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Mounted on a pedestal: Bertha Honoré Palmer

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Mounted on a Pedestal:

Bertha Honoré Palmer

by

Hope L. Black

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Department of Humanities
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

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ABSTRACT

The thesis *Mounted on a Pedestal*, chronicles the life of Bertha Honoré Palmer. The focus of her story are the years after 1910, when she traveled to Sarasota, Florida and heralded the flight to the southernmost state, leading the pack in the purchase and development of land in the Sarasota/ Tampa Bay area. The totality of her years prior to that time serve as a prelude to her accomplishments and the vicissitudes of her life in the sleepy little fishing village she found.

Born in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1849, she was provided with a privileged, comfortable childhood and a sheltered academic education at the most prestigious schools for young ladies of the day. She excelled academically and won high praise for her exemplary demeanor. She was beautiful, intelligent, musically gifted, a competent linguist and writer, an astute businesswoman, a paragon of graciousness, and politically savvy. She married business mogul, Potter Palmer, when she was twenty-one and he forty-four.

Bertha Palmer was a pacesetter of *haute couture*; the society pages of the newspapers were filled with detailed descriptions of her gowns, her jewels and her lavish parties. Her

Chicago homes were architectural masterpieces and she furnished them with treasures from renowned artisans.

In 1900, she was appointed by President William McKinley as the only woman on the national commission to represent the United States at the Paris Exposition. Mrs. Palmer's most prominent position was as president of the Board of Lady Managers at the Chicago World's Fair of 1893. She had close personal relations with the elite of American Society and European royalty.

Following the death of her husband Potter, in 1902, Mrs. Palmer combined her life of splendor, advocacy, and mobility while pursuing every opportunity to increase the value of her holdings, principally with real estate investments. She had been bequeathed an estate worth eight million dollars. Before her death, she would more than double her net worth. She would invest in thousands of acres of land, build more homes and amass a fortune in possessions.

Preface

In 1910, Bertha Honoré Palmer heralded the migration to the southernmost state and led the flock in the purchase and development of land in the Sarasota/Tampa Bay area. During a period of eight years, Mrs. Potter Palmer as she was known, along with her father, her sons, and her brother, masterminded the transformation of a frontier fishing village into a winter haven for the wealthy and a lucrative wellspring of employment for others. The Palmer legacy endures in the local archives of history and folklore. Roadways are named after members of the family: Palmer Boulevard, Palmer Crossing Drive, Palmer Glen Circle, Honoré Avenue, Lockwood Ridge Road, Potter Place and D'Orsay Street. The existent sprawling residential developments of Palmer Ranch and *The Oaks* as well as the remnants of *Meadowsweet Pastures* (the cattle ranch) in Myakka River State Park were among the Palmer properties.¹

Her arrival marked a turning point for the region. When other potential investors learned that Mrs. Potter Palmer considered land development in Sarasota a worthy enterprise, they chose to follow her lead. She had become an international celebrity and an exemplar of high society and astute business acumen. Bertha Honoré Palmer's elegance, her affluence, her intellect, her *haute couture*, and her *joie de vivre* made her the unsurpassed queen of Chicago society during the Gilded Age. She set the vogue by

¹ Lockwood and Adrian Honoré were Bertha Palmer's brothers; D'Orsay was her mother's family name and the middle name of her grandson, Potter D'Orsay Palmer III. She named her elegant estate on Sarasota Bay, The Oaks, and Meadowsweet Pastures was the cattle ranch in what is now Myakka River State Park.

her choice of gowns, coiffeur, jewelry, the grandeur of her homes, and the names on her social calendar. She had traveled the world and mingled with the King and Queen of England, the Queen of Belgium, the King of Greece, and political and societal luminaries throughout Europe and the United States. She enjoyed ocean travel and booked passage on the newest, fastest, and most luxurious liners. She made certain she would be a passenger on the *Lusitania* for the maiden voyage on September 7, 1907.

Her passion for jewels never abated and whenever the Palmers traveled to Europe, her husband Potter made his requisite visit to Tiffanys to select the most precious stones and the richest gold in their collection. She loved flaunting them. In 1904, as she was crossing the Atlantic on the steamship *Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse*, she deliberately made her grand entrance into the salon after the other passengers were seated and a singer from the Metropolitan Opera was beginning his song. Author Aline B. Saarinen, related:

So fabulous were her jewels that a newspaper declared that when she appeared on the S.S. Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse with a tiara of diamonds as large as lima beans, a corsage panned with diamonds, a sunburst as big as a baseball, a stomacher of diamonds and all her pearls around her neck, Alois Burgskeller of the Metropolitan Opera, who was singing at the ship's concert, was stopped right in the middle of a high note.²

On one trip abroad, in 1902, the Collector of Customs in Chicago listed the following articles declared by Mrs. Potter Palmer:

One fur coat, sable
One astrakhan coat
Thirteen wool and crepe gowns
One silk gown
One black chiffon dress
Twelve summer gowns, silk and cotton
One string of pearls
Two pair earrings, pearl

² Aline B. Saarinen, *The Proud Possessors* (New York: Random House, 1958), 8.

One sapphire pin
One ring consisting of two pearls and one diamond
One catseye brooch
Two diamond mounted lorgnettes
Two pearl bracelets
One pearl pendant
Two tailor suits, cloth
Two cloth cloaks, five hats³

Those articles were shipped ahead so she might have a respectable selection for the first round of social galas. Her wardrobe would be supplemented many times over during her stay. She was well known on the Place Vendôme, the fashion center of Paris. She frequented the most splendid and expensive houses of the couturiers. Palmer's biographer, Ishbel Ross noted:

She made her selections swiftly, perhaps a velvet mantle with a gray sheen and chinchilla collar, a lacy gown, a gossamer tulle sparkling with arabesques of diamanté. She loved everything to sparkle and glitter. Newspapers and magazines in London and Paris, Clair de Pratz, writing in *La Fronde* on May 10, 1900, found her a combination of French elegance and much allure.⁴

Following the death of her husband in 1902, she purchased a home in London⁵ and would spend two hundred thousand dollars entertaining (comparable to four million dollars today) during a social season.⁶ She reveled in the splendor and adulation of her wardrobe, her homes, and her elegant soirees.

As Bertha Palmer reached the beginning of her seventh decade in 1910, there was a marked transformation in her desires and priorities. There was no lull in her pursuit of profitable enterprise. She retained that fire within her. But the Mrs. Potter

³ Palmer Personal Collection, Chicago History Museum.

⁴ Ishbell Ross, *Silhouette in Diamonds* (New York, Harper and Bros. 1960), 169.

⁵ Before Potter Palmer's death, the couple had been staying in fine hotels in London and Paris whenever they visited; as a widow, Bertha Palmer decided to purchase her own homes.

⁶ Ross, *Silhouette in Diamonds*, 197.

Palmer of royal castles and silks and diamonds compromised her elegant life style for something different. She evolved into a woman who was not above walking through the wet muck of the Florida hinterland and acknowledging among her friends the cowboys and farm hands she employed. She chose family, not social acquaintances, to fill her life. The joy of growing flowers meant more than wearing diamonds. The grande dame of Chicago, the pacesetter of London, Paris, and Newport had not disappeared, yet she had slipped into the shadows. In this new setting she became a woman wearing simple dresses, entertaining her family at picnics and cherishing every moment with her grandchildren. She took great pride in the successes of her ranch, croplands, and gardens and took an active role in the conception, implementation, and administration of the properties.

The totality of Bertha Palmer's life prior to 1910 when she traveled to Sarasota served as a necessary prelude to her accomplishments and the vicissitudes of her life there. As her arrival revolutionized Sarasota, it marked a sea change in her own life and the how and why of her story represents the essence of this thesis.

Introduction

Bertha Palmer was born in Louisville, Kentucky in 1850, and moved with her family to Chicago when she was six. She enjoyed a privileged, comfortable childhood and a sheltered academic education at the most prestigious schools for young ladies of the day. She excelled academically and won high praise for her exemplary demeanor. The young Bertha was beautiful, intelligent and musically gifted. She became a competent linguist and writer, an astute businesswoman, a paragon of graciousness, and politically savvy. It has been said that she reveled in the limelight of her station in society. She married business mogul, Potter Palmer, when she was twenty-one and he forty-four.

While she was concerned about the conditions forced upon the disenfranchised and allied herself with social reformer Jane Addams in the early years of Hull House, she was not a saint or a paragon of benevolence.⁷ At times the beneficiary of her philanthropy was determined by the degree of social recognition it would kindle; perhaps a token gesture designed to make the society pages of the newspaper. She adhered to the accepted mores of the time in terms of status, race, and ethnicity and did

⁷ Jane Addams, 1860-1935. Founder of Hull House, social reformer, feminist, pacifist, winner of the Nobel Peace prize.

not confront those issues. When Jane Addams's anarchist associations became controversial, Palmer withdrew her support.⁸

Palmer was a complex and often paradoxical woman. She would spend vast amounts of money on clothing, jewelry, homes, furniture, and entertaining political and royal notables, yet she would quibble about pennies. She insisted on detailed records and reports and she conscientiously kept meticulous accounting journals. She refused to be taken advantage of and personally checked every invoice for accuracy. On April 22, 1918, a few weeks prior to her death and in constant pain, she wrote the following letter to Messrs. Marshall Field & Co. in Chicago:

Dear Sirs:

I beg to call your attention to an error in your statement returned herewith.

The charge of \$5.54 is for a blue compote and expressage on same.

This was sent to replace one of a shipment of January 30 which was broken in transit and which in accordance with your instructions was returned but the enclosed card omitted by an oversight. Under date of January 30, you make the following charge:

2202-8 blue compotes with fruit @\$5.00	40.00
prepaid expressage	1.71
War tax	.09

The above were duly received and I at once notified you that one compote was in bad condition (see my letter of Feb. 1) and later this one was returned and one to replace it was sent on Feb. 21:

Blue compote	5.00
Prepaid express	1.71
War tax	.03

The \$5.54 in dispute
Thinking that one charge would offset the other, I did not deduct the broken compote from the January bill but sent cheque [sic] for full amount of account from Nov. 1 to Jan. inclusive i.e. \$198.88. This was sent on March 11.

I trust that I have made it clear that I have only eight compotes and have paid for eight, so will you kindly make the proper adjustment and send me corrected statement, and oblige

Yours truly,

⁸ Allen F. Davis, *American Heroine, The Life and Legend of Jane Addams* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publishing, 1973,), 71.

Mrs. Potter Palmer⁹

Five dollars and fifty-four cents was a mere pittance for the Grande Dame of Chicago Society whose husband Potter once remarked to a friend at a party as they watched Bertha come into the ballroom, “There she stands with two hundred thousand dollars’ worth of jewels on her.”¹⁰

She was known to be aloof and autocratic with her peers on both continents and some accused her of being “a pretentious snob.” Yet her employees remember her warmth and caring. While Bertha Palmer was always soft-spoken with a velvet southern timbre and genteel manners, she usually got her way.

When she came to Sarasota, Mrs. Palmer compromised her vanity; high fashion was inappropriate on the frontier. Instead she wore simple linen skirts and blouses and more practical hats and shoes. She was not seen wearing her famous jewels as she was out and about in the area; the regalia were taken out of the boxes only for galas at *The Oaks* arranged for her wealthy northern friends or when she traveled to Palm Beach, Florida.

Always the patrician, the young Mrs. Palmer made certain that her sons understood the social standing of their privileged class and dressed them like little princes, yet she encouraged them to join in and play with the children of her staff and less well-to-do neighbors at holiday parties.

Though she could have been considered uncaring because she continued with her social schedule when her husband was ill, she demanded the same for herself; she

⁹ Bertha Palmer Papers, Sarasota History Center Archives, MSS 32, Box 2, Folder 32, Correspondence.

¹⁰ Ishbel Ross, *Silhouette in Diamonds*, 115.

found invalidism distasteful. When she had typhoid fever in 1903, she avoided the usual recuperative spa treatments and continued to receive visitors graciously. As stated by author Ishbel Ross, “She had splendid health and vitality. No one who knew her intimately ever heard her say she had a headache or felt depressed, or had aches and pains.”¹¹ When diagnosed with cancer in 1916, she insisted that no one outside the family learn of her illness. Ross continued,

Her radiant health began to fail shortly after her father’s death. For the next two years she fought a losing battle with cancer. None but her immediate family knew until the end what ailed her. Although beset by pain and discomfort she never showed a sign and continued to work and direct operations until with a few weeks of her death. Four months before her death she was ordering New Orleans roses from Pasadena and Japanese hop vine seed from Floral Park, New York. Six weeks before the end she wrote to her manager saying that whenever a cow was butchered at the pasture for the commissary, she wanted to know about it and how much it brought.¹²

Bertha Palmer was a pacesetter of style; the society pages of the newspapers were filled with detailed descriptions of her gowns, her jewels, and her lavish parties. Her Chicago homes were architectural masterpieces, and she furnished them with treasures from renowned artisans. She purportedly introduced Impressionist Art to America.¹³ Later in her life she owned homes in London, Paris, Newport, and Sarasota, and hobnobbed with the pillars of American society and the titled international set with aplomb. Her younger sister, Ida Honoré, married Frederick Dent

¹¹ Ibid.,70.

¹² Ibid., 250.

¹³ According to Margo Hobbs in her thesis, *Bertha Palmer’s Philanthropy in the Arts*, the Palmers were novices when they first began purchasing art. They worked with a knowledgeable agent, Saras Tyson Hallowell who introduced them to both the Barbizon School and Fresh Impressionism. It is also generally accepted that while Bertha was forging alliances for the benefit of the World’s Columbian Exposition, it was Potter who worked directly with Hallowell and amassed a sizeable collection.

Grant, the son of President and former Union General Ulysses S. Grant and their daughter, Julia Grant, married a Prince of the Russian Court, Prince Michael Cantacuzene,¹⁴ Palmer had a close personal relationship with Edward, Prince of Wales, which continued when he was crowned the King of England; his wife, Queen Alexandria; Robert Todd Lincoln, son of the deceased president; James G. Blaine, the United States Secretary of State; Lord Salisbury, the Prime Minister of England; the Duke and Duchess of Teck; Princess Christian, the third daughter of Queen Victoria; and many American and European millionaires and art collectors could also be counted among her friends.¹⁵

In 1900, she was appointed by President William McKinley as the only female member of the national commission to represent the United States at the Paris Exposition where her glory was enhanced as she stole the spotlight from the most titled and notable and was awarded the Legion of Honor decoration by the French government.

Palmer's most notable position was president of the Board of Lady Managers at the Chicago World's Fair of 1893. The *Chicago Weekly Magazine* reported: "the leadership of the World's Colombian Exposition saw Bertha Palmer as the one person possessed of the necessary elegance, charm and tact to sell the Exposition to Europe

¹⁴ In the historical introduction to the autobiography of Princess Julia Cantacuzene, Countess Speransky, nee Grant, it was explained that "Prince Michael Cantacuzene, Count Speransky, was not a prince of the ruling Romanov line; his credentials stated that he was the direct descendant of the fourteenth-century Byzantine emperor John Cantacuzene, and the great-grandson of the statesman, Count Michael Speransky who served in Russian Service under Catherine-the-Great. He created a regiment of Wallachian Hussars, obtained the rank of Colonel and was granted a princely title in keeping with common Russian practice." Written by Terence Emmons, Stanford University in the historical introduction to Princess Julia Cantacuzene, Countess Speransky, nee Grant, *Revolutionary Days* (Chicago: The Lakeside Press, R.M. Donnelley & Sons, 1999), xxii-xxiii.

¹⁵ Ross, *Silhouette in Diamonds*, 191.

thereby assuring the inclusion and funding of each country.”¹⁶ She had the charisma, magnetism, and self-assurance to appeal to royals, the politically powerful, and aristocrats for cooperation and financial support. One by one the pacemakers of the major capitals of Europe and Asia were convinced of the significance and the value of the Exposition and joined forces with the original organizers, promoters, and strategists of the most remarkable and exciting event of 1893.

In an article of 1911 titled “The Social Leader of Chicago,” the author states:

Mrs. Palmer looks upon society as a business-one of the necessary branches of our complex business civilization. She considers it a duty for a woman or a man to take an active interest in society. In the last nineteen years she has found time to maintain her social supremacy in Chicago and to reach the heights of society in London and Paris. Diplomacy is the explanation of her success. If she were a man, she would make an ideal ambassador. She is democratic, cordial, frank yet never says a thing she does not want to say and seldom says a thing she should not say. Her mental vision which extends beyond her keen insight into human nature enables her to tell far in advance what effect a certain speech or a certain act will have.¹⁷

One of Palmer’s most extraordinary and progressive speeches was presented to the Board of Lady Managers at the opening of the Woman’s Building on May 1, 1893.

The following excerpts provide insight into her thinking:

The few forward steps which have been taken during our boasted nineteenth century-the so-called age of invention-have promoted the general use of machinery...with the result of cheapening manufactured articles, but have not afforded the relief to the masses which was expected. The struggle for bread is as fierce as of old. We find, everywhere the same picture presented-overcrowded

¹⁶ The Chaperon, *Chicago Weekly Magazine*, “The Story of Old Chicago, Mrs. Potter Palmer-An American Beauty.” Sarasota County History Center Archives. MSS 39 From the private collection of Rollins W. Coakley, Not processed. [Note]:“The Chaperone” was the *nom de plume* of Mary T. Dougherty who wrote the column for the *Chicago Herald-American* She moved to New York City from Chicago in 1927 to work for the *New York Journal*. She was society Editor for the *Sun-Times*. When she returned to Chicago, she wrote a society column titled “Cholly Dearborn.” Dougherty died in 1974. *Chicago Tribune* Newspaper Archives.

¹⁷ “The Social Leader of Chicago,” *Hampton’s Magazine*, October, 1911(New York: Columbian-Sterling Publishing Company), 540-542.

industrial centers, factories surrounded by dense populations of operatives, keen competition, many individuals forced to use such strenuous effort that vitality is drained in the struggle to maintain life under conditions so uninviting and discouraging that it scarcely seems worth living. It is a grave reproach to modern enlightenment that we seem no nearer the solution than during feudal days...

It is not our province, however, to discuss these weighty questions, except in so far as they affect the compensation paid to wage earners, and more especially that paid to women and children. Of all existing forms of injustice, there is none so cruel and inconsistent as is the position which women are placed with regard to self-maintenance-the calm ignoring of their rights and responsibilities, which has gone on for centuries....

The theory which exists among the conservative people, that the sphere of woman is her home-that it is unfeminine, even monstrous, for her to wish to take a place beside or to compete with men-tells heavily against her, for manufacturers and producers take advantage of it to disparage her work and obtain her services for a nominal price....

We are forced to turn from the realm of fancy to meet and deal with existing facts. The absence of a just and general appreciation of the truth concerning the position and status of women has caused us to call special attention to it and to make a point of attempting to create, by means of the Exposition, a well-defined public sentiment in regard to their rights and duties, and the propriety of their becoming not only self-supporting, but able to assist in maintaining their families....

We shrink with horror of the unjust treatment of child widows and other unfortunates on the opposite side of the globe, but our own follies and inconsistencies are too close to our eyes to see them in proper perspective....

...but the sentimentalists again exclaim, 'Would you have a woman step down from her pedestal in order to enter practical life? Yes!~ A thousand times, yes! If we can really find after a careful search, any women mounted on pedestals, we should willingly ask them to step down-in order that they may meet and help to uplift their sisters....¹⁸

She diligently moved forward with other progressives to work toward her goals.

Perceiving the Exposition as much more than a spectacle; to her it was a calling to every country to survey statistically conditions and opportunities for women in every arena.

She did not however, align herself with suffragists. Their often hard-nosed tactics were not in keeping with her philosophy. The vote for woman was an issue to be addressed at another time; her immediate passions were equal standards of employment, the

¹⁸ Bertha Honore Palmer, "On the Occasion of the Opening of the Woman's Building, "May 1, 1893, Addresses and Reports of Mrs. Potter Palmer, (Chicago:Rand McNally & Company, 1894), Chicago Public Library, Special Collections Division.

realization that so many females had to work as breadwinners, and that others should be allowed to work because they could make a contribution to society.

Following a period of mourning after Potter Palmer's death in 1902, Bertha resumed her life of grandeur, spending enormous amounts of money on homes, travel, art and antiques, clothing and jewelry. As a widow, she embarked on an even more frenetic climb to the uppermost echelons of society, which culminated in her close relationship with the King and approval from the Queen of Great Britain.

There is an oft repeated anecdote that when Potter Palmer was drawing up his will, his lawyer suggested that since Bertha was much younger than he, he consider the ramifications of his bequest, should his wife remarry. He replied, "If she does remarry, he'll need the money."

Following the dictum of her late husband, she pursued every opportunity to increase the value of her holdings and made prudent investments in real estate. She invested profitably in thousands of acres of land, buildings, and livestock in Florida and amassed a fortune in possessions.

She did not remarry; she used the eight million dollars bequeathed to her and before her own death in 1918, she would more than double her net worth by virtue of her own ingenuity and determination.

