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Development might steal distinct Jasper County history, site

BY DAVID LAUDERDALE

This story is part of the Lowcountry Swamped series.

Milton Woods grew up like Huck Finn in the creeks and fields of Chelsea Plantation, sometimes hunting fox on horseback with dogs yelping loud enough to be heard through the towering pines all the way to Ridgeland.

His father, Milton Woods Sr., was for decades manager of the large hunting preserve in the Okatie area between Ridgeland and Beaufort.

That quiet wonderland for young Milton is now threatened by high-density, cookie-cutter, Anywhereville development.

His father had a big job, answering to Chelsea owner Marshall Field III, one of the wealthiest men in America as heir to the department store empire and owner of Chicago newspapers.

Field built what he called his "Quail Lodge" at Chelsea in 1937, and indeed the 7,700-square-foot white brick mansion that provided a winter getaway was tiny compared to his main estate on Long Island, New York.

"After five years of work by hundreds of men under his personal supervision, (Field) had created a country estate like those he had admired as a student (at Eton and Cambridge) in England," reads a history of Caumsett, now a state park.

"Even by the standards of the Long Island Gold Coast of the booming 1920s, it was baronial — a manor house of 108 rooms with stables to match, 20 cottages for guests and his 85 employees, a dairy farm of 180 Guernsey cows, a private polo field, yacht basin, indoor and outdoor tennis courts, greenhouses, gardens and miles of beach."

Milton Woods' father had to make sure the Chelsea cottage was clean, the meals gourmet, the dogs (that summered in North Carolina) disciplined, the quail and dove aflutter, the horses reined, the grass green, the roads passable, the woods free of poachers, the crops planted, and all the guests treated like royalty because some of them may have been.

Milton Woods, an 84-year-old retired insurance agent, stands today in his own cottage not far away. It's on the banks of Euhaw Creek, across the marsh from the burial site of Declaration of Independence signer Judge Thomas Heyward and the spellbinding remains of his White Hall residence just beyond.

"I had a wonderful childhood in the marsh and creeks and woods," he says, "and that's where I get my respect for nature. I love it. The streams and rivers are part of our DNA."

That has driven him to now stand before the Jasper County Council and Ridgeland Town Council, urging them to say "no" to over-development.

He tells them it will harm the creeks, rivers and thereby the deep Port Royal Sound that has been known as a Lowcountry jewel for all of recorded history.

ELEANOR ROOSEVELT

Milton Woods says the Chelsea Plantation that Marshall Field III bought from a hunt club was once an 18,000-acre timber operation.

Snake Road that runs through it comes by its name honestly.

That's because it was designed, in effect, by oxen. Woods said it was a logging road that slithered through the woods on a winding path of least resistance.

Later, Chelsea, like other plantations in the Lowcountry, was a gathering place for America's blue-bloods.

The president of the hunt club who sold to Field was Harold Stanley, chief executive of Morgan Stanley, according to the book, "Northern Money Southern Land: The Low-country Plantation Sketches of Chlotilde R. Martin" edited by Robert B. Cuthbert and Stephen G. Hoffius.

A real estate agent who sold Alfred Loomis and Landon K. Thorne their first land on Hilton Head Island met them at Chelsea, according to the book "Remembering the Way it Was, Volume II" by Fran Bollin.

The late Harriet Keyserling tells in her book "Against The Tide" about the time she was invited to a dinner party there because she knew the other guest, Flora Lewis, a longtime columnist in The New York Times and other publications.

Marshall Field III bought Chelsea shortly after marrying his third wife, Ruth Pruyn Phipps Field.

He would rethink the gaudy glitter of the roaring '20s, and he and Ruth would spend their lives supporting liberal causes such as racial equality. He was considered one of Eleanor Roosevelt's closest allies and strongest financial supporters of causes supporting the United Nations and refugees.

Eleanor Roosevelt wrote of his hands-on approach to philanthropy in one of her "My Day" newspaper columns:

"I think Mr. Field has learned what I feel is a great lesson for all of us to learn. Namely, that if we really want to know and understand the life of this nation, we must see things with our own eyes, talk to people ourselves, and build up a power of understanding through personal contact."

They also were leaders and philanthropists for the arts, and Ruth was an advocate for the rights and welfare of children.

A lasting legacy of Ruth Fields in our community is her donation long after her husband died in 1956 of land for the first clinic and headquarters for the Beaufort Jasper Hampton Comprehensive Health Services Inc. in 1970. The clinic, a stone's throw from the Chelsea mansion, is named for her.

Ruth Field died at Chelsea in January 1994 at age 86.

It was believed the land would always be as she left it. Robert L. "Bob" Phipps, a son from her first marriage to American Thoroughbred racing giant Ogden Phipps, lives today at Bolan Hall Plantation on Euhaw Creek.

That's an area of old Chelsea now being eyed by developers.

$32 MILLION

Marshall Field V, former publisher of the Chicago Sun-Times and a national leader in conservation causes, sold Chelsea along with the estate of co-owner and close friend Nelson Doubleday Jr., former owner of the New York Mets.

Its 5,200 acres were sold in 2019 for $32 million to brothers Bryan and Blaine McClure partnered with Legacy Land Holdings of Missouri, the Charleston Post and Courier reported.

Bryan McClure told the paper that development of the site was not on the radar.

The Jasper County Chamber of Commerce quoted Bryan McClure at the time saying, "We realize that the property is in the path of growth and that it is prudent to periodically evaluate the development options . . . but we do not have any immediate plans. In the meantime, we are committed to trying to preserve as much of the rich history and tradition as possible ..."

The brothers have kept land around the main house, but now other tracts of Chelsea are being proposed for development by different owners.

Milton Woods, whose primary residence is in downtown Ridgeland, is afraid it means rural Jasper County will soon need to be fitting itself for its first highway flyover.

His river cottage would be in a doughnut hole consisting of some 50 homes on Tickton Hall Road that would be surrounded by residential and commercial development under a proposal before Ridgeland Town Council.

"We already have a problem of shellfish harvesting in Hazzard Creek," he said. "We're very concerned that this a critical area. Water quality is a key issue, and so is traffic."

He said Jasper County needs stronger regulations on stormwater runoff.

Woods, who many years ago chaired Jasper's first planning commission, says local governments have it backward. They need to plan infrastructure before allowing development, not play catch-up later.

"We need to be very careful with what we approve on our land," he said. "They aren't making any more of it.

"We've been blessed with our land in the Lowcountry, and it is disappearing now. They think that growth is the answer to all things. But it can bring on undesirable things."

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DAVID LAUDERDALE

Milton Woods in his Euhaw Creek cottage.

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