

Memoirs of Julian Burroughs

Julian Burroughs, son of the naturalist John Burroughs, was the superintendent of the Payne estate from 1913 through early 1918.

Chapter X

In 1909 a New York man, Col. Oliver Hazard Payne, bought an estate near us and began to build a big mansion. He had a fine three hundred and fifty foot steam yacht, the old style of a millionaire's boat: white hull, clipper bow, three masts, and a big buff stack. The place he bought had almost a mile of riverfront so he could come up the Hudson from New York and anchor out in front of his new home. The first time they came up here the crew felt they were surely up in the woods so they were surprised when the anchor chain kept running out almost as though there was no bottom.

Of course, I had to look her over, the beautiful Aphrodite, so I rowed about her in my duck boat and narrowly missed an accident. I was keeping well off so I could look up at her rail and superstructure and just missed the little boat they had out on the end of a boom. It was so close!



Most of the local people got work on the place or construction and it became known as "the big job." Henry Ackert, who used to fish with me, was a night watchman but often would not show up so his father had to stay on for him. Well, we were having a most unusual period of iceboating and Henry, of course, had built a small boat and was having the time of his life with it, so he wasn't always at his work as night watchman. His father, the patient, hard-working Gill, would take his place, after working all day at his own job.

The iceboating that had been so thrilling and such a feature of this part of the Hudson was on its way out. The wealthy people across the river, the Roosevelts and Rogers and others, had gorgeous iceboats, shining butternut or basswood frames and snowy white sails. There was a story that Rogers was paying a native three dollars a day to search the woods for a big sound butternut for the backbone, running plane, for an iceboat. Many young fellows and even boys built a small one. I compromised by making a skate sail and even with this I was often swept off my feet and slammed down on the ice.

It was at this time that an event occurred that was to make a great difference in our lives. Glenn Buck of Chicago introduced Father to Henry Ford and Mr. Ford gave Father a car, a real live Model T which Father and I set about to learn to run.

One winter morning in 1913 when I opened my mail I found a letter from Miss Larson, who ran Col. Payne's establishment, there being no Mrs. Payne, and she asked me if I would become the superintendent for their place here at West Park. That was such a surprise that it almost gave me a shock. Since the girl we had helping us was a native related to people who worked at Col. Payne's, the story soon got around and it gave the people here almost as much of a shock as it had me. Many men were trying for that job and it was a

bitter disappointment to them. The natives were stunned. They suddenly saw me in a different light.

The Colonel had been treasurer of the old Standard Oil and father of American Tobacco and no one knew, except his lawyers, how much money, how many millions, he really had. There was a rumor, that for quite a good many reasons I believe is more or less true, that he turned over to his heirs a part of his wealth to avoid inheritance taxes.

So I was asked to call on the Colonel at his home on Fifth Avenue in New York so he could look me over. I realized I was green and inexperienced, yet I passed. I remember it all so well: the English butler, whom I already knew, came to the door and took me in to the library where the Colonel was reading his morning paper. A slightly built gentleman, an aristocrat of the blue blood with the domed head of a financier and an eye that looked right through you. The Colonel's mother was a Belmont and he was not only a son of Senator Payne of Ohio but he was a direct descendent of Admiral Perry of the battle of Lake Erie fame. He came to the door with me and was the perfect gentleman, gracious and courteous.

Next I had to be installed at the beautiful, wonderful estate here and we moved up to the superintendent's house, once the home of Col. Pratt. Of course, everyone hated me, that is, those who were at the heads of departments and who had made their own plans: the gardener and florist, the chief engineer, the dairyman, and so on. I resolved that I'd carry on smoothly and never fire anyone for any personal reason. As Miss Larson told a friend, and it got back to me, I had everybody against me.

One of the dangers in such a situation is that there are those who in turn hate the foreman or heads of departments and would run to me with any story that they could get me to listen to and I was far too prone to listen. I often think that though at Col. Payne's we had about as near an earthly paradise as it is possible to get there was no end to jealousies and hatreds and general meanness.

The Colonel, through Miss Larson, was like a father to us all. We had everything from free milk, chickens, eggs, vegetables, telephone, much use of the car and so on to always a generous Christmas present; so no wonder there were many who wanted my job.

The Colonel was here in the summer with a household of servants. In the fall, part of them went to the Fifth Avenue house and later, toward Christmas, on down to Col. Payne's house at Thomasville, Georgia, returning to New York in the spring and later up here. Miss Larson had charge of everything and everyone, and a strict, yet kindhearted and generous disciplinarian she was. Before going south the Colonel would give me sixty or seventy thousand dollars to run the place while they were away and one winter I know I ran short and had to write for more.

