

Ruth Esherick Bascom

The Extraordinary Life and Times of an Artist's Daughter

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Ruth Esherick was born on June 28, 1922 in an old stone farmhouse on Aschenfelter Road near the summit of Diamond Rock Hill in the northwest corner of Tredyffrin township, Chester County, Pennsylvania. A decade earlier her father, Wharton, a painter, and Ruth's strikingly beautiful mother Leticia (Letty) Nofer Esherick, who wanted to raise her family close to

nature, bought the house and a small barn on five acres of relatively level land for \$3,000. Wharton and Letty sought a place where they could live off the land, and he could paint as he pleased. It provided far more primitive living conditions than they were accustomed to, but for these newly-weds the property was as romantic as a Parisian garret.



The original farmhouse, Ruth's birthplace, as purchased by Wharton and Letty in 1913, with the wild cherry tree beside. Wharton said he bought the tree, and they threw in the house. *Courtesy of the Wharton Esherick Museum.*

Both Wharton and Letty came from prosperous families, with large houses in fashionable West Philadelphia and beach homes at the New Jersey shore. Wharton's maternal grandfather, Wharton Harris, had used profits from the family's sugar refinery, Harris and Stotesbury, to found the Provident National Bank. He owned the land in Philadelphia between 38th and 39th Streets, from Walnut to Locust streets, where he built a mansion that was sold after his death to financier Anthony Drexel, a partner of banker J. P. Morgan. Letty's father was a purveyor of fine meats, with a large stall at the Reading Terminal Market. His customers included the Union League and the leading hotels and restaurants in the city. He had built a large home on 40th Street, and another at the Jersey shore, and was the first in the area to own an automobile—a Packard convertible—and a naphtha-fueled motor boat.



Letty Escherick holding her daughter Ruth, 1922.
Courtesy of Mansfield Bascom

At the artistic height of American Impressionism, with its play of contrasting colors, Wharton had studied drawing and print-making at the Pennsylvania Museum School of Industrial Art, and painting at the Pennsylvania Academy for the Fine Arts. Painters were abandoning their city studios for the more colorful countryside such as in New Hope in Bucks County, and the Academy had opened a summer school at Yellow Springs in Chester County. But while Wharton knew precisely which pigments to mix to duplicate any color he saw in nature, the buying public seemed to want exaggerated color, and his subtle paintings hung unsold on his studio walls. While Ruth gestated in her mother's womb, Wharton was busy carving 71 woodcuts illustrating *Rhymes of Early Jungle Folk*, a children's book on evolution published in 1922, the year of the famous Scopes "Monkey" Trial.

As a teenager, Letty was interested in cars and boats, and had earned a reputation for her abilities to get stubborn engines working. When they first moved to Chester County, she and Wharton had relied on a horse and two-wheeled cart for their travels to the nearby village of Paoli. Soon, however, she found a much-used Stanley Steamer which they could afford. It took no longer to develop a head of steam than to harness a horse. Wharton recalled driving a guest to the Paoli railroad station one night, using a polished pie plate and a kerosene lantern as a headlight. But the steamer finally gave out, beyond repair, and they returned to the horse and buggy.

These two "Bohemians" managed to assimilate well into the community at all levels. By 1915, the Pennsylvania Railroad had completed electrification of its Main Line right-of-way from Philadelphia west to Paoli, and many wealthy families were moving to the suburbs. The Great Valley—despite its water-powered grist, lumber, hammer, paper and plaster mills; its smithies and wheelwrights; its dairy farms and its quarries—was becoming increasingly gentrified. Wharton could play chess with the wealthy while Letty socialized with their wives. He would help the farmhands with haying while Letty learned about canning, and taught the rudiments of family planning to the quarry-workers wives.

Ruth was Wharton and Letty's fourth child. The first, Jane, had died of an infection contracted at the hospital in West Chester, and Letty vowed to have all her future births at home, attended by a physician or midwife. Her second child, Mary, born in 1916, had

survived, but the third, born in 1918, died from sudden infant death syndrome. Ruth was born in 1922, and in 1926, Ruth and Mary were joined by brother Peter. Wharton converted the bedroom overlooking the Valley, which he had used as a painting studio, into the children's playroom. He painted the walls with farmyard animals—sheep, rabbits, a horse looking around one side of the window, a mule looking around the other, a duck with her ducklings beneath, and birds flying in a teal sky.