Chapter One

Sarasota, 1840-1910

In order to understand the impact of Bertha Palmer's arrival in Sarasota, in 1910, it is important to establish a benchmark by opening a door into the past to see the images and hear the echoes of the sparsely populated frontier town as it was when she and her party first disembarked. In conjunction with this, a cursory overview of the history of Florida from 1840 places the evolution of Sarasota within the time frame of the state's growth and development. According to the Federal Bureau of Census, the town of Sarasota was incorporated on October 14, 1902. In 1910, the first census figures reported that 840 men, women and children lived there. Sarasota became a city on May 16, 1913. In 1910 Manatee County, which included Sarasota, reported a population of 9,600.¹⁹ Concurrently, the population of the State was 752,615.²⁰

The federal government struggled to populate the Territory of Florida in the early decades of the nineteenth century however; it was difficult, if not impossible to persuade prospective pioneers to come to the frontier after two brutal Seminole wars, (1817-1818 and 1835-42) in Spanish Florida. As a strong measure to populate the state,

¹⁹ Karl H. Grismer, *The Story of Sarasota* (Sarasota, M.E. Russell Publishing, 1946), 263. It is important to note that in 1921, Sarasota County was carved out of Manatee County and became an entity in its own right.

²⁰ Sarasota County History Center Archives, Florida Maps, presented by the Historical Records and State Archives Surveys from Works Progress Administration, 1820-1936.

Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri introduced the Armed Occupation Act to Congress in 1840, recommending “armed occupation, with the implements of husbandry in one hand, and the weapons of war in the other,” in order to drive out the indigenous population and make way for the unencumbered development of the land by the new settlers.²¹ At that time, the measure was defeated; however, following the end of the Second Seminole War in 1842, Congress passed the Act to encourage the migration of a white populace and the departure of the remaining Seminoles. The Act offered one hundred and sixty acres of land to men over eighteen years of age, with or without a family, and was conditional upon building a home and cultivating a minimum of five acres for five consecutive years. The pioneers who came to the new frontier were a diverse and hardy group. They included including war veterans, cowboys, farmers, fish ranchers, grocers, ditchers, coopers, boat builders, shoemakers, surveyors, real estate developers, and slaves. They were stalwart men and women, striving against extraordinary obstacles to sustain themselves and to forge a new beginning in the wilderness. The names of the early settlers have remained in the annals of Sarasota; Hamlin Snell, William Whitaker, Joseph Woodruff, John Blackburn, Owen Cunningham, Charles Abbe, William Rigby, and many more.²² They built homes, raised their children, planted orange groves, cultivated their fields, fished the waters, and drove their cattle. When disease or injury intruded upon their lives and curative measures were unavailable, they buried their dead. When the forces of nature destroyed their crops, their homes or their livestock, they began again.

²¹ James W. Covington, “The Armed Occupation Act of 1842,” (*The Florida Historical Quarterly*, July 1961), 41-43.

²² *Ibid*, 49.

By the Third Seminole War (1855-1858), bounty hunters had raided the plantation of Seminole Chief Billy Bowlegs and the few remaining members of the tribe and carried out the braves and women. A guerrilla war ensued, and the tribe was driven deep into the Everglades. The fear and greed of the white settlers was not satiated. They believed acquisition of the land was their destiny. By 1858, Billy Bowlegs and his wives, slaves, and thirty-eight warriors were taken from Florida and transported to the West. Few indigenous people remained.

The Civil War interrupted the proliferation of pioneers as men, young and old, joined the Confederate Army. And when the bloody battle was done, the soldiers returned to their decimated lands to repair, rebuild, sow the fields and increase the numbers of livestock. Many new settlers began coming to the frontier: Northerners who had heard of a land bountiful with sunshine and fertile soil, and defeated Confederates whose buildings, lands, crops, and cattle had been destroyed in the battles of the war. They were emboldened by the Homestead Acts of 1862 and 1864, whose entitlements paralleled the conditions of the Armed Occupation Act two decades before.

The late nineteenth-century frontier of Florida was, to some extent, analogous to that of the territory comprising the western region of America. While lacking the expansiveness and the distinct topography of the West, the remote, unsettled areas of Florida were characterized by similarly harsh conditions and obstacles to subsistence and survival. The pioneer families that migrated to Florida to create a garden out of the wilderness were adventurous and resolute; rivaling the undaunted, self-reliant intrepid heroes of lore most often glorified in histories of the far West. The lives of the early

Florida trailblazers were fraught with dangers, and they were forced to endure primitive conditions and isolation with no ordinary comforts.

Early newcomers to Sarasota were John G. Webb and his wife, Eliza who were transplants from Utica, New York. They came in August 1867, with their five children and extended family members, as part of the mass migration magnetized by the promise of land through the Homestead Act.²³ The Webb family was motivated to come south because of Eliza's chronic asthma and the prospect of a new beginning. John Webb had taught chemistry at Union College of New York and had been a druggist; however, as was common among professionals in that era, he never veered from his agrarian roots and continued to till the soil and maintain the livestock. Webb had read an article about Florida agriculture written by Major Robert Gamble prior to the Civil War.²⁴ The text sparked an interest in the possibilities of Manatee County, which culminated in the family immigration.

The settlement at that time had one general store and one small "sloop" to haul passengers. The Webbs initially planned to settle on acreage in Terra Ceia, but a squatter refused to move.²⁵ While searching for the optimum location, the family camped out in the harsh wilderness, which was so different from their comfortable

²³ Bertha Palmer and her family would live in the Webb cottage while the home in Osprey, purchased from Lawrence Jones, was being reconstructed.

²⁴ Robert Gamble established a plantation of more than three thousand acres to grow sugar cane. The mansion, built in the 1840s, is now a State of Florida Historic site which stands in what is now the town of Ellenton on the banks of the Manatee River. Gamble achieved legendary fame by granting asylum after the fall of the Confederacy, to Judah Benjamin, a former United States Senator, who became Secretary of State for the Confederacy. Gamble was the author of many books and articles about agriculture.

²⁵ A town currently in Manatee County, originally settled by Europeans in 1843. The name means "heavenly land."

home in New York. They all suffered loneliness and the threat of marauders, animal predators and disease.

In 1867, a cattle steamer from Havana came to the shore of the Manatee River carrying an engineer afflicted with yellow fever. When an epidemic began to spread throughout the community, the Webbs were compelled to move their campsite to avoid contracting the disease and renewed their search for another home site. Their quest culminated on Little Sarasota Bay on an Indian midden which they named Spanish Point.²⁶ The family built a shanty, moved their spartan belongings into a tent, and, when they were able to move lumber down the river on a raft, built their first home, a one-room cabin with a roof of palmetto fronds. They planted their garden and began their new life. Although they had scant financial resources, they were able to find many materials for building their home locally, and together, they created their own labor force. John Webb purchased a sugar mill to make and market syrup, and a refinery to produce sugar. Influenced by a suggestion from a winter visitor, he built additions to his existing home to make it a rooming house and began advertising in Northern newspapers. The advertisement enticed Northerners who came to Webb's Resort and as the reputation spread by word-of-mouth, more came. During the winter season he housed as many as twenty-five tourists at a time.

Florida also had its share of vigilantes. In Sarasota, in 1884, a disgruntled group of settlers, who harbored deep resentment toward their more prosperous neighbors, established the Sara Sota Vigilante Committee, formed a posse, and shot a man named Harrison Riley and then slit his throat. The killers were prosecuted but ultimately

²⁶A trader the family met in Key West told them of a elevated point of land on the bay in Sarasota. When the family found the land and settled here, they named it "Spanish Point" to honor him. See <http://www.historicspanishpoint.org/>.

vindicated by a jury comprised of members of the same secret society. Two days after the bloody incident, Charles Elliott Abbe, a successful and hard working citizen and the founder of the first Post Office in the town in 1878, was gunned down. The vigilantes had vowed to protect each other and remain incognito; however, local citizens were steadfast and persevered until the killers were exposed and brought to justice. Newspaper correspondents from far and near came to cover the trials, and the small town achieved a modicum of notoriety.

In 1885, an emigration and land promoter in Scotland, John Selwin Tait, organized a colony of approximately eighty people to journey to Florida, in conjunction with the Scottish Company, Florida Mortgage and Investment Company Limited. The company's solicitor in Edinburgh was Sir John Hamilton Gillespie who was, in addition, Writer to the Signet, a member of the Royal Company of Archers, and the Queen's bodyguard for Scotland.²⁷ The Board of the Scottish company had purchased fifty-thousand acres in the Sarasota Bay area from the son of Henry Disston, a successful Philadelphia saw manufacturer.²⁸

Scottish immigration to America had begun in the second decade of the 18th century as part of a mass movement from the Borderlands of England because of a

²⁷ Janet Snyder Matthews, *Sarasota, Journal to Centennial*(Sarasota: Pine Level Press, 1985), 55.

²⁸ Hamilton Disston was a sportsman who came to the area in the 1870s to hunt and fish. Upon his father's death in 1878, Disston was bequeathed a large sum of money and sought his own ventures. He became one of four Philadelphians under contract to the governor of Florida, William Bloxham in 1881, to implement the drainage of specified interior areas of the State for development in 1881. Disston was given the opportunity to own four-million acres of land at the price of twenty-five cents per acre. He turned a tidy profit when Florida Mortgage and Investment Company Limited paid him one dollar for each acre they purchased. Ultimately, Disston's future expectations for profitable development were impeded by ill-advised overdrainage of land; a nationwide economic panic in 1893 that sent land prices plummeting, and a halt to railroad construction beyond downtown St. Petersburg, precluding traffic to Disston City. It has been speculated that Hamilton Disston's death on April 30, 1896, was by his own hand, resulting from anguish over vanquished dreams.

severe economic depression. Alex Browning, a Scottish colonist who was a child at the time of the migration, wrote a vivid memoir of the journey across the ocean and the settlement of Sarasota. Written in 1932 for his children and grandchildren, his first chapter notes:

In 1885, the British people were passing through a great commercial depression, many families emigrating to America, Canada and other British Colonies....at this time my father's business was dull and the outlook was dreary. About this time, my Uncle Lawrie's warehouse burned to the ground.....Somehow a pamphlet about Sarasota in Florida got into my uncle's possession, written by a promoter named Tate. It looked so promising the family got into communication with the author, who had inveigled some other well to do families into the signing of papers and establish a first class colony. Mr. Tate was a nephew of the Archbishop of Canterbury and all the gentlemen involved were of high standing. None of them had ever been to Florida which may be an excuse for the prospectus written by Tate to induce the promoters promised a first class settlement which they would call the Ormiston Co gullible settlers to colonize. This land had been bought by Hamilton Disston, mostly in Manatee County and we were enlisted to buy forty acres of land and a town lot. The colonists paid one hundred pounds sterling for this, getting the advantage of a reduced fare on the Anchor Line Steamer, Furnessia. The promoters promised a first class settlement which they would call Ormiston Colony²⁹

The Ormiston Colony was a failure. The colonists had been promised a town and arrived to find a barren expanse. There was no infrastructure, no lodgings, and only the few primitive scattered cabins of settlers. A promised wharf and a boarding house were yet to be built. Predators, reptiles, mosquitoes, and untamed wilderness confronted the unhappy travelers. Furthermore, it turned out to be the coldest winter in recorded history; snowflakes were falling when they disembarked. The members of the colony, certain they were headed for a tropical clime, had left their warmest clothing and

²⁹ Sarasota County History Center. Vertical File: Sports History: Golf, cross-referenced as Gillespie John and Ormiston Colony- Alex Browning, "The Founding of Sarasota."

blankets at home. The disgruntled Scots either went home or dispersed into other areas to the north where they had friends or family members.

The Florida Mortgage and Investment Company learned from its costly blunders. The son of the company president, John Hamilton Gillespie, was sent to Sarasota to manage the investment. Under his direction and capital, the company moved forward with building plans, initially investing fifty thousand pounds on grading and drainage. The town of Sarasota had been surveyed after the first migration failed and after the plat had been drawn up in Edinburgh. The company constructed a dock, a wharf, a warehouse and “portable” cottages. A sixteen by twenty-four foot schoolhouse, built with lumber Gillespie donated, was constructed on Main Street; roadways graded for wagons and riders; and an artesian well sunk at Five Points, the pivotal center of the town, to supply water. Forty acres were cleared for an experimental farm. In 1886, Gillespie built the beautiful De Soto Hotel, constructed on the bay front, to entice visitors to remain long enough to consider an investment in the available land.

Next to the new hotel, Gillespie built a home for his family. He was a lay reader and regular participant in the Episcopal Church of the Redeemer, which he built on his property. Notably, he also brought with him, from Scotland, the game of golf. He had learned the game in its cradle of St. Andrews in Scotland, and, in Sarasota, he built a number of golf courses, a clubhouse, and began a campaign for memberships and participation in the game.³⁰ He also donated land for the African Methodist Episcopal

³⁰ Gillespie has been credited with the introduction of golf to the United States; however, research has proven this to be untrue. He did introduce golf to Florida in 1886 when the first game was played on a two hole course on his property near Main Street in downtown Sarasota. *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, May 21, 1978.

Church and five acres for the Rosemary Cemetery. After Sarasota was incorporated as a town in 1902, Gillespie served six one-year terms as mayor.

The evolution of Manatee County, and its cities of Sarasota, Venice and Bradenton, continued in its nascent stage. It would take a huge investment of resources to move the frontier in the direction of a progressive, modernized, and relatively mobile society.

As one century faded into another, the prevailing milieu remained primitive and void of cultural refinements and an adequate standard of living. A walk through the sand, dirt, and shell-packed roads dented with buggy tracks and sullied with animal droppings, required caution by raising long skirts and maneuvering about to avoid soiling shoes. Domesticated beasts and poultry roamed the streets, eating whatever they could find and drinking from the polluted Main Street water trough. Mosquitoes were everywhere, and the dangers of malaria and other diseases lurked in the stagnant water, partially filled ditches, and disease-breeding drains. Foul smelling privies were ubiquitous in the yards of homes, schools, churches and commercial enterprises.

Arriving residents began investing their minimal capital and labor in the town, Commercial enterprises appeared: drug stores, hardware stores, a dental office, a real estate office, a tailor shop, a livery stable, and an emporium named, Grantham and Broadway, which sold groceries, corn, oats, hay, dry goods, clothing, and novelties. There was an old company store at Main Street and Gulf Stream that dealt in dry goods, groceries, feed, and general merchandise. Another store owned by H.B. Harris advertised ice cream, cool drinks, fresh fruits, tobacco, and cigars. He later opened a barbershop.

In 1878, Charles Elliott Abbe applied for the first local Post Office to serve a population of forty families. Sarasota's blacksmith shop, a frame building on Main Street, was owned by Jerry Wesley Harvey, Sr. Harvey had a successful enterprise until Dr. Cullen B. Wilson introduced the first motorcar in the town and others followed suit. In time Harvey presciently combined his blacksmith work with auto repairs.

Travel and shipping were, for the most part, confined to water traffic until the second decade of the century. Horses and buggies were used inland when roads were passable. The southern terminus for Henry Plant's railroad system was Tampa; therefore, goods had to be shipped and people transported by water to the wharf on Sarasota Bay.³¹ By 1910, bridges and boardwalks were built across streets inundated by the bay and kerosene lamps installed to light the way. The transition to electricity took about six more years as the current went on and off with frequent technical difficulties. The electrical installation, once innovated, was initially used to make ice and to store perishable foods.

Following the approval of a 25,000-dollar bond issue for street paving in 1909, lime rock was used to pave both Main Street and sections of adjacent roadways. Eventually, wooden boardwalks became embedded sidewalks, and the waterfront enforced with seawalls. Although Sarasota was beginning to move forward, livestock and domesticated animals continued to roam at will, horses remained the most prevalent form of travel, and adequate plumbing had yet to be introduced. Medical practice was

³¹ Beginning in 1882, Henry B. Plant developed the Plant System of railroads, hotels and steamship lines along the gulf coast and into central Florida, connecting Florida by rail with the North. While Plant's development was on the west coast of the state, his counterpart on the east coast was Henry Morrison Flagler. For more information on the railroad magnates of Florida, see Samuel Proctor, *Prelude to the New Florida, 1877-1919*, , 266-284 in Michael Gannon, ed. *The New History of Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida.1996), Les Sanford, *Last Train to Paradise* (New York:Three Rivers Press 2002) and Susan R. Braden, *The Architecture of Leisure: The Resort Hotels of Henry Flagler and Henry Plant* (Gainesville: The University Press of Florida 2002).

inadequate, and disease was widespread. Infant and child mortality rates continued to be high; many women died in childbirth, and the projected life span was low.

In 1899, Cornelius Van Santvoord Wilson established the *Sarasota Times*.

Historian Karl Grismer relates,

Wilson took an active interest in everything pertaining to the welfare of Sarasota. The first issue was published on a Washington Hand Press from handset type. Thereafter the newspaper never missed an issue until it was sold more than twenty-two years later. *The Sarasota Times* building was a small two-story timber structure in the central area of Five Points.³²

The barrier islands Longboat, Lido and Siesta Keys were pristine. A handful of families homesteaded on the land and fished the waters. When a small hotel was built at the north end of Longboat Key in 1913, the proprietors, the Dorritys, ferried passengers to and from the Sarasota mainland and other residents used skiffs for travel to and from the Key. Residents used a tiny post office location built in 1904, at the south end of Longboat Key to serve a population of twenty-five until a larger facility was established in 1914, located in the home of the postmistress, Mrs. Henrietta Tallman. Mail from the nearby community of Cortez was carried by motorboat to Longboat Key twice daily.

In 1912, a school was established at the south end of the Key to teach the children of employees of an experimental farm established to perfect the growing of avocado, guava and papaya.

Siesta Key, then called Sarasota Key, was more accessible because of its proximity to the mainland. A small bridge was constructed in 1915, and the island was populated by a small group of year round residents who were hardy and fiercely

³² Karl H. Grismer, *The Story of Sarasota* (Sarasota, M.E. Russell Printing, 1947), 74.

independent farmers and fisherman. During the summer, Sarasota residents came to enjoy the powdery white sand and cooling water of the Gulf.³³

By 1903, a 50-line magneto telephone switch was installed in the post office and service became available. By the winter of 1903-04, Sarasota's population had increased incrementally and the small two-room school on Eighth Street was overcrowded. With financial backing from the Manatee County School Board and the contributions of Sarasota citizens, a two-story school building was constructed and opened in September 1904.³⁴

That same year, Dr. Jack Halton arrived from Muncie, Indiana.³⁵ He later built the first sanitarium in the area, on the bayfront in 1908. Dr. Halton denounced the outdoor privies and inadequate cesspools in the business district and argued that the town's lack of sewers was a disgrace, singling out the Belle Haven Inn on the bayfront as a serious offender. The Inn was ordered to install adequate cesspools; however, without a sewer system, the problem persisted. Resident Joseph H. Lord financed and built the first sewers. Lord, a land investor, developer and realtor would become a potent force in the community.

In the early history of the town, council members drew up ordinances to govern the behavior of their constituency, which from a twenty-first century perspective, appear quaint and anachronistic. The citizens could be fined or sent to jail for blocking a sidewalk, profanity, fighting, driving a wagon too fast, entering a stable with an

³³ Lora Colvin Whitney, *Hail This Feisty Village*(Torrington, CT: Rainbow Press, 1984), 22.

³⁴ Grismer, 128.

³⁵ Dr. Halton moved to Sarasota in 1905. In March, 1908, he opened the Halton Sanitarium and managed the Belle Haven Hotel for three years. Source: *The Story of Sarasota* by Karl Grismer, 156-157.

uncovered light, or burning trash too close to buildings. Business owners whose property was on the shady side of the street had to install hitching posts in the front of their shops or offices. The ordinance outlawed prostitution, gambling, pool halls, and bawdy houses. Vagrants were not allowed to rest in privies or hitch rides on trains. People were warned against making noise, arriving nude, or exhibiting indecent behavior in church.³⁶

Sarasota had a police force by 1900, despite its low crime rate. The speed limit on the downtown roads was six miles per hour, and cattle and hogs roamed the streets. There was rarely a person out walking about after ten o'clock at night, and it was common for doors to be left unlocked. A volunteer fire department was organized in late 1908 as a result of two fires that destroyed the 16-room Bay View Hotel and the Livery Stable. The department purchased three hundred feet of hose; however, the process was convoluted and inefficient. The hose reels had to be hauled several blocks and often arrived too late. It wasn't until 1915 that the city acquired modern firefighting equipment. Most structures at that time were constructed of wood and sporadic fires were unavoidable.

Although the town as well as the county was moving forward, it was at a snail's pace. The population was increasing incrementally, homes and mercantile buildings were going up and services were becoming available, yet the area remained rustic and agrarian. But soon this would all change.

³⁶ Janet Snyder Matthews, *Sarasota, Journey to Centennial*, (Sarasota, Pine Level Press, 1985), 82.

Chapter Two

The Early Years

Bertha Matilda Honoré was the second of the six children of Henry Hamilton and Eliza Jane (Carr) Honoré. There were four boys: Adrian, Henry Jr., Nathaniel, and Lockwood. The younger daughter was Ida, who was described as a more petite version of her sister, quieter but equally charming and beautiful. Bertha's paternal French great-grandfather, Jean Antoine Honoré, immigrated to Maryland in 1781 and within twenty-five years had moved to Louisville, Kentucky where he established a hardware business. He was an entrepreneurial man of wealth who established the first steamship line between New Orleans and Louisville. His son Francis was a gentleman farmer who married a woman named Matilda Lockwood. The couple had four children: Mary Ann, Benjamin, Francis Jr., and Henry Hamilton, who would become Bertha's father. As a representative of his father's hardware business, Henry traveled to Chicago and, inspired by the possibilities of that nascent city, began to consider a move for his family.

