

Anna Matheson Wood  
1882-1980

Anna Matheson was born August 2, 1882 the beautiful sister of two younger brothers. She was the darling of her father, especially, a relationship that lasted until he died. Anna called "Nan" was a bright-eyed child, very inquisitive and fearless. She grew up in Brooklyn, New York where her father ran a very successful business. The children were brought up with every material possession they could possibly want.

Nan challenged the restrictions put on the young ladies of her time and it was for this that her father loved her. He was a man of courage, endurance, spirituality and joy and she inherited these qualities from him. She was schooled in the finest institutions and even spent time in France where she learned to speak French fluently. She always had heaps of friends and the ability to see the "good" side of most challenges.

She was later to say that she first saw Willis Wood, her future husband, when they were in Sunday School. We wonder at the license she took with this story as there was a ten year difference in their ages. She was courted by dozens of men who were swept away by her beauty and good disposition. She kept many dance cards from the various social events she attended and they were always filled with different names. Even when she was much older men were attracted to her. As she neared one hundred years of age and decades after the death of her beloved Willis, she spent many hours holding the hand of her admirer "Mike" as they sat side by side in their wheel chairs. Women loved her too. Many of her women friends had been part of her life for as long as fifty to sixty years. Only the women whose husbands were smitten by Nan remained outside of her circle of admirers.

"Aunt Nan" as she was known to everyone, except her grandchildren who called her "Granny", lived most of her married life in New York in a fancy Park Ave. apartment, on Lloyd Neck in the Manor House or at Fort Hill and in Florida in one of various huge houses which got progressively smaller as she got older. She was always attended by a large staff, most of whom were of Scottish or Irish descent, and who were as loyal as her oldest friends. She paid them well, often gave extra gifts and allowed them to make most of the decisions concerning the running of the house. As a child I remember Granny playing Irish jigs on the piano as the maids danced on the stair landing. Her last and longest term maid was "Julia" who even did her clothes shopping as Granny got older. Granny cared little for what she wore or what she ate. She reluctantly spent the beginning of each week planning menus with the cook. The cooks she hired were frustrated by her "farm" like tastes. She would have been perfectly happy to eat creamed chicken, mashed potatoes, green beans and vanilla ice cream every day of her life. One time Granny told me that during one of the more nerve-wracking sessions of meal planning the cook suggested "constipe" instead of "consume" for dinner. I remember how hard Granny laughed at this mistake. Eventually, the cooks took over the ordering themselves.

As a middle-aged woman Granny spent much of her time riding horseback, swimming and sailing. She rode her beautiful thoroughbred horse, Blackie, side-saddle dressed in a long, elegant skirt. She swam daily until she was well into her seventies. Her real passion, however, was sailing. She

raced a red Atlantic and she often won. She had a keen sense of the shifting breezes that stayed with her even after she lost some of her eyesight. She tried to pass on this love of sailing to any of her grandchildren and it never really "took" at the level of passion that she herself possessed. She always sailed dressed in red from head to toe including red "sneakers". We loved to watch her through the telescope on the porch at Fort Hill in her red boat the "Zest" as she was always easy to spot. One time when she had promised Grandad that she would be back for a very important business dinner that they were to attend together the Zest was becalmed. As the clock ticked toward the "promised" return time, Grandad, who normally was pretty unruffled, was seen pacing the floor. Nelly, Granny's maid at the time, checked Granny's progress through the telescope. From long experience Nelly wasn't the least bit surprised when she saw the figure in red look at her watch, calmly take off her red shoes, jump in the water and swim to the shore in time for a hot bath before dressing to be ready as promised. Long Island Bay is very far from shore to shore, and that was no small swim not to mention that she was not a young woman at the time!!!!

Granny and Grandad took a cruise most of the winters during their middle years. Grandad tolerated these cruises because Granny loved them so much. Grandad would far rather be in his beloved Adirondacks fishing for an elusive trout. We have many pictures of Aunt Nan and Uncle Willis dressed up in some ridiculous costume, him looking miserable, her looking delighted. It was after Grandad died that Granny was on a cruise that took her to the Scandinavian countries. One of the stops included a Maritime Museum with a particularly fine collection. Granny was so engrossed in the displays that she didn't notice that the five o'clock closing time had come and gone and she was locked inside. When it started to get dark she realized that she was in a real pickle because the ship was supposed to leave that evening for the next port. She rushed around knocking on windows and doors with no luck. Finally, she found a basement door where she could exit the museum. She rushed down the street to the pier and noticed to her horror that the ship had drawn anchor. The seamen were still pulling up ropes so she yelled to them to throw her a rope ladder. The sailors greeted this request with a mixture of horror and mirth. "I'm sorry, Ma'am", one of them said, "but that is impossible. I mean a lady of your age....." "Young man I have been climbing ship ladders all my life, she yelled. "Do what I say or the Captain will hear about it." They threw down the ladder and she climbed it with the agility of a monkey.