The farm house on Aschenfelter Road had been built in 1839 with no water other than from a well, and heat only from a Franklin stove, a wood-burning cast-iron cooking stove in the kitchen, and a fireplace in the living room. But the old house became one of the first in the township to have its own running water. In 1895, the Berwyn Water Company had dammed Pickering Creek in Phoenixville and pumped water to a small reservoir atop Diamond Rock Hill. The water main to Paoli and Berwyn ran through the farmhouse's front yard, and the homeowners received the benefit. Likewise, in 1915, an electric utility company ran a pole line along Aschenfelter Road from its generating plant in Phoenixville to the Howellville quarry, thus allowing the farm house to be one of the first to have the luxury of electricity. There were many within the Great Valley who would wait almost a decade for that privilege.

As the power company expanded its service, telephone lines from a Paoli exchange utilized those poles. The Esherick's phone number, like that of other subscribers, was just three digits plus a letter indicating a party-line shared with two or three other customers, each of whom responded to a call based upon the number of rings. There were no phone books; the numbers the Esherick's needed were scrawled in pencil on the inside of the basement door, where the "candle stick" telephone stood on its shelf.

The farmhouse's previous owner had been a seedsman who used the property as a summer home and for lawn grass display. Wharton and Letty quickly plowed the east lawn for a vegetable garden, the west lawn—formerly a grass tennis court—into an asparagus patch and an orchard, and much of the south lawn for a large peony garden with a hundred or more plants thinned from a relative's garden, saving only enough lawn for a croquet court. To earn a bit of income, the peony blossoms were sold to Bryn Mawr College for graduation festivities—if they bloomed on schedule. Ruth remembered standing



Taken in 1924, two-year old Ruth plays in the pond Wharton built to keep himself busy and out of the way while she was being born with the help of the family doctor.
Courtesy of Mansfield Bascom

barefoot as a child of six on Diamond Rock Hill Road trying to sell bunches of blossoms to the few passing motorists and wagon drivers.

With the exception of the Lancaster Turnpike (the "Pike"), all the roads in the township, including Diamond Rock Hill Road and Aschenfelter Road, were dirt roads. The Pike had been "paved" with macadam using layers of crushed stone without any bituminous binder, and compacted by heavy, horse-drawn or steam-powered rollers. The Pike was an all-weather road, whereas all other dirt roads would easily turn to mud when it rained. One year, torrential rains scoured deep ruts in Diamond Rock Hill Road, making it unusable. Wharton contacted the Road Commissioner to complain, and was told to fix it himself. On the advice of a friend who had been a road commissioner, Wharton had the Commissioner arrested with the threat of jail if the road wasn't repaired immediately. The next day the job was completed.

The final repairs to Diamond Rock Hill Road included thirteen shallow swales cut diagonally across the road, designed to divert a flow of water to the shoulders to prevent future rutting. Called "thank-you-ma'ams," they provided a small bump as one rode over them, hence their name. They also provided a place where a wagon could be stopped to give the horses a rest without the threat of rolling down the hill. And in the winter, when the road was covered with snow, these swales formed

small jumps for sledders. Speeding down Diamond Rock Hill Road was truly a thrill, becoming airborne at the thank-you-ma'ams, with the momentum taking the sled far into the valley. But the thrilling ride was followed by a long, lonely, cold and exhausting walk back up the hill to home. Once per snowfall was enough.

Wharton and Letty installed a coal-fired boiler to heat the uninsulated house, with radiators placed throughout. But there were stories of families being asphyxiated in their sleep by carbon monoxide, so the Eshericks slept on porches or with windows open summer and winter. Wharton and Letty slept on a first floor porch, and the children on a separate porch over the kitchen and adjacent to the nursery. In the winter all would put on their pajamas, snuggle into their feather beds—sleeping bags made of down-filled quilts—and then, like in a sack race, quickly hop onto the porch and into their cold beds.

Letty baked the family's bread using flour ground by the one-armed miller at the Great Valley Mill on North Valley Road at Valley Creek. She had a large vegetable garden, and started seeds early in a cold frame and hot bed—a cold frame with a layer of earth over fresh manure that produced heat as it rotted. They picked apples from their own trees. Their milk, un-pasteurized, came from a farm in the valley. Yogurt was as popular then as it is today, and Letty made her own, leaving bowls of milk on the window sills to sour and thicken into clabber—until Ruth became allergic to it.