Bertha's mother, Eliza Carr Honoré, was the daughter of John and Mary Dorsey Carr. She was descended from Edward D'Arcy (Americanized, first to Dorsey and then changed to D'Orsay) who came to the southern colonies in the seventeenth century. Mary Dorsey may have provided the progressive role model for Bertha. In the

biography, *Silhouette in Diamonds*, Ishbel Ross wrote, “She [Mary Dorsey Carr] freed her slaves because of her conscientious scruples long before manumission became mandatory.”³⁷

Bertha was six when the family arrived in Chicago in the year 1855. Henry Hamilton Honoré invested in subdivisions of land on Chicago’s West Side for himself and for other families of wealth who had also come from his native Kentucky. The Chicago they came to was a rough and tumble city with uneven wooden sidewalks, dirt paths and unpaved roads with mud and dust everywhere. The dominant modes of transportation within the city were horse and carriage or wagon; however, three years prior to the Honorés’ arrival, the Michigan Southern and Northern Indiana Railroad had come to Chicago and connected the city with states in the East. The city became a burgeoning grain market with a natural harbor. Its location was ideal for commerce. In an article in the September 1858 issue of *Atlantic Monthly Magazine* titled “Illinois in Spring–Time,” author Caroline Kirkland wrote,

To describe Chicago, one would need all the superlatives: grandest, flattest, muddiest, dustiest, hottest, coldest, wettest, driest, worst harbor on Lake Michigan, worst harbor and smallest river any commercial city ever lived on...most elegant in architecture, meanest in hovel-propping, most lavish, most grasping, public spirited in some things, blindest and darkest on others. And some souls would add, most fascinating or most desolate, depending on whether one goes there, gay and hopeful, to find troops of prosperous friends or, lonely and poor, with the distant hope of bettering broken fortunes...³⁸

To Henry Honoré, Chicago, with a population of more than forty thousand, was a metropolis about to happen, a city on the cusp of development and modernization; he was a visionary with powers of persuasion, wealth, and important connections. He

³⁷ Ross, *Silhouette in Diamonds*, 15.

³⁸ Caroline Kirkland, “Illinois in Springtime, With a Look At Chicago” (*Atlantic Monthly*, Volume 2, Issue 11, September 1858.), 487.

became a developer, an innovator and an exemplar; he purchased and subdivided land and built and improved properties and neighborhoods.

Eliza Carr Honoré forged important friendships and became part of an elite social circle, many of whom were members of the coterie from Kentucky. The Honorés attended the First Christian Church and followed its credo of charity. They maintained ties with their native South by donating food and clothing to Confederate prisoners at Camp Douglas in Chicago while supporting the Northwestern Sanitary Fairs in 1863 and 1865, raising a great deal of money to aid wounded Union soldiers.³⁹ Eliza and Henry Hamilton encouraged their children to stay informed and to participate in political discussion and they nurtured them in the spirit of *noblesse oblige*.

Bertha began her education at St. Xavier Academy and moved on to the Dearborn Seminary.⁴⁰ In 1922, Lucy Harrison, the wife of former Mayor, Carter Henry Harrison Jr., wrote a series of articles about Bertha Palmer entitled, “Mrs. Potter Palmer As I Knew Her.” The installments appeared in six consecutive Sunday editions of the

³⁹ In the northern states, from 1863 through 1865, fund-raising fairs were designed to raise money for the United States Sanitary Commission. These “sanitary fairs” as they were called, sold donated articles, provided entertainments and operated restaurants. The fairs were an appropriate means for church women as members of social reform organizations, to replenish the treasuries of the regional Sanitary Commissions which served the needs of Union soldiers. The United States Sanitary Commission became an official agency on June 18, 1861. Modeled on the British Sanitary Commission during the Crimean War, the agency, primarily staffed by women, canvassed neighborhoods for donations, set up kitchens in the military camps, worked on hospital ships, provided blankets, uniforms, socks and gloves, prepared food and raised thousands of dollars of goods and funds for the Federal Army. It should be noted that Abraham Lincoln contributed the original draft of his Emancipation Proclamation to the Commission, which sold for three-thousand dollars. See: <http://www.routledge-ny.com/ref/womencivilwar/sanitary.pdf>.

⁴⁰ St. Xavier Academy was founded by the Sisters of Mercy in 1846. It was girls’ day school in the 19th century and eventually became Xavier University. Both this academy and the Dearborn Seminary were prestigious schools known for teaching proper young women.

*Chicago Herald and Examiner.*⁴¹ In the Chapter, “Bertha As a Girl,” the author remembers,

If there was one trait more than any other developed in the youthful Bertha it was her strict adherence to keeping her word. This honor system pursued her through life. One morning she asked permission of her mother to go to a neighbor’s home to play. Permission was given but she was told to return in one hour. Young Bertha waited at the doorway for her friend to come out. When a member of the household found her waiting on the doorstep, she drew her in welcoming her. The little girl protested, saying ‘I’m sorry I can’t stay; I’ve got to go home now. I already made my visit standing on the doorstep waiting for someone to answer the bell.’ The doorbell was broken.⁴²

Harrison also recalled that during her childhood days Bertha Honoré’s greatest devotion was for her brother Adrian, whom she called Bud. She went to her big brother with her problems, and he always tried to solve them. Their close friendship continued throughout her life.

The Ashland Avenue area where the Honorés lived was, during Bertha’s childhood, almost in the prairies, and when the ponds flooded and froze, the children could ice skate for miles. In another excerpt from her articles, Harrison offers the reader a glimpse of the neighborhood during that period:

There was plenty of fresh air in the Ashland Avenue section and the cupola of the Honoré home (afterwards the Carter Harrison home) became a favorite stomping ground for the children who loved to look out at great vistas of places unknown. In the morning, in the cloud of dust, or, depending on the weather, in the sea of mud,

⁴¹ Carter Henry Harrison, Sr., (father-in-law of the author of the articles) was born in Lexington, Kentucky and came to Chicago in the 1850s along with the Honorés. The elder Harrison served as mayor of the city during the years, 1879-1887. He purchased the first home of the Honoré family on Ashland Drive when they moved to more fashionable Michigan Avenue at the end of the Civil War. On the evening of October 28, 1893, the former mayor came to the front entrance to his home to answer the door and was mortally shot by an assassin, Patrick Eugene Prendergast, a dejected office-seeker. (Prendergast was hanged for the crime the following year.) Harrison Senior’s son, Carter H. Harrison, Jr. served as mayor of the city from 1897 to 1905.

⁴² Mrs. Carter H. Harrison, Jr. , “Mrs. Potter Palmer As I Knew Her,” *Chicago Herald and Examiner*, Unnumbered Pages. Private collections of Rollins Coakly.

the cow man [sic] took his herd of milk cows out to pasture on the rich prairie grasses.⁴³

The Honoré family adhered to the social conventions of the upper classes of the day. All entertaining was done within the home, and the children were included in the large and lavish gatherings. During the Civil War, when parties were curtailed, the elegant home was open for sewing circles, bandage rolling, and fund raising for the war effort. The Honoré girls [Bertha and her younger sister, Ida] were kept discreetly distant from the often corrupt and brawling city of Chicago during the war. It was a time of brothels, gambling houses, and saloons as displaced persons who were victims of the raging turmoil came through the streets. Caroline Kirkland described the Chicago of 1858.

“Chicago has, with all her wealth, no public park or other provision for out-of-door recreation. She has no gallery of art or the beginning of one, no establishment of music, no public library, no social institution whatever, except the church.”⁴⁴

The churches fulfilled the social as well as religious needs of the people. All that was to change, however, with the rapid growth of the area. After the Civil War, Bertha attended the Convent of the Visitation, a cloistered finishing school run by Catholic nuns in Georgetown, Washington, D.C. In June 1867, she graduated with honors in history, geography, the sciences, philosophy, literature, rhetoric and composition, advanced mathematics, and domestic economy. She also was honored for her talents in

⁴³ Mrs. Carter H. Harrison, Jr. , *Chicago Herald and Examiner*, Mrs. Potter Palmer As I Knew Her: January 22, 1922. From the private collections of Rollins W. Coakley.

⁴⁴ Caroline Kirkland, Illinois in Springtime: With a Look at Chicago, *Atlantic Monthly*, 2, number 11, (September 1858), 2-3. available from: <http://condor.depaul.edu/~chicago/primar>.

piano, harp, and vocal music.⁴⁵ In later years she sometimes bemoaned the fact that too much of her time at the Convent was spent learning to hem linen towels and embroider handkerchiefs, yet she realized that that these were domestic skills considered *de rigueur* for a proper lady.

When the social season began in autumn of that year, the beautiful young woman made her debut in the new family home on Michigan Avenue. The traditional Bachelors' Assembly Balls followed the formal occasion held at the Tremont House, a leading hotel of the day.⁴⁶ The debutante social season was a time for the young and wealthy set to picnic, attend the theater, and enjoy a whirl of formal parties. Bertha enchanted many admirers; however, one uncommon man came to the front of the line. Potter Palmer, returning from his sojourn in Europe, had made up his mind. Bertha Honoré would become his wife.

⁴⁵ Rima Lunin Schultz and Adele Hast, *Women Building Chicago 1790-1990* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 661-664.

⁴⁶ The balls were communal rituals that allowed eligible young men who had attended the debutantes' galas to repay their hostesses for hospitality.

Chapter Three

Potter Palmer

As the story has been told through the years, in 1862 the thirty-six year old retailer and entrepreneur, Potter Palmer, came to the Honoré home for a business meeting; he had been working in tandem with Henry Honoré on various real estate developments. Palmer reportedly gazed upon the very beautiful thirteen-year-old Bertha with her sparkling dark eyes, long dark hair and graceful movements and engaged her in conversation. Finding her to be intelligent with impeccable manners and an aura of self-assurance, he was at once smitten. When Bertha came of age, he vowed, she would be an ideal wife and companion.⁴⁷

According to Ishbel Ross, Palmer was Chicago's richest bachelor but a lonely man. His life had been one steady drive for success." Ross described him as:

A man of reserve, stockily [sic] built, with dark brown hair, a high forehead and keen blue eyes that dimmed when he lapsed into one of the long silences habitual to him. He exhibited a wry sense of humor in the social chitchat of the family circle on the night that Bertha first saw him, but mostly the talk was of [the Civil]war.⁴⁸

In future years, when his wife was famous for her congeniality, grace and eloquence, Palmer was often taciturn during social events and stepped into the shadows, proud of his beautiful wife but preferring to go for a walk or stay quietly in a distant

⁴⁷ Ishbel Ross, *Silhouette in Diamonds*,(New York:Harper and Bros.1960),10.

⁴² Ibid,11.

room. The spotlight was on Bertha. He was known to be stubborn yet compliant when Bertha used her wiles to have her way.

Palmer was born on May 26, 1826, in the tiny hamlet of Potter's Hollow in Albany County, New York. He was the fourth of seven children of Benjamin and Rebecca Palmer; his mother was a descendant of the Potter family who were the original settlers of the town. The children were raised as Quakers, and Palmer attended the Friends Academy in a nearby community. Benjamin Palmer owned and operated four successful dairy farms; however, Potter was not interested in the life of a cattle rancher.⁴⁹ He took another road through the intervention of his uncle, Samuel P. Potter, who arranged for the young boy to work for Colonel Platt Adams as a clerk in the largest general store in Durham, New York. The Colonel recognized the young man's proclivity for the trade and left Palmer in charge of the store while he pursued his primary interest, political office. Within three years, Palmer was offered a partnership in the store; however, the entrepreneur within him was emerging, and he ventured forth on his own, fortified with money borrowed from his father.

His first experience as a proprietor was in a small general store in the Quaker community of Oneida County, New York, where, he broke with the tradition of negotiable prices and established a one-price cash policy.⁵⁰ When the small community was unable to support the store, he took his losses and moved to Lockport, New York. He advertised his new dry-goods store as "The Cheapest Place in Town!" and he continued his one-price, cash only policy, terms unacceptable to those townspeople who

⁴⁹ It is ironic that Palmer's future wife, Bertha Honoré Palmer, would ultimately own and operate cattle ranches in Florida.

⁵⁰ Lloyd Wendt and Herman Kogan, *Give The Lady What She Wants* (South Bend, and Books [sic] (Marshal Field & Company, 1952, 2001 Fifteenth Printing), 18.

relished driving a hard bargain by their cunning. Disheartened, Palmer was ready to move on to try his luck New York City. Fortuitously, a seemingly innocuous event changed the course of his life. He learned that the quarries in Lockport had received a large order for limestone to build a new courthouse in Chicago. The young man decided instead to explore that city. The year was 1852 and during a week's visit to Chicago, he was convinced that the burgeoning city offered great opportunities for success. He made his move. With two-thousand dollars from his earlier ventures and an advance from his father of three-thousand in gold, Palmer traveled to New York City to buy goods, "spending his money carefully and arranging for credit with those who would trust him, he went to auctions and importers, getting the best prices for a varied assortment of merchandise."⁵¹ Before leaving the city, he visited the largest emporium in the city, the "Marble Palace," owned by the stalwart Irishman, Alexander Turney Stewart, who regaled the young man with stories and advice, focusing most of all on the importance of attentiveness, courtesy and honesty to be offered to every customer, reinforcing a philosophy already inherent in the young man.⁵²

Palmer opened his dry goods store on Lake Street in 1852 at an opportune time. It was the dawn of nineteenth-century feminism, and women were beginning to venture out on their own, able to use their own discretion when making purchases for themselves and for the home and family.

During this transitional period, when proper women were always escorted, the dry goods store was an early bastion of shopping and meeting friends without a

⁵¹ Ibid, 21.

⁵² Stewart was a retail maverick, and by 1848 he built a large marble store on Broadway between Chambers Street and Reade Street, which was devoted to the wholesale branch of his business, and it was the largest retail store in the world at that time.

chaperone. Other factors worked in his favor. In their book, *Give the Lady What She Wants*, Lloyd Wendt and Herman Kogan talk of Chicago's boom during the Civil War. It was logistically central to the country's railroad network and a collecting point for foodstuffs; it had become a huge grain market, a pork packing center, and manufacturers were receiving orders for farm machinery made in the city.⁵³ There was wealth, and wealth begot consumers. Immigrants were flocking into the area; household servants were available for middle-class women, freeing them from daily tasks and allowing more time to shop.

Young women from the East were coming to the city to find husbands. The crinoline and hoop skirt vogue called for many yards of fabric, which netted great profits. Following guidance in the women's magazines of the day and vogues popular in Paris, Palmer offered his customers the finest quality of Parisian silks, laces, gloves, and cloaks. With the 1861 passage of the *Married Women's Property Act* in Illinois, women had control over their money and the right to spend it.

He decided to stock Persian rugs in addition to apparel and by making shrewd purchases directly from manufacturers, importers and wholesalers, he was able to sell at lower prices. The enthusiasm for dancing brought many young women into the store for new frocks, cloaks, hats and shoes for polkas and waltzes, dances unheard of in an earlier decade. Palmer was insightful and cognizant of the importance of appealing to the ladies, sparking what amounted to a retailing revolution by allowing the customers to purchase the article with a guarantee of a full refund if they decided to return it. Furthermore he undercut his competition and sold on credit. The store became famous

⁵³ Wendt and Kogan *Give the Lady What She Wants*, 61.

for its unusual and attractive window displays and consistently eye-catching advertisements. With the onset of the Civil War, Palmer bought up warehouses packed with cotton and made a tidy profit selling when the prices rose; it was the beginning of a successful wholesale business that warranted the opening of an office in New York City. He purchased the total production of factories and sold and shipped the goods directly to jobbers and retailers, thereby circumventing the warehouse. The Quaker tradition of hard work and ethical dealings served him well as hands-on-management involved him in every facet of the business. He was always the first to arrive at the store in the morning and remained after closing to review the accounting or process orders. He was known to have an abundance of energy, extraordinary instincts and exemplary ethics. In 1857, five years after the opening of his 137 Lake Street store, he moved to larger quarters next door. Within one year he was able to move into his own marble palace located one block east of his original location. Day after day, year after year, he never wavered in his quest for success and wealth. As his retail business flourished, Palmer invested the profits in real estate.

His achievements came at a price. He had amassed a fortune of seven million dollars at the age of thirty-eight; however, his health had suffered and his physicians ordered him to rest. Palmer no longer had a choice. Following a period of negotiations, he sold his store to two young and ambitious retailers, Marshall Field and Levi Z. Leiter.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ For comprehensive facts on the lives and careers of Leiter and Field, refer to Wendt and Kogan, *Give the Lady What She Wants*, and John William Tebbel, *The Marshall Fiels; a Study in Wealth*, (New York: E.P. Dutton 1948) and Harold M. Mayer and Richard C. Wade, (*Chicago:Growth of a Metropolis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1969).

Palmer then went abroad for approximately three years. In the *Chicago Tribune* article on his upcoming wedding in 1870, it was stated, “ He left a monument to his business ability in the magnificent store occupied by Field, Leiter and Company, his successors.”⁵⁵

Bertha Honoré had become familiar with P. Palmer and Company and the store’s welcoming owner who, attired in a frock coat, greeted all customers and made certain that they would be offered the most attentive and courteous attention. She would arrive with her mother and sister in their brougham, often passing the time between social calls to shop at their leisure. Palmer always gave the Honoré family his personal attention; however, Bertha and Palmer did not meet socially during that time. During the years of Palmer’s retail entrepreneurship, Bertha was immersed in her studies, friends, and family, and her social activities and obligations were carefully orchestrated by her mother.

Palmer returned from Europe in 1868 with renewed vitality. His career in merchandising was behind him. He had, surprisingly become somewhat of a *bon vivant*, enjoying the sporting life and the attention of pretty women. He built a ball field for the Chicago White Stockings (later known as the Cubs) and frequented the horse races. Although he had learned to enjoy the fruits of his labor, his entrepreneurial spirit had not diminished. He was determined to transform the city by moving the site of the retail business from Lake Street running east and west to State Street that ran north and south. He tore down old buildings, widened avenues,

⁵⁵ *Chicago Tribune*, June, 1870.

and constructed stores, banks, and other buildings for commercial use. His acquisitions proliferated, and he platted new land for development.

There were, reportedly, one hundred-seventeen properties listed as holdings of Palmer in 1870. Ten of those buildings, located on State, Randolph, and Madison Streets, were listed as “high rental” with income ranging from three thousand to fifty thousand per year. The additional one hundred and seven properties were rented for sums ranging from one hundred to eighteen hundred per year. The gross income thus amounted to two hundred thousand dollars.⁵⁶

During the intervening years, Bertha Honoré had blossomed from a lovely young girl to a poised and beautiful woman. By 1871, she was of marriageable age, and Palmer began courting the twenty-one year old belle in earnest, sending flowers and messages requesting permission to escort her to theaters, restaurants and galas. He asked her parents for their consent and despite the difference in the ages of the prospective bride and groom, they agreed, convinced he would make their daughter happy. Bertha did not act impulsively; she considered his proposal and ultimately Palmer triumphed. Rumors circulated that “the marriage was a business transaction—that Honoré, who was deeply in debt, had virtually sold his daughter to Palmer to help the family financially. Nevertheless, the marriage proved to be solid and fulfilling to both partners.”⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Paul M. Angle, ed. *Potter Palmer's Chicago, Chicago History*, (Vol. V, No. 10, Winter 1959-60, The Chicago Historical Society, Note: According to the American Institute for Economic Research, his rentals would total \$4,117,286.00 in today's market.

⁵⁷ Gioia Diliberto, *New York Times*, (December 20, 1998 Arts and Architecture), 42 Also, *Chicago Tribune* (1860-1872); July 29, 1870; ProQuest Historical Newspapers Chicago Tribune, 4. Palmer-Honore. See also Ross, *Silhouette in Diamonds*, 31. No personal diaries or letters to friends or family have been found in regard to Bertha's private thoughts about Palmer as her future husband and a man more than twice

As a wedding gift, Palmer built a hotel in Bertha's honor, which would include spacious and elegant apartments as their first home. They were married in the Honoré home on July 28, 1870. A news story about the wedding was printed the next day in the *Chicago Tribune*:

PALMER-HONORE

BRILLIANT WEDDING IN HIGH LIFE; MARRIAGE OF POTTER PALMER AND MISS BERTHA HONORÉ.

Fashionable circles, commercial circles, and all other circles in the city of Chicago, have been exercised for the last month or two, over a rumor that Mr. Potter Palmer, the well-known millionaire, was to be married. His great wealth made the topic interesting, and attracted to it more than ordinary attention. The rumor became a reality yesterday afternoon, when Rev. J.S. Sweeney, pastor of the Christian Church, united Mr. Palmer and Miss Bertha Honoré, of this city, in the holy bonds of matrimony. Palmer is prominently before the public in connection with that happy event, as it generally is in a bridegroom. He is six feet high, slight, but well made and erect as a poplar. The long years of business anxiety and care have not bent his back nor detracted from his appearance. The forehead is full and its bumps well developed. The eyes are a sort of hazel with a glimmer of fun in their sharp scrutinizing glance. The lips are clearly cut and when compressed indicate strength of character and inflexibility of purpose...