All my life I have been associated with artists, architects, writers and so on and I find that they are mostly a jealous, selfish crowd. That is, rather more so than the average run of humanity. I remember that some one told Father, when he criticized W. J. Long for his nature faking, that Long said, "Oh he's just jealous of me." I know that when I began to design and construct these

handsome if not beautiful stone buildings for the Colonel I ran into plenty of jealousies.

When I completed the plans for the big stone barn the Colonel wanted, I was asked to show them to the architect, Mr. Hastings, who had done his work. So I rather proudly went to New York with them only to find that Mr. Hastings was not only not at all interested but he didn't care to see them. He only said that the Colonel would never think of having anyone else do any building for him.

As for that, the house Hastings built around an inner court was a snow trap. Some winters the snow would pile up in this inner court ten feet deep. And the French limestone he imported for it found our climate too severe; it began to slack and shell. I was told that was due to the carelessness of the builders. They let these stone lie around on the ground in the freezing rains. All of which I can readily believe. When I first went there the limestone about the cellar windows was all crumbling so we cut out replacements of our native stone which are good to this day.

I surely was both busy and happy, I loved to build, to design and put up beautiful stone buildings and now I could do it without any thought about the cost. I would go in the library to see the Colonel and he would ask me how much money I needed. Often I'd say fifteen thousand and he would write me a check for twenty. I deposited this in the Fallkill Bank in Poughkeepsie and would check against it and afterward when they were settling up the Colonel's estate they had me up before the lawyers to find out how much we had spent there. For inheritance tax purposes, I felt sure.

Years afterwards, after this dream world was finished, friends of Father tried to get me a job with a New York builder and he, of course, would have none of me; of a builder who never estimated or even considered the cost! The first buildings I put up were for a poultry plant, all built of our native stone that we quarried ourselves, then lined with hollow tile and roofed with the best Vermont slate. A plumber that put in the plumbing declared, "There can't be no better construction than this!" The Colonel approved all plans, of course, before we began work.

The dock and boathouse of the estate were small and not in keeping with either the beautiful Aphrodite or the other buildings that Mr. Hastings of Carrère and Hastings of New York had designed for the Colonel so it followed that he wanted me to build a boathouse and dock that would be in keeping. Captain Scott drew a plan of what he wanted and I was told to be down on the dock with both Captain Scott and the plans to meet the Colonel there and go over the situation but when I went down to tell Captain Scott I found he had gone to New York. However, we managed without the plans and the next morning Miss Larson found them in the Colonel's desk.

For our construction work we had four quarries, derricks, a stone crusher and so on. I'll never forget the day the air compressor began to work in the big quarry -- the sound of the air drills that was like a chain running out a hawser pipe. We had three types of stone: a bloc sandstone that stood up on edge in layers or "lifts", a stone that would split one way but not across; a rock that we used for the stone crusher; and over the mountain a very hard green grey stone that would split in any direction when it was drilled and then

had plugs and feathers driven in. And, of course, four or five blacksmiths to make and sharpen stone cutting tools.

The greatest joy of all the building was not only the work over the drawing board but in seeing the work in the quarries and the actual construction. Twice, at least, while watching the construction, I came so near to being killed that it wasn't funny. Once a derrick, on the dock, with its cables and boom, crashed down on me. I know I had my hand in my pocket and after I had jumped, I found my keys and money scattered about. The cause of that was that the boom with its load swinging in, at a certain point, raised the strut right off the spider on top of the mast. The derrick stood on the edge of the dock so it could have only guy cables on the shore side.

The other occasion of my nearly being killed was an experience that I feel few people have ever had, and it is so unusual that I can feel it yet. We needed rubbish stone for fill down at the dock and I saw I could get it at the face of an abandoned quarry so I had my foreman put in a line of holes and shoot off the face of slate and rubbish stone for the teams to haul. I took a bar and went prying at this hanging stone when suddenly there was a sound, a sort of lisp, and I jumped backward.

The feeling of liquid stone, slate stone breaking like a wave, rolling over and over and spewing outward is a sensation that is unforgettable. It only tapped me on one ankle but I was on crutches for days - the weight and power of that tumbling stone! Sometimes the big little word "if" is on your side if I hadn't heard that lisp and if I hadn't been so quick that stone would have literally made hash of me.

