

Almost family: Recalling life for the staff at the Scoville mansion

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By Alexander Wilburn



Suzanne Paddock, Otto Rapp, Ollie Firuski and Tony or Tommy Scoville at a late 1940s Christmas party.

Photo courtesy Richard Paddock

SALISBURY, Conn. — Salisbury resident and Northwest Corner historian Richard Paddock recalls his grandfather's lifelong service to the prominent Scoville family as a kind of accident.

"It was a twist of fate," Paddock said in an interview last week. The occasion for our conversation was the recent listing of the house for sale; when the sale is completed, it will be the first time the estate has left the hands of Scoville family members.

Charles Paddock was in his mid 30s at the start of the summer of 1918, when he was working as a chauffeur for John Ames Mitchell.

Mitchell, a Harvard graduate who studied architecture at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, was the founder of the original incarnation of Life magazine, with Arthur Miller, as a highbrow humor publication that mocked the manners of the time.

Life would later shift to hard news and photojournalism under the ownership of Henry Luce in 1936.

Mitchell was preparing to spend the summer in France, and Charles, prone to sickness while overseas, decided to stay stateside for the season until Mitchell's return. A letter of introduction was written for Charles, and he found seasonal employment as a chauffeur to Herbert Scoville, commuting from their brownstone in Manhattan to Hill House, in the Taconic section of Salisbury, near the Twin Lakes.

Charles, however, would never return to his position with Mitchell.

Ironically, though it had been Charles who wanted to avoid sickness, it was John Ames Mitchell who suffered a stroke that June and died while at his summer home in Ridgefield, Conn., roughly 60 miles from where Charles Paddock was working for the Scovilles.

After that, “Herbert Scoville kept [Charles] on as a full-time chauffeur,” Paddock recalled.

At the time, Paddock said, his grandfather was “a widower with a son: my father. The rest of his family had all been lost to the flu epidemic.”

Charles would go on to marry Suzanne Magnussen, a caretaker for the Scoville children who later rose to become the estate’s cook. In 1923, however, the happy home where they worked was destroyed.

“The cause of the fire was never established,” Paddock said of the disaster that leveled Hill House in a single night. “There were people in the house at the time, but they escaped. They ran down to the road to sound the alarm, even though there was a car available.”

Joseph D. Leland who, like John Ames Mitchell, studied at both Harvard and the École des Beaux-Arts, was hired to design a new, Norman-inspired Hill House.

The Scovilles had a new summer home when the house was completed in 1927, and Charles and Suzanne had fully settled into Taconic by the time of the birth of their daughter.

Family was important to the Scovilles — not just their own, but also the families of their staff.

“All of the children [of the staff] on the estate got scholarships to school from the Scovilles,” said Paddock. “That was typical of the Scovilles, they were very good to the staff. If something happened to one of the kids, a health emergency, the Scovilles were right there. My grandfather had a house, his utilities were paid, he was given meals and a salary. It’s not a lifestyle you see too often anymore.”

Charles would live on the Hill House estate until his death in 1955.

“Hill House was not the vision you typically have of a Gilded Age family and staff,” Paddock continued. “If you go up to Newport [Rhode Island] you might hear a much different story, like that they made the guys who shoveled coal wear white shirts. Or that the staff was kept on the third floor of the house, with no windows.

“The Gilded Age house ethic was that none of the grubby part of the operation of the house should be visible; everything came and went through tunnels. The staff shouldn’t be seen, they had their own stairways — and worked long hours for low pay.

“You get a bad picture of what it was like to be on the staff at one of these mansions, but you have to forget all that when you think of the Scovilles. That was not how they ran Hill House. The figure behind all that was [Herbert’s wife] Orlena Scoville.

“She hosted an annual Christmas party, there were sledding parties, there were fireworks shot up near the pond on the Fourth of July. In some respects that house was a community center. It wasn’t open to the public, but if you lived in Taconic you were welcome, you didn’t have to be staff; but of course a lot of the nearby residents were staff.

“In many respects the house leaving the family marks the end of an era.”

The Scovilles’ generous spirit extends to the present day, Paddock said, with Molly Scoville Fitzmaurice, who is Herbert and Orlena’s granddaughter, sending Christmas cards and gifts to Paddock’s two aunts (Charles and Suzanne’s daughters) until the end of their lives. Of Hill House’s staff, Paddock said, “They were servants, but they weren’t treated like servants. They may not have been family, but they were almost family.”