

WILLIS DELANO WOOD
(1871-1957)

Willis Delano Wood was born in 1871 the second to the youngest of five children. His parents were Cornelius Delano Wood, born in 1832 in Northhampton, Massachusetts and Helen Ogden born in Philadelphia. Cornelius left Northampton when he was thirteen to look for a job in New York. Starting as an office boy in a New York Banking House Cornelius later became a stockbroker and eventually had his own company which was the outgrowth of one founded in 1869. The children of Cornelius and Helen had much in common. Emily, born in 1862, was a co-founder of the Brooklyn YWCA. She graduated from Smith College and never married. She was remembered for her "a sympathetic interest not only in young women but in all humanity....". Howard, born in 1865, and graduated from Amherst and Columbia Law School. He was the president of the Brooklyn Children's Aid Society and the Brooklyn Eye and Ear Hospital. Mabel, born in 1867, also graduated from Smith and was called a "pinko commie" by some members of the family. (As far as I can tell this translates to mean that she was an artist) She wrote and played music. She was married to a lawyer named Trevor Hill and they raised German Shepherds on their large estate in Connecticut. Cornelius Jr. born in 1873 is remembered by his granddaughter as a "gentle quiet man". He graduated from Yale and later owned an Electric Company which manufactured Christmas lights, amongst other things. He sold his products all over the world. During World War I he worked for the Red Cross.

Willis grew up in Brooklyn, New York, attended Adelphi Academy for his secondary education and enrolled in Amherst College in 1890. He left college during his sophomore year but was awarded a honorary degree of Masters of Arts in 1910. His classmates at Amherst said of him: "We all liked him. Kindness and good fellowship were outstanding not only to his classmates and fraternity but to the upper classmen as well." After only two months at Amherst he was elected president of his class. His affection for Amherst was deep and he went every year to the Commencement to see old friends and renew his youth. "He liked young people and was exceedingly kind and hospitable to those who lived in Cold Spring Harbor. He was a fixture in that part of the world and was regarded with universal affection. And he deserved to be, for he was a gentle, lovable man."

An extremely sensitive man, Willis was devastated by the death of his mother in 1890 and took a long time to recover. An extraordinary account of his mother's last hours, written by her brother, states that Willis' mother tried to persuade him to contain his emotion by saying, "You are a great, strong fellow. You play baseball and belong to a football team, are you not strong enough for this?" To all her children who were with her she said, "death is too beautiful to cause sorrow". This seemed to be a tender and caring mother who attempted in every way she knew how to help her family deal with her dying. There are no letters or diaries to record Willis' reaction to her death but one wonders if his depression influenced his decision to leave college after such a short time.

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Willis and Nan Matheson went to the same Sunday school when they were small children. They both lived in Brooklyn and their families would have attended some of the same functions but it wasn't until around 1900 that the extremely handsome Willis met the perfectly beautiful and dashing Nan Matheson and fell in love instantly. Nan was ten years his junior and the belle of all the balls in New York City. Her father adored her and was less than impressed by any young whippersnapper who might woo away his daughter. Thinking that distance would probably quench the fires of love William John Matheson, Nan's father, proposed for her a trip around the world on a yacht, preferably to take as long as possible. Nan, who loved boats more than almost anything, consented. However when she boarded the yacht the skipper noticed that she seemed less than her usual "gay" self. When he questioned if she really wanted to go on the trip, she said "No". "Well I don't want a grouch on this trip so you can just get off the boat". She agreed happily and the engagement was announced.

The wedding of Nan and Willis was legendary. Eight bridesmaid and eight groomsmen attended the couple. They were married in the East Wing of Fort Hill on October 11, 1905. Two hundred guests attended the marriage ceremony and four hundred more arrived for the reception. The Boys Choir from St. Paul's Church of New York sang to the accompaniment of a full string orchestra. The East Room was resplendent in evergreens and yellow roses arranged "by a famous woman decorator" and the "feast was prepared and served by Manhattan's most widely known caterer". The reception was held on the green lawn at Fort Hill with sheep grazing in the near by pasture. The bride and groom left the reception aboard the Lavrock, a steam yacht, belonging to Nan's father. Their honeymoon trip lasted for two months.

