

My Family's America: The Charleston Experience

A N T H O N Y H A R R I G A N

CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA—the place and the people—is what I know best. The world of Charleston clothes my imagination and fills my memory. Though it is a small city, Charleston long had a special place in American life. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was regarded as the most aristocratic, romantic and individualistic of American cities. Henry James found it a haunted city. The old city and its surrounding plantations produced a distinctive human type—the planter class—noted for personal courage, independence, impetuosity, social realism and elegance. Prior to the Civil War, Charlestonians lived in conditions of great affluence. The riches of rice and cotton plantations made possible a brilliant social world. The world of the rich planters was destroyed in the conflict which tore apart a nation. To be sure, there were wealthy individuals in Charleston before and after the turn of the century. The majority of them were from a different strata—merchants, moneylenders and a new breed of entrepreneurs. In time, their families were fused into Charleston, but they represented an element somewhat apart from the old planter families.

In my childhood, Charleston was a window on the past. Poverty sealed the city like a time capsule from Reconstruction through the Great Depression. Poverty preserved the city, cocooned in time, preventing the destruction of its eighteenth and early and mid-nineteenth century mansions. Poverty produced a world of constricted opportunity in which Charlestonians maintained their traditional social structure and unique character. The old Charleston came alive to me through familiar figures in my family's world—Anna Ravenel Sass, my uncle's mother, her gold-headed cane striking the

floor in front of her fireplace at the house on proud Legare Street, as she insisted on her way in autocratic fashion; Col. Nathaniel Barnwell, a distinguished lawyer, authoritative and commanding in speech and presence; cousin Josephine Pinckney, a poet and novelist with an incisive wit and a passion for accuracy, who combined a superb modern intelligence with a love of Charleston's antique ways.

In my childhood, the city still belonged spiritually to the old Charleston families—Ravenels, Legares, Elliotts, Manigaults, Guerards, Haskells, Pinckneys and many others. The names represented special family traditions and characteristics. Much of their quality—and the quality of the city as a whole—was derived from the tension that existed between an inherited way of life and outlook and the pressures and standards, or nonstandards, of contemporary American life. The people and the place *were* different. When the tensions eased or disappeared in the latter part of the twentieth century, when Charleston and Charlestonians were reconciled to contemporary ways, the city died as a unique place, except insofar as architecture and other physical charms are concerned.

The generation of Charlestonians, of Lowcountry people generally, that was born in the 1880s was a very special generation. This was a generation that I knew very well. It had a lightness of spirit that we won't see again. The men and women of this generation didn't tell their problems to the world or indulge in psychological analysis of themselves, their friends or enemies. I think of my mother's friend, Laura Porcher, describing my mother singing as she swept the floor in her pineland village home, though there was little to sing about. This generation had very little in a material way but everything

in the way of fortitude, personal charm, and manners. Many of the people in this generation, my mother's generation, grew up in the countryside outside of Charleston in small villages in the pine woods that were free of the fever that raged in summer along the rivers where the rice fields were located. This generation was resourceful, good humored, and stoic in the face of what couldn't be changed. In the country, they lived close to the world of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

A flood of images fills my mind—images derived from my mother and my uncles, aunts, cousins and their friends. One image in particular stands out, that of a distant cousin who operated a small, one-room store at a crossroads called Pocatigo near the village of McPhersonville, where my mother grew up. When this cousin wasn't selling a little tobacco or a small bag of sugar to his black field-hand customers, he rested on the counter and read Homer in Greek. That's the kind of world it was; it really happened that way, though not everyone read the classics in the original, of course. It is very difficult to recover the life of another era or to understand the terms on which it was based. I have done my best, however, to understand that remarkable generation of South Carolinians to which my mother belonged. The central fact is that they were brought up in poverty or very near to it, but aristocratic notions were bred in them. They had the courtly manners of earlier generations. They lived with a code of strict honor, civility and personal accountability. Many of the young men who were born into planter class families in pineland villages rose to places of responsibility in the Army and Navy. An appointment to West Point or Annapolis was a way to obtain a superior education and to escape the retarding conditions of life in a capital-starved state. I think, for example, of my cousin Middleton Read who became a Vice Admiral in the U.S. Navy during World War II. Such men rarely either discussed money or were less than completely hospitable, though hospitality may have cost them dearly with their limited resources.