Since his retirement he has been recuperating his health in Europe and enjoying his hard won millions. He thought in far-off lands of dear Chicago; he came back and sought a congenial partner for life. The lady, Miss Bertha Honoré belongs to one of the most respectable families of the city. She is endowed with personal charms of a high order, is well educated and very intelligent. She is particularly distinguished for her Christian principles. A long acquaintance ripened into friendship and friendship into love, and love was consummated yesterday in marriage. The engagement has been short-only two months. About a year ago, he communicated with his family of his being baptized. Last Sunday he renounced the 'devil and all his works', and was received into the First Christian Church by baptism.

The time appointed for the wedding was five o'clock. About half past five, the bridal party entered and immediately proceeded to the chapel, where the ceremony was performed in a brief but impressive manner. The only persons present were the immediate relatives of the bride and groom. There were no bridesmaids, groomsmen or ushers.

The bride's dress was of white satin, shrouded in point lace. It was a gorgeous garment made in Paris exactly for the occasion. The ceremony over, the bridal party

her age. It is impossible to determine whether her acceptance of the proposal was her own desire or dutiful compliance with the wishes of her parents.

returned to the residence of Mr. Honoré, at the corner of Michigan Avenue and Adams Street, where a reception was held. There was an immense assemblage of friends of both parties. The refreshments were provided by Kinsley, and were served on two thousand pieces of silver. The happy couple left last night for New York, en route to Europe where the honeymoon will be spent.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ The greater portion of the copy refers to the bridegroom rather than the bride, a practice prevalent at the time. In fact, Potter Palmer was the better known of the couple. That would soon change.

Chapter Four

As Mrs. Potter Palmer

Palmer's wedding gift to his bride was the Palmer House Hotel built at a price of \$3,500,000. It was in the process of construction when the couple boarded the ship for Bertha's maiden voyage abroad.

The honeymoon itinerary precluded both Paris and cities in Germany because of the Franco-Prussian War.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, there was much to see and it was Palmer's first opportunity to indulge his wife's whims and desires, buying her anything and everything, particularly fine jewelry, high fashion apparel, and lavish furnishings for their homes.⁶⁰ It was the beginning of a lifetime of acquisition and an unremitting climb to the very pinnacle of social ascendancy. Their honeymoon was spent in the finest hotels in England and the Continent, where they met up with other wealthy Americans and attended the theater, toured museums and gardens, visited historical monuments, castles, and the locales of events Bertha had known only through books. Her heretofore secluded world expanded.

⁵⁹ Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71 was a conflict between France and Prussia that marked the rise of German military power and imperialism. It was provoked by Otto von Bismarck (the Prussian chancellor) as part of his plan for a unified Germany.

⁶⁰ It has been noted in various articles, that despite her love of rare and precious jewelry, Bertha was often cavalier about caring for it and would sometimes misplace a costly piece. Potter Palmer felt secure only when he had control over her jewels and was said to have slept with them under his pillow when they were traveling.

On their return to Chicago, they moved into Palmer's country house outside the city limits, preparing to move imminently into the recently completed Palmer House. At eight stories high, it was the tallest building in the city; its two hundred twenty-five rooms were decorated with Italian marble and French chandeliers.

On the night of October 8, 1871, Bertha was at home alone, except for the servants; Palmer had left his bride briefly to travel to New York for his sister's funeral. That night, the infamous Chicago fire occurred, reportedly started by Mrs. Catherine O'Leary's cow kicking over a kerosene lamp.⁶¹ The *Chicago Tribune* building was destroyed, and the paper was forced to stop publication for two days. In the post-fire issue which appeared on October 11, 1871, the headlines announced that twenty six hundred acres of buildings had been destroyed and eighty thousand people had been burned out. Hotels, banks, public buildings and great business blocks had been swept away, over a hundred dead bodies had been found in the debris, and tens of thousands of citizens were without a home, food or clothing. The report continued:

But to a blow, no matter how terrible, Chicago will not succumb. Late as it is in the season, general as the ruin is, the spirit of her citizens has not given way, and before the ruins are cold, they are beginning to plan for the future. Though so many have been deprived of homes and sustenance, aid in money and provisions is flowing in from all quarters, and much of the present stress will be alleviated before another day has gone by.⁶²

⁶¹ *The Chicago Tribune* reporter who created the story, Michael Ahern, later admitted that he had concocted the story because he thought it would make colorful copy. Alternative speculation has been Daniel "Pegleg" Sullivan who reported the fire and trying to steal milk in the barn that night; Louis M. Cohn may have started the fire during a crap game; Engineer and Physicist, Robert Wood blamed it on the breaking up of Biela's Comet and said the fire was caused by methane in comets. It might also have been caused by a prolonged low pressure weather system. Sources: Karen Sawislak, *Smoldering City: Chicagoans and the Great Fire*, (Chicago:University of Chicago Press, 1995).

⁶² *Chicago Tribune*, October 11, 1871.

Worried that harm may have come to her family on Michigan Avenue, Bertha busied herself by rallying her neighbors and her servants, sharing the task of storing their cherished possessions away safely to prepare their houses to be shelters. The fires burned totally out of control for twenty-seven hours. When she procured transportation, she went to her parent's home to find them unharmed but in a state of shock. Their home and most of the furnishings were in ruin. She immediately brought her family to her home and opened the house to others as a refuge, inviting the dispossessed and giving them whatever food and clothing she could find. She joined with others whose homes were left intact to do whatever was possible to comfort and provide for those less fortunate.

When Palmer returned he learned the worst. The wealth of both the Honorés and the Palmers was gone. The Palmer House, thirty-two buildings on State Street, and most of the Honoré properties were in ruins along with most of the finest buildings in the city.⁶³ Palmer was extremely discouraged. All but five per cent of his buildings had burned, and he did not have the income to pay his taxes. Moreover, his own country home was filled with family, friends and homeless *guests* he did not know. They were without gaslight and bare essentials. The writer credits Bertha with reassuring her husband and convincing him to move ahead.⁶⁴ William H. Carter, President of the city's

⁶³ For more information on the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, see: Paul M. Angle, ed. *The Great Chicago fire, Described in Seven Letters by Men and Women Who Experienced its Horrors*, (Chicago History Society, 1946). Also *History of the Great Chicago Fire*, October 8,9 and 10, 1871, (Michigan Historical Reprint Series, *Scholarly Publishing*, University of Michigan Library, March 31, 2006), and David Lowe, *The Great Chicago Fire*, (Dover Publications, March 1, 1979).

⁶⁴ Although other sources give all the credit for determination to Potter Palmer, since Ms. Ross actually interviewed Honoré Potter while writing her biography, he may have repeated incidents he learned from his family.

Board of Public Works, predicted, “Chicago is burned down but not despairing-she has the energy and push and will rise phoenix like from the ashes.”⁶⁵

Palmer began the formidable process of rebuilding before the last ashes were cool. With his borrowed funds, he began to rebuild, determined to move expeditiously. According to an article in the *Chicago Sun-Times*,

It was Bertha who drove a buggy to the nearest town with telegraph wires still intact and wired and wired New York business men seeking an extension of credit for her husband. The Connecticut Mutual Life Insurance Company allowed him to borrow \$1,700,000, the largest single loan made in the United States up to that time. In total from mortgages and other sources, he was able to amass three million dollars, all possible because of his impeccable credit rating.⁶⁶

In 1872, Palmer was lauded for being in the vanguard of the rebuilding of Chicago by a real estate journal of the day, *Land Owner*:

Mr. Palmer is now more than ever before entitled to the esteem of our citizens. His many marble buildings, including the Palmer House, fell before the fire fiend when he was east he returned to see them all in ashes. With a fortitude unexampled, he gave immediate orders for the clearing away of the rubbish and their re-erection in more elegant style than before. His architect was ordered to hasten the hotel with all possible dispatch, as he recognized that Chicago was temporarily crippled in its accommodations for the traveling public. With Spartan energy he now calmly but firmly commences again, with faith in Chicago undiminished, with belief in her future strengthened by knowledge of her marvelous past.⁶⁷

Losing no time, he saw to it that the rubbish was cleared expeditiously and the ground leveled, and he ordered the architects to proceed with all deliberate speed toward the building of a new Palmer House. He had the irregular blocks on

⁶⁵ Williams H. Carter, Letter to His Brother, (October 5, 1871)
<http://www.chicagohs.org/fire/conflag/carter/html..>

⁶⁶ Brenda Warner Rotzoll, “The Other Bertha Palmer”, *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 16, 2003, Lifestyles Archive, Sarasota County History Center Archives, MSS 39 Rollins Coakley Collection.

⁶⁷ *Land Owner, Journal of Real Estate Building and Improvement*, January 1872.

State Street cut to uniform proportions, making the street wide enough for horse drawn trolleys and carriages. When the work was finished, he proudly opened a hotel that he guaranteed was fireproof. He was so confident, in fact that he said in advertisements:

If at the expiration of one hour, the fire does not spread beyond the room, the person accepting this invitation is to pay for all damages done and for the use of the room. If the fire does extend beyond the room (I claim it will not), there shall be no charge for the damage done.⁶⁸

The new Palmer House became an internationally renowned hotel of grandeur and luxury that attracted the aristocracy of Europe and America.

By 1874, the Palmers moved into their spacious apartments in the hotel. They had survived the financial panic of 1873 despite the debts Palmer had incurred after the fire.⁶⁹ He was able to convince his creditors to allow more time, and he mortgaged property at higher rates. With diligence and brilliant maneuvering, he was able to pay off his loans and the Palmer interests emerged whole.

On February 1, 1874, Bertha gave birth to their son, Honoré, who was given the name of his mother's family, "...which, according to The Chaperon, traced its lineage back to Bruges in 1679. The Honoré coat of arms-three silver serpents twisted together

⁶⁸ American Experience, *Chicago: City of the Century, People and Events*: Potter Palmer (1826-1902) available from: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/chicago>.

⁶⁹ An important event of President Grant's second term in office was the severe financial depression by which it was marked. The era of high prices and business activity which had followed the war yielded its legitimate effect in an abnormal growth of the spirit of speculation. The inevitable consequence followed. In 1873 came a financial crash that carried ruin far and wide throughout the country. It began on October 1, in the disastrous failure of the banking firm of Jay Cooke & Co., of Philadelphia, the financiers of the Northern Pacific Railroad. Failure after failure succeeded, panic spread through the whole community, and the country was thrown into a condition resembling that of 1837, but more disastrous from the fact that much greater wealth was affected. Years passed before business regained its normal proportions. A process of contraction set in, the natural change from high war-prices to low peace-prices, and it was not until 1878 that the timidity of capital was fully overcome and business once more began to thrive. [www publicbookshelf.com/public_html/](http://www.publicbookshelf.com/public_html/).

with tongues and tails terminating in arrowheads-represented wisdom and a love of life.”

⁷⁰ On October 8, 1875, the Palmers welcomed their second son, Potter Jr. In later years Potter, Jr. was dubbed “Min” for his small size, and Honoré was given the nickname of “Cap or Cappy.”

These domestic years were times of contentment for Potter Palmer who took great pleasure in his home and family. His greatest joy was observing his wife in their home with the children. Palmer cherished his *Cissie* as he called his young wife and when men admired and complimented her, his jealousy and rancor was often evident. A story circulated that he once locked her in her rooms, and she was discovered by one of the schoolboys that often called on her to talk and to enjoy sweets and a drink on their way home from school. She slipped a note under her door and asked the child to take it to her brother Adrian so he would come and unlock the door.⁷¹ There was never a scandal or allegation to warrant his jealousy; from all accounts Bertha was a faithful and devoted partner to her husband within the home and in his business affairs. At the end of the workday he regaled her with minute details about guests of the hotel, employees, maintenance, purchasing, bookkeeping, and contractual negotiations, and she absorbed the most complex elements of owning and operating sizeable interests in both the hotel and real estate industries. At that young age, she had an innate entrepreneurial bent. As

⁷⁰ The Chaperon, Mrs. Potter Palmer, An American Beauty, (Society Column, *Chicago Herald-American*, March 17, 1940) “The Chaperon” was the *nom de plume* of Mary T. Dougherty who wrote the “Chaperon” column for the *Herald-American*. She moved to New York City in 1927 to work for the *New York Journal*. She was society Editor for the Sun-Times. When she returned to Chicago, she wrote a society column titled “Cholly Dearborn.” Dougherty died in 1974. Source: *Chicago Tribune*. ProQuest Newspapers Chicago Tribune.

⁷¹ Ross, *Silhouette in Diamonds*, 41.

she learned, she became a knowledgeable and pragmatic advisor involved in every facet of their business.

On October 20, 1874, the year of Honoré's birth, Bertha's sister Ida, married Frederick Dent Grant, the son of the President of the United States. Ishbel Ross speculates that Bertha nurtured the romance between the two who met socially when Grant was assigned to military duty in Chicago. If this is true, her involvement was a harbinger of the future when she would actively nurture another romance, one between Ida and Frederick's daughter, Julia, and Russian Prince Michael Cantacuzene from Russia. The hypothesis suggests a self-serving motivation on Bertha's part. Surely entrée into the White House and later the Russian aristocratic inner circles would propel her social status significantly just as marrying Potter Palmer had assured her access to Chicago's elite.

The wedding of Ida and Frederick took place at the Honoré home in Chicago, and the Palmers supplied the silver service for the banquet. Thereafter, when Frederick was deployed on long westward expeditions where she could not join him, Ida lived in the White House. As in Chicago, she was a much-admired favorite. Bertha Palmer was often in the receiving line with her sister on state occasions, and the Palmers hosted the Grants whenever they visited Chicago. The Palmer House became, in effect the Midwestern White House.

Two years later, in the executive mansion, Ida gave birth to a daughter, Julia. When the little girl was five, her brother Ulysses was born and Ida suffered a difficult delivery and went through a long period of healing. Her sister Bertha remained with her throughout the ordeal. In 1889, President Harrison appointed Frederick Dent Grant

“Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to Austria.” The family traveled to Vienna where they lived for four years. Bertha and Julia had from the beginning an extraordinarily close bond that would endure until the end of Bertha’s life. As a child, Julia often spent holidays with the Palmers and in later year accompanied them on travels abroad. Bertha became a surrogate mother and confidante to the young girl who played with her cousins as though they were brothers.

By 1882, Potter Palmer had acquired the means to begin work on a house that would fulfill his family’s social needs. He broke with tradition when he chose to drain and fill three thousand feet of marshland on Michigan Avenue, creating solid land that would eventually become Lake Shore Drive, since the fashionable section was then on Prairie Avenue. He hired the architects Henry Ives Cobbs and Charles S. Frost to design his home with a projected cost of ninety thousand dollars. The construction took three years, and Palmer spent seven hundred thousand dollars, almost eight times the original estimate and the equivalent of fifteen million dollars in 2007. Bertha Palmer became involved early in the plans for the house, and continued to make suggestions so expensive that at one point her husband tried to sell the house before it was completed, to cut his losses. Finding no takers he had to continue, and advised his accountant to keep him ignorant of the mounting cost.⁷²

In the end, the Palmers had the largest, finest, costliest home in Chicago. It had a great tapestried hall, an eighty foot tower reached by a spiral staircase, marble mosaic floors, a Louis XVI drawing room and a grand staircase of carved oak with newel posts bearing the Honore coat of arms. Bertha Palmer’s Moorish bathroom was ebony and gold; her dressing room contained a sunken tub shaped like a swan. She slept in a Louis XVI bed and washed her face in a mother-of-pearl basin.⁷³

⁷² Rollins E. Coakley Collection, Sarasota County History Center MSS 39.

⁷³ Jeanne Madeline Weimann, *The Fair Women* (Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1981), 14.

In May 1893, *Godey's* magazine described the house with enthusiasm: "Mrs. Palmer's house is easily the finest residence in the city, surpassed by no other in the world. It is built like a baronial castle, is of dark and light stone, has turrets, towers and marble halls, is as large as many hotels and as beautiful as Aladdin's palace"⁷⁴

For years, Bertha continued to add to the pastiche of decorative treasures garnered from all over the world. The house was the showplace of Chicago and the scene of sumptuous galas, musicales, and charity balls, ostensibly to obtain funds for the needy while enhancing the social status of the hosts. As author, Jeanne Madeline Weimann states:

For Bertha Palmer, the charity ball was ideal; she could benefit the poor while entertaining her society friends. Her annual balls were the social events of each season. Interestingly, she cautiously chose her lists of guests so that those whose affinity was for the downtrodden in the labor movement and those who were strictly society friends did not cross paths in her home.⁷⁵

Bertha was an astute politician and a most gracious hostess, but she treasured her privacy. There were no doorknobs or locks on the outside of the house. As told by art historian Patricia Erens:

Potter Palmer could not go into his own home until a servant opened the door. Even Bertha's closest friends had to write for an appointment. This was then filtered through the hands of several of the house's twenty-six servants: butlers, maids and social secretaries, in that order.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ *Godey's* magazine, May 1893, Mrs. Potter Palmer (MSS, Ryerson and Burnham Archives, Art Institute of Chicago).

⁷⁵ Weimann, *The FairWomen*, 28.

⁷⁶ Patricia Erens, *Masterpieces, Famous Chicagoans and Their Painting*, (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1979), 27.

Potter Palmer remained involved in civic affairs; he was an incorporator of the Chicago Chamber of Commerce, an early member of the Chicago Library Association, one of the three creators of the Chicago Interstate Industrial Exposition, Commissioner of the South Side Park System, and a manager of the Y.M.C.A. He was involved in the Citizens League, a group that worked with troubled juveniles, and the first President of the Chicago Baseball Club, while continuing to manage his real estate empire.

In 1890, the *Chicago Daily* published an article titled “The Men of Millions “and listed the estimated wealth of over two hundred leading Chicagoans, stating that most of the aggregate wealth of \$506,500,00 had been amassed since the Chicago Fire. There was no available attribution for the estimates printed other than a mention of “an eastern statistician.“ The first ten names on the list are:

Marshall Field	\$25,000,000
Philip Armour	\$25,000,000
George Pullman	\$15,000,000
Potter Palmer	\$10,000,000
Peck Estate	\$10,000,000
Mrs. C.H. McCormick	\$10,000,000
Columbus R. Cummings	\$ 8,000,000
G.F. Swift	\$ 8,000,000
Nelson Morris	\$ 8,000,000
L.Z. Leiter	\$ 8,000,000 ⁷⁷

Potter Palmer declined a position in President Grant’s cabinet in 1870 when the portfolio of Secretary of the Interior was offered to him. As stated by Ishbel Ross,

Potter liked Chicago and abhorred the jungle of politics. His decision was reached after he talked things over with *Cissie*... The Grant administrations were checkered with scandal, and tales of nepotism abounded. Interested as she was in public service, Bertha recognized Chicago as home ground.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ *Chicago Daily Tribune* (June 28, 1890) 1 Proquest Historical Newspapers,*Chicago Tribune*.

⁷⁸ Ross, *Silhouette in Diamonds*, 47.

It is also possible that the Grant scandals were the key to Bertha's acquiescence since it is known that she would have enjoyed being the wife of a cabinet officer.⁷⁹ In 1896, she actively lobbied for her husband's appointment to the mission in Berlin to fill the vacancy created by the death of Theodore Runyon. Bertha created copious lists of "Influential friends to be counted upon" and prevailed upon them to urge President Cleveland that Potter Palmer be considered for the position. She wrote a special list of names titled "Strong letters have gone forward from:" and personally wrote several letters by her own hand. There was, however, no copy of a letter that she herself sent to the president. One of her most ardent solicitors was Malcom McNeill, Secretary of the Chicago-Southern States Exposition Company, whose letter was dated February 3, 1896. In an article in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, dated February 5, 1896, it was announced from Washington, D.C.:

Edwin F. Uhl, Assistant Secretary of State will be Ambassador to Germany to succeed the late Theodore Runyon...In talking over the subject of the German Embassy it was stated by officials at the State Department and the White House that the letters, telegrams and personal appeals made for Potter Palmer were of an unusually satisfactory character and that if they had been made at the beginning instead of the end of the administration they would have landed the Chicago Representative in the office without doubt.⁸⁰

It was noted in another article that Palmer lacked "diplomatic usage of the German language which was an important credential for the position."⁸¹ Bertha was disappointed and as Ross relates, "It was becoming evident to her friends that Mrs.

⁷⁹ Chicago Southern States Exposition Company Files, Box number 286, Chicago History Museum Archives.

⁸⁰ "Uhl to Get the Place," (*Chicago Daily Tribune*), February 5, 1896.

⁸¹ "Palmer's Chances Not So Good," (*Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 2, 1896), 5.

Palmer was restless for larger things.”⁸² At a later time, in 1901, she worked diligently to secure political office for her son, Honoré. She had conquered much of the social world; now she was bent on entering the political realm.

Potter would, in 1893, be appointed vice president and director of the World’s Columbian Exposition, a position that would catapult his wife into her highest and most notable position. Despite the impressive philanthropic resumé and largesse, by all accounts, he began receding into the shadows as the lovely Bertha stepped forward.