It had been a custom for the Colonel to take all the people on the place for a day's picnic on the Aphrodite. We would go off down the river and there were sandwiches and drinks for everyone, a privilege that I'm sorry to say, was outrageously abused, so much so that some of the Italian quarry men drank so much beer that they got sick and tracked up the fine rugs and carpets. After that there were no more outings for the workmen and this is a fact that is so often true, privileges are abused. The yacht and her finishings meant nothing to them nor did the sail down the river. All they saw or appreciated was free beer and that they liked too well. I remember one day that Miss Larson took a few of us in the Aphrodite down to West Point where the yacht swung about and dropped her anchor, her three hundred and fifty feet of snowy sides,

Chapter XI

"As superintendent I had a chauffeur we called Pete, a short, jolly Swede who liked to fish so, of course, we went fishing. Father got invited over to Mr. Roof's place on the West branch of the Neversink to trout fish and Pete drove us there in the Packard. To Pete's delight, Mr. Roof wrote out permits for all three of us. We waded in the beautiful stream where it flows south from Slide Mountain and almost every cast we got a rise. Pete soon caught his limit so when we got back he took his trout over to the Big House for the Colonel's dinner. There were guests and the butler had told them they were to have real speckled trout, fresh out of one of the most beautiful streams in the Catskills, but the cook, of course, considered that anything the chauffeur brought was not fit for the Colonel and his guests and served his trout to the servants.

I was learning to drive the Packard, my first attempt at handling a gear shift car. One Sunday afternoon I took my family and a friend up the road in the car and going up a slight grade the engine suddenly stopped. We were directly in front of a summer boarding house so the guests all came out to see the fun for those were the "get a horse" days. One of them said there was a blacksmith just down the road. Well, I knew the sort of blacksmith I wanted and I got to a telephone and called Pete. As the "city boarders", as the natives called them, stood about making derisive comments a Pierce Arrow limousine with a chauffeur in livery pulled up in front of me. And how the expression of the city boarders did change!

We were in the War and there were many shortages to deal with. The Colonel was sick as was Mother and there was a feeling of worry and uncertainty. Colonel Payne loaned the Aphrodite to the Navy and she served as a scout ship in foreign seas. Some of the Englishmen left to go and enlist in the English Army.

But as anxious and troubled as were the times we had some fun too. We would go up in the mountains for a picnic and fish in Cooper's Lake. Sometimes we went to the stream only a short walk away. The streams that flow into the Hudson along this section of the river all run north and then turn and fall rapidly to join the river. Our stream here, Black Creek, does that; after coming out of ponds and swamps it plunges down over ledges of rock and then flows over gravel reaches. This is an ideal place for fish to come up out of the river and even from the ocean to spawn: alewives, or herring, flashing silver as they swim so swiftly in the brown water, both white and yellow perch and also the big river suckers.

Our last trip out was a trip up to a lake in the Adirondacks where we caught trout and Pete got a big lake trout. When we got back that night we learned that Col. Payne had died in New York. Though his death had been expected we still were not really prepared and we did not realize what changes it was to make in our lives.

Captain Bingham, the Colonel's nephew who inherited the place here, was in service and ordered a shutdown as far as possible on our work. The big stone barn I had designed and was building was to be finished, however, but not by me. A New York architect and his firm of builders were to do the work instead and so I was called over to meet Mrs. Bingham's architect and to hand over my plans to him. The man who came to take over was one of those loud-mouthed bullies who said he'd put the fear of God in them so most of my workmen, the good masons and stone cutters, all quit. We were in the thick of the first World War then and good men were hard to get so instead of the barn being finished at once, the work dragged on and on.

It is almost a universal truth that women love to change their surroundings but men do not. Young Mrs. Bingham wanted to change everything: she even wanted to change the entrance driveway to the Big House, to move those century old Norway spruce that lined it and the cobblestone gutters on each side. And change my plans for the big stone barn. I had always liked a Latin phrase, "Horae pereunt et puniunt" so I had a fine slab of stone, about four by five feet, cut by our most expert stone caller with this phrase and set in the front wall of the barn and she ordered it ripped out and broken up. But the workmen had too much respect for that beautiful stone cutting by Harry Sheeley, who had cut it, so they put it out of sight and I

asked Capt. Bingham if I could have it. I'm glad to say he was man enough to give it to me and I set it into the front wall of a stone building I was putting up for myself at Riverby.

That is something I've always had, regard or care for the work of others; I respect what someone else has toiled to create. I find that many people not only do not but they even enjoy destroying what others have made as a young woman I knew expressed it -- "I like to throw things away, I enjoy wasting things." Anyway I do not. In this I had a fellow traveler in Col. Payne; he abhorred waste.

After a long illness my mother had died about the time the Colonel was taken so Riverby was standing vacant and we moved back into it. The local tax assessors refused to lower Capt. Bingham's tax on the place here so he just gave it to the Episcopal City Mission Society of New York and then they saw it taken entirely off the tax list. The Mission later sold part of the place to a religious order that made changes in the Big house. I had occasion to go in there one day and I saw the oil paintings in the loggia of the inner court had all been painted over. The artist who had painted them died and how well I remember his widow coming here to see his truly beautiful work. I felt so sorry it had all been destroyed.