Unhappy with the teaching methods of the public schools, Letty wanted to open a “progressive education” school at “Sunekrest,” the name they had given the farmhouse. So she, Wharton and Mary spent the winter



Wharton Esherick's woodcut *Winter Play*, 1928. Courtesy of The Wharton Esherick Museum

of 1919-1920 at Marietta Johnson's School for Organic Education in Fairhope, Alabama, where Letty could observe the teaching methods. Play was the basis for education; historic events were learned by costumed pageants, arithmetic by inscribing the numbers on the smooth orange clay walls of the local gullies. There were even classes in stone throwing and rhythmic dancing. And in Fairhope they learned of a Rudolf Steiner-related summer camp for Eurythmic dancing in the Adirondack Mountains.

Upon their return from Fairhope in the spring of 1920, the Eshericks visited the Walter T. Matthews Ford

dealership in Paoli—which also sold tractors and had a gas pump—and bought a Ford Model T automobile. The car had four cylinders, wood slat seats, and celluloid (also known as “isinglass”) roll-down side curtains. The family was now able to travel to the dance camp and other adventures beyond Paoli. By 1922, Letty was teaching rhythmic dancing on the farmhouse lawn using a wind-up Victrola for music. Her students were young local girls who danced wearing nothing but flowing, colorful cheese-cloth scarves in the style of Isadora Duncan. It was said that horsemen from Chesterbrook Farm sometimes included Aschenfelter Road on their daily rides when the girls were dancing.

For the next several years the family’s summers were spent at the dance camp in the Adirondacks where Letty earned their keep by serving as housemother for all the children, who lived in a separate building apart from the adults. Wharton made two large tables for the camp’s dining room, drawings and woodcuts for the camp’s promotional material, and a sculpture he called *Dance Finale*.

Mary had started at the Organic school, and Letty home-schooled her in the ways she had learned. But when Mary was unable to pass the standard academic tests administered by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, she was required by law to attend a public or certified private school. Friends from the dance camp who were professional teachers had started a “progressive” school in the Hessian Hills at Croton-on-Hudson, New York for children of a growing community of intellectuals of the time. Mary became one of their first pupils, and lived with one of the teachers. Her first project was to paint a mural on the wall of her classroom. Wharton paid her tuition by making chairs for the entire class of five, plus one for the teacher.

In 1928, when Ruth was ready for first grade, Letty insisted that she join Mary at Hessian Hills, despite Wharton’s concern that they could not afford two tuitions. Letty was adamant, and accepted the position of housemother at the school, cooking and caring for all the boarders in exchange for her girls’ tuitions. But that December, Mary found Letty lying comatose on the kitchen floor. After local hospitalization she was transported by ambulance to Philadelphia where her uncle, a physician, determined she was suffering an acute inflammation of the brain called encephalitis. Six weeks later, out of her coma, Letty insisted that her rehabilitation take place at a clinic recommended by a friend who was an osteopath. Her condition was



Ruth with her dog, the model for Wharton's 1928 sculpture *Pup*.
Courtesy of Mansfield Bascom.

treated with diet, diuretics and purgatives until she was discharged into Wharton’s care and he took her home. The clinic was later closed, and the doctor jailed for fraud.

Letty’s encephalitis had left part of her brain permanently damaged, and her coordination would remain impaired. She was no longer able to dance, manage a household or open a school. She had been happy at Fairhope, however, so Wharton took the family there for the 1929–30 school year, where the tuition at the Organic school was free to residents. A local woman was hired to provide care for the family, allowing Wharton to come and go. During his stays at Fairhope, he sculpted two large pieces in local sandstone, and, working with a local potter who had a wheel and kiln, created 30 humorous ceramic garden sculptures.

Returning to their Paoli home, Ruth now decided it was her turn to paint murals. There was a small bedroom used as a sewing room and clothes closet, with a mirror opposite the window. Ruth painted a large sun in the dark corner next to the window where it would glow from the reflected light. She painted the lower half of the bathroom a watery green with colorful fishes, the upper half a sky blue with colorful birds, and on the door she painted a giant frog. On the walls of her parents' bedroom she painted mountains.

