Old Friends

By William H. Orsinger

While eating breakfast, lunch and supper here at home, I am reminded of two old friends I met seventy years ago in a corn field at the end of Marcey Road in Arlington, Virginia. I was fourteen.

In 1920 William Harding was unemployed and still in his army uniform. He was looking for work. He was going from house to house asking if they needed help.

There were only five or six homes on this single lane unpaved Marcey Road off Military Road near Cherrydale.

Harding walked down the dirt road, between forests of oak and black locust, past an old family graveyard of some sixteen graves. Most of the markers were large field stones of quartzite. He continued past an open field to the last house on the left, shaded by a large old walnut tree. He knocked on the door of Mrs. Fannie White's modest home. He asked her if she needed a man to help. Her house was not large. It was two stories high and covered with brown wooden shingles. Behind it was a low red barn. A small subsistence farm—a few acres on a wooded bluff on the Virginia side of the Potomac River a few miles above Washington, D.C.

There was an old log cabin on the other side of the road. It was early spring. Wildflowers were coming up in the woods. The First World War ended November 11, 1918. Harding, unmarried, had just been discharged from the Army. He had no family to go to.

Mrs. White did need help. Her husband had recently died and her son, Bob White, a fireman in Washington D.C., had moved to Suitland, Maryland. Mrs. White told Harding he could stay for a few days to see how things went. He remained there the rest of his life—forty-seven years—as her helping hand and friend. Before Mrs. White's death she sold the property to Arlington Parks and Recreation, stipulating that Harding could live there the "rest of his natural life."

But how could I have met these two people in a corn field when I was only fourteen? The story really starts over two thousand years ago.

An Indian tribe, paddling up the Potomac River, found a very small stream tumbling over rocks into the big river. The Indians followed it to its source, a spring at the base of a large oak tree. The spring had an ample flow of clear sweet water. The Indians cleared the land nearby and made it their home for over a thousand years. They planted corn and squash, and picked the abundant berries and nuts nearby. They hunted, using quartzite projectile points they chipped out there in their village. They fed on the numerous deer, elk and other animals in the woods. They made other implements of softer soapstone they traded with

other Indians. With these they could grind their corn. Their dome-like houses were covered with bark and grass. In spring they built weirs of brush in the Potomac River at the mouth of Marcey Creek and trapped the abundant fish. They buried the dead on a bluff at the top of the hill overlooking the river.

Then the small tribe disappeared.

In the 1750s [Most authorities believe it was later–Ed.] the Donaldsons came from Scotland and settled on the land and built a log house. While digging the foundation they found Indian bones. Plowing the fields they found countless stone hammer heads, projectile points, grinding bowls of soapstone, and many pottery fragments decorated with grass impressed in the wet clay before firing.

Years later a Donaldson descendant was living in the rustic two story log house, now covered in wooden shakes. Around 1870 Mr. and Mrs. White built a small two story house across the dirt road. Here they raised two children. The house was built of rough sawn boards, then covered with cedar shakes. Together the Whites and Donaldsons continued farming the land—planting corn, squash, and tomatoes raised between a few rows of apple trees.

Mrs. Donaldson became depressed. One winter day she took her two children down to the frozen river and pushed them under the ice. She then jumped in to join them, taking her own life.

Old man Donaldson was now lonely, so, when Titus Ulke, naturalist, archaeologist, prospector, and patent attorney, came hiking by, they sat and talked for hours. They liked each other. Donaldson permitted Ulke to hunt for Indian artifacts in the fields again planted, as always, in corn. After Donaldson died the log house, now covered with wooden shingles, became a home to the Stewart family, a descendant of the Donaldsons.

(Be patient. This is important background. I'm getting to the part where I met Mrs. White and Harding in that cornfield when I was only 14 years old.)

Titus Ulke, the naturalist, archaeologist, prospector, and patent attorney, visited my father, then Director of the National Aquarium in the Department of Commerce Building on 14th Street in Washington. Titus was 65 years old. He had just retired to The John Dickson Home for Dignified Old Men at 5000 14th Street N.W. in Washington D.C. He traded his botanical collection to Catholic University for tuition and space to write his Ph.D. dissertation, "The Flora of Yoho Park, British Columbia." Titus told my father that he was born and raised on that exact site of the Commerce Building at the time the Washington Monument was under construction. Typical of my father, he invited Ulke to come for dinner that night and to meet me and my brother Victor.

We young boys began making regular Sunday forays with Ulke. He knew lots of interesting places in the open fields and along the streams and woods

then existing around Washington. Ulke could identify every tree, insect, bird, and rock along the way. One day he said we would hunt for Indian artifacts. To get to the Marcey Creek site we rode the Cabin John streetcar from Georgetown, getting off at stop #20. We walked down the hill, then crossed Chain Bridge to the Virginia shore of the Potomac. Walking along the river shore we found where a small creek tumbled over rocks into the Potomac. We followed the small creek to its source under a big oak tree. From there we entered the corn fields on the hillside. It was now owned by Mrs. White and tended by Harding.