Bertha’s young sons were well attended to by servants; she had none of the perfunctory responsibilities of a young mother yet she was actively involved in their upbringing, organizing, and prioritizing her social schedule whenever possible in order to have time for them. As they grew older, she insisted on their participation in physical exercise and outdoor activities. She did not believe in pampering them, and when they misbehaved, they were appropriately punished.⁸³ She loved them dearly and no matter how late she returned to her home after a social event, she always stopped to look in on them before going to her own rooms.

Honoré and Potter were afforded every advantage and were nurtured in the spirit of conquering uncharted orbits. They were expected to work assiduously, excel academically, behave appropriately, and associate with the *right* people. In an anecdotal excerpt from *Mrs. Potter Palmer, An American Beauty*, Mary T. Dougherty, known by the followers of her column as The Chaperon, relates a story told to her by Charles Batty, Bertha Palmer’s English coachman:

⁸² Ross, 124.

⁸³ Ross, 50. In later years, workers of the family holdings in Sarasota remembered the adult Honoré regaling them with stories of the “walloping he would get from his mother.

In the year, 1880, he remembers driving her down Michigan Avenue on summer day when a thunderstorm was beginning to brew. ‘Charles’, she said through the speaking tube in her firm low voice, ‘hadn’t we better turn back?’ ‘If you wish, Madam,’ said Charles continuing on his course. After a few minutes, she spoke again, ‘Charles, aren’t you afraid?’ ‘Madam’ said Charles, Ajax defied the lightning, but if you want to turn back we will.’

To have subjected Mrs. Palmer to a drenching would have been to ruin the most beautiful toilette in Chicago and Charles forewent his own love of defying the elements to bring her home dry.

He wasn’t so pliant with the little Palmers, Honoré and Potter, Jr. Dressed in their Fauntleroy suits of velvet and lace, they would come down to the stables to watch him wash the carriages. One day as he was directing a heavy stream on the side of the brogham, they began tickling with long switches the legs of a quick tempered horse in one of the stalls. Charles took the most direct action and turned the hose on the boys.

Soaked and vanquished, they ran back to the house and that night their father paid a visit to the stables. After hearing Charles’ story, he said, quietly. ‘If any christening is to be done, I will do it myself’ and went away.⁸⁴

Relating the tale to *The Chaperon*, Charles Batty was later inspired to write a poem:

I was coachman for Mrs. Potter Palmer
Who since has passed away.
She was such a beautiful lady
And a favorite of her day.

She treated her help
As a fine lady should
And we all tried to please her
As well as we could.

I trust she has gone with the angels to dwell
And that someday I’ll see her-you never can tell.⁸⁵

Charles Batty also remembered that “the only difference of opinion between Mr. and Mrs. Palmer was about the trees in the yard: “ Mr. Palmer would come home in the late afternoon and begin to prune the branches vigorously. Mrs. Palmer would come out, sigh but say nothing and take the saw out of his hands and go back in the house.” It was the

⁸⁴ *The Chaperon*, Mrs. Potter Palmer, An American Beauty, *The Chicago Weekly*, pages 10,11, from the private collections of Rollins Coakley sent to Hope Black.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 11.

testimony of many of Bertha Palmer's servants and workers that she was never heard to raise her voice. Her children recalled that they never heard a cross word pass between their parents.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Ibid, 11, and Ross, *Silhouette in Diamonds*, 42.

Chapter Five

Philanthropy and High Society

Spared of all but administration of her home, Bertha was free to concentrate on her societal considerations. She lost no time in entering the realm of wealthy matrons and courted those who had the most outstanding and useful credentials.

In her book, *Noblesse Oblige*, Kathleen D. McCarthy states that the “Civil War legitimized a more significant role for women through the work of the Sanitary Commission.”⁸⁷ , However, benevolence and participation by the wealthy in aiding the poor and needy began much earlier as the Industrial Revolution brought urbanization, and the exodus from the countryside to the cities begot population density, poverty and disease. Furthermore, the anonymity of living in the crowded cities militated against widespread communal caregiving, although mutual aid networks did exist. Initially the church and individual benevolent souls served as social workers; however, with the passing of time, continual growth and the disparity between rich and poor, some among the wealthy became involved in civic philanthropy, giving their money and time to minister to those in need.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Kathleen D. McCarthy, *Noblesse Oblige, Charity & Cultural Philanthropy in Chicago, 1849-1929* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 5.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

Philanthropy had become the accepted practice of upper-class women, through benevolent giving, advocating social reform, and by volunteering in social institutions. Participants saw philanthropy as a way to enhance their political power, improve the lives and opportunities of less affluent women, and to develop artistic and cultural institutions. Humanitarianism was, in addition, a means of widening a woman's social network and forging relationships with important people.

Clubs for women combined social activism, fund raising, study, and discussion. In 1874, Bertha Palmer met Ellen Martin Henrotin at meetings of the newly formed Fortnightly Club, the first women's literary association in the city.⁸⁹ Subsequently, she joined the Friday Club, another exclusive literary group. Henrotin was interested in social reforms, and she had encouraged Bertha Palmer to participate in the Fortnightly Club, and the Chicago Women's Club, which helped to support women in public work in the city. Henrotin would then and in the future have an important influence on Palmer's choice of organizational membership and involvement and would be involved in the dedication ceremonies of the Women's Building at the Columbian Exposition in 1892. Bertha Palmer became a leader in the Fortnightly in 1880 and became president in 1901. She was also active in the Chicago Women's Club beginning in 1888 and served on its reform committee beginning in 1891.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Ellen Henrotin was a prominent Clubwoman in Chicago concerned about the disparity in pay offered to women. She served as president of the General Federation of Woman's Clubs. The first Resolutions Committee was established during the Ellen Henrotin Administration (1894-1898). All her life she sought solutions to a multitude of social problems. She was married to Charles Henrotin, a banker and the president of Chicago Stock Exchange and a member of the Committee on Dedication of the Columbian Exposition. Jeanne Madeline Weimann, *The Fair Women*, (Chicago:Academy Chicago 1981), 13.

⁹⁰ Rima Lunin Schultz and Adele Hast, ed., *Women Building Chicago 1790-1990*,(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 662.

One important offshoot of the Woman's Club was the Protective Agency for Women and Children that placed night as well as day matrons in Police Stations to protect female prisoners from abuse from policemen. The agency gave legal advice to help incarcerated mothers keep their children and learn how they might obtain divorces if they had been battered or deserted.⁹¹ Palmer supported Hull House both personally and financially until Jane Addams became interested in the writings and philosophy of Leo Tolstoy. In Palmer's view, Addams's pacifist and anti-imperialistic pronouncements tainted her image, and accordingly Palmer distanced herself from the famous social worker.

Some privileged women of the Gilded Age honored the responsibilities of their elite status and forged personal links to the needs of the poor. They became activists for the prevention of communicable disease, more equitable and adequate healthcare, the implementation of better sanitary conditions, educational opportunities, and homes for the dispossessed. Bertha Palmer personally championed better education for women and equality of wages. She became a patron of the Women's Trade Union League and was instrumental in organizing millinery workers to improve their working conditions, holding a number of meetings in her home. She allied herself with reformers and became involved in the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, founded in Chicago by Frances Willard, despite the profitability of the bar receipts in the fashionable Palmer House. She strongly believed that drunkenness interfered with a man's ability to provide for his family and forced his wife to seek employment outside the house.⁹²

⁹¹ Weimann, *The Fair Women*, 14.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 18.

The Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876 served to clear another path for the cultural enhancement of the community and a way to help women in their quest for opportunities. As Kathleen D. McCarthy has written: “The exhibition of America’s fine arts at the Exposition was found to be sadly deficient in comparison to the riches of the old world and as a result, a decorative arts movement was developed to elevate domestic handiwork and moved feminine artistry to the center of the creative process.”⁹³

The Chicago Society for Decorative Arts was founded in 1877 as a cultural and charitable organization focused on helping impoverished women who were victims of the Civil War by training them to make high quality objects of art and household items. They were trained to produce products within their own homes, providing sustenance and care for their families.⁹⁴

In addition, the members of the Society, including Bertha Palmer, amassed an art library and formed study groups to learn about artistic technique. These studies were augmented by trips to Europe, and for Bertha Palmer such trips provided the foundation of her collection of objects d’art.⁹⁵ Her experience in a movement extolling the handiwork of women laid the groundwork for her blueprint for the Women’s Building Exhibition of the Columbian Exposition of 1893. Bertha became a member of the board of the Society from 1878 to 1884, and briefly chaired its embroidery and sales committee. Eventually, the organization abandoned philanthropy to concentrate solely on raising

⁹³ Kathleen D. McCarthy, *Noblesse Oblige, Charity and Cultural Philanthropy in Chicago, 1849-1929* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 35.

⁹⁴ The Chicago Society was a branch of a national organization established in New York City.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 36.

standards of taste in the decorative arts, as its members pursued a relationship with the Art Institute of Chicago.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Schultz and Haste, *Women Building Chicago 1790-1990*, 662. There was no reference to indicate Palmer's role in moving from philanthropy to setting higher standards for art.

Chapter Six

World's Columbian Exposition

On April 25, 1890, President Benjamin Harrison signed a bill into law, making Chicago the official site of the World's Columbian Exposition. Steering committees were formed for fund-raising and general planning, which included an exhibition hall for the achievements of women. Officers were appointed and Potter Palmer became a second vice-president of the Exposition. Given her husband's prestigious appointment, her social position, and formidable civic and cultural achievements, Bertha Palmer was a popular choice for the presidency of the Board of Lady Managers of the Women's Building.⁹⁷ While Mrs. Palmer was widely recognized, controversy erupted over her appointment, particularly among the women of the newly formed Queen Isabella Association. They were for the most part professionals and suffragists who, in opposition to Bertha Palmer, believed women's achievements would be diminished by separating their exhibits from men's. Early on she voiced her unequivocal conviction that a separate building should be constructed to house the achievements of women. Art historian Margo Hobbs states: "Palmer feared that women would be ignored or overshadowed if they were forced to compete with men for the limited space in their exhibition halls.

⁹⁷ For detailed information about the Chicago Exposition of 1893 and Mrs. Potter Palmer's involvement, read: Jeanne Madeline Wiemann, *The Fair Women, The Story of the Woman's Building, The World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago 1893* (Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1981), and David F. Burg, *Chicago's White City of 1893*, (University of Chicago Press, 1976).

Establishing a separate venue for women and highlighting the domestic arts reflected Palmer's belief that women had their place in society."⁹⁸

The men who ran the Fair, the elite of Chicago's corporate leadership, sought to restrict the women's involvement in the fair to fund-raising and when that became impossible, to subordinate women's voices. Bertha Palmer was an exemplary diplomat; she did not attempt to silence her critics, rather she sought to control the arena in which they expressed themselves. She helped organize a World's Congress of Representative Women that featured speakers who offered many different viewpoints on issues of interest to women. She believed in the leadership of women in society, particularly in advancing the improvement of working conditions, wages, medical facilities, and educational opportunities. She did not, however, align herself with suffragists. Her southern heritage militated against her acceptance of their more radical stance; she believed in feminine grace, womanly attributes, and limitations on women's ambitions and expectations. There were dissenting opinions and conflagrations, and Bertha Palmer was often the target of hostility. Several African-American groups protested when their demands for representation were ignored. Bertha rationalized that it was necessary to satisfy the interests of both North and South.

There was universal agreement that Bertha's travels to Europe to meet with heads of state, government officials, aristocracy and the notable and wealthy cultural trend-setters to garner support for the Women's Building at the Exposition, was key to its success. Through her personal connection with a number of ambassadors, members of the

⁹⁸ Margo Hobbs, *Bertha Honore Palmers Philanthropy in the Arts* Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts in Art History, Theory and Criticism, (The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 1992),2. Private Collection of Rollins B. Coakley.

court and the aristocracy, her stunning appearance, her extraordinary gowns and jewels, and most of all her warm and gentle coercion, she was a formidable presence even in the hallowed halls of state. In her articles, Mrs. Carter H. Harrison, Jr. observed, "Once tasting power she never again felt the slightest desire to give it up."⁹⁹ Throughout the exhibition, she prevailed and upheld her position of leadership. Voices of dissension ultimately were silenced. They became resigned to the power of her invincible personality and the support of the devotees who were either in agreement with or beholden to her. In reading through the multitudinous correspondence between Bertha and her Board as well as prominent visitors to the Exposition, one fact is obvious. The Woman's Building became her domain, and the letters she received from one and all were submissive beyond the flowery style of the period. As an example, Susan B.

Anthony wrote in April of 1893:

Our national organization did not consent to ask for separate space but it was with the expectation-the promise of ample space within the rooms to be allotted to the National Council-which I now learn is to be very limited-but my dear Mrs. Palmer-while I shall feel very sorry to have the space we need-I shall surely make the most and best of what you are able to give. ¹⁰⁰

A.B. Farquar, Executive Commissioner of the Board of World's Fair Managers of Pennsylvania, wrote in April 1892:

I can say without flattery that my interview with you was the most pleasant and profitable part of an unusually interesting and instructive visit Mrs. Farquar is an enthusiastic advocate of your plan. As I remarked to your father, whom I had the pleasure of meeting after I saw you, that you will have it all your own way for Paris would not have hesitated in this choice, if Minerva and Venus had been combined

⁹⁹ Mrs. Carter H. Harrison, Jr. "Mrs. Potter Palmer as I Knew Her," *Chicago Herald & Examiner*, January 22, 1922.

¹⁰⁰ Chicago History Museum Archives, Reports and Correspondence of Columbian Exposition, 1893, Board of Lady Managers, Box 5.

into one. At any rate, I cannot choose but to serve you in every way possible. You have in Mrs. Farrquar a zealous ally.¹⁰¹

Colonel J.W. St. Clair, Secretary of the World's Columbian Commission, wrote to Palmer at the Grand Hotel in Paris on May 9, 1892, in regard to a controversy during a session of the National Commission over the powers of the Board of Lady Managers in the matter of awards:

I beg of you not to allow this, or any other occurrence on this side, to disturb the pleasures of your visit, or militate against the work I m confident you are doing, and will be able to do, in the interest of the Board of Lady Managers and the Exposition generally while you are abroad. Remember me kindly to Mr. Palmer, and with the hope that you may both thoroughly enjoy your visit, I remain, Your friend and coadjutor, J.W. St. Clair¹⁰²

Palmer was instrumental in commissioning Boston architect Sophie Hayden, whose plan for the Woman's Building was chosen in a national competition. She also commissioned artists Mary Cassatt and Mary Fairchild MacMonnies to paint murals. The Woman's Building had evolved through her efforts and others into a building celebrating the accomplishments of women, created by women and for the advancement of women. There were forty-seven separate exhibits.

She advocated a "baby-sitting" building at the Exposition and raised the necessary twenty five thousand dollars by allowing the public to visit her home for three days and nights, giving them souvenir spoons to take away. By virtue of her personal efforts and accommodation, the Fair enhanced the perception of women throughout the world and stressed the impediments in their lives. The exhibits combined the wares of domesticity

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

with the decorative arts along with exhibits of the literary and artistic accomplishments of women from forty-seven nations. She was indefatigable and innovative and took every possible advantage of her opportunity. She handled everything that came her way with calm and composure. Even when the Infanta Eulalia, representing the King of Spain, declined the invitation to a reception in her honor given by Palmer, famously saying, “I prefer not to meet this innkeeper’s wife,” Bertha was unperturbed and remained gracious. The Infanta did have her comeuppance five years later when Palmer was invited to a gala in her honor. Palmer said, “I cannot meet this bibulous representative of a degenerate monarchy.”¹⁰³

After Bertha’s appointment to head the Board of Lady Managers, the Palmers began to assemble a magnificent art collection. Margo Hobbs elaborates,

When the Palmers began to collect art in earnest, just prior to the World’s Columbian Exposition, they were part of a trend among Chicagoans. The Art Institute was a part of this as well, taking advantage of the World’s Fair to build a permanent structure...Bertha Palmer was also motivated by her unique position as President of the Board of Lady Managers, she was considered the nation’s hostess. In the process of decorating her home, she considered the social gatherings she would hold over the course of the World’s Fair.¹⁰⁴

In 1873, Potter Palmer had met Sara Tyson Hallowell, (1846–1924), a Quaker from Philadelphia, who was an important agent in Paris for American collectors and museums and was instrumental in introducing Impressionist works to the United States. She had come to Chicago to become secretary of the art department at the Interstate Industrial Exposition. In 1889, the Palmers were introduced to an art dealer, Paul Durand-Ruel and artist Mary Cassatt by Hallowell, and through these associations began a

¹⁰³ Aline B. Saarinen, *The Proud Possessors* (New York: Random House, Conde Nast, 1958), 9,10.

¹⁰⁴ Hobbs, “Bertha Honore Palmer’s Philanthropy in the Arts” M.A. Thesis, 62.

prodigious collection of French Impressionists. Later the Palmers purchased works by younger artists, members of the Symbolist and Synthetist groups assuring Bertha that her avant-garde acquisitions would cause a sensation during social gatherings in her home.

¹⁰⁵ When she later furnished her opulent mansions in Paris, London and Osprey, Florida, she adorned the walls with those works of art.

Palmer herself became a subject for art. Following the opening of the Exposition, the Board of Lady Managers commissioned Anders Zorn, a notable painter serving as Swedish commissioner for the event and a good friend of Bertha's, to paint a portrait of her. Patricia Erens relates:

The portrait captures Bertha, fascinating and commanding, at the height of her success. Still young, with dark eyes and silvery hair, the picture reflected the perfect image of how a social leader should look. Bertha wears the same gown she had worn for the official opening of the Exposition.¹⁰⁶

Zorn was not the only artist to celebrate Palmer. She is the only American woman immortalized by August Rodin. "The marble bust-sculpture of the American beauty can be appreciated at the Musée Rodin in Paris."¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 75.

¹⁰⁶ Erens, 25-26.

¹⁰⁷ <http://www.paris.org/Musees/Rodin>.

Chapter Seven

Newport

In 1896, Bertha Palmer found new a new milieu to enter, the bastion of the scions of Aristocracy East, Newport, Rhode Island. Among the residents were the prestigious William Astors, the Stuyvesant Fishes, the Cornelius Vanderbilts and the August Belmonts. The Palmers rented a châteaux and attempted to assimilate into the world of the gilded rich. Their acceptance was not instantaneous. Midwesterners, particularly the *nouveau riche*, were not considered on a par with old money from the northeast. The break in the ice came when she held a sumptuous coming-out gala in honor of her niece, Julia Grant. As she continued to host the renowned and royals of Europe, famous artists and writers, and to entertain in the understated good taste *de rigueur* in Newport, she was slowly accepted.

Princess Julia Cantacuzene, Countess Speransky née Grant, wrote of her relationship with her Aunt Bertha in her memoirs:

My uncle and lovely aunt [Potter and Bertha Palmer] put all possible pleasure in my girlhood, and gave me much that our limited means would not have offered. My aunt, slim and graceful, with her hair grown silvery white, had kept her freshness and seemed more beautiful than ever. She had no daughter and gave me the affection she could have lavished on one. Whenever the question of my marrying came up, I found in her a true friend whose advice was easy to follow. I was grateful that in spite of our small means, I was not pushed into a 'brilliant match.' ...¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ Princess Julia Cantacuzene, Countess Speransky née Grant, *Revolutionary Days*, Begun as articles for the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1918; published as a book, *Revolutionary Days. Recollections of Romanoffs*

Julia and her Aunt Bertha were kindred spirits. Both enjoyed a life of affluence and splendor. During her father's tenure as envoy to Austria, Julia Grant had come to love the excitement of court life with its fine parties and dances, elegant clothing, and a beautifully furnished home with servants to see to her every need. Julia's most memorable event was her presentation at the Austrian Court Ball. Wearing a gown made in one of the leading Parisian house of the *belle époque*, she was presented to the emperor and then danced in the ballroom of the Hapsburgs to an orchestra conducted by Strauss himself. When Frederick Grant's tenure came to an end, the family's return to New York was clearly a letdown for Julia as they went from the opulence of the Viennese Court to a small and modest three-story house in New York City. They had little money. Fortunately, since her brother was at West Point and her parents were preoccupied, Julia was thrilled to spend the summers with the Palmers at Bar Harbor and then at Newport.

In the early autumn of 1898, my mother was to join my father in Puerto Rico, where he was military commander. She did not want to take me with her for fear of the climate and the roughness of a newly conquered country. Uncle Palmer had passed a bad summer at Newport and was being sent abroad to spend the time of cold weather on the Nile. My aunt was taking the two boys [Honoré and Potter II] along for a year's travel before they settled down to business. The Palmer family proposed to take me abroad with them and I was perfectly enchanted when my mother accepted for me.¹⁰⁹

Potter was becoming increasingly infirm and tired easily. Bertha decided to plan a trip abroad for her husband, joined by Honoré, Potter II, and Julia, lest his health further deteriorate during Chicago's winter of 1899. They planned to spend several months on a

and Bolsheviki, 1914-1917 (Boston, Small Maynard & Company, 1919) Current edition: (Chicago, The Lakeside Press, 1999), 44,45.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

sightseeing tour but, in Egypt, where they had gone for the mild climate, Potter fell ill and they immediately traveled to Rome for better medical treatment. As he rested and recuperated, Bertha began a whirl of royal entertainments. Wherever her travels took her, she took advantage of every opportunity to enhance her status among the elite. As Potter's health improved, he made an effort to participate socially in his own backstage way and agreed to an audience with Pope Leo XIII.