Willis and Nan Wood raised their family in the historic Manor House on Lloyd Neck just a short distance from Fort Hill. Their son Robert Matheson was born in 1906, followed by a daughter Jean in 1908 and Katharine Emily("Kaaty") in 1912.. Life was a mixture of joy and sorrow for this family. Son Bob was plagued with painful back problems. Because of the extreme wealth of Nan's father and the financial success of Willis' stock brokerage firm, the family wanted for nothing. The children went to the best schools and were able to have anything they desired. The children loved animals and the family had dogs and horses. Nan's father and grandmother lived in Fort Hill so the extended family was close and supportive. The family was changed deeply and dramatically by the sudden and unexpected death in 1924 of "Kaaty". At the time, the family was vacationing in Canada and Kaaty got sick and was dead in 24 hours.

During the later years after his family was grown, when they were not at home in their apartment at 635 Park Ave., Willis commuted to New York City by train for years. He had a strong interest in trains and enjoyed reading about and investing in them. He was fascinated by how they worked and looked for the excuse of traveling by train whenever possible. He was a promoter and investor in the Moffat Tunnel in Colorado, which was the first tunnel under the continental divide.

Willis was a shy and quiet man, nothing like his gregarious wife. The place he loved the best was his family's Sprucewood "camp" in the Adirondack mountains. He loved to fish and would spend hours by himself in a canoe on the still waters of the Upper Ausable Lake or on one of the many brooks near by. Nan loved the camp also but was more comfortable taking groups of friends

there. The guest books which date back to the early 1900s include the names of many famous people who enjoyed the hospitality of the Wood family, including Helen Keller. Willis loved the camp at all times of the year and besides fishing, he enjoyed climbing the mountains in the summer and skiing and snow shoeing in the winter. He was in the daring party that climbed some of these imposing mountains for the first time in the winter. The Adirondack guide, George Lamb, became a close friend of Willis. George was also a quiet and sensitive man deeply connected to nature. The two men spent many hours communing in silence as they sat in a canoe on the lake waiting for the trout to rise.

Willis' best friend was his dog "Loki". Actually, since dogs don't live as long as people, Loki became more than one dog, but each one spent his time being Willis' best friend. Both Lokis adored Willis with the devotion that only a dog can evoke. They would watch him for any sign of a request or promise. The outing which might include a walk or a swim was anticipated with shivering excitement. Never raising his voice and without changing expression, Willis would tell Loki that he had forgotten the leash which was upstairs. The dog would wait for the command and dash up and get the leash bounding and slipping down the stairs seeming to appear even before he left. Loki was well known for his diving trick. He loved to swim and he would spend as long as patience held out retrieving balls thrown into the ocean. If there was a diving board he would jump on it up and down until he got good momentum and then fling himself into the water.

Willis had an old gray car which always smelled like wet dog. He never drove over 25 miles an hour as time meant nothing to him when he was away from his work. The car was probably not driven over three to four thousand miles during its entire lifetime of thirty plus years. This gray car is a subject of many diverse recollections which is typical of our family. Four of the "older" grandchildren interviewed for memories of their grandfather, swore up and down that this car was a Buick, LaSalle, Packard, Plymouth. This car was very symbolic of our relationship to our grandfather. It was somewhat mysterious, representative of another time and coveted by all because for its "specialness". The car was serviced by the long time chauffeur, Henri Fermery. Henri was also a quiet man, devoted and kind. During his declining years Willis learned to depend on Henri's friendship as well and no matter what the season he wore a scarf, given to him by Henri as a Christmas gift.

Willis had a captivating sense of humor. He loved the cartoons in The New Yorker and marveled at the fact simple pictures could evoke such deep mirth. His eyes would light up when he saw the humor in something and his laugh was quiet as the smile lit up his face. Towards the end of he life when he was unable to speak he still sought out the cartoons and pointed out their impact to let others know he still appreciated them.