Such men were characterized by superb manners, distinguishing bearing and deep sensitivity to family obligations. They also expected good manners and respectful attention from the young. It's true that they "looked back to glory" (a phrase my uncle Herbert Ravenel Sass used as the title of a novel he published in 1934), but the contemporary scene offered little hope in the straitened circumstances of South Carolina in their early and middle years. The experience of my mother's family was typical of many families with this background.

My grandfather Marion Martin Hutson was born in 1845 in Prince William's Parish not far from the Combahee River, fifty miles from Charleston. His family had come to the colony in the early 1700s, his progenitor, William Hutson, having served as a congregationalist parson in Charleston. Parson Hutson married the granddaughter of Dr. Henry Woodward, the first settler in South Carolina, who lived with the Kiawah Indians for a year in 1666 before the settlement was made. Dr. Woodward planted the first rice in South Carolina. My great-great-grandfather Thomas Hutson served with Marion's Brigade, the guerrilla leader, in the War of Independence. At sixteen, my grandfather Marion enlisted in the Confederate Army. He was wounded in the second battle of Manassas and walked home from Virginia. In 1876, Marion Hutson married May Elliott, daughter of Captain William Waight Elliott of Beaufort and granddaughter of George Parsons Elliott (1807-1871), a farsighted Southern planter and railroad director who envisioned a rail line from Port Royal, South Carolina, to the Arizona Territory. The Elliotts had been very affluent before the war. The family had produced a noted botanist and writer. My grandmother made her husband promise only one thing, that she would not have to spend her life in the country. Unfortunately, he couldn't keep that promise. Almost their entire married life was spent in the tiny country hamlet of McPhersonville. Happily, Northern friends of the Elliotts gave a large tract of cotton land to the newlyweds—Rose Hill near the

Combahee River. For all his working life, my grandfather planted cotton on that tract, riding to the plantation each day. My grandmother was ahead of her times in many ways. She was an ardent proponent of contour farming and rotating crops, at a time when most planters scorned that practice as ridiculous. She aspired to a literary career, and at night wrote poems and stories at a table in the living room under a large brass kerosene lamp. My grandmother was determined that her children would live in the city when they grew up. She understood that plantation life was coming to an end; she realized that those young people who remained in the country would become "crackers," rustics with no opportunities and no contacts with polite society. To get the young people to Charleston wasn't easy; nevertheless, one by one, she managed to get them out of the country. My Uncle Elliott was the first to go, entering The Citadel, the South Carolina Military College in 1900, from which he graduated as a civil engineer. During his college years, he had two dollars a month spending money, which was provided by a cousin, Congressman William Elliott. This indicates the slimness of resources available to young people of my mother's generation. My mother's venture into another world came in the form of a job in Richmond, Virginia, selling the *Southern Churchman* door to door.

The early 1920s marked the end of an era for the Hutson family and so many other families who had lived on or near plantations. These families made the move to Charleston. My grandfather was miserably unhappy in the city. He died in 1920 and was buried at Stony Creek in Prince William's Parish, a family burying ground from the time the area was a strategic zone on the lands of the warlike Yemassee Indians; my grandmother died in 1923. Theirs was a life typical of the old planter class in an era of privation and lack of opportunity and few today can appreciate the depth of the struggle of South Carolinians and other Southerners to maintain civilized standards against all odds. They were shut off from all the good

things of life that other Americans enjoyed in the post-Civil War period in which enormous wealth was amassed. Their land had been burned and stripped of things of value; their region was without capital or the means of operating major educational institutions. My mother and her brothers and sisters made their adjustments, however.