During their stay in Rome, Julia Grant met Prince Michael Cantacuzène of Russia. Within a short period of time after a whirlwind courtship, they were engaged and Bertha lost no time in telegraphing her sister and Frederick Grant, urging them to give their daughter their blessing. The Palmers soon sailed for the United States where Bertha rented the Astor's villa, Beaulieu, in Newport, and decided that this would be a suitable setting for the wedding. She was in her element planning the wedding. In the historical introduction to Julia's memoirs, Editor Terence Emmons reflects,

In her memoirs, Julia skimps on the details of the courtship. She recognized in this marriage a means of regaining the social life she enjoyed in Vienna during her father's diplomatic career. And there was an air of adventure to the prospect that appealed to her nature as well. By her own admission, she knew nothing of the country she was about to adopt. As Julia's temporary guardian, Aunt Bertha could easily have squelched the affair simply by catching an earlier steamer home. Instead, she seems to have taken an active part in persuading Julia's parents to give their consent. It is not unlikely that having a prince in the family was an idea that flattered her social ambitions.¹¹⁰

This was the third time in Bertha Palmer's life that marriage fulfilled her ambitions: her own, her sister Ida's, and that of her niece, Julia. Julia did not have to be

¹¹⁰ Terence Emmons, Historical Introduction to book by Princess Julia Cantacuzene, *Revolutionary Days*, (Chicago: The Lakeside Press, R.R. Donnelley, 1999 reprint), xxi. Original Publication: (New York: Scribner & Sons, 1920). *Revolutionary Days* affords the historian a first-hand account of Julia's life during an important period in Russian History and a glimpse into the relationship she enjoyed with the Palmer family.

persuaded; the glamour of becoming a princess was alluring to the young woman. She hadn't a clue as to the political turmoil brewing in her new country.

On September 25, 1899, the *Newport Daily News* carried the following headlines on its front page: "Miss Julia Grant Wedded to Prince Cantacuzene." The article continued:

General Grant's granddaughter is now a Russian princess. Today at noon the American ceremony according to the rites of the Protestant Episcopal Church, following the Russian service last evening made Miss Julia Grant, daughter of General and Mrs. Frederick Dent Grant, the wife of Prince Cantacuzene/Count Speransky. It was the closing and the crowning social event of the Newport season of 1899 and among the most brilliant affairs of the kind ever chronicled in the social annals of this city, bringing to an end a series of entertainments in honor of the bride and groom which has probably never been surpassed in number and elaboratness of arrangement. The Russian orthodox service was held at Beaulieu, the William Waldorf Astor villa which Mr. And Mrs. Potter Palmer were occupying for the summer. ¹¹¹

The prestigious guest list, the gowns, the jewels, hundred of roses and orchids in profusion, the décor and array of wedding gifts to the bride and groom, and the music performed by the St. Cecilia Quartet ensured that Bertha Palmer had created her *magnum opus* in Newport.

¹¹¹ A Two-Fold Function, Miss Julia Grant Wedded to Prince Cantacuzene, *Newport Daily News*, September 25, 1899, 1,2,6,8,10,12.

Chapter Eight

The Paris Exposition

In 1900, Bertha Palmer was appointed by President William McKinley as the only female member of the National Commission representing the United States at the Paris Exposition. Her primary focus was to look after the interests of Americans in Paris. Despite Potter's precarious health, Bertha rented a large house and staffed it with servants in anticipation of grand entertainments. The media wrote of her French heritage and, unlike other Americans who remained within the confines of their colony, she moved comfortably within the cosmopolitan community-at-large, speaking flawless French and frequenting the grand fashion salons of the city. Ishbel Ross notes that Palmer was well schooled in Debrett and acquainted with members of the nobility.¹¹²

She was subjected to opposition, especially from Mrs. Ferdinand Peck, the wife of the official head of the American Commission who was chagrined that Palmer was receiving too much attention and too many honors. Mrs. John Logan, wife of the former senator from Illinois, led the forces at work to diminish the hegemony of Palmer. Many other women who Bertha had worked with at the Columbian Exhibition continued to resent that she was singled out as worthy of credit for its success. They felt that she had

¹¹² Debrett's is a specialist publisher, founded in 1769 with the publication of the first edition of The New Peerage. This genealogical guide to the British aristocracy evolved into a keystone of British society and is published today under the name Debrett's Peerage & Baronetage, a book which includes a short history of the family of each titleholder. Debrett is also considered to be the last word in British manners.

been manipulative in securing her appointment to this exposition. She became the subject of gossip and innuendo among visiting Americans. Nevertheless, Bertha went on with her social obligations and seemingly ignored the petty chides and scuttlebutt. One of her accomplishments was successfully appointing Jane Addams as juror of exhibits in social economy. The highlight for Bertha was the invitation to visit Queen Marie Henriette of Belgium at the Royal Villa. Potter had kept a low profile during the various events. His health had improved somewhat, but he required a great deal of rest and was usually unable to keep up with his wife's schedule; however, he agreed to accompany her on the trip to Brussels.¹¹³ When the last vestiges of the exposition were swept away, Bertha Palmer was awarded the Legion of Honor for her work. The Exposition had been a grand success. Her critics were silenced.

The following year she focused her energies on her son Honoré's entry into the world of politics. He was by then a man of twenty-seven and a graduate of Harvard. Ross states, "Bertha had come back from Paris determined that Honoré should enter the political field....in later years he [Honoré] never made any secret that he would not have thought of entering politics but for the prompting of his mother who threw the gauntlet before him to end the 'civic mess' in the city."¹¹⁴ Bertha provided headquarters for the campaign, entertained, and wrote personal letters to her wealthy and influential friends asking that they attend political rallies and speak in support of her son. She wrote a letter in January of the election year to Charles Hutchinson, a banker and President of the Chicago Art Institute, asking that Honoré be made a member of the board of the Institute. In April 1901, she wrote to Judge Lambert Tree:

¹¹³ Ross, *Silhouette in Diamonds*, 172.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, 179.

Dear Judge Tree,

My son, Honoré opens his headquarters at number 133 North Clark Street tomorrow at eight P.M. He asked me to write and to beg you to be present and to say a few words. You are such a favorite in the party and I sincerely trust that you can gratify Honoré, and his parents by being with him at his little informal warming.”

In a subsequent letter, she said: Honoré was greatly disappointed that you could not come yourself for a few moments to your many friends and herewith. It is planned to have two large rallies to close the campaign on Friday, the 22nd and the 29th... Can you not be present and say a few words of encouragement to Democratic voters on one of those dates?¹¹⁵

In the end, Honoré was elected alderman by a plurality of thirteen hundred votes over his opponent. The headline in the Chicago Journal was “Honore Palmer is Chosen Alderman” with the subheading, “His Mother is Pleased.” The article stated:

Honoré Palmer, under the careful and judicious training of his mother, Mrs. Potter Palmer, and under the guidance of ‘Jimmy Quinn’, yesterday won a signal victory over Alderman Helm and John Maynard Harlan in the Twenty-First Ward.¹¹⁶

Honoré Palmer would be re-elected in 1903. In 1910, the year the family came to Sarasota, he reportedly, turned down an opportunity to run for Congress. Instead, with his brother and uncle, he undertook a primary administrative role in the acquisition and management of the Palmer properties within and outside of Florida.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ *Chicago Journal*, April 3, 1901, MSS, Tree, Archives of Newberry Library. Correspondence.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Janet Snyder Matthews, *Venice, Journey from Horse and Chaise*. (Sarasota: Pine Level Press, 1989), 176.

Chapter Nine

The Years Alone

By early 1902, Potter Palmer was very fragile and he no longer wished to leave his home. Bertha often appeared at social and civic functions alone. Her husband's life ended on May 4, 1902; the immediate cause of death was edema of the lungs. Ishbel Ross spoke with Honoré Palmer about the funeral in the late 1950s when he recalled that:

His father lay in state in the grand gallery of the mansion, and the funeral took place the following morning at the residence. The public streamed past as though he had been a mayor or other public official. Among hundreds of business and social friends were many Negroes, old and young, who had worked for Potter Palmer. Tears streamed down the faces of some and they all agreed that he had treated them well. Friends were allowed at the house, however Palmer's burial at Graceland Cemetery was for family members only. The death of her husband was one of the crucial turning points of her life and for a time she was uncertain about the course she would follow.¹¹⁸

After the funeral, Bertha observed a period of mourning. In her husband's name, she established a medal and a cash award for American Art at the Art Institute of Chicago's annual exhibition. As the sole benefactor of his estate of eight million dollars, most of it in real estate, she and her brother Adrian became trustees.¹¹⁹ She maintained total control of funds to be dispersed to her adult sons and following her husband's advice, continued to invest her money in real estate and art. Her world was changing; her

¹¹⁸ Ishbel Ross, *Silhouette in Diamonds*(New York:Harper and Brothers, 1960),182-183.

¹¹⁹ When Marshall Field learned that his old colleague had left everything to his wife, he said, "A million dollars is enough for any woman." Ross, *Silhouette in Diamonds*, 183.

once energetic mother was frail, and her friend and in-law, Julia Dent Grant, the wife of the former president, passed away in December of that same year. Following the second funeral in the family, Bertha's sister Ida and Frederick Grant traveled to Russia to spend time with their daughter and her family.

In the summer of 1903, Palmer traveled to England for the wedding of her son, Honoré, and the wealthy and beautiful Grace Greenway Brown, a match she heartily approved. Palmer was in half mourning during the occasion, wearing lavender and gray in place of black. Following the festivities, she left on a motor trip through France with her niece, Julia, however she was afflicted with typhoid fever and it was necessary for her to stay on in Paris with her devoted niece as her constant companion. Ishbel Ross relates, "She disliked invalidism yet accepted her fate with philosophical calm and received many visitors as she convalesced."¹²⁰

As her energy and zest gradually returned, she exchanged her widow's black for brighter apparel and returned to the *haut monde*. Much of her time was spent in Europe; the castle in Chicago was often unoccupied and dark. She had in the past stayed at the finest hotels when abroad; she decided instead to purchase grandiose houses in London and Paris and concentrated on filling them with opulent furnishings and priceless works of modern art. Her acquisitive lust had not abated. Her public rooms were elaborate stages for entertainment and for the display of treasured collections. Her forte was not to follow the current vogue but to create it. As fine paintings from Europe were purchased

¹²⁰ Ross, *Silhouette in Diamonds*, 184. There is no evidence beyond that of this author who did have the opportunity to interview family members when she was writing her book, that Palmer had previously considered moving to Florida for the winter season or contemplated major investments there. Ross listed her sources, but there was no direct attribution to speculation. Palmer's life was full, and her stature was at its highest at this time.

and shipped to the United States by the wealthy, among them the Morgans, Vanderbilts, Whitneys, Fricks and Mellons, and once avant-garde Impressionist art became conventional, Palmer was in search of unexplored antique acquisitions, items whose value had not yet been universally acknowledged.

Bertha Palmer returned to Chicago from sojourns in Europe sporadically, visiting with friends and hosting philanthropic galas. She continued to receive legendary renown as the epitome of flair and fortune in that city. Ross quotes *Elite* magazine as stating, “Some of her friends were growing old while she was growing young. Mrs. Palmer goes on her shining way. After her husband’s death, she was absolutely unaccompanied in Chicago. Mrs. Palmer married when very young and now is having out some of the youth denied her then.”¹²¹

The same year that Potter Palmer died, Queen Victoria’s death marked the end of the longest reign in history. The Queen’s son, the Prince of Wales, ascended the throne as King Edward VII. In Europe, Bertha Palmer had fostered continuing relationships with the privileged and prominent; she would now ascend the ladder to the very pinnacle of social acceptance: the Court.

Following the somber Victorian period, the Court and those in its favor reveled in the vitality and opulence of the brief Edwardian era.¹²² The world of the King’s court was clear of the inhibitions and restraints of his mother’s reign. He welcomed rich commoners and foreigners to share his enjoyment of horse racing, golf, hunting, and extravagant banquets. He liked political and economic discussions and kept his

¹²¹ *Elite Magazine*, January 28, 1905.

¹²² Crowned in 1902, Edward died in 1910, leaving the throne to his eldest son, who became George V.

guests on edge with his acumen. He particularly liked the company of women. Edward treated his marriage with indifference, keeping mistresses throughout his married life, including actress Lillie Langtry, socialite Jennie Jerome (mother of Winston Churchill and wife at the time to Lord Randolph Churchill), Daisy Greville, Countess of Warwick, actress Sarah Bernhardt, dancer La Belle Otero, Mrs. George Keppel, and wealthy humanitarian Agnes Keyser . Although she became a close friend of the King, Bertha Palmer's reputation remained untarnished. She attended races at Ascot, went to hunting events and often played golf with the King. She learned of his particular preferences and gave intimate dinner parties of eight in London, at Sandringham Castle or at Biarritz. She schooled herself judiciously in the finite details of European and American politics and people in order to keep pace with the King's insight and opinions.

Palmer did not confine herself to England. She traveled by rail and luxury automobiles to France and Italy and was often joined by her family in Europe. "She traveled with mountains of luggage, from tartan rugs to diamond stomachers with many attendants to look after them."¹²³ She enjoyed the diversity of events during a given day and changed her outfits several times, frequenting the designers for the latest fashions.

In 1906, Palmer's mother died. In the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, the headline was "Fatal Fall for Mrs. Honoré." and the obituary noted,

Mrs. Eliza Carr Honoré, 80 years old, wife of Henry H. Honoré, died at 4:30 p.m. yesterday at her residence, 2103 Michigan Avenue, as the result of injuries caused by a fall last Wednesday... She fell down several steps of a stairway in her residence, fracturing her collar bone and receiving other injuries... the surviving members of her family are her husband and six children, Adrian C. Honoré, Mrs. Potter Palmer, Henry H.

¹²³ Ibid, 199.

Honoré Jr., Mrs. Frederick D. Grant, Nathaniel K. Honoré and Judge Lockwood Honoré. Mrs. Palmer is now in Europe. Arrangements for the funeral which will be private, have not been completed.¹²⁴

Henry Honoré would survive his wife's death for ten years. Eliza Honoré had always been an ambitious cheerleader for her children and had taken great pride in their accomplishments. While the young Bertha was close to her mother and followed her lead in the proprieties of social behavior, there is no available information on their more intimate adult relationship.

The years following the *fin de siècle* were, for the wealthy, a whirl of entertainments in Europe: grand balls, horse races, polo matches, theater, opera, hunting weekends, sumptuous mansions in the cities and the countryside, and luxurious motor cars. The earth continued in its course, seasons changed, and the pages of the calendar were torn away. It was a good period for the gentile white elite, particularly for men. Between 1871 and 1914, Europe experienced forty years of relative peace. Despite the Boer War, the murder of King Alexander of Serbia, the 1905 revolution in Russia and internal anti-tsarism developing into the Social Revolutionary Party, Austrian annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Italy's declaration of war on Turkey, war on a continental scale was averted.

On the other side of the Atlantic, the Spanish–American War was a “splendid little war” according to Secretary of State John Hay. The press showed Northerners and Southerners, and blacks and whites fighting against a common foe, helping to ease the scars left from the American Civil War, replacing them with brand new scars of the United States versus Spain, non-state versus state, and the throwing of America's hat into

¹²⁴ “Fatal Fall for Mrs. Honoré,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 7, 1906; ProQuest Historical Newspapers *Chicago Tribune*, (1849-1985).

the ring as another imperialist nation. The war enabled the young nation to emerge as a power on the world stage, and marked American entry into world affairs: over the course of the next century, the United States had a large hand in various conflicts around the world. The Panic of 1893 was over by this point, and the United States entered a lengthy and prosperous period of high economic growth until the United States Bank Panic of 1907.

Following the 1905 revolution in Russia, when the internal situation in Russia became dangerous, Julia Cantacuzene traveled with her two children to London to her Aunt Bertha's home. She returned to Russia while Bertha and the children left for Southampton where they would board a steamer and she would bring them to the safety of their grandparents in America.

Speculation sporadically arose about romances between Bertha and various wealthy and titled widowers. In fact, there were suitors of French ancestry with whom she was frequently seen. Some of the names circulated among the gossipmongers were the Earl of Munster, the Duke of Atholl, the Prince of Monaco, and the King of Serbia. Nevertheless, she remained Mrs. Potter Palmer.¹²⁵

¹²⁵ Brenda Warner Rotzoll, "The Other Bertha Palmer, Lifestyle Archives," (*Chicago Sun Times*, March 16, 2003).

Chapter Ten

The Sarasota Years

In 1907, a financial panic in the northern region of the country caused many prospective pioneers to relinquish plans to purchase citrus groves in Southeast Florida. Fueling the downturn were the reoccurring fires in the town of Sarasota, especially the leveling of the Hotel and Livery Stables, which had provided lodging and transport. The real estate business ground to a standstill. It was during this time that two enterprising realtors chanced to place an advertisement in a Chicago newspaper, a decision that would mark a sea change in the region.

The senior member of the real estate partnership, Arthur Britton Edwards, was a true “Cracker” born in 1874 in Sarasota, where his father was a descendent of an old Florida family. He grew up in the frontier community where there was no opportunity for education until the arrival of a professor from Ireland who taught Edwards and his siblings in their home and eventually in a newly constructed public school, five miles from their home.

Edwards was later employed intermittently by frontier cattlemen and served with the Quartermaster Corps during the Spanish-American War. Upon his return, and sparked by the advent of the extension of the Seaboard railroad from Tampa in 1903, Edwards opened the first real estate and insurance office in Sarasota, when the town’s population was three hundred. Believing in the potential profitability of development of

the area, yet lacking funds to advertise, he innovatively contacted development departments of leading railroads requesting lists of people who had inquired about Florida. Once he had acquired the names, he wrote personalized letters and mailed them throughout the country.¹²⁶

Concurrently, Joseph H. Lord, a native of Maine, came to Florida in the final decade of the nineteenth century to buy phosphate, agricultural and grazing land, and residential property in Venice and Sarasota. By 1904, Lord owned two hundred town lots and seventy thousand acres in the area. His ability to buy the land with cash greatly stimulated the local economy. He became a partner with A.B. Edwards in a real estate venture and, for visibility and contacts they opened an office in Chicago. It was then that he decided to advertise in the *Chicago Tribune*, an announcement that was read by Mrs. Bertha Honoré Palmer on January 10, 1910.¹²⁷

Grapefruit and orange groves
Beautiful Winter homes
Fruit and vegetable lands
In famous Sarasota Bay District of
Manatee County on the Gulf.
I am one of the largest growers and
landowners in Manatee County and can
furnish you with any kind or size of
property desired.
I also improve lands and raise groves for purchasers.
Best location in the U.S. lowest prices, easy
terms, call or write for free book and
full information.
J.H.. Lord
Owner
922 Marquette Building¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Karl Grismer, *The Story of Sarasota*, (Sarasota: M.E. Russell, 1947), 300.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, 155.

¹²⁸ *Chicago Tribune*, January 10, 1910.

Its timing in January may have been propitious. The winter season in Chicago was harsh and the winds from Lake Michigan (near the Potter mansion), exacerbated the freezing cold.

The question of what prompted Bertha Palmer to come to the rough frontier of southwest Florida at the age of sixty-one is difficult to resolve. She had experienced a lifetime of elegance and grandeur with properties in Chicago, Paris, Newport and London. If escaping the harsh winters of Chicago was the motivation, she had traveled to the south of France and Italy for warm waters, sunshine, and the drama of the mountain peaks for years and might have continued. Or she might have chosen to spend the winter season in southern California or southeastern Florida where in playgrounds of the wealthy, she would not have compromised her comfortable lifestyle. Furthermore, why did she immediately choose to invest her legacy in uncharted territory and venture forth into fields she had never experienced before: the agrarian world of farming and cattle ranching? This legendary lady of refinement was not above trekking through the muck of Florida's wetlands to determine her options.

The woman who had studied fine art, music and literature and spoke fluent French, became an autodidact in the assimilation of knowledge about crops, cattle ranching, manure, the chemistry of soil and water, the identification of trees and other vegetation as well as wildlife in the area, by writing to every viable source for materials and advancing heretofore unaccepted methods of operation. The question of why she chose to explore Florida and embark upon a new life there continues to be open to

speculation. Surely, the sleepy, sparsely populated village of Sarasota seems incongruous with the way of life to which she was accustomed.

Perhaps she had tired of the urban frenzy and the hectic pace; in the words of Leo Marx in *The Machine in the Garden*, perhaps Palmer was: “yearning for a simpler, more harmonious style of life, an existence closer to nature that is the psychic root of all pastoralism; genuine and spurious.”¹²⁹ The frontier may have inspired her imagination and her entrepreneurial ingenuity beyond that of a more settled and developed region. The vast wealth at her disposal would allow her a sense of control over limitless possibilities and the advertisement may have ignited a spark of excitement for a new challenge in uncharted territory; a quest for the possibilities of another world.