As Wharton progressed from painting to carving frames for his paintings to woodcuts and then to furniture making, the house began to fill up with his work. An antique chest he carved like a woodcut, with depictions of their house and barn engulfed in a swirling Art Nouveau landscape, was soon followed by a dining table with depictions of the preparation of the meal carved around the periphery. There was a plate rack, and a desk for storing and showing the woodcut prints with depictions of Letty and Wharton on the front *au naturel*. Becoming convinced that furniture did not need all that "literature," he dropped the carving in favor of pure form.

With their parent's funds exhausted by Letty's illness, Ruth and her siblings attended public school in Paoli. Mary was academically unprepared for eighth grade and would soon drop-out of school. But Ruth was an excellent student, learning quickly and easily, and had many friends. She attended the Paoli Grammar School,¹ a large brick building on East Central Avenue, through the eighth grade. Some of the Paoli school's students were from the large Italian community on West Central Avenue, where their fathers worked as masons, or in the Pennsylvania Railroad yards and car shop adjacent to their neighborhood. In those lean depression years, when jobs and money were scarce, she remembered one boy walking to and from school along the tracks, carrying a sack in which he gathered spilled chunks of coal for his family's cook stove. Some days the boy arrived at school smelling of homemade wine, reportedly the only food in the house.



Ruth c. 1934. Courtesy of Mansfield Bascom.

Ruth long remembered a day, April 18, 1934, when as a seventh grader, she and all the students and teachers were requested by principal Kenneth Mateer to move outside and sit along the Pennsylvania Railroad's sloped



A Ford school bus from East Whiteland township arrives on the west side of the Paoli Elementary School in the mid 1930s. Ruth would have taken a similar bus to school every day, catching that bus at the restored but unused Octagonal Schoolhouse at the bottom of Diamond Rock Hill Road. Courtesy of the Matthews Ford Collection.

¹ The Paoli Elementary School, opened in 1927 on East Central Avenue in Paoli, continued as a public grammar school until 1981. In 1997, the Delaware Valley Friends School moved into a completely renovated campus on the same site, where it continues to serve the community today.

embankment behind the school “to watch for something special.” Before long, gliding gracefully from Philadelphia’s Broad Street Station to Downingtown, passed the magnificent and revolutionary Burlington *Zephyr*, just manufactured by the Budd Company of Philadelphia, with its lightweight stainless steel passenger cars and streamlined diesel locomotive glistening in the sun. Passing through Paoli on its press debut, it was followed by a steam locomotive pulling a train of Tuscan red Pennsylvania Railroad heavyweight cars filled with reporters. That *Zephyr* was the precursor to passenger railroading as we know it today.²

Back in 1924, a troupe of actors from the famed Provincetown Playhouse in Greenwich Village under the direction of Jasper Deeter, established a new repertory theater (“Hedgerow”) in an old grist mill in nearby Rose Valley, Delaware County, Pennsylvania. The troupe’s reputation gave them access to current, socialist playwrights such as George Bernard Shaw, Eugene O’Neil and Sean O’Casey. Letty’s brother Ferd, a graduate of Swarthmore College, had joined the theater as their business manager, and the Eshericks quickly became very involved. Jasper recognized Wharton’s talents and invited him to design the set and costumes for a new play. Wharton also agreed to carve and print a large woodcut poster to promote the show. Though this show was a flop, never to be repeated, the two men become lasting friends as fellow artists.

Through the 1920s one of Letty’s traditions was to bake a chocolate cake for every Hedgerow Theatre opening night party. In the absence of baby-sitters, they took young Ruth with them to the openings. After the shows there was nothing to eat but chocolate cake, and nothing to drink but beer. Ruth soon developed a liking for the combination that lasted her lifetime, though later in life she switched to the non-alcoholic variety.

In 1931, at the age of eight, Ruth made her stage debut in A. A. Milne’s *Make Believe*, and Wharton carved a woodcut poster to commemorate the occasion. Some



The *Zephyr* was officially christened at Broad Street Station, Philadelphia, on April 18, 1934. A bottle of champagne was broken over the nose of the train, after which the train left with many distinguished passengers, traveling through Paoli for Downingtown, on the first of two demonstration runs prior to delivery to the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad. Courtesy of Temple University Libraries, Urban Archives, Philadelphia, PA.