My family's life experience provided perspective on the past. Through the stories and customs of my relatives, I was able to visualize another time, the passage of generations and the change of eras. I came to learn a great deal about how my forebears lived, who they were, what they thought and valued, why they acted as they did. On the piazza at 10 Legare Street, where we lived in Charleston, often in the summer evenings I would hear my mother and her sisters, cousins and friends talk of an earlier time and long dead people: Cousin Charlie Barnwell, who took his Elliott cousins to Bay Point for a summer's holiday, "loaded them with unsolicited favors and then proceeded to insult them"; Middleton Read, a cousin who lived at Hobonny Plantation on the Combahee, who owned the first automobile seen in McPhersonville. My grandfather referred to it as "Read's floggybombas." Young Charles Elliott before the Civil War and the Negro boy who stood behind his chair at meal times and repeated, "Chew Mass Charlie, chew." My grandfather telling his children that "every cracker is born with an axe in his hand," a reference to the countryman's penchant for chopping down shade trees. My cousin Eliza Read Mangum, the ultimate South Carolina aristocrat, to the extent that many of her Charleston relations thought she was putting on airs. I admired her immensely; she wasn't putting on airs; she was intelligent, well spoken, and well traveled; she had been presented at the Court of St. James; she had lived in India. I can see her now in a languid posture on a divan, describing the trip on a steamer on the Brahmaputra River in India on the way to a hill station in the hot season.

Memory is a matter of imagery, and my

mind is full of it. My outlook on life was shaped by the experiences, the sights and sounds, of Charleston in my youth: A Sunday picnic at the site of Laurium Plantation, an old McPherson place near Yemassee, with the 1928 Buick churning through the red mud of the back roads; ducks on the pond at Tide's Meet, an uncle's country place, and the antique splendor of the green marble table under the portico of the house; lunch on the rude board floor of the fishing shack at Curlew Town on Edisto Island, with another uncle scanning the egrets and blue heron in the marsh and talking of Calhoun's *Disquisition on Government*; a day at Biffen's Backward, an abandoned rice field reserve off the Summerville Road, with wild flowers reflected in the black water; an August day at the beach in 1940, with the old battleship Wyoming swinging at anchor in Rebellion Roads, and my uncle's brother, Louis Y. Dawson, in Army uniform. Later, he would serve as chief engineer on the Burma Road and build the longest wooden bridge in the world—the bridge over the Salween River.

All these people experienced, as the Anglo-Irish novelist Elizabeth Bowen said of her people, "a poverty that brought into relief their natural aristocracy." The word "aristocracy" is alien to contemporary America. When we use it, we refer to a lost America. Even as many of our historic buildings have disappeared, fallen to the wrecking ball, so have many qualities of the older American life disappeared in less than half a century. My generation found it very difficult to preserve these qualities in the face of new conditions, though here and there an individual or family manages to do so, an effort not well-understood. The leveling spirit—the democratic spirit—is so strong in contemporary America, including contemporary Charleston, that it is hard to maintain the distinctions or sense of apartness that is basic to an aristocratic way of life. Happily, the sense of the family—the larger family of cousins—is still strong in the city. However, while the physical fabric of the city is preserved, painted and often

cherished, much of the inner spirit has been eroded by modern life, and old ideals have been weakened as a living force. How else could it be in late twentieth century America with its spirit of excessive toleration?

As teenagers and young adults shortly before and after World War II, we weren't alert to the passing of a social order. Our elders were still with us, and relations between the two generations were very good. There wasn't any generational conflict in Charleston. Some of us imagined that the older order would continue. When I founded the literary quarterly *American Letters* in Charleston in 1948—the first such journal in the city in a century—and I secured work from such budding talents as Richard Wilbur and James Merrill, I thought that Charleston's literary renaissance would continue in my generation. I looked to my contemporaries to be the successors to DuBose Heyward and other important literary talents of the 1920s. This was not to be. On the whole, old Charleston didn't understand that a profound readjustment in life was necessary. As Loren Eiseley, the philosopher, once said in another connection, "Our little corner of American life experienced an inability to adjust to drastic change." I remembered my Aunt Marian saying, when a young cousin mentioned that he was planning to become a dentist: "Not a dentist!" Gentlemen, in her view, simply didn't become dentists.

Our early education certainly wasn't typical of the national experience. My first schooling was in the old and very decrepit Crafts School on Legare Street. Many of the seats in the auditorium were broken. There wasn't any money for repairs in 1933. Both the American and the Confederate flags were displayed at the front of the auditorium; we stood up for the playing of "Dixie" on the school piano. The High School of Charleston was almost as spartan in 1940. The faculty was excellent, however: Irving Wallace, a brilliant student of literature and music, taught English; Jack Fishburne, who had been in the Consular Service, taught French; John

Gibbs combined a Gullah accent with a real love and knowledge of English classics and good composition; Mr. Jarvis taught algebra and administered punishment with a sharp-edged palmetto stick (on one occasion, it was said, he held a student outside a window as a disciplinary exercise.)