It is conceivable that she sought an opportunity to demonstrate, if only to herself, that she could achieve success in the management of a new enterprise, enriching the family coffers and reinforcing the renown she gained as an administrator of the World’s Columbian Exposition seventeen years in the past. The wealth she had enjoyed during her lifetime had come from her father and from her husband; this adventure would be hers.

An event across the Atlantic warrants reflection: the death of King Edward VII, which occurred in May that same year. Although she had traveled to Sarasota in February prior to his death, she knew of his poor health and the dire prognosis. Her position as a friend of the King and Queen had placed her in the royal inner circle and given her entrée to the most notable places and people. This would all change when Edward was buried and George V and Queen Mary ascended the throne. Palmer rarely

¹²⁹ Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 6.

traveled to London after the monarch's death. Returning to Chicago, she noted with sadness that her guest lists had to be modified; older friends were ill or had passed away; others had moved away and some had lost their fortunes. The old world was changing. This was a turning point in her life.

Her children and her niece, Julia, had married and she was blessed with the births of grandchildren and grandnieces and nephews. She may have looked upon this new generation as her and Potter's immortality; their descendants were carrying forward the Palmer and Honoré legacies. Never before was her need for family so paramount. While she donated willingly to the needs of the community, she rarely participated in the social life. The natural beauty of the beach and the inland areas of Sarasota became her garden of Eden and a wondrous magnet for family companionship.

Once she read Joseph Lord's enticing advertisement, Palmer was not a woman who would put things off; she asked her father to visit Lord's office located in the same building as the Palmer family suites, to evaluate his credibility; subsequently they both met with Lord in the Palmer mansion. The charismatic Lord was the consummate salesman; he was able to convince them to plan a journey to Sarasota, Florida.

Palmer arrived, via rail and water transport, in Sarasota, Florida, in February 1910 amidst a fanfare and a flurry of excitement. Before her arrival, the word was quickly circulated that Mrs. Potter Palmer, *the* internationally famous Mrs. Palmer, was coming to Sarasota to consider land acquisition. In the *Sarasota Times*, her arrival was front-page news. "The most distinguished party recently visiting Sarasota is that of Mrs. Potter Palmer, and her family will be arriving from Chicago."¹³⁰ The article simply

¹³⁰ *Sarasota Times*, February 24, 1910, 1.

stated that “rooms with bath at the Belle Haven were occupied and necessitated that Mr. Whipple, the proprietor engaged apartments for them at the Halton.” which was untrue based on other writings of the time: the Belle Haven Inn was considered too shabby for the grand lady.¹³¹ Instead, Dr. Jack Halton’s new sanitarium was quickly converted for the use of the family, replete with some renovation and new furniture.¹³²

Palmer traveled in a private railroad car with her two sons, Potter II and Honoré, her father Henry Hamilton Honoré, her brother Adrian, her general manager W.A. Sumner, her secretary, and a coterie of servants. She knew what she wanted. She had traveled to many locales in the world, and the Sarasota area was her choice for a winter home. She deemed Sarasota Bay more beautiful than the Bay of Naples. Yet she took her time before she signed legal documents; it was not in her nature to act impulsively. Palmer first employed a surveyor to appraise the land she was most interested in purchasing and estimate the worth of the timber. She employed an expert to analyze the soil to determine the percentage of carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, magnesium, calcium, iron and sulfur, data required for agriculture. She thoroughly inspected the acreage for sale with the help of her brother, sons and manager. Although there is minimal information as to where and when she studied the composition of soil, she knew enough to gather experts for investigation.¹³³ She did have knowledge about trees, flowers, and other plantings prevalent in the Midwest and in Europe because she

¹³¹ Karl H. Grismer, *The Story of Sarasota* (Sarasota: M.E. Russell, 1947), 138.

By 1910, the auspicious year of Bertha Palmer’s arrival, the hotel had lapsed into disrepair and would have undoubtedly created a bad impression of the community to Mrs. Palmer.

¹³³ *Sarasota Times*, February 23, 1911, Page One, Sarasota County History Center Newspaper Archives.

had personally supervised gardens wherever she lived. She often said that if she had any talent, it was her “joy in watching things grow.”¹³⁴

In his biography of John Ringling, *Ringling, The Florida Years*, David Weeks states: “Almost overnight Mrs. Palmer became Sarasota’s most widely publicized winter resident, conspicuous in her French-built Cadillac limousine, at first, an object of intense curiosity. She would drive it about and when aware that the roads ahead in her destination had not been paved, she would have made arrangements to be picked up by her coachman and her car driven back to the garage. She contributed generously to all appeals and remained a patron without participating in the social life of Sarasota.”¹³⁵ She was soft spoken, serious and single minded about making prudent investments to increase the family holdings.

The remainder of her life was spent between two different worlds, the dazzling life she had been accustomed to in Chicago, Paris, Newport, and London and the life of a gentlewoman farmer and rancher in Manatee County, Florida. She devoted herself to purchasing and improving her acreage, selecting her livestock, hiring her foremen, overseeing the work force, and directing the construction and furnishing of her home which she dubbed *The Oaks*, in Osprey, a community just south of Sarasota. She also engineered the construction of a home for the ranch foreman in Meadowsweet Pastures, the ranch lands in what is now Myakka River State Park, as well as cottages for the family and living quarters for her workers. Her hands touched every acre and within each boundary, every structure, waterway, flora, and fauna. There was not an order

¹³⁴ Sarasota Times, February 19, 1911.

¹³⁵ David C. Weeks, *Ringling, The Florida Years* (Gainesville:University Press of Florida, 1993), 39.

written or a contract signed without her express approval. Whether on site or thousands of miles away, she would supervise each detail of her domain and she insisted on comprehensive briefings from her attorney, Charles T. Curry, as well as her managers and foremen before any decision was made. To accomplish this, she would immerse herself in accumulating definitive and the most up-to-date information about every aspect of farming and ranching in the new frontier.

Palmer wrote to a number of associations for agricultural information, including the University of Florida Agricultural Experiment Station, College of Agriculture in Gainesville.¹³⁶ She also read detailed circulars from the University of California College of Agriculture in Berkeley, the *Breeder's Gazette in Chicago*, the *Country Gentlemen Magazine* in Philadelphia and became a member of both the Florida Livestock Association and the National Agricultural Society.¹³⁷ She wrote letters asking for guidance on the hiring a man “who is capable of going on a farm and keeping run of things and making average estimates without going into elaborate bookkeeping and who will stay with me.”¹³⁸ She also wrote to Clay, Robinson and Company, Live Stock Commission on April 13, 1917 asking “for a man for Meadowsweet Pastures who has made a success of handling baby beef.”¹³⁹ “Other publications she sent for contained

¹³⁶ University of Florida Agricultural Experiment Station, Press Bulletin No. 187, Reprint July 29, 1916, Spanish Point Palmer Archives, Osprey.

¹³⁷ Bertha Palmer Collection, Sarasota County History Center Archives, MSS32, Box 1, Folder 1.

¹³⁸ Letter from Mrs. Potter Palmer to Mr. Clyde Marquis, Curtis Publishing Co, Philadelphia on January 17, 1918. Palmer Paper, MSS 32, Box 4, Folder 45, Sarasota County History Center Archives.

¹³⁹ Letter from Mrs. Potter Palmer to Clay, Robinson and Company, Live Stock Commission, Chicago, April 13, 1917, MSS 32 Box 4, Folder 45, Sarasota County History Center Archives.

bulletins on increased cattle production, economical winter feeding of beef cows, and utilization of waste tomato seed and fishmeal as feed for hogs.”¹⁴⁰

The people who worked for her were fond of Palmer. In January 1983 an interview was conducted with Clarence Sumerall who lived his life in Old Miakka and was acquainted in the 1920s with the foreman of Meadowsweet Pastures.

Interviewer Anna Carton asked Summerall if he knew Mrs. Palmer. He responded:

Yes, I knew her. She was just plain every day. She didn't want to be taken advantage of. She could get you told if you needed it. But if you treated her right she was just as nice as could be. She had her own ideas about what she wanted to do. And if it worked, all right and if it didn't why she could afford to lose it. She liked to bird hunt. She liked to go out quail shooting and stuff like that. She'd pay good money for anybody that could handle the dogs. She wanted them dogs to mind. She didn't want to have to go out there and get the birds herself. But she never refused to pay good money. Mrs. Palmer didn't get half the praise she should have. Now, Honore [Mrs. Palmer's son] you'd a thought he was a farmer if you had just run into him. He didn't go out and do a lot of things. He had money and he'd just stay home and spend it. She did most of the planning.¹⁴¹

There is general agreement among those who knew her that the men in charge of her ranch, farms, and gardens were closer to Bertha Palmer as a person than anyone else outside of her own family. As Ishbel Ross said, “She was a strong and savvy woman taking charge in a man's world. “

In later years, the men who had worried about her reception, when she first arrived in Sarasota, realized that none of the fuss had been necessary. They found her ‘a good sport; a swell girl,’ in the words of Albert Blackburn who managed her ranch. She was equal to any emergency even mutiny on her ranch, criminally cut fences, unfriendly homesteaders, flooded crops and dying cattle. She could take a joke and kept her temper under stress.”¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Mark D. Smith, “A Look Back, Meadowsweet Pastures” (*Sarasota Herald Tribune*, March 17, 1999.)

¹⁴¹ Bertha Palmer Files, Spanish Point Historical Archives.

¹⁴² Ross, *Silhouette in Diamonds*, 224.

In *The Story of Sarasota*, Karl Grismer wrote that Palmer and A.B. Edwards immediately got along very well. She was interested in the history of the area, and he was the person to enlighten her since he had lived there all his life and could relate his childhood memories and describe the transformation of the area, its tribulations, its qualities, and its promise. When their initial explorations, via water transport, took them to Osprey and the settlement at Spanish Point that had so captivated John Webb, she was enchanted with the sight of an enigmatic cabbage palm tree intertwined with an oak as if they were one tree, and also the huge Indian mounds and the breathtaking view of the bay.¹⁴³ When she asked Edwards if the property was for sale, he told her that Lawrence Jones, a member of the John Paul Jones whiskey family from Kentucky, owned the property. He set the price very high, eleven thousand dollars for the house and thirteen acres.

Later, Palmer went without Edwards to visit Jones to “beat him down” by trying to convince him that she’d save him money by dealing without an agent. Ultimately, she blinked and paid the eleven thousand dollars because she wanted that land. She would later purchase two hundred additional acres contiguous to the Jones land and create the estate at Osprey Point. Palmer had envisioned building her own home from the ground up, but she changed her mind when she saw an impressive and distinctive house which had been occupied only for a few weeks during the winter. In the winter of 1901, Lawrence Jones had also purchased twelve acres from Frank Guptill, an early resident of the town and the son-in-law of settler John Webb. Within four years he had sold the house to Mrs. Palmer’s aunt, Laura Carr Honoré, at a handsome profit; she later

¹⁴³ Grismer, *The Story of Sarasota*, 157.

sold it to Bertha Palmer who, with massive renovation and additions, made the house her own.¹⁴⁴

Edwards was wise and did not indicate any anger over what amounted to a double-cross and the loss of his percentage of the purchase from Jones. It paid off; he and Lord would eventually sell most of the two hundred eighteen square miles or one hundred forty thousand acres of lands the Palmers would purchase.¹⁴⁵ When Joseph Lord arrived from Chicago, he continued his colleague's tour, taking Palmer by horse and buggy to look over his large land holdings.

During the weeks that followed, Palmer completed arrangements with Joseph Lord for acquiring a half interest in his extensive holdings. To develop the property, the Sarasota-Venice Company was organized with Adrian Honoré as President, W.A. Sumner, Vice-President, Potter Palmer Jr. as treasurer, and Honoré Palmer as secretary.

The Palmer family moved forward expeditiously in their acquisition of land. They formed a number of individual companies listed under family names, purchasing approximately one-fourth of the land that ultimately became Sarasota County, from Oneco through Sarasota, to Venice, a total of twenty-five miles. Palmer insisted that a railroad extension be implemented from Sarasota to Osprey before she would finalize the contract. The question of why the railway company decided to comply with her wishes has never been clarified. Some sources say she was a large stockholder in the Seaboard Railway Company and she threatened to organize a railroad of her own if the company did not comply. Another source stated that the railway company cooperated

¹⁴⁴ Laura Carr, who was the sister of Eliza Carr, married Benjamin Lockwood Honoré, the brother of Bertha's father. She was Bertha's aunt both on the maternal and paternal sides. Ross, *Silhouette in Diamonds*, 14, 230.

¹⁴⁵ Charles E. Harner, "First a Panic, Then a Lady Tycoon" (*Florida Trend*, June 1972), 140-152.

because it was looking toward the future development of the west coast of Florida. Whatever the motivation, construction on the spur began thirty days later.¹⁴⁶

Palmer's construction supervisor from Chicago, C. Thompson, arrived and set about having a dock constructed with rails to transport materials to Osprey. The transformation of the Jones homestead into a winter estate began. Janet Matthews describes the enhancement of the property in her book, *Venice, Journey From Horse and Chaise*:

She wrapped walkways, formal gardens, reflecting ponds, a tennis court and paths around Indian middans, homestead inns, winter houses, a community cemetery and chapel, boathouses and commercial docks. She beautified those elements around the remodeled Jones house, which she called The Oaks. Mrs. Palmer's Osprey Point estate contained its own electric plant and water system, several groves, separate buildings for house servants and grounds supervisors, a small village and commissary for white and black work crews, livestock and poultry sheds and a farm which she called Home Farm.¹⁴⁷

Palmer furnished her thirty-one-room home with fine furniture and art, including her Impressionist collection of the works of Mary Cassatt, Picasso, Monet, and Degas. From Chicago, she brought her *Spode* china, family portraits, gold carved in sconces and Native American wall hangings; blending treasures of the past and present her winter home. Seventy workers were employed simply to maintain the property including domestics, gardeners, mechanics and stablemen.¹⁴⁸ The gardens were the work of Henri and Achille Duchene from France who adorned the property with native plantings and introduced new exotic non-native species. When the grounds were being designed, thirty-five master gardeners were employed along with more than two hundred

¹⁴⁶ Rollins Coakley Collection, Sarasota County History Center Archives, MSS 39.

¹⁴⁷ Janet Snyder Matthews, *Venice, Journey From Horse and Chaise*, (Sarasota: Pine Level Press, 1989), 182.

workman. Palmer ordered what amounted to four freight cars of non-native exotic tropical plants from California alone.

She installed boardwalks throughout the property and walked about constantly overseeing the work being done. Several of the sources mention that if she came upon a wet and muddy area, she simply drew her skirt up and plowed through.

Renovations were undertaken on the *White Cottage*, the home built by John Webb, and the former Guptill home, which the Palmers called the *Hill House*. The family members used both homes.¹⁴⁹ It was stated in the *Fort Myers News-Press* and the *Tampa Tribune* that Mrs. Palmer initially hired three hundred workers (ending all problems of local employment) to enlarge the house and landscape the property.¹⁵⁰ She was known to pay the highest wages in the area and attracted skilled workers.

In the same year, Palmer purchased six thousand acres of land along with three thousand head of cattle on the Myakka river from Garrett “Dink” Murphy on land where Myakka State Park is now located, twenty miles east of Sarasota. She continued the use of his “Triangle Brand”, which he had recorded in 1880. Murphy was reputed to own one of the largest herds in the state and some of the best pastureland. Palmer reportedly, paid seventy thousand dollars for the land that would become Meadowsweet Farms.¹⁵¹ Upon her acquisition of the land, she made the decision to improve the runty cows she had bought by importing beef-type bulls including the Brahma, originally

¹⁴⁹ The homes are currently used by Historic Spanish Point in Osprey for administrative offices.

¹⁵⁰ Bert Collier, “Queen of Chicago Brought Culture to Sarasota”, (*Ft. Myers News-Press*, April 4, 1976), 4E and June Hurley, “Bertha Palmer’s Midas Touch Helped Florida Grow”(*Tampa Tribune*, November 15, 1976).

¹⁵¹ The Palmer ranch had been located in Manatee County, however, in 1921, the boundary of Sarasota County was established and the park is now primarily part of Sarasota county with the exception of Clay Gully picnic area which remains within Manatee County. Paula Benschhoff, *Myakka*, (Sarasota: Pineapple Press, Inc.,2002), 43.

from India and crossbred between English and Spanish breeds. She subsequently brought in Herefords from Texas and Angus from Georgia, breaking the tradition of free ranges by fencing the pastures to protect her cattle.¹⁵² Since they were not native to the area, many succumbed from tick fever. Local cattlemen had long argued that cattle could not survive dipping, which was the only method that would work against the ticks. The process required gathering and dipping through a vat every fourteen days. In the summer, the combination of heat and hot rain on the dip might split the hide of the animals. In winter, many died of pneumonia. Palmer was not deterred by the suspicions of the local cowboys. She ordered cattle dipping vats installed on the ranch and approved the innovative dipping procedures, eradicating the ticks with no harm to the cattle. The ranch ultimately supported 2,200 head of cattle. In 1932, cattle dipping became mandatory in the state.¹⁵³

In January 1917, Palmer was made a vice-president of the Live Stock Association.¹⁵⁴ In the February 22 issue of the same year, a letter to the editor to the *Sarasota Times* newspaper and signed by “A Subscriber” was published, congratulating Palmer on bringing in pure bred hogs to the region. “Mrs. Palmer added to her herds by buying the entire herd of a prominent breeder of Berkshires in the North. Mrs. Palmer is certainly to be praised for encouraging the pure bred industries in this part of the South

¹⁵² Joe Akerman, *Florida Cowman, A History of Florida Cattle Raising* (Kissimmee: Florida Cattleman’s Association, 1976), 247-251.

¹⁵³ Joe G. Warner, *Biscuits and ‘Taters, A History of Cattle Ranching in Manatee County*, (Bradenton, Great Outdoors Printing, 1980), 66-69.

¹⁵⁴ *Sarasota Times*, February 1, 1917.

and is proving to we Florida people that we are not solely dependent on citrus and truck farming.”¹⁵⁵

Palmer purchased the most modern equipment and materials, including a Chicago-built International Harvester gasoline tractor, a road grader, and wagons. New devices and innovations on a small or large scale fascinated her and she wanted to try the most current contrivances. She often sent for brochures and information regarding the product and its uses directly from the manufacturer and when the new equipment was delivered, she expected periodic reports from her foremen. At times the equipment was inappropriate for use on her lands and the machines were left to rot.

The socialite from Chicago was the first to introduce electricity to Sarasota during construction of her home and farm buildings in spite of the fact that Thomas Edison lived seventy miles to the south in Fort Myers. She built three large silos to store grain, a source of ridicule by seasoned Florida ranchers who knew that cattle in the South could graze throughout the year. She had difficulties growing particular crops; she insisted on growing corn during the spring on a field near the entrance to Meadowsweet Pastures, not understanding that planting seasons in the south were different. Thirteen hundred acres of citrus groves were profitable almost immediately and fruit by the carload was shipped north.

She insisted on detailed daily labor reports from Home Farm and Meadowsweet Farms. The reports were itemized by the name of the workman, the number of hours he worked and the cost of his labor. In addition, the foreman at the ranch sent Palmer semimonthly reports explaining the labor distribution for that period.

¹⁵⁵ *Sarasota Times*, February 22, 1917.

Detailed reports were also sent from Home Farm (*The Oaks*), specifying what each workman did during a given month. For example, a man named Lockyer, “Worked at making cuttings, potting, setting out plants in rose garden and elsewhere, worked in greenhouse, rose garden and flower gardens, pruned roses, watered, fertilized citrus trees and shrubs south of Avenue and helped fertilize in numbers one, two and three groves, and planted grass near Mirror Lake.”¹⁵⁶

Separate reports were itemized regarding “colored help.” An African-American man named Joe Gilleson had worked on:

Domestic work, cutting wood, cleaning lumber for new house (several days at this) cleaning speed boat, helping on Flying Fish, hoeing in fertilizer, cleaning carpets and rugs, helping on old Cadillac, unloading Phantom, cleaning eaves, troughs on Oaks and leaves off of roof, watering, raking, spraying, wheeling sand for chimney of new house.¹⁵⁷

African American workers were given the menial tasks; and they slept, ate and spent their non-working time in segregated quarters. They were referred to by the white staff as “colored work hands” and, by Palmer as “my Negroes”. There is no indication that any possibility for advancement in wages or type of work existed. If when they went into town on their nights off, there were any reports of carousing, they would be dismissed.