² For much more on this legendary railroad event, and Ruth Esherick’s girlhood memories of this occasion, see “When the Legendary Burlington *Zephyr* Passed Through Paoli” by Roger D. Thorne, found in Vol. 47, No. 1 (March 2010), of the *Tredyffrin Easttown History Quarterly*

of Hedgerow’s plays had children’s roles, and there was usually an Esherick child the right age for the part.

There were always many visitors to “Sunekrest,” including the fun-loving author Sherwood Anderson, there for the opening of Hedgerow’s dramatization of his *Winesburg, Ohio*; the overweight and pompous Ford Madox Ford, who stayed more than a month while writing his *Great Trade Route* until Wharton sent him off to New York on a Hedgerow tour bus; and Theodore Dreiser, for the opening of Hedgerow’s premier of his *American Tragedy*. When Wharton completed his sculpture *Oblivion*, depicting two lovers in embrace from a scene in the Lynn Riggs’ adaptation of James Gould Cozzens’ novel *Son of Perdition*, the entire Hedgerow Company had been invited to the Esherick home. Caught by a blizzard, however, the troupe spent the night sleeping on the living room floor warmed by a fire in the fireplace.

Wharton was by this time becoming well-known for his furniture and interiors, and was developing a small group of patrons who sought his work year after year. But his true interest was in sculpting. He made furniture for the enjoyment of others, sculpture for himself. His

work was not representational, but expressive of a concept, mood or emotion. His *Adolescence* (1941) depicts the abstract Ruth as a shy teenager in the nude. And *Nocturne* (1927) shows a bent, hollow-chested figure portraying Letty's grief at the loss of her child.

In time Letty recovered sufficiently from her encephalitis to function without help, and to resume, at least in a limited way, her independent life. But Letty and Wharton were becoming increasingly estranged. By 1938 Letty had moved to Hedgerow, and Wharton sent money for her upkeep when and as he could. Ruth, now sixteen and having obtained her driver's license, took over the management of the household, the shopping and cooking the meals.

Later that year, after completing her junior year at Radnor High School, Ruth spent the summer at Hedgerow. She loved it, and by fall she was uncertain whether to return to school to complete her senior year, or to remain at the theater. The Radnor principal persuaded the school board to include theater as a part of its career-study program, like carpentry or auto

repair. Ruth was thus able to accomplish both her objectives, returning to school once a month for tests and assignments. At the end of the school year the principal personally delivered her diploma at the theater. Ruth had been accepted by the theater company as an apprentice, and as payment, Wharton had made 36 chairs—with legs and backs of hammer handles—for the theater's rehearsal room.

Ruth would remain as a member of Hedgerow for the next 15 years, living in a large house the company had bought to house its members, with two, three or even four to a room. Hedgerow had survived the Great Depression by operating as a commune, with each member receiving room and board in lieu of wages, plus a small weekly allowance for clothing, cigarettes, beer, etc. Each was expected to perform household chores, and



Esherick's sculpture *Adolescence*, c. 1941. A shy adolescent caught in the nude. The sculpture is 9'2" tall, made of birch, and pressure treated with creosote. Courtesy of Mansfield Bascom.



Ruth, age 20, at Hedgerow House, 1942. Courtesy of Mansfield Bascom.

the company's only employee was a cook. In addition to performing on stage, Ruth progressed from cleaning the theater to managing the commissary and its vehicles to scheduling the actors' days and hours of performance, rehearsal, and chores. She would custom barber the actor's heads to best suit their scheduled roles. She would plan the meals, and shop for the food using the same truck that—equipped with benches—she used to pick-up audience members at the Rose Valley train station, sometimes in costume if she were in that night's play. In time, Ruth became a member of the organization's board, and ultimately, its chairman.

The plays were performed in repertory, in groups of three or four, which meant changing the sets, costumes and lighting daily. Although she enjoyed acting, she considered herself a craftsman at it rather than an artist, and usually performed in supporting roles. Her favorite role was as "Madeline" in Susan Glaspel's *Inheritors*, playing opposite Jasper Deeter as "Simon." Though the play had failed in New York, it was a great success at Hedgerow under Deeter's direction.