Our little world was full of characters, friends and acquaintances and, sometimes, cousins who had distinctive ways. Ashmead Pringle, who lived down the street, had a large Italian car at a time when foreign cars were a great rarity. He chased the girls as they came down the street; my sister and first cousin Betty Sass were terrified of him. Mr. W. W. Ball, editor of the morning newspaper—a gifted editorial writer for whom I would work in later years—always sat close to the pulpit in St. Michael's on Sundays, and twisted and turned when the preacher said something that was contrary to his views. As for St. Michael's, in those days pews were rented by families. My friend Henry Ravenel and I were once chased out of a high box pew in the church by the owner, an elderly lady, who arrived in the middle of the service.

Life in Charleston in the 1930s, and even the early 1940s, was rather primitive. At 10 Legare Street, the only heat was from the fireplaces and a kerosene heater. The great four-story mansion owned by Edward B. Perry, who lived on the first floor, was unchanged from antebellum days except for the electricity. I brought up the coal in coal scuttles from the coal room in the yard. Thinking of that, I am reminded of the title of John Rice's autobiography: "I Came Out of the 18th Century"; John Rice was the founder of the innovative, radical college, Black Mountain, which I later attended for a brief spell. I truly came out of that century, as did he. The Perrys lived downstairs, partly in a half-open area that our Slovak cook Mary Gaal called "the cage." We could hear Mrs. Perry's sewing machine going much of the day; it was foot-powered, of course. Mr. Perry—Edward Buist Perry—worked in the advertising department of the Charleston newspapers, owned by his close friend Robie Manigault. Mr. Manigault and Mr. Perry

were veteran members of "The Old Bats," the Old Battalion, the card-playing group of the Charleston Club. The Perrys were proud, courageous people.

Through the 1940s, Charleston people obtained their vegetables from street vendors who had horse-drawn wagons or pushcarts. The colored men and women who hawked their wares had distinctive cries. I can hear them call, "I got okra, watermelon, sibby beans, sweet potato." Other groceries came from Ohlandt's grocery store in blue, open-sided trucks. Each day, housewives would telephone Ohlandt's—it was a morning ritual—and ask what was available. Poor Mr. Ohlandt often had to wait an age for payment. Some Charlestonians thought they had a divine right not to pay him on time. This was the era when cooks took groceries home from the pantry. This was more or less expected. As they were receiving about five dollars a week in the depression, they undoubtedly couldn't have fed their families without helping themselves to the household supplies. The cooks came on time to prepare breakfast, and usually were on hand to serve Sunday dinner. In the hardship period of the thirties, my Uncle Stuart's home was an oasis of comfort, including central heating and breakfasts with shad roe, shrimp paste, and, sometimes, oysters. Uncle Stuart had been terribly poor as a boy; the family was so poor they saved every piece of string.

On the third floor of the Perry house lived Peter Gething, a retired major in the British Army who had fought at Gallipoli and who played Gregorian chants on a Victrola early in the morning. He was brilliant, superbly well versed in religion and somewhat mysterious—some people said he was "a remittance man." Around the corner on Lamboll Street lived "Uncle" Jerry Slocum, husband of my cousin Anita DeSaussure. He did an immense amount for me in life, helping me widen my horizons. Jerry was the son of General Slocum, for whom the fort is named, and had a large income from his mother's family, the family that endowed the Russell Sage Foundation. Jerry was a man of ex-

traordinarily wide interests. A playboy for much of his life, he turned to the study of religions. He was a director of the Fort Ticonderoga Museum in New York State and traveled to Santo Domingo to obtain eighteenth century cannon for the fort. In his last years in Charleston, he launched the Bears Bluff Marine Laboratory and hoped to establish a Swedish-style memorial forest on his Wadmalaw Island property. Across the street lived Cousin Hetty Walsh, born Hetty Barnwell. She was an extremely autocratic old lady, but she was very nice to me. She had been a maiden lady until mid-life, when she met a wealthy man from Albany, New York, and married him. My great aunt Martha said, "It was a good day when she met Walsh." Thereafter, life was very comfortable, a big house, numerous servants, summers at the Ausable Club in New York, and power over relatives who thought she might leave her money to them.