The stone dock and boathouse I designed I often pass as I go up or down the river. The iron gate, the design of a peacock standing on a post, that the Colonel liked, was not raised in the fall when the ice began to run, and I think the ice damaged it. Some of the cut stone was rolled overboard by the boys of the Mission, but the bollards or dock snubbing spiles that I made are there yet and always remind me of those busy, happy days "at the Colonel's."

Emily wanted the children to have a month at the beach and since the house at East Hampton had been sold, she rented a cottage at Ocean Bluff near her family's - not on Long Island now but about thirty miles south of Boston. I drove up to Roxbury with Jack, my dog, and got Father and we spent two days driving over to the coast. In Cambridge we saw William Brewster on Brattle Street and by chance Dr. Edward Emerson.

At Ocean Bluff we had carefree days loafing on the beach, swimming, and fishing off Brant Rock. Father found the water too cold for swimming but waded and collected the colorful granite pebbles he found in the water. We did some sightseeing since I had the car and I remember that one day we went to Plymouth and another day to Marshfield where we found the grave of Daniel Webster.

That September Emily rented a house in Kingston so Betty, who was going to high school there, would no longer have to board and Ursula and John could go to a city school too. I told her that she would have to pay the rent if she moved to Kingston. "I have one house and I am not going to pay for another." So she paid for it by having two boarders and she kept the house for the next four years.

I wanted to do War work so I got a job at the Mingo hollow ammunition plant in the shipping department which sent out enough TNT in one shipment to wipe the city of Kingston off the map. When the War ended I took up the vineyard work again, but there was no need to try to sell the grapes because I've managed to get off that lee shore financially through thrift and

management with the cooperation of Emily and my family and with what. Col. Payne left us in his Will and with Father's help and lucky investments. The principle is that once you are able to buy some stock you can use the dividends to buy more stock and soon you no longer hear the surf pounding on that lee shore.

Back at Riverby and living in the stone house it surely was a different life. At the Colonel's two big Diesel engines had supplied the place with electricity and I remember we had twenty-six lights just in our dining room alone and now in West Park there was no electricity except for the two or three people that made their own. But all that was to come.

We were in a period of great change. Taxes and wages were going up and we had Prohibition. It has always amused me to think how childlike Father was about it. He thought the question of Temperance was settled for ever! He had belonged to the Anti-Saloon League and he was both surprised and annoyed that they should want him to continue his contribution even after Demon Rum was abolished.

So I began to learn to make wine and turn the grapes into something to drink and supply my friends. I suppose I should be ashamed of this but I'm sorry to say I am not: it was the first time in my life that I had something to sell for which I not only got cash but got my price in full. And this was not the least of it. The best part was you met such grand people! I remember the treasurer of the Texas Corporation was one of my customers and Gladys Swarthout, the Met. contralto, was another, and one of the top-ranking New York surgeons another.

Father asked Mr. Ford if he had something that I could do and Mr. Ford said, "Why, yes, he can sell Fordson tractors," but it was really a foolish thing to say, because this is not tractor country with its stony pastures and upland hillsides and all that. But I tried to sell them. The rule was to have a dealership you had to buy a tractor. So I got my tractor and I tried, but, of course, I never sold a single one.



Well, I used the tractor for hauling and did away with the horse and was able to get along that way. Then I gave up the tractor and used the truck for all the hauling I had to do. Doing that for some years I completely forgot that these tractors would turn over if they weren't adjusted and hooked just so.

One morning I hooked the tractor on the truck to haul it in to do some work on it. I hooked it all around. I did everything but I was out of practice. I was off my guard. So I started and it all happened so quickly. I looked up and with my eye I saw the tractor, a mass of steel, over my head just ready to fall down on me. I realized that life was done for me.

Well, it wasn't. A miracle happened, and when the tractor came down it struck on the fender of the truck and it didn't hit me. The truck bucked and hurtled and I was able to crawl out from under. But it came very, very close. I remember running and telling Ursula, "Ursula, I'm still alive. I'm alive. I'm

alive." For I really didn't expect to be alive. I thought surely I'd be killed. So, I tell you, I pulled the whiskers of death that day.

References:

Julian Burroughs, *Hudson River Memories*, Riverby Books, 1887. (edited by Elizabeth Burroughs Kelley) (available in Port Ewen public library) Chapter X, pp 87 - 93; Chapter XI pp 95 - 99.

Editor's note: (5 Nov 2004) Julian wrote: "The Colonel's mother was a Belmont and he was not only a son of Senator Payne of Ohio but he was a direct descendent of Admiral Perry of the battle of Lake Eric fame. " In fact Payne's mother was a Perry, and Payne was a relative or both Oliver Hazard Perry of Lake Erie fame and Commodore Mathew Perry who opened Japan to Western commerce.

Editors note: (7 Dec 2004) "Horae pereunt et puniunt" translates to "the hours pass and they punish".

most recent revision: 7 December 2004

return to [top of page](#) [documents list](#) [home page](#)