A newspaper clipping from 1945 features Ruth as "Madeline," and Jasper Deeter as "Simon," in a performance of Susan Glaspell's *Inheritors* at the Hedgerow Theater. Courtesy of Mansfield Bascom.

By 1950, Ruth was in charge of stage lighting, responsible for designing and operating the constantly changing stage illumination used in every show, including the numbers, locations, intensities, colors and sequencing of the spot and flood lights.

In 1951 the Hollywood movie *Bright Victory* was introduced in American theaters. It is a poignant World War II film about an American G.I., blinded by a German sniper in North Africa and transported, along with other blinded soldiers, to Valley Forge Army Hospital to recover and come to terms with his disability. Starring Arthur Kennedy, Peggy Dow, and Julia Adams, the production was made on-site at the Army Hospital in Phoenixville, with several scenes shot in downtown Phoenixville and Kimberton. Ruth applied for the role of "The Nurse," played the role in the film, and appeared in the film's credits. Many years later, when the film was being digitized, substantial sections were edited out, including all scenes showing Ruth's character. Ironically,

despite her character being cut from the digital version, Ruth's name remains on the credits as an official cast member of the movie.

It was also at that time that she met and married the Hedgerow Theater's electrician, Richard Keeler. They established housekeeping rather primitively in a small barn behind Hedgerow's house, the barn used to store electrical equipment. The theater's only requirement was that "any pregnancy would have to be scheduled two years in advance." The couple were divorced a few years later when his alcoholism and infidelity were more than she was willing to live with.

Finally, in 1954, Ruth left Hedgerow as the theater was experiencing major changes, foremost among them the retirement of founder Jasper Deeter. An old friend from Hedgerow offered her a temporary stage lighting job at a theater in Battle Creek, Michigan. From there she went to a theater in Denver as stage manager. When that company collapsed, Ruth worked as an administrator for a large engineering firm, reorganizing and stabilizing its drafting room procedures. But finding no good reason to remain in Denver, she returned to Paoli.

For 30 years Wharton had depended on cabinetmaker John Schmidt, who was able to grasp and produce his unique furniture designs in his workshop on nearby Jug Hollow Road in Valley Forge. But in 1955, John sold his house and shop, and moved away. Fortuitously for Wharton, an aunt died, leaving him an inheritance, enough to build his own furniture-making shop next to the studio. Wharton would have asked his architect friend George Howe to design it— they had worked together on a project for the 1940 New York World's Fair—but Howe had taken over the architecture school at Yale and recommended his protégé [the now renowned] Louis Kahn. Kahn designed, in collaboration with his assistant Ann Tyng, the hexagonal shapes of the workshop.

Ruth recalled the night Wharton, Lou and Ann met to define the building. Wharton had made a model of the site with its present buildings, and Ann had made models of the roofs: a single large roof, two midsize roofs and three small ones. One by one these were set on shot glasses on Wharton's model and their pros and cons discussed. With each change, the glasses were filled and emptied. They finally settled on three connected hexagonal units, each unit having three diamond-shaped roof planes.

It was at that time that blues singer Libby Holman, who had previously met Ruth when Libby performed in concert at Hedgerow, invited Ruth to be her stage manager for a tour of her show *Blues, Ballads and Sin Songs*, to raise funds for social causes, at colleges across the country and at the United Nations in New York. It was hoped that the tour would later expand to include Israel and India.

Libby, the widow of Smith Reynolds, heir to the R. J. Reynolds tobacco fortune, had a house on East 52nd Street in Manhattan, a large country estate in Stamford, Connecticut called "Treetops" with gardens, greenhouse, tennis court and pool, and a summer house in East Hampton. When their son died at age 14 in a mountain climbing accident, Libby used his inheritance to establish the Christopher Reynolds Foundation for World Peace, which enabled the Rev. Martin Luther King to travel to India to learn non-violent protest methods from Mahatma Gandhi.

Ruth shared an apartment on Riverside Drive with Miriam Phillips, a former leading lady at Hedgerow who was then performing in New York. The view out their window was not of the Hudson River, but the back yards of neighboring buildings with a cat-crib of clothes lines. Ruth owned no car, but was able to drive Libby's Rolls-Royce convertible to and from Stamford, sometimes living at "Treetops" to manage the household while Libby was away on trips.

