

The Rambler

By Lois Faulkner

HOLLY HOUSE IN CO'S COB

Picture a young man sitting on a railroad bridge at noon consuming the contents of a bag of penny candy! If it was in 1896, it might have been the well-known artist Elmer MacRae "enjoying" (?) his first lunch in Co's Cob.

A twinkle enters Mr. MacRae's eye as he recalls his first appearance at the summer art classes being conducted by the great teacher and artist, Twachtman, at Holly House on Strickland Rd. during the peak of the art colony in what was then a little fishing village. Classes were in full swing when the youth arrived from New York and being shy, he preferred the penny candy to the chattering young lady students having luncheon in the house! That only happened once, however!

Mr. MacRae now makes his home in rambling old Holly House with his wife, the former Miss Constant Holley. The 300 year old historical dwelling and its occupants carry the visitor back half a century to the late 19th century and early 20th century when great men painted there or held "bull-sessions" on the long front veranda. Twachtman (whose son Alden now lives on Round Hill Rd.) and for a while, J. Alden Weir, taught many art students during the summer there and Mr. MacRae recalls among his friends the names of many great artists and writers who came to the old house.

Included among the writers and the artists all "individualists" were such famous names as Childe Hassam, Lincoln Steffens, Kerr Raby, Bert Leston Taylor, Willa Cather and many others.

The greatest man to Mr. MacRae was Twachtman. "It is an inspiration to think of him", says the Co's Cob artist. "I just adored him. He was a very kind and charming man who had a great sense of humor."

Lincoln Steffens, well-known writer and "muck-raker" (he even "muck-raked" Greenwich!) was a very close friend of the MacRaes and their little twin daughters, Constant and Clarissa. He was a great lover of the water and while editor of the N. Y. Globe, he used to come out to the little art colony often, insisting on a swim before dinner. If the tide was out (as it is so faithfully!) Mr. Steffens, undaunted, would go up the road a piece and dive happily into the mill pond! He was very fond of sailing, too, and Mr. MacRae took him out in his boat many times. Steffens later had his own home in Riverside, across the river.

Childe Hassam, who did many etchings of Holly House and the harbor, is also remembered as a very mischievous person who loved a good time although he worked longer and harder than anyone.

Mrs. MacRae has several books by Willa Cather which the authoress inscribed to her in the "Roarin' Twenties" when Miss Cather's audience had yet to acclaim her as it does today. One of Mr. MacRae's pet possessions is the writer's father's mustache cup which she sent him from Red Bank, Ariz., when he once remarked that he'd never seen one of the curiosities!

Holly House is a monument to the great men fostered by the "Co's Cob school of artists", as well as to the history of a great nation. Slave quarters are still in the attic and Mrs. MacRae remembers a negro woman whose mother was born a slave in the very house!

The house is full of beautiful etchings, paintings and other original art pieces done by Hassam, Twachtman and the other artists, as well as much of Mr. MacRae's distinguished work. It is an inspiring experience to walk through the old place and admire the beautiful art work as well as the workmanship of the house itself.

Four poster beds, hand carved mantels and panelled walls, antique furniture, the hand-carved Queen Anne staircase, all carry one back to another era. The modern world seems far away indeed. Mrs. MacRae delights in pointing out the "goldfish window" and many other scenes sketched by Holly House frequenters. The visitor can view the scenes through his own eyes and then on paper through the artist's eyes.

Some of the most delightful work which Mr. MacRae has done are the pictures of his twins as they grew up in Holly House. One which is especially memorable is a portrait of the twins when babies, asleep in their carriage. Only the heads are shown and the infants look so real and petal-fresh that you expect them to open their eyes and smile.

Mr. MacRae has done pastels, oils and water colors. He says it depends on your mood, what medium you choose. He no longer paints but now devotes his time to carrying many beautiful objects in his barn studio. One of the loveliest examples of his work is a five-panel peacock screen, intricately carved and painted by the artist. Another lovely carving is a piece painted with colorful zinnias which hangs over one of the beautiful old fireplaces.

When asked his opinion on modern art, this artist, who comes from a tradition of the best in American artists, replied, "I am waiting for the storm to blow over." Mr. MacRae says that the first acquaintance he had with the new form of "art" so discouraged him that he "wanted to jump overboard." Everything he had learned as a basis for art was ignored.

He does say, however, that he feels art has grown too "sugar sweet" and that this new "artificial" art is helping to restore it to its former strength and greatness by cutting out the overly sweetness.

The same pertains to music, in his mind. The dissonances of "modern music" hurts him, although, he laughs, "Some golfing people says it's gorgeous." His favorite composer is Beethoven and he doesn't believe that he's progressed far beyond that stage in his genuine enjoyment of music. Beethoven, for him, suits every mood, whether it be joyful, tragic, dancing or yet another.

Mr. MacRae believes that Rembrandt is one of the world's greatest painters. He considers "Woman Paring Her Nails" as one of the greatest of the Dutch master's paintings because of its very simplicity and oneness of expression. Art should not be concerned with the scientific, according to this artist, because science is not art. Art is what appears to be to the artist.

"That is why", he states, "that the art of the American Indians is great. It is not complex. It expresses one emotion and is simple. It is true art."

So there it stands Holly House, a place of beauty and of tradition, a place full of memories and a great era. It is set apart from the rest of Greenwich as a place complete in itself, a place symbolic of the past, a monument to the men and women who grew there.