We lived in a world that wouldn't be understood today. The Perry's dined on old silver, but Mr. Perry would never think of polishing his doorbell or doing other work on the property. Indeed I was brought up to believe that gentlemen didn't carry parcels when walking in the street. One of my earliest memories was of visiting McPhersonville. Taking the train to nearby Yemassee, I was astonished and dismayed at the houses of the "crackers" with whitewashed tree trunks and yards that were hard clay and swept with a broom. A few years ago, I read that President Jimmy Carter's childhood home had such a yard, and I knew the setting immediately.

My mother, unlike her brothers, had no interest in politics. Nevertheless, she immensely admired Franklin Roosevelt, whom she deemed a "gentleman" and who was, in addition, a distant cousin through her mother's family, the Elliots. Ironically, President Teddy Roosevelt had ousted my grandfather, Marion Hutson, when he served for a time—by President Cleveland's appointment—as collector of the Port of Beaufort. These stories and memories shaped my consciousness through child-

hood and into my teenage years. The past impinged very heavily on the present and almost obscured it in many ways. Nevertheless, my teenage years were a glorious time for me, with a large family connection and many close friends. The 1940s—the years before, during and after World War II—are vivid in recollection. Charleston constituted a small universe, happy and comfortable. This was a marvelous, lazy time in which there was little thought of striving and only vague ambitions. Life, especially in the summers, was an idyll—beer parties at Craig Bennett's family summer house on Sullivan's Island; midnight swims at "Porgy," DuBose Heyward's old house on Folly Beach; sailing in the harbor on Arthur Jurvey's sea island scow "Undine"; the August Regatta at Rockville on Wadmalaw Island; a birthday party given by Bee and Elliott Hutson on a shrimp trawler. Never again would life be so easy, pleasant and free of care. In the winter came the debutante season and dances and balls at the Hibernian and the South Carolina Hall on Meeting Street and the post-dance parties at private homes, which lasted until early in the morning.

The tempo of life in Charleston a generation ago was infinitely slower than it is today. The town was virtually a village in that one knew who occupied almost every house "below Broad Street." Indeed one usually knew two or three generations of the families who owned the houses, and one was related by blood to many of the people who lived in them. It was inconceivable then to imagine an invasion of newcomers from elsewhere in the state and beyond its borders, though here and there a wealthy Northerner had purchased an old downtown house as a winter residence. Usually, these people had found a secure place in the life of Charleston. To be sure, there was some sensitivity on this score in that there were families who were known for "collecting rich Yankees," as the late Mrs. William Grimbball remarked one time. The Carolina Lowcountry had become very popular in the 1920s with wealthy Northerners, who bought old plantations as shooting places. Many of

them melded nicely with the old families and made contributions to the life of Charleston. There was no question of Charlestonians being dispossessed, as they have been, to a considerable degree in the 1970s and eighties, under waves of mass tourism and the arrival of newcomers on a different wavelength than the old inhabitants.

William Watts Ball, the editor of *The News and Courier*, wrote in his book *The State That Forgot* in the 1930s, that the postwar political order in South Carolina was the triumph of "Ohio democracy," but in truth, the older order didn't break down until the 1960s; but that is another time and another story. John Locke, the English philosopher, in preparing a constitution for the colony founded by the Lord Proprietors in 1670, had devised an instrument aimed at "preventing a too numerous democracy." His ideal, a peculiar one for America, prevailed until recent times. My uncle Herbert Ravenel Sass was one of the last in Charleston to articulate the old aristocratic, Southern conception. These ideas were set forth in an article he wrote for *The Saturday Evening Post* in the early 1950s, in an exchange or debate with the Western historian Bernard DeVoto. I believe that very candid and beautifully written exposition of the older Carolina ideals sealed my uncle's fate with the magazine for which he had written, usually on nature subjects, for decades. The American public didn't want to hear anything contrary to what Henry Adams once referred to as democratic dogma.