Willis was a devout Republican. He was a party-line man and loved to argue about his politics. He was very sure of his position but always respected another point of view. He and his daughter Jean canceled each others votes every time but he always encouraged her to think for herself. He loathed Franklin Roosevelt and his "New Deal" programs and wouldn't support anyone who backed FDR. He read every newspaper he could get his hands on and sought out political and media people so he would be well informed.

Willis was a devoted husband and loving father. Nan was ten years his junior and was constantly on the go and he went along many times when he might have preferred to sit and read a book. He wrote letters almost daily when he was separated from his dear Nan. The letters are full of tenderness and sensitive observations of things around him. When his son Bob was going through a divorce in Wyoming, he rode the train all the way from New York to be with him during this difficult time. His observations of his grandsons, John and Robert, which he shared with Nan in his letters are amazingly sensitive and perceptive.

In the business world, Willis' success was noteworthy. This success was also widely recognized. It had all started when, in 1894, Willis joined his father's investments and securities firm, Wood & Heustis. Five years later he formed his own firm. This company became Wood, Low & Company and in 1941 Wood, Walker & Co. He was a general partner from 1924 to 1941 and a limited partner thereafter. He was a member of the New York Exchange from 1902 until his death and was a member of the Board of Governors from 1910 to 1928. He served on several committees of the Exchange, including one concerned with the reorganization of railroads and the protection of the rights of the minority stockholders. When the Stock Exchange closed at the beginning of the First World War, he was appointed to the three member committee that passed on all bond transactions and continued on that committee until the market reopened. He was on the boards of many organizations and companies, a number of them connected to the railroads. When he resigned from the Board of Governors of the Stock Exchange, he was praised for his "faithful, able and extensive service". He was said to have given "fatiguing and active service, bringing ripe experience and a distinctly independent mind".

Besides the many company boards on which he served, he was honored with appointments on the Board of Trustees of the American Missionary Association, Vassar College, Union Theological Seminary, and the West Side YWCA. He was appointed to be a member of the Academy of Political Sciences and the New York Chamber of Commerce. He belonged to numerous country clubs where he played golf and enjoyed swimming. He served as a trustee of the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church where he was a member for many years. When he retired after 25 years of serving on the Board of the Union Theological Seminary, he was said to be "the ideal Director and Christian gentleman. A man of many and wide responsibilities, he has given the Union Seminary a pre-eminent place among them all. Mr. Wood has given generously of his time and substance. His benefactions have frequently been anonymous in keeping with his modesty. He has been a friend and supporter of the School of Music since its founding in 1929. His gift of a practice organ is a constant reminder of his help to generations of students. He has served long and well and on the Library Committee. Faithful in attendance at meetings and at all Seminary exercises and functions he has been an inspiration to us all."

Willis died in May of 1957 while at the family winter home in Key Biscayne, Florida. Son Bob had predeceased him but because Willis had been ill for a long time and unable to communicate, no one told him of his son's death. At Willis' memorial service in Coconut Grove, Florida the minister's words summed up well the character of this wonderful and outstanding man: "He had a sweetness and gentleness of spirit that endeared him to us and yet it was combined with Gibraltar-like strength of character and conviction".

The recollections of his grandchildren were very similar. All of us remember "Grandad" as a quiet and thoughtful man a real "gentle gentleman". Those of us who liked to fish remember watching and later imitating his shaking hand as he cast for trout. We all remember his cigars and to this day can tolerate the smell of cigar smoke because of the memories connected to it. He would carefully take the "ring" off the cigar and present it to the closest grandchild. Then he would cut the end of the cigar and light up with shaking hands. The library, his favorite room and the favorite room of most of his grandchildren, always smelled of cigar. One grandchild remembers Grandad taking the rubber band off the box of cigars and putting it gently around Loki's nose for just a moment. It was a ritual both of them expected and perhaps the dog was as amused by this as the master. None of us remembers a great deal of interaction between our grandparents. Grandad was not in his element, at least in later years, in the party atmosphere of Fort Hill. He tolerated Granny's social personality but he felt most comfortable at his beloved Sprucewood in the Adirondacks. As the grandchildren get older many of us have learned to understand the importance of family through this deep connection to the Adirondacks. Our grandfather taught us many lessons quietly and by way of example. He was a very, very special person.