The Donaldsons settled on the land and built a log house. While digging the foundation they found Indian bones. They found countless stone hammer heads, projectile points, grinding bowls of soapstone, and many pottery fragments decorated with grass impressed in the wet clay before firing.

It was fall. The corn was ripe. We walked between the rows picking up interesting stones and pottery fragments. We then met at the old spring to have a drink of the cool sweet water and to wash the mud from what we had collected. Titus, in his khaki jodhpurs, canvas leggings, and a jaunty visored cap, examined each piece and told us what they were, or more often, what they were not. We found many flakes of quartzite stone chipped off in the making of arrowheads, and fragments of brown pottery with marks of the grass that had been embedded in the damp clay before firing. And rarely, a hammer head. We then walked along the rocky shore of the Potomac in the direction of Washington to Key Bridge, passing a working stone quarry on the way, then home by streetcar.

Ah, but we young boys became careless. With our heads down, searching the ground, we suddenly looked up into the faces of a scowling Mrs. White and her trusted farm hand Harding. Mrs. White, her white hair blowing in the gentle breeze, was standing there with her hands on her hips. Harding stood a step behind her puffing on his corn cob pipe. Mrs. White said she'd call the police and have us run off her land. Then Ulke, being among other things, a lawyer, engaged her in an argument, saying she stole the land from Old Man Donaldson who had been his friend and had told Ulke he could hunt for relics there in perpetuity.

We knew we were caught red handed so before she could call the police we started down the still unpaved Marcey Road to Military Road, then to

Cherrydale on Lee Highway. We then walked two miles down Lee Highway to Rosslyn, across Key Bridge into Georgetown and up the long steps to get our streetcar to home. We resolved to be more careful next time.

Years passed. I finished college, medical school, and internship. In 1951 I began private medical practice in our first home at 4011 Lorcom Lane, a few blocks from Mrs. White's farm. One fine balmy Sunday afternoon I drove down Marcey Road in our 1948 Chevrolet, taking my seven year old son Mike along. Harding and Mrs. White, having finished their Sunday dinner, were sitting on the screen porch of their two story frame house gently rocking and talking—enjoying the fall weather. They had now been friends for 32 years. The house was just as I remembered it—covered with aged brown wooden shakes. The walnut tree was dropping its fall crop of nuts hidden in thick green shells. The old low red barn was still there.

Harding leaned forward in his rocker as I walked toward the screened porch. Would they scold us and run me off again? I introduced myself and told them I was a doctor living nearby. I then confessed that over 16 years ago I had been here with Titus Ulke and we were told to leave or Mrs. White would call the police and have us run off her property. They said they remembered Ulke bringing young kids there. We all now had a good laugh.

Harding, too old to farm it all, got rid of his old plow horse but still kept the cow. The cow looked up for a moment, then went back to grazing.

Harding still raised a small field of squash and some sweet corn, tomatoes, and a few pole beans. He sold them to neighbors, weighing them in an old spring scale with a great round dial and a metal pan hanging from three short chains.

In the next ten years I visited them to buy squash and corn, and, in the fall, to get a few apples. I could no longer hunt for arrowheads. The fields were grown up in weeds and poison ivy.

As we became better friends, Harding took me out to the old red barn to show me how he was making extra money. He had cages and cages of guinea pigs. His old rusted red pickup truck shared space with the cages along with old plows and other farm tools no longer being used.

Soon Harding began to call me when he felt sick. If he came to my office he was wearing his only costume—bib overalls and a blue shirt. His straw hat, perched on the back of his head, was falling apart. Mrs. White was tended by Dr. Zylman, a friend of mine. She did the cooking and Harding did the chores. Then she died of old age. She had sold the house to Arlington County for a park but stipulated Harding could live there the rest of his natural life.

Harding had a standard routine. In the mornings he would put on his bib overalls and drive to the Drug Fair on Lee Highway, across from the old red

brick volunteer firehouse in Cherrydale. He had breakfast at the soda fountain. Then he'd sit and talk to anyone who came by. After that he would back his truck to the loading platform of the nearby Safeway store. He would gather all of the lettuce and cabbage trimmings, carrot tops, and any other vegetable residue from the produce department, then drive back home to feed his little piggies, as he called them. The young Stewart boy living next door in the old Donaldson log house cleaned the cages and chopped bedding hay for the guinea pigs. Once a month a man came and bought the mature guinea pigs to sell to medical laboratories.

Then I found the greatest treasure of all, an old iron coal scuttle in a dark corner. It was filled to the top with Indian artifacts that had been picked up on those very fields over the years. There were hammer heads, arrowheads, scrapers.

After Mrs. White was buried Harding moved his bed from upstairs into the small bedroom room just off the side door, Mrs. White's bedroom. On good days he would still sit rocking on the front screened porch.

