. “The founders, Walter and Leo Clark, were pioneers in education, in conservation, in organic farming. We’re talking 1940s and he was already into that kind of thing, just way ahead of his time, a really remarkable person. If anybody asked me who was the person that meant the most to me in my life it would be Walter Clark. He taught me about being a good steward of the environment. One of their sayings was ‘Ruggedness, Resourcefulness and Resilience.’ Loving nature. Doing things for yourself. To this day I cannot waste a scrap of anything. I prefer to do things for myself from scratch.”

Sally communicated her enthusiasm for the place to her own kids. Three out of the four ended up going to summer camp there, most the expenses footed by Miriam, as the cost would have been prohibitive for Sally. Hilary was 10 and 11 when she went to Treetops, and the experience probably influenced her more than it did her siblings. (Sally explains that “Alison missed out because by the time she was old enough, we had moved to the Pacific Northwest and it was just too far to send her. ‘Gram’ later made up for it by helping her purchase her first car.”)

It was Hilary’s first exposure to the outdoors, canoeing on the lake next to which it was located, and hiking in the surrounding hills. “Definitely my love of nature and the desire to protect it, that all came out of Treetops,” she says. It also affected her career choice. She earned a Master’s degree in Environmental Science and Public Affairs at Indiana University, and now works as an environmental educator for the state of Washington. “I’m like Nature Girl, working in the environmental field, simple living,

organic farming supporter, all that stuff. But my grandmother made it all possible. If she hadn't found that place, it wouldn't have happened. When I was in my 20s and became conscious of how much of an impact the camp had on me, I wrote my grandmother a letter and sort of rethanked her for having given us that experience as kids. Because we would never have had it. My parents wouldn't have sent us. “

Part of a camper's duties at Treetops was working on its organic farm, which not only gave kids a sense of responsibility, but exposed them to where food comes from, and how to tread lightly on the environment. “I really loved that philosophy,” Hilary continues, “of it being this sort of working community with fun activities but also responsibilities for the kids. It just really spoke to me. I would just really love to be a full-time camper for the rest of my life.”

She almost did. After graduating from college, Hilary went back to work as a teacher and camp counselor for five years. “My brother and sister were so jealous when I went back to be a counselor, and I was like, ‘Well you can, too! I'm just choosing to defer responsibility for a few more years.’ “

Hilary's cousin Johan, who is ten years younger than she and the son of Mimi's daughter, SallySue Girolamo, also went to Treetops as a boy, and went back later as a counselor. Miriam and he have, over the years, formed a close bond. Because they always lived far apart when he was growing up and hence didn't get many chances to visit, they relied instead on a “pen-pal” relationship. “I have very fond memories of wonderful correspondences between my favorite stuffed bear and a colleague of similar persuasion at her house,” Johan says.

The few times he did visit her, in Vermont, were memorable. “It was a long trip for small children and it seemed as if we were going to another country. But once we arrived, the mountains, air, smell of

fresh cut grass, it was all part of the perfect retreat. I remember her showing me where to pick blackberries and giving me a bamboo cane to go fishing with. And she also had these bicycles that had headlights powered by the wheels turning. And of course there was a picture puzzle always waiting for us to work on. Later in life we would take walks together and talk about life, botany, history, or any other topic we fancied.”

Hilary, for one, believes that the reason Miriam has made such a strong effort to develop good relationships with her grandkids and great grandkids has been to perhaps make up for the emotional distance that characterized the parenting style she employed with her own children as they were growing up. It is a point that Miriam herself alludes to when she talks about raising children: “Children should be raised, if at all possible, by the mother and father, and not be farmed out so the parents can work,” she says. “The child is more content and better adjusted if the mother can be like a mother.” Her own children, of course, were raised by a series of nurses and governesses, and then, when they were older, sent off to boarding schools and summer camps. “I think that was a terrible thing to do,” she says. “I think my children resented it just a bit. We did a lot of that and I think it was too bad. One time we went off on a trip (Bert Sr. and she) and the little boy (Bert Jr.) was quite sick. My husband didn’t think there was any reason to stay home, and so off we went and I felt terrible. It was wrong and very uncomfortable.”

Bert and Sally, Miriam’s two surviving children, reacted to their upbringing by doing just the opposite with their own children. “I swore,” Bert says of his six children, “that unless they wanted to go, I would never send my kids to boarding school.” Only two chose to go.