Granny, "Aunt Nan", was a very spiritual person as her father had been before her. She was also very loyal but this loyalty spread to whatever church included the most of her friends and was at a convenient distance from where she was at any given moment. When we Prestons were small she took us each Sunday to the Episcopal Church in Cold Spring. That was during the war and since gas was rationed we rode part way in her chauffeur driven limousine (which probably got a quarter of a mile to a gallon of gas) and the rest of the way by bus. This is the only time I ever remember Granny riding a bus. She lured us to church with a promise to see the Fish Hatchery which was next door and a vanilla (only kind) ice cream cone on the way home. We also had permission to choose any one of her terrible hats to wear. Somehow they looked ever so much better on her!!

Granny's personal life challenged her spirituality and her joy. Her mother and father were separated when she was a young woman and they never spoke to each other again. Her son Bob

was ill during a long period of his childhood and it grieved her to see his pain. Her youngest and beloved daughter, "Kitty" died suddenly at the age of twelve, on a trip to Canada. Although she never really recovered from this loss she spent her life remembering her daughter with memorials that benefited others. Her belief in God never wavered, in fact it deepened. Oddly, she survived Willis and all three of her children.

Granny was brought up in a class of people who definitely had their prejudices. It was amusing to see how these prejudices played out in a woman who was usually incapable of being impolite or unkind to an individual. I remember how confused she was after a trip to Israel. Her experiences there belied everything she had ever heard about Jews and she came home full of admiration for them. She was also friendly to a fault. One time a strange man in New York somehow got past the doorman and up to her apartment. She asked him to identify himself and he asked her, quite forcefully for a thousand dollars. She told him to please leave, and for some reason he did. Later when she told the story she informed us that she would have gladly given him one hundred dollars, but certainly not a thousand!!! Another time I had ridden the train to New York and when I arrived I was trying to shake a persistent sailor who was trying to make his leave more interesting. Granny felt sorry for him (would she have done the same for a soldier?? I often wondered) and asked him to dinner. The sailor had never been away from his home in Paris, Maine. To say that his eyes were popping out of his head at the Park Ave. apartment would be an understatement. Maybe I exaggerate but I think he really DID drink the water in the finger bowls.

There were few things Granny wouldn't try especially if she would get attention and credit for doing it first. She maintained that she was one of the earlier women who rode in a plane. She loved to travel to remote places and was many times on a tourist excursion to an "unusual" country. Some of us were amazed to find out that she helped to form the New York chapter of Planned Parenthood. I have a speech that she made to that group. Since "sex" or anything related was absent from her vocabulary when speaking to us, it was a shock to find out she was vocal on this subject at such an early date.

Granny ran her various expensive real estate with intense care and knowledge. She knew each tree branch that should be removed, each furnace that needed repair and each tenant who had a complaint. She always had a "superintendent" but she was the one who made the decisions about everything. I remember riding in the car with her when she would notice the smallest detail of something that needed her attention. All her living spaces were cared for meticulously.

I don't want to make Granny into an unbelievable saint. She wasn't. She had a very strong will, an unbending sense of fairness from her own point of view, and an uncanny ability to remember grievances. Having been spoiled by a doting father and admired for her beauty she was accustomed to being the center of attention and thrived on this. She often had problems interacting with those she loved the most. She was always concerned with the opinions of others and was adamant that her family perform in a way that was "acceptable" to her social class. Family dynamics are complicated and the "rules" of any era are hard to judge. There were the usual differences and hurts between her and her children. As in most cases this had less effect on

her relationship with her grandchildren. Granny had a great sense of humor and when her grandchildren broke the rules, luckily for us, she was far more able to laugh about it.

Granny was one of the most generous people I ever knew (and she passed this on to my mother.) As children we loved going to the openings of the plays in New York and finding her name as a chief donor on the program. She gave land for an entire "club" at the beach and then dedicated one or two mornings a week at the club for the inner city New York children to enjoy a day at the beach. She gave to organizations and she gave generously. On Lloyd Neck where she summered at Fort Hill she rented her "cottages" (far bigger than my house) for a dollar a year to those people she wanted to include in her little circle of friends. At Christmas everyone she knew received lavish gifts. One time she went out and bought my sister Annie a car just as if "we had gone to buy a pair of shoes". Sam remembers a story he heard when someone who was dining with her at a restaurant questioned a tip she left thinking that Aunt Nan hadn't noticed the extra zero on the "ten dollar" bill. She had noticed, and left the lucky young waiter a \$100 tip!

One of the many "talks" I had with Granny was about how a person can spread joy to others. She even gave me instructions on how to make my voice sound joyful. I remember her demonstrating how one's voice should go up at the end of the sentence and she insisted that we answer the telephone with a pleasant and joyful attitude. She convinced me that if one sounds happy one can convince others and maybe even oneself. I have taken that to heart and it has worked very well for me.

Granny has had an enormous influence on the lives of her grandchildren and great grandchildren. The qualities she possessed have been passed on in bits and pieces to all of us. These are just a very few of the many stories that tell about the kind of person she was. Be sure and ask the members of your family to tell the stories they remember. Those stories are what keep our grandparents immortal. Those stories are our history and our inheritance.