On December 26, 1959, having spent Christmas with Letty, Ruth was headed back to New York by train. The dining car was exceptionally crowded, and the waiter asked if she would mind sharing her table with me and my nine-year old daughter, Halsey. When Halsey learned that Ruth was from Pennsylvania, she was ecstatic, as she had just finished reading the Nancy Drew mystery *The Witch Tree Symbol* and was eager to learn more about the Pennsylvania Amish. Working as an architect/engineer, I had just finished building a hotel in Puerto Rico, and had recently opened an office on San Juan's beautiful Condado Beach—with the Atlantic in the front yard and the lagoon, with its view of the city, in the backyard. It was my very good fortune that my daughter's spontaneous conversation with a complete stranger was to bring Ruth and me together.

As Ruth and I talked, we realized that each of us had just met the person we had been looking for. It was love at first meeting. I promised to send her a Caribbean cookbook, if I had her address; she would send Halsey

and me a Pennsylvania Dutch cookbook if she had ours. We all parted at Grand Central Terminal; me taking daughter Halsey to visit her mother, my ex-wife, and Halsey's brother James, for a few days while I stayed with friends; Ruth traveling to visit her old friends in Greenwich, Connecticut. She remembered weeping with joy as she walked from the train station to their home.

We exchanged the promised cookbooks, and began writing each other. Not sentimental love letters, but letters telling about ourselves. I invited her to the hotel's grand opening party, and Ruth accepted, and flew to Puerto Rico. Leaving Halsey with my housekeeper, Ruth and I drove the three hours over the mountains to the hotel on the opposite side of the island. Stopping at the summit, we stood looking out over miles of sugar cane toward the white beach and blue Caribbean beyond. We embraced and shared a long kiss in happiness in being in each other's arms. At the party that night, several couples commented on having seen us kissing as they drove by.



Bob and Ruth in a Puerto Rican rain forest, 1962. Courtesy of Mansfield Bascom.

During the Easter vacation of 1960, I again took Halsey to New York to visit her mother. This time I stayed with Ruth, and she prepared lamb shanks, which I'd never had before, to thoroughly impress me with her cooking skills. We rented a white convertible and set-off to her father's studio in Paoli to enable each man to get an opinion of the other. Wharton and I hit it off. When Wharton learned that I was an architect, he assured me that he considered all architects to be the "east end of a horse headed west." I fell in love all over again, this time with this man and his work. As Ruth and I drove back to New York, I kept talking about how Wharton's studio needed to be preserved, just as it was, for the entire world to enjoy.



Home on the Condado Beach in San Juan, Puerto Rico (*Condado* is the Spanish term for the arcing clasp of a padlock). Courtesy of Mansfield Bascom.

Despite the hopes and preparations, Libby Holman's plans to take her show to Israel and India never materialized. Ruth was left to find show-by-show employment designing the lighting for two off-Broadway shows. Ironically, just before the opening of one of those shows, its director insisted they stage a second dress rehearsal, complete with lighting, on the very weekend that I had planned a large party with a spit-roasted pig to introduce Ruth to my friends. Neither show was a box office success.

Then Ruth was diagnosed with cervical cancer, and would require an immediate hysterectomy if she was to survive. Anesthetized on the operating table, Ruth's heart stopped. With instant reaction, the surgeon slit her chest, inserted two fingers, and massaged her heart back to beating. It had been a close call, but he went on to successfully perform the operation. Ruth recovered completely, though of course she would be unable to bear children. And, during her recovery, she lost all further interest in smoking.

Ruth and I wanted to live together, but each of us had been traumatized by our first marriages, and each was fearful of another possible marriage to an alcoholic or drug-addictive mate. The following summer Halsey's

mother picked the girl up in Puerto Rico. When the day came for her return, she never appeared. I waited at home, sent a friend to the airport, telephoned; all to no avail. Not finding me at the airport, she had taken Halsey with her to Guatemala. On her return to Bronxville, she sued for sole custody. She had money, and the willingness to hire lawyers to enforce her plan. The cost of Halsey's private school, and the housekeeper to walk her to and from school, left me without the financial resources to contest the matter. Broken-hearted and in despair, I asked Ruth to come live with me.