None of Sally's four children did. "Obviously my kids didn't go to private schools," she says. "They didn't have a lot of the things that I had as a child, but at the same time they had a lot of things I didn't have. They had their family around. And I'm very close with all my kids...I regret sometimes not having given them all the advantages I had as a child. But I was always there. I was the one who nursed them and changed them and was always there with them. It wasn't a conscious effort to be different, it was just the way people did it in my day and age. I mean she (Miriam) lived in a very different world, a totally different world than I can almost even imagine."



Though Miriam, like most people, doesn't like to dwell on painful memories, it is to her credit that she acknowledges mistakes she has made, wrong turns along the path. It's part of what makes her wise.

Other elements of her wisdom are embodied in the attitudes she holds about a variety of matters:

 *Advice to future generations:* "I would say eat and drink wisely, that would be my first piece of advice, because that's something that makes a great difference all your life. I've been pretty careful. Also, get plenty of exercise. I don't think children do these days. And study hard of course. Be as positive as possible in your actions and beliefs."

☞ *On careers:* “I think a person should be trained in some career in order to support himself. Some things come quite naturally like music or artistry. There should be a definite goal. I wasn’t brought up that way. I wished I had a career. I think I could have been good at things, really. (She told me that if she had gotten into Vassar as she had hoped, she might have pursued a career in journalism, where she could employ her love of language and literature.) I was awfully sorry I didn’t keep going to college.”

☞ *On God and religion:* “As a little girl I was sent to Sunday School at the Congregational Church. Then at 17, in New England, I started going to the Episcopal Church, and it all dawned on me. I just absolutely loved it. I joined that church and I still enjoy going, but sometimes I can’t go because I don’t have transportation. I think God is trying to help all of us, each and every one of us. I firmly believe he loves me. And I read him first thing every day. I take a little magazine called Day by Day. For each day, someone has chosen a portion of the Bible and written a small essay on it.”

☞ *On things she would have done differently:* “I would certainly have gone through college. That would have changed my life immensely. My family wanted me to go very, very much but I just didn’t listen to them. The harder they tried, the less I listened. I also would have tried not to be so idealistic. I thought with a little effort you could work out anything with anybody, but I don’t believe that now. I would have brought my children up differently. I think the family unit is very important and I think it has to have a chance to work, to have people together.”

☞ *On life after death:* “That we don’t know. I think there’s something but I don’t know quite what it is. I think there may be something on the other side of the door. I guess my attitude is: I will take what’s there.”

☞ *On abortion:* “I’ve had an abortion. I believe it’s good to have the choice to have an abortion, within reason.”

☞ *On homosexuality:* “I don’t think there should be marriages between the same sex. What’s the point of that? I like homosexuals, they’re fun, smart. But many of them are quite pathetic.”

☞ *On the death penalty:* “I debate with myself on that. It doesn’t seem right to tax the free world to keep a criminal alive. The money could be better spent on poor people. To lock a person up is not doing a person good. Yet to take another person’s life is a terrible thing.”

☞ *Greatest inventions in her lifetime:* “Electricity—we had gas lights when we were growing up. I’m not going to say TV because I think that’s an abomination. I think they’ve prostituted that art. They slithered into the dull, rock and roll. I suppose the automobile. Some of the medicines have been wonderful inventions, too.”

☞ *On love and marriage:* “Now there’s a difficult one. I’m rather an idealist. I thought any marriage would

work if you were willing to work at it. But I don't believe that's true now. You have to know what you're doing and what you're working for. You have to be willing to give in a lot. I don't know...it's a very difficult thing. That's what I really wanted in life, to be married and have children. I did that (with Bert Work) but I really didn't have a marriage. A good many bad beginnings have been gotten over, and a good many good marriages have come out of it."

➤ *On politics:* "I'm not interested in politics. I hate it. It's gotten so dishonest that I dislike it even more. I don't think Bush has been a good president. Almost all my life I've voted Republican, but not anymore. The Iraq war has not made us safer. No, I think the whole world is stirred up to a very dangerous level. I think 9/11 made me very conscious of how dangerous the world is today. I don't think they're (Al Qaeda terrorists) through doing awful things to us if they can get away with it. I don't think we're very good at handling the situation, to tell you the truth."

Miriam's views about the current president come as a bit of shock to Sally and Bert and Hilary: "...I just assumed she was one of these dyed-in-the-wool Republicans," Sally relates. "And she said, 'I voted for Bush and I am so sorry I voted for him.' That was a huge surprise. Now she says, 'I don't care who I have to vote for as long as it's not Bush.' "

"Mother was always a staunch Republican," says Bert, "but I go the other way. In fairness, though, I must add that she is horrified by George Bush, which speaks well for her, but reflects poorly on Bush."