Uncle Hobo, as we called him, provided a marvelous corrective to the radicalized ideas that I had been fed in college in the North. I gained from him an appreciation of the old, agrarian America and a formal understanding of the aristocratic ideal of excellence. At that time I also began to spend hours reading in the Charleston Library Society with its rich historical collections and its superb British periodicals, such as *The 19th Century and After*. I was particularly struck by a brilliant essay in that journal on the theme of the peril in excessive toleration, a theme that would

never have been treated in an American publication of that day. I also discovered and began to read the works of W. R. Inge, the so-called "Gloomy Dean" of St. Paul's, one of the pioneer conservative thinkers of the early twentieth century. For the first time, I began to establish a frame of ideas for viewing the life of which I was a part and the values in which I had been schooled.

The world of ideology was alien to most of my contemporaries in Charleston in the 1940s. Indeed, Americans as a whole, in that era—except in the highly politicized Northeast and West Coast areas—were largely nonideological. Life was simpler in the United States. Moreover, the end of World War II brought to the country and region a new era of good feeling. Opportunities for a comfortable life were abundant, vastly so compared to the hard times of the 1930s. In Charleston, we had little understanding of the problems that lay ahead. Looking back on Charleston in this period (and Cyril Connolly, editor of *Horizon*, said at the time it was only one of three American cities worth a second look), I am reminded of the limits of imagination, especially in a time that didn't indulge in futurology, as we have come to do in the past twenty years. Time and again in history, societies have failed to anticipate drastic change. One thinks of those peaceful Gallo-Roman towns in the fifth century that went about their way in the classical mold of life with no recognition of the shocks that would take place when the barbarians moved in. The mold of life would be shattered forever. The Romanized city life would come to an end. The social order would collapse even as temples, amphitheatres and markets crumbled and disappeared under the soil.

All around us, old worlds are being swept away and new worlds are being created. This is the nature of life and history. In every generation, a web is woven, and in every generation the web of life is torn or broken. It's the dynamic of building up and tearing down, of life and death. The task of the social chronicler

and the historian is to put the events and the people who make them into perspective. The fragments of any period, in any place, are very scattered. We can't always be sure of what our elders or contemporaries thought; we are sometimes unsure that our own recollections are accurate. Nevertheless, we have an obligation to bridge the gap between eras, to fashion a portrait of life as it has been lived in different times and places. History is a composite of the life experiences we record. We need to try, therefore, to fill out the portrait in memory, presenting people as they were—vivid, laughing, angry, prejudiced, tormented, happy or however they happen to have been. People live in memory.

Charleston as it was deserves at least a footnote in the history of the United States, the colossal human, political and social drama written by the people of this continent. The American dream is largely a democratic dream, but that is not all there is to America. Other dreams and conceptions have a place in our national quest for identity. America has been a leveling society, and the striving for equality is as strong, indeed stronger today, than the search for liberty. My friend, Robert Lancaster, former dean of the University of the South, said that, "men have been so leveled that we honor few men as great. Scarcely can we recognize one in our midst." Charleston took another route. It preferred excellence to the commonplace. The social realism, which recognized the differences and inequalities between men, originated

in the harsh struggle of life in the seventeenth century settlement, in the effort to build rice fields along alligator-infested rivers. This struggle produced something very different from the typical American outlook, but it is American nonetheless.

From an English philosopher's model of government for the Earl of Shaftesbury's "darling," as he referred to the colony, to the summer fun of young Charlestonians in the 1940s is a transition from the sublime to the ridiculous. Nevertheless, the life experience of Charleston—the place and the people—is all of a piece within a frame of more than two hundred and fifty years. It is part of my family's America; it is part of my America. The remembrance of things past is a Proustian experience that has value for whoever summons the events of yesteryear to the surface of the mind, giving pleasure and a sense that time is with us, not extinguished or encased beyond rediscovery. Our nation is past, present and future—a chain of events, feelings, and beliefs. So it is with our lives as individuals and families. The past gives us perspective on our present and our future and enables us to go forward with a sense of the varieties and possibilities of life. Charleston, an important fragment of the American experience, may be only a physical shell today, albeit a handsome, elegant one, but recollection of its people and inner existence in other times sustains us as we pass through an age lacking in the style and outlook of what is summed up in the Greek word *aristoi*, the best.