¹⁵⁶ Palmer Papers, Meadowsweet and Home Farms, Bertha H. Palmer Collection, MSS 32, Box 4, Folder 49, Sarasota County History Center Archives.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

Reports were also written in regard to transportation including motor trucks, tractors and horses and mules. This included the number of vehicles or animals, the number of hours they were used, the purposes of their use and itemized costs.¹⁵⁸

Among the new plantings added to the ranch acreage, many were exotic and ornamental. It is possible that Palmer was unaware that non-native plantings could be invasive to the detriment of native species. In an interview, in a July 2007, Paula Benschhoff, Park Services Specialist for Myakka River State Park, said,

We have found several ornamental-type plants around the area where the ranch foreman's house was located. Though plants that are categorized as invasive, i.e. bamboo, guava, citrus and turk's turban, are routinely removed, many persist. They are scattered over the shaded areas adjoining the ranch site. Plants not on invasive species lists i.e. Washingtonian palms and bananas, were not removed. However, the two palms planted by the driveway {to the ranch] have both died.¹⁵⁹

In her book, *Myakka*, Benschhoff states, in regard to Big Flats Marsh in the Myakka River:

Invasion of this marsh by exotic plants makes this my least favorite part of the river. Big Flats was once a diverse wetland, patched with clusters of bulrush, the golden blooms of marsh marigold, and the pink spikes of smartweed. Maidencane was probably the dominant marshgrass. Now you seldom see anything but paragrass (tall thick invasive grass) and West Indian marshgrass in this section of the river. Only the native water paspalum is able to compete in a few places with these aggressive exotics. Invasive aquatic weeds are also a problem in the river and lake.¹⁶⁰

Benschhoff elaborated further,

Robert Dye, Myakka's former park manager, once told me Albert Blackburn's [Bertha Palmer's manager) son mentioned to him that his father had planted the

¹⁵⁸ There were no daily records found on household expenditures, duties of maids, butlers and drivers; however, it is likely that those records were as detailed as farm and ranch accounting.

¹⁵⁹ Interview with Paula Benschhoff, Park Services Specialist for Myakka River State Park, April 26, 2007.

¹⁶⁰ Paula Benschhoff, *Myakka*, (Sarasota: Pineapple Press, 2002),34,99.

paragrass [for grazing] when he worked for Mrs. Palmer. Paragrass is now considered an invasive exotic. We remove it when we find it in isolated marshes, but it would do no good to herbicide it in the river corridor as the seeds would keep floating downstream to the park and reestablishing. Until we can find a way to control it in the entire river floodplain, we won't treat it along the banks or in the marshes adjoining the Myakka River.¹⁶¹

Palmer established a "camp" for the enjoyment of the family at Upper Myakka Lake; each family had their cottage with a porch. Prior to their first visit, she ordered the installation of reliable electric, gas and water facilities. She brought in fine ponies for her grandchildren to ride and hired a rancher from the Far West to instruct them. She purchased child sized toolboxes in the hopes that the children would learn aspects of construction and repairs. She bought many pets for them to care for, selected books for their reading pleasure, and encouraged them to write well. She was an affectionate and caring grandmother and when she and the children were separated, they carried on a continuous correspondence:

Dear Grandmother,

The rabbits have not come yet. You said you wished me to remind you of this when I reached home. I thank you very much for the twenty-five dollars you sent me at Christmas. I have not spent it but you know how fond I am of books and I shall enjoy it very much later on. I send you 50 kisses and hope your cold is better now.

Love from Honore.¹⁶²

Dear Grandmother,

Thank you for taking care of us. We had a very pleasant time at your house.

Your grandson,
Potter III¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ Paula Benschhoff, e-mail correspondence, August 16, 2007.

¹⁶² Palmer Papers, Bertha H. Palmer Collection, MSS32, Box 2, Folder 3, Sarasota County History Center Archives, Children's Letters.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

December 31st/16

My dear Auntie Bertha,

Thank you very much for your nice present of toys. We have had a very happy Christmas. Mike was with us . The day New Year's Eve we are going to have all sorts of games. Love and best wishes for a very happy new year from your little niece, Ida.¹⁶⁴

An article in the *Sarasota Times* stated, "The greatest of comradeship exists between Mrs. Palmer and her grandchildren—a palship approximated only by the keen enjoyment that Mrs. Palmer's father, the late H.H. Honoré, found in the company of his great-grandchildren."¹⁶⁵ Family life for the Palmers in Sarasota was a virtual scrapbook of walking on the beach, swimming, fishing, hunting and displaying the trophies, enjoying meals together on a table underneath the trees and relaxing in small groups, often enjoying the grandchildren's excitement as they presented plays for everyone who would watch.

In 1983, Paula Benshoff interviewed Walt and Ron Sweeting two of the sons of Gene Sweeting, the past foreman of Meadowsweet Pastures. The interview began at the boat basin where there was a long cypress building where cooking was done.

According to Walt,

When Mrs. Palmer wanted to rough it, she would come out and camp at the boat basin area as that was her favorite. Concrete pillars had been built with a round cypress flooring connecting them. The tent poles were put on the concrete pillars and the tents spread over the cypress floor. That is how Mrs. Palmer and her party would camp." [Mrs. Palmer's butler, her chef and several servants always accompanied her to the camp]

The ranch house and the boat basin area were extensively lit by electric lights. They were very bright. The electricity was made by the Delco plant. It was the children's job to keep the large batteries full of water and in good condition. You'd be standing down at the lake and slowly the light would start to dim. Then all of a sudden the lights would flash bright and you'd know the Delco plant was cutting back on.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ *Sarasota Times*, December 17, 1916, Sarasota County History Center Archives.

South of the house there were three circular concrete structures. Two of them are silo foundations. They were built for storing food for black ginnys Black ginnys are same as black angus. But, the angus were too fragile and could not endure flies and rigors of Florida ranch life. The peas and all that were to make up their feed were only stored in the silos one year.

The third round structure was originally a compost bin, but they never used it. The children kept a baby alligator penned there.

In that area were a barn, a slaughterhouse, a blacksmith shop and the area they kept horses and mules. Mules had to be kept separate from the horses.

There were lots of vultures in the area. If a cow died there would be at least two hundred buzzards on him. There were Mexican buzzards too.”¹⁶⁶

Albert Blackburn, the son of Florida homesteaders, was the ranch manager and hiring agent for Mrs. Palmer. According to the employment contract, signed on May 1, 1915, he agreed:

to take care of the cattle now ranging in Manatee County or else where in Florida; that he will give all of the cattle now West of the Railroad that are sick, the necessary and proper treatment; that he will turn out from the Miakka pasture all cattle, except such numbers of stock cattle, as can be properly taken care of on said pasture; that he will inspect all of the fences around said pasture, and see they are kept in proper condition; that he will ride over all the ranges or pastures upon which the cattle range or pasture and mark any ill calves that are unmarked; and that he will, in every way give the cattle on said range proper and efficient care. ¹⁶⁷

He was paid two dollars and fifty cents per day and was authorized to “secure the services of three or more men at two dollars and meals per day when necessary for marking the calves. “¹⁶⁸ He lived in a home on the property and was in addition, the contractor for some of Palmer’s bayfront dredging. They shared a close personal relationship and she had confidence in his suggestions. She told him to hire anyone who could work and since the local supply of labor did not suffice, she bought in black and Italian workers from outside and paid the highest wages in the area. Palmer was said to

¹⁶⁶ Benschoff, Oral History Interview Records, Myakka State Park.

¹⁶⁸ Palmer Papers, *Contract of Albert Blackburn*, May 1, 1915, MSS32, Box 2, Folder 4, Sarasota County History Center Archives.

have kept close tabs on her foremen and personally stipulated when the cattle were to be sold and the number to be butchered, and she insisted on regular updates about the condition of all the animals.

The land at Osprey came under siege by woodmen, squatters, and hermits who resented the Palmers' intrusion into the area, and habitually raided the property and plagued her workers when they knew Palmer was away. The news of these ongoing disturbances was telegraphed to her in Paris. She would not tolerate the situation from both a humane and an economic stance and wrote the following letter to V.A. Saunders who ran the local store at Osprey where the marauders gathered at night.

Since buying at Osprey I have been greatly annoyed by the annual criminal assaults on my place and on my innocent, unprotected, sleeping Negroes by cowardly bands of armed men who come at night to shoot them up and drive them away. Every investor wants to know first about labor conditions and to be told of a community living back in the times and the atrocities of the lawless Ku Klux era finishes its case at once.¹⁶⁹

The letter was written in April

1914 and she subsequently wrote a second letter, to her manager:

Dear Mr. Blackburn,
What prospective buyer would invest here after learning how I was treated, I who have spent a large amount of money to show what the soil and the climate can do and to create values...What a horrid position I am forced into. It is disgusting. I should feel very badly to help put any man in the chain gang but perhaps it is our duty and thus make the country possible for honest, law-abiding citizens who are trying to develop it.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁹ Palmer Papers, Spanish Point, Osprey, Florida, Administrative Archives.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

There were not only problems from the outside but altercations among the workers who resented the manager at *The Oaks*, William Prentice, who was, according to some, too imperious to the workers. Although she often privately chastised him for this, she defended his actions and decisions to all others and would dismiss those who were disloyal to him. He assiduously reported pertinent details of daily work and conditions at *The Oaks* whether Palmer was in residence, on a ship or train en route to her latest destination, or thousands of miles away in Europe. One of those messages included: “ The rain was good after a drought. They had laid tile drains; they had cut a road through the shrubbery; the pampas grass was in full bloom; the begonias were thriving; the mule had died of old age; four men were working on the fence at the East Stable; the turkeys looked fine and all the chickens had been sold. “ He inquired, “What were her orders for installing the new laundry tubs? Would black-striped wallpaper be in order for her bedroom?”¹⁷¹ She was the executive in full command. No one dared pay a bill without her permission.

In a January 28, 1918 letter to her attorney, Charles T. Curry of Bradenton, less than four months before her death, she was concerned about details of Florida law in regard to her land, animals, and workers:

Dear Sir,

I do not know about changes in laws in Florida and write to ask if they are the same as two or three years ago:

First: Regarding hogs on fenced land, whether fence is imperfect or not. I have not fenced in the waterfront of my property and do not want to do so, yet the hogs swim in by the water. I understood that if hogs on my land were placed in a pound, fed and the owner notified of the fact that he would be obliged to come and take them away and pay for the food that had been furnished them.

¹⁷¹ Palmer Papers, Sarasota County History Center, MSS 32, Box 4, Folder 3.

Second: When pigs are trespassing on a private place is it the duty of owner to come and take them away when notified, or can the person whose land is trespassed on have them driven out?

Third: One of my negroes was suspected of stealing a hog. The sheriff was brought was brought out by the supposedly aggrieved party and my negro's house searched which took most of the afternoon work hours. What formalities is the sheriff obliged to comply with? Should he not be forced to come to me or my superintendent and show his warrant and have assent to search the quarters?

Fourth: When it is claimed that an animal is included in a bunch sold and delivered, is it not the duty of the claimant to show from the records of the cowman delivering the bunch or of the butcher receiving and killing same that he had an animal included in that bunch? Can he come several weeks or months later and say that he had an animal in the bunch (of which there is no evidence whatever from any record and claim payment for him)? When evidence of fact is demanded is it not his duty to give same or make no further claim? In two cases such claims are made on me with no evidence supporting them.

Will you kindly let me hear promptly about the above, and greatly oblige.

Yours truly,
Mrs. Potter Palmer¹⁷²

The Palmers purchased 19,000 acres in Tampa in 1912, including a ranch which they named Riverhills. The agents they retained went on to sell lots in the Tampa subdivisions of Hyde Park, Virginia Park and Ashland, names prominent in the Chicago subdivisions of the Palmer family.

The Palmer holdings were not confined to Tampa, Meadowsweet Pastures, Osprey Point and other holdings of the Sarasota-Venice Company. According to Janet Matthews, corporate operations included ongoing enterprises in Chicago, a mining company, an oil and gas company in Louisiana, and Medec Orchards at Medford, Oregon.¹⁷³

¹⁷² Palmer Papers, Box #1, File #2, Sarasota County History Center Archives.

¹⁷³ Janet Snyder Matthews, *Venice, Journey From Horse and Chaise*, 184.

Honoré Palmer bought land on a waterway called Phillippi Creek and relocated in the city north of the Oaks property, and he and his brother, Potter Jr. built a winter home, which they named Immokolee. Simultaneously, as part of their commercial development, the family purchased farm land in the community of Bee Ridge, utilizing wide parcels of land for the profitable growing of celery and watermelon while conducting inovative agricultural experimental operations. Additionally, this area was used for chicken and hog production. The company began its citrus business by planting four hundred acres of grapefruit and orange groves, which eventually proliferated to thirteen hundred acres of a high quality crop which was shipped to the North.

Palmer continued to travel by ship and rail to her destinations in Europe, Chicago and Florida and maintained her homes in Chicago, and Paris. On September 17, 1911, the Chicago Tribune observed:

Mrs. Potter Palmer has returned to Chicago from a summer of European travel and a short stay at her Paris apartment. While not very talkative during the interview, one point she did make clear was that she was not planning to drop the reins of social leadership in Chicago. She will leave for Florida in two weeks, but will return at the end of November for the balance of the winter season. In particular, Mrs. Palmer will take part in the charity ball which she has engineered for years. 'Oh yes I shall be here for that', she said, 'though I wonder at times whether it would not be better to let someone else take charge. I have done it for so long. Perhaps newer hands could improve it, but it would seem strange to me. 'However', she continued, 'I really don't see that there should be any interest in my return. It is only a personal matter and I don't believe many care about it. I came back a little early in order to spend a short time here before going to Florida where I must see how my cottage is progressing. I am tremendously interested in that right now. I shall stay about two months with my brother and son who are also building and then return to Chicago and the Charity Ball'. The new winter cottage is at Sarasota, on the west coast of Florida, where Mrs. Palmer, with her father H.H. Honoré, spent much of last winter. There the family will probably stay through the winter months hereafter, when the residence, of Italian villa design is completed, Mrs. Palmer plans to leave in the early spring for another European trip.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁴ "Mrs. Palmer Tells Plans," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (September 17, 1911), 3.

As the years passed she spent fewer months in Chicago and increased her time in Sarasota. Her greatest pleasure was within her own family and she preferred to enjoy all of her time with them.

She pioneered the Woman's Club in Sarasota and contributed two thousand dollars for a building and offered her ideas regarding organizational planning to the leadership. The Club supported a library and promoted beautification efforts for the town. Palmer chose not to become directly involved. She contributed generously to all appeals and charities but remained on the periphery of Sarasota social life. She was said to be gracious to her neighbors; however, she did not nurture close relationships away from her immediate family.

Palmer was in Paris when World War I erupted in 1914. She and her servants packed her treasured belongings where they were hidden in a "safe location." She turned her house over to the American Red Cross as a home for chaplains and headed for Chicago where she put her energies and her time into working for the Red Cross and doing whatever was possible to help the war effort. She had made her final journey to the continent. Her niece Julia's children had returned to America from St. Petersburg at the time of the Russian Revolution. During the War, Julia's husband, Prince Michael, was wounded, and the entire Cantazuzene family joined Mrs. Palmer in Sarasota. In the words of Matthews:

Wartime brought a shortage of farm labor and inflated prices for fertilizer and machinery. Agricultural production of beans, pork, and corn was encouraged in place of citrus crops. Mrs. Palmer read every advisory bulletin from the government in regard to helping the war effort and was named a gubernatorial appointee to the 'Win the War Congress for Health Food and Labor.'¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁵ Matthews, *Venice, Journey from Horse and Chaise*, 196

In 1916, Henry Hamilton Honoré died at the age of ninety-three. His passing was a dire blow to Palmer who had adored her father and respected his advice and counsel in all of her undertakings.

Within a two-year period following her father's death, Bertha was diagnosed with breast cancer. She underwent a mastectomy in New York City and the prognosis confirmed her worst fears; she did not have long to live. The metastasis of cancer, the ultimate egalitarian, could not be contained by enormous wealth. Money could not buy more time. During her travels to New York, she consulted with the most renowned specialists, but there was no cure. Only her immediate family was aware of her illness, and she valiantly continued to be involved with her holdings and maintain limited activity until she was bedridden. She died on May 5, 1918, at the age of sixty-nine. A brilliant star had dimmed and faded.

The city began a period of mourning, and the mayor lowered the flag to half-staff. A funeral cortege went by horse and wagon to the railroad depot and then onto the final journey to Chicago where she was buried in a mausoleum at Graceland cemetery next to her husband.

Conclusion

Bertha Palmer was an exceptionally progressive, astute, and accomplished woman who possessed the charisma and grace to captivate those who knew her. She was endowed with an innate business savvy that allowed her to compete on a par with seasoned men of commerce before women had achieved the right to vote.

She was ambitious and opportunistic with impeccable *savoir-faire* and intuitive cognition to select those with whom she should ingratiate herself. She sought the limelight and adulation. Her accomplishments in the patronage of fine arts and culture and her efforts to improve working conditions for women are worthy of admiration. It may also be said that she chose to live a life of frivolity, over-abundant acquisition and conspicuous consumption. She did it all with grandeur and style.

Her decision, during the last eight years of her life, to come to Sarasota, heralded a new epoch in the evolution of the community. She achieved success in the last frontier and others followed her lead. The land she purchased and developed and the innovations she conceived and implemented altered the landscape and the perceptions of Southwestern Florida. Increasingly, the region came to be widely known as a sanctuary from winter's cold and as a resort. The number of winter visitors increased and a new spirit was injected into the community.¹⁷⁶ There are no certainties in regard

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 182.

to the motivations that brought her to Florida or the reasons she immersed herself completely in a world so distant from all she had known. Sadly, no personal letters or diaries have been found to enlighten us. Without her voice, we are left to wonder, to pursue the facts that are available, to put together the fragments of the puzzle and hope that someone, someday will find a letter or a journal and the answer will be within those pages.

Epilogue

Another Chicago entrepreneur came to Sarasota in April 1910, following Palmer's lead.¹⁷⁷ Owen Burns had acquired his vast wealth by manufacturing metal home savings banks that he sold to financial institutions all over the country. Karl Grismer quotes him as saying: that "a town good enough for Bertha Palmer was good enough for him."¹⁷⁸ Historian, Jeff LaHurd believes that it was Burns who actually did more to make Sarasota a successful city than any other single individual.

His involvement in the community began shortly after Bertha Palmer cast the international spotlight on this unheard of and difficult to reach town. Burns immediately saw in the area's intrinsic beauty the potential to make it a desirable destination for wealthy snowbirds.¹⁷⁹

Furthermore, Burns's dedication to the sports of fishing and hunting reinforced his decision. He immediately began to buy property rights with the intention of developing land and purchased the sizable holdings of Hamilton Gillespie and the Florida Mortgage and Investment Company. Burns eventually convinced the town council to pass the seawall ordinance with the hope that he would get the construction contract. He told the

¹⁷⁷ Burns knew Palmer by reputation. There is no evidence that they had been friends or colleagues in Chicago.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, 160.

¹⁷⁹ Jeff LaHurd, *Sarasota, A History*, (Charleston, History Press, 2006), 33.

council, “Unless you clean up your front yard-and get seawalls built-this town will never amount to a tinker’s damn.” Burns began his development by forming the Burns Realty Company, and eventually a building supply company and landscape nursery; he built seawalls to create Sunset Park, founded Citizens Bank, presided over the Board of Trade, and vigorously developed downtown Sarasota. In years to come he collaborated with John Ringling on his vast interests and development. Burns’s area of interest was construction of small, unadorned concrete buildings in the city while the Palmers’ concentration was agricultural, land development and cattle ranching.

John and Mabel and Charles and Edith Ringling came for their first winter sojourn to Sarasota in 1911. They had previously wintered in Tarpon Springs and Tampa but were convinced by former Chicagoan and Sarasota land speculator Ralph Caples that Sarasota would be the ideal place to have a home as a welcome change from the constant travel of the circus. In the early years John Ringling had little interest in land development. His remarkable and auspicious contributions to Sarasota would come later.

As Sarasota County prepares to mark the 100th anniversary of Palmer’s arrival, much has changed. The great country estate, The Oaks, is gone, ravaged by neglect and, ultimately torn down to make way for a prestigious housing development. The lawn and garden paths are traversed daily by groups of tourists who come to see the Guptill House, the Country House and the place where Bertha Palmer chose to settle. The grazing and farmland is carved into multiple residential communities under the umbrella of Palmer Ranch. The housing sites might be modest, splendid, most with requisite golf courses, clubhouses and recently paved “*natural paths*” into the heart of

nature. There are gargantuan shopping malls on the contiguous property, boasting every species of merchandise known to modern persons, and a continuous maze of traffic movement on the expanded roads.

Myakka River State Park, a fifty-eight square mile natural paradise of woodlands, wetlands and prairie was developed in the early 1930s by the Civilian Conservation Corps and includes approximately nineteen hundred acres from the estate of Adrian C. Palmer, brother of Bertha Palmer, deeded to the state for a park by Honoré and Potter Palmer, Jr. in memory of their mother on the advice of Albert Britton Edwards. The park is open to the public and serves as a camping haven, a sanctuary for wildlife and their habitats, and a place to experience the natural Florida. The Meadowsweet Pastures sign remains; the pump for the artesian well can be found; the railroad bed, the corn fields, the pasture, the circular images of the silos and remnants of the materials used in the construction of the ranch house and the pasture land are there. It takes a little time and a willing guide to find them.

One wonders what Palmer's thoughts would be if she could visit the Sarasota of today with its multilane roads, towering buildings, sprawling shopping areas, and twenty theater multiplex movie theaters. Perhaps there is a key to her thoughts within an article in the *Sarasota Times* of April 20, 1916. "There seems to be no place of beauty or utility that this remarkable woman does not see and appreciate, and seek to exploit for the enjoyment and benefit of mankind."

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