"She always has been right of center," Hilary adds. "In high school I was like this very radical left winger at the time and not afraid to state my opinion and I said something negative about the military

and she very diplomatically said, ‘Oh, what’s your problem with the military?’ Which was a fair question to ask. But when we were down there visiting her, she came out strongly against Bush. I was very surprised. I think she almost said something kind of threatening (she jokingly suggested that the U.S. might be better off if Bush were shot). Perhaps I shouldn’t say that because she’ll end up in Guantanamo. But she’s really, really, anti Bush. She’s historically been right of center, but she’s also smart enough to see through things and she’s not happy with how this administration is operating. Maybe in her elder years, she’s come back (towards the left) a little more. That’s my take on it.”

For the record, Miriam’s father was a Republican “very much interested in politics,” Miriam says.

⇒ *On environmental matters:* “Certainly we’re not taking good care of what the good Lord gave us. I suppose we started polluting the minute we came to the Earth, and never stopped, but we’re going to have to think more about it.”

⇒ *On the state of the world:* “It’s a very uncertain world now, it’s wobbly and shaky. We worry more today. Now it’s all mixed up and kind of crazy. I fear for it. We’re not thinking very far ahead really, in lots of ways. Take the water situation for instance. Someday water will be so polluted you can’t drink it. Water is going to be very valuable. We’re not taking very good care of the world.”

⇒ *On the war in Iraq:* “I’m not for it a bit. As soon as 9/11 happened—(she slaps her hands together for emphasis)—he (President George W. Bush) wants to go right in and attack Iraq. Well, were there

no other means to try? By George, he went right to it...I don't see what we're doing except stirring everything up, making more enemies all the time. I don't think it has settled anything."



Though her memory isn't quite as sharp as it once was, Miriam is remarkably well informed on a wide range of topics, a product of her inquisitive mind and voracious reading habits. But when it comes to herself and her own legacy, introversion and [self effacement](#) lead her to state that "I don't think its important that anyone remember me. They're bound to forget everything but my name."

When I questioned her further on this, she allowed that she hoped her descendants would know that she was an honest and kind person, and that they'd be proud to trace their lineage to her. (The number of her descendants continues to grow; there are now 13 grandchildren, 15 great-grandchildren, and four great-great grandchildren.)

I, for one, think it is important that she be remembered, for all the reasons that history of any kind should not be forgotten. It won't be hard for her descendants to remember her, for in many ways Miriam Wilcox Starr has certainly been a "star." Even if her temperament and personality weren't "suited to the theater," as she put it, the life she lived after her stint in New York with Richard Boleslavsky, the Russian acting teacher, has been every bit as dramatic and challenging and memorable as a life on the stage.

Her first major role, one could argue, was as the wife of a fabulously wealthy though callow young

man, Bert Work, who launched her into the upper stratosphere of wealth and fame, much of the latter unwanted. It was a difficult role to say the least, for it did not satisfy her desire to have a close-knit, loving family like the one she grew up in. She did, however, win two “awards” in that performance, her children Mimi and Bert Jr. The second part she landed was as the wife of an ambitious, rather high-strung man, Joe Powell, which won her two more prizes: her daughters Sally and Sue. Then came the role of a lifetime, in which she reached her emotional and intellectual zeniths, with a co-star/director named Jim Dennis. Later roles, as the wives of two other men, could only prove disappointing in comparison to her crowning achievement.

But her “career” certainly didn’t end with the last marriage, when she announced to Sally that she “didn’t have to be married any longer.” It was as if she was undergoing, as a married woman, the kind of transformation that a butterfly goes through inside its cocoon. She was developing herself, changing her view of the world, accumulating wisdom. And, once free to fly, she could clearly look back on her life and reflect on what went right and what she would have changed, and to value simple things like caring for the Earth (by contributing generously to environmental causes and organizations) and expressing her love in meaningful ways to those who are close to her.

Hilary talks about that increasing love she feels from her now, and about Miriam’s transformation. “I definitely think she’s changed over time. I know that my view of her has changed. I think that she may be exposing more of herself now than she used to. She wants to feel like she’s had an impact on the world...”

Although there are no Oscars on her shelf or best-sellers written about her life, she is famous, and to

a certain extent almost mythical, in the eyes of those who know her. And like stars in the heavens, this Starr will always be a compass point to guide the way for future generations, who will remember far more than just her name.