

A Special Conversation With Mrs. Bonner.

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Editor's Note: Bill is spending time with family today. We expect him back tomorrow. Below, we share an essay from Thanksgiving 2015 where Bill recounts a special conversation with his mother.

BALTIMORE – Markets have been calm over the Thanksgiving holiday.

Americans – distracted by friends and family – had better things to do than panic.

We celebrated at our family farm in Maryland. In addition to Thanksgiving, we attended a family reunion and a grandchild christening.

The three family events focused our attention on family history and how the culture of Southern Maryland has evolved over 50 years.

Whether this has any parallels in other parts of the country – or whether this has any significance – we don't know.

But we'll tell you what happened anyway...

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Those Were the Days

At the family reunion, we each brought our old photos and tried to identify the people in them. Many were almost 100 years old.

The grainy, brownish photos showed people in romantic poses – at a windblown, empty beach... a couple in front of Model T Fords in Bonnie-and-Clyde- outfits.

One showed an uncle out in Wyoming in 1928 in a cowboy outfit. Another showed a family on the lawn – five blond children with a father wearing a bowtie and a mother in a long, frilly dress. No smiles. There were workhorses. And tractors. Barnyard.

"That's Uncle Edward..." said a cousin.

"No, that's Uncle Hal..." said another.

"I can't tell... It looks like a woman... Isn't that Aunt Ellen?"

"Let's ask Anne."

Anne is your editor's mother. At 94, she is the oldest member of the family. We count on her to remember.

“Let’s see,” she said, studying the old photos. “That’s definitely Uncle Hal. But I don’t know who that is on the left.”

If she didn’t know, no one would. The poor man was lost. Gone from family history, erased by time and indifference. We was not from our family at all and that his family remembered him at its family reunions.

“But look at Frank,” mother continued. “He was such a handsome man.”

They all looked handsome. In the 1950s, these were people we knew only as old people. But here, on film, they had been captured 20 or 30 years before we were born. They were good-looking. Young. Full of life.

“Life is full of so many surprises,” the matriarch went on. “You just never know how things will work out. I’m surprised I’m

“Some of these people we’re looking at had such wonderful lives. Others – many of those who seemed to have every advantage – lived in ways that were very sad.

“You can’t predict it. I mean, I feel so lucky in so many ways. And I don’t understand why I should have so many good things happen to me...

“These people were all my friends and relatives. They were all so much smarter than I was. And so much more at ease in the world. I was always very timid, shy... painfully shy. But they were so nice. They always tried to include me.

“Those were the days!”

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A Different Rhythm

The Chesapeake Bay area was a farming area then. You were either a farmer or a waterman. There wasn’t much else.

And so the rhythm of life had only two main tempos: farming, which almost always meant tobacco, or the bay, which was oysters.

There were no suburbs. No office workers. No marketers. No baristas. No app developers. And no strangers.

“Everyone knew everyone else,” mother went on. “And if you didn’t know the person personally, you ‘knew of’ the person. You knew what family they were from or what church they went to... and whether they were a tobacco person or an oyster person. There just wasn’t much more to know.

“But it was so much fun. In the summer, we’d drive down to Fairhaven [a little community on the bay]. We’d go swimming. The beach was clean... or at least we thought it was. And there was no one at the beach there.

“Jules [Mother’s brother] drove down in my father’s Packard. It was a convertible. It was such a pleasure to drive down the road to that beautiful beach. We’d spend the whole day there. And then we’d go to Aunt Lillian’s or Aunt Ellen’s or Aunt Mary for dinner.

“There were always tomatoes and corn on the cob directly from the garden. And somehow, they found time to bake a cake from scratch. It was full of butter that they got from their own cows.

“Or if it was the winter, we’d go ice skating on the West River. We’d go down to Ivy Neck and make a fire on the shore.

hockey on the ice until the moon was out. And if the moon was bright enough, we'd just keep playing until we were worn

"Now, the bay doesn't freeze the way it used to. You have to remember – this was before the war. We had no idea what was going on in the rest of the world. And we didn't care. We only cared about our world. Our world was safe. And we were all happy

"It was very different then. It must be hard for you to imagine it. Today, everyone is so worried about what happens on the other side of the world. And everyone is so worried about money.

"I don't know why... but we didn't have much money, and we didn't worry about it, either.

"I was a few years younger than everyone else. And they're all gone now. I mean, I'm happy to be alive... and to still be part of my family. But sometimes, I miss them all so much that I can barely stand it.

"You see, I loved them... as I love you. And I want to see them again. All of them. I knew them. They knew me. We were family. We were family.

"Now, everyone lives in the suburbs... and everyone is a stranger."

Regards,

Bill