Shepherds, living in Donaldson's house, moved to a more modern house off Lee Highway. Harding soon got too old to raise pigs but I could still find him at the soda fountain at Drug Fair having breakfast and talking to his many friends. He spent most days sitting by the window next to side door, smoking a cigarette and hoping someone would visit. And I did. Often.

In 1961 Viola and I bought our home at 5161 North 37th Street. Harding loaned me his old rusting red pickup. I loaded it from a pile of his *Pig Maoor*, as he called it. I backed the truck up the hill beside our new house and spread it on my new vegetable garden.

A Donaldson relative, Mr. Hahn, built a nice brick home near Harding's house and moved in with his wife. It had been the last remaining open field where I could still hunt artifacts. Harding could see the Hahns coming and going as he sat most of the day 1ooking out the window. When I visited Harding in his house, I looked about. There was a fine Seth Thomas wall clock in a mahogany case hanging in the room, ticking away. Harding wound it every Sunday night. It kept good time. He had an old cradle phone sitting on top of a telephone book that was perched atop a low handmade walnut two door cupboard sitting on the floor to one side of the door. The few shelves in the room held old oil lamps—for when the electricity went out. And a few pieces of milk glass. I especially admired the painted milk glass syrup pitcher. I asked if I could look upstairs.

"Go ahead; I haven't been up there for years." There I found a tiny metal lathe and lots of watch parts. When Robert lived with his mother he used to make watch parts on the small lathe. Mrs. White's son, Robert, the fireman, died in 1952 in Suitland, Maryland of a heart attack.

Then I found the greatest treasure of all, an old iron coal scuttle in a dark corner. It was filled to the top with Indian artifacts that had been picked up on those very fields over the years. There were hammer heads, arrowheads, scrapers. This exceeded anything Ulke and I ever found. Harding said I could have them.

One by one I became the physician for the five other families living in old homes on that dirt road, each a separate story.

Early on a Wednesday morning, April 12, 1967, I got a call from Mr. Hahn. "Doc, I looked over this morning and Harding was not at the window, smoking his cigarette like always. I went in. I think he's dead."

1 went right over. Harding had gotten out of bed and was pulling on his bib overalls and never finished. He lay slumped alongside the bed.

I filled out the death certificate—I always carried several in my car. I called the undertaker from the old cradle phone sitting on the telephone book atop the hand made walnut cupboard near the door. As I was leaving Mr. Hahn said: "Doc, Harding told me you never charged him for all those medical visits. He said you were to take anything you wanted out of the house and barn before we notify the County Park people."

Why am I reminded of these two old friends every day these many years later? Because that handsome handmade low walnut cupboard hangs on the wall of our family room. It is filled with old things, including the painted milk glass syrup pitcher. The mahogany Seth Thomas wall clock ticks and tocks, telling the correct time—if I remember to wind it Sunday nights. The old scale Harding used to weigh vegetables hangs on the beam between the kitchen and the family room. There is a sticker seal on the back of the big dial certifying its accuracy by Mr. Melnick of The Arlington Weights and Measures. I'm pleased how handy it is for weighing things. Harding's old sickle and a wooden potato masher hang on the old board wall, separating the two rooms.

When I hung the clock in our home I noticed that Harding had routinely put family obituaries in the bottom of the clock, just under the pendulum. I continue this practice. It is an exercise in reality for me. Today I am 84 years old. I have lost so many dear friends and relatives in the 70 years since I met Harding and Mrs. White in a corn field when I was fourteen years old.

The property now belonged to the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority and they soon made changes. They tore down the old log cabin of Old Man Donaldson. They kept Daedy's house, on the right just before Harding's. It was made into a Nature Center. Hahn's modern brick house is now the resi-

dence for the park superintendent. Harding's house and the one story red barn were removed. They said they were of no historical importance. The walnut tree still stands.

Neighborhood citizens bought several acres of the land on the now wide two lane paved Marcey Road. The Donaldson Run Civic Association was born and a community swimming pool was built. New houses sprouted up like intrusive boulders along Marcey Road. Water and sewer were extended to the Nature Center. The George Washington Parkway was under construction and heavy equipment crossed the bluff to reach the construction. They drove right over where the Indians were buried over a thousand years ago.

So, as I eat my breakfast, lunch and supper each day I'm surrounded with memories of these old friends—the clock, the walnut cupboard holding the milk glass syrup pitcher, the sickle, the potato masher, the scale. And as I look out at my productive garden, rich with the "Maoor" from Harding's guinea pigs, I feel good.

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Dr. "Bill" Orsinger and his wife Viola moved to Arlington when they married in 1945. He was then still a medical student at George Washington University Medical School. They lived in the old one bedroom apartments, Arna Valley, on South Glebe Road until he finished his internship. His first job was physician for the prison at Lorton, Virginia, while also being a country doctor for three years. Except for an 18 month tour as a public health physician in Naples, Italy, they have been Arlington residents ever since, where he was a family doctor until retirement. For the past 20 years he has been a volunteer in the Bonsai Collection at the National Arboretum in Washington.