Home was a second-story flat in a three-story apartment building surrounded by tall hotels on the upscale Condado Beach, a narrow arc of coral reef, coconut palms and sand beach. My office was in a similar apartment, but on the ground floor, in the same building. We would often entertain our friends on the beach, cooking *shashlik* on skewers over an open fire. Convinced after a year of living together that neither was addicted to anything but the other, we were married in 1962 at the Union Church in San Juan, with my good friend and his wife as best man and matron of honor. For music we all sang *Happy Birthday* to the reverend who was celebrating his 40th birthday on our special day. We

then celebrated with lunch at a rooftop restaurant. There was neither time nor money for a honeymoon; just being committed for life with each other was sufficient celebration.

There was the unceasing rhythm of the ocean waves breaking on the beach. The windows were louvered shutters, and with the constant breeze there was no need for screens. From our living room and balcony we could watch vibrant sunrises and sunsets reflected in the lagoon. Ruth and I began collecting orchids, small, and large, all colors and kinds. These were displayed on a “tree,” a large forked branch found in the rain forest and cut to fit snugly between the floor and ceiling of our apartment. It soon attracted a small lizard that would appear whenever he heard the sound of the fly swatter and its promise of a hand-fed meal.

One of my clients was an American financial group starting a truck farming operation in the Lajas Valley—27,000 acres of sugar cane fields for which the government had just installed a complex irrigation system with a dam in the mountains and canals through the valley. It was intended that this enterprise would be able to ship tomatoes, cantaloupe, cucumbers and watermelons to New York in the winter months using refrigerated 40-foot trailers loaded onto container ships—filling a void left by the trade ban with Cuba.

I had designed and supervised the building of a packing plant for cooling and processing the produce, and constructed the farm’s irrigation pond, canals and piping. Quite often Ruth and I spent our weekends not relaxing on the beach in San Juan, but driving over the mountains to and from the farm where my supervisory duties were required. It was a busy time for us as Ruth became absorbed in, and knowledgeable of, my work.

The American enterprise that took so much of my time had little operating capital, and could only afford to pay me with stock in their firm. During the first two years the farm lost money—as expected. Costs exceeded income; a 40-lb. box of tomatoes brought \$1.67 on the New York market, less than the cost to plant, irrigate, cultivate, harvest, pack and ship. But by the third year, liabilities again far exceeded assets, and the enterprise declared bankruptcy. I received nothing for all my work and expenses.

This was a challenging time for Ruth and me. Fortunately, other assignments kept my small business alive. With the help of two draftsmen—one an aspiring

young architect, the other a retired architect from Washington, D.C.—I designed several other projects: a chemistry lab, library, and headmaster’s house for Halsey’s school; an extensive transformation for a large beachfront hotel; and renovations for a large beach-front house. But when the Rockefeller family’s International Basic Economy Corporation (IBEC), based in New York, invited me to join them as Director of Architecture and Engineering for its Puerto Rico commercial division—at a salary twice what I had been earning—I accepted their offer and closed my business.

Despite the good income and exotic life near the beach, Ruth was becoming increasingly concerned about being so far from her aging parents. And I wanted to be closer to my children. So when my brother Willard in Washington, D.C. asked if Ruth and I would consider taking a six-week leave of absence to care for his young daughter while Willard and his wife were on a business trip in South Africa, we saw this as the opportunity we had been looking for to leave Puerto Rico permanently and move to the mainland. The next weeks were spent finding a replacement for me at IBEC and planning our move.

The year with the IBEC had allowed Ruth and me to use our increased income to save for the future and for unexpected expenses. When Wharton announced that he intended to sell his sculpture *Adolescence*, and had a potential buyer for the piece, we decided to buy the sculpture ourselves. It was at that time that we specifically began planning our future together. Foremost in our plans was to permanently preserve Wharton’s studio and his collection of unsold work, and to share them with the public so that Wharton could gain the fame his work deserved. Each time Wharton needed money we would buy another of his sculptures.

Moving day was Christmas Eve, 1963—a summer-like 80 degrees as we drove to San Juan airport. Our car had previously been shipped to the States, and now all our furniture, clothing, and household possessions had been loaded into a rental truck which we were driving to the airport. After a long delay, during which we watched our possessions being loaded onto a flight in which we were to be the only passengers, our take-off finally had us winging our way north. There was no food or beverage service on the flight, and several hours later we arrived in Washington tired, hungry, and desperately trying to acclimatize to the freezing winter night.