

SOCIAL LIFE AT TURN OF THE CENTURY

BY

Mrs. Charlotte "Lotte" Larrenaga

1976

Mrs. Larrenaga identified herself to the group as "Lotte" and stated that she is known by that name in Key West.

Lotte said she is 89-3/4 years old. This story was told by her to Maggie Kivel in her home. Maggie explained that Lotte was ready to tell her story sitting there with her beautiful blue eyes, a blue dress, and white silky hair, with a very trim figure.

Lotte's home is over 100 years' old; it once belonged to the Coachman family and her father acquired it before she was born. (Lotte was born in this home.) Her father came from Huntington, Long Island. He was in the soda water business in New York City--it was a forerunner of Coca Cola. Because of his suffering from rheumatism, he decided to move South. He had been in the Union Army and decided on settling in Key West because it was the only city south of the Mason-Dixon line that flew the Union Flag. Lotte's maiden name was Sweeney; she assumes her ancestors came from Canada because our Bible was given by my great grandfather, Alexander Peacock, to my grandmother, Charlotte Sweeney. Her father came to Key West in 1874; he came with a friend, John Ryan; he was married but he left his wife and his 14 year-old daughter, Minnie, with his mother. After he was settled which was in November, he sent for his wife and daughter in the January following. In June, of that same year, he buried his daughter. She had succumbed to yellow fever. The mother was crushed; she lived here for six years until she died. Then, he married my mother some years later.

My mother's name was Mary Enzio Rieke; she was born in Germany. Her father came to the United States to see if he'd like living here. He decided to settle at that time in Milwaukee so he went back to Germany to get his daughter, and wife. They came back to the United States by way of Cuba and landed in Key West. Before leaving Germany, my grandfather was told that he could not leave the country until he had served two years in the army or navy. He chose the Navy and he was aboard a ship carrying supplies to ~~Sebastopol~~ when Napoleon ~~stormed~~ stormed it; after his term in the Navy, he, his wife, and their 3-year old, my mother, came to this country, and by some misfortune landed in Key West. My grandfather got a government job here--on a government boat (cutter) and while he was away, he left my grandmother and my mother at a German boarding house. My grandmother contracted yellow fever and was buried when my father returned. They could never locate the grave because it was a mass burial; there were so many victims.

My mother was put at the Convent; she spoke German and the sisters spoke French. When my grandfather's ship finally returned, she was talking French instead of German. When he went back to the boarding house, my father discovered that towels were hanging on various towel racks which had been taken out of my grandmother's "love chest." So, that was their entrance to this country and to Key West.

My mother stayed at the Convent until she was old enough to want to get out; so my grandfather looked amongst the people and asked around for someone to take care of her if he'd pay her room and board. He finally found a place, but

("Lotte" Larranaga - cont'd).

instead of treating her like a paid border, they put her to work. How my father met her, I'm not sure, but she was 17 when they were married; he was 30 years older than she was.

My father started in business here down at what we call the Cosgrove home, presently occupied by Gamble, the jeweler. That's a very deep lot (on Whitehead St.) so he started in the back yard in the soda water business (same as he had in N. Y.) but he quickly outgrew this space so he had to look around for another location. He made his own syrup; everything was pure. The vanilla was from the ~~beans~~, the ~~beans~~ bean; the lemon was "out of this world". He did his own bottling. He bought this property--he excavated the rear of this property going down 18 ft. and built the first elevator in Key West. This was in his factory. He had a horse and buggy for my mother to drive around town in; she had black servants to drive her, of course.

I met my husband like most people -- in a crowd; we had two children, a girl and a boy. I now have ten grandchildren and a goodly number of great grandchildren. My husband was in the cigar business. I went to New York to live for awhile--was there ten years.....lived just off Perry Avenue. Why I went to New York, I paid my first visit to New York when I was ten years old; I went alone in the charge of an elderly gentleman who was one of my mother's bondsmen. Friends met me there and showed me all the wonderful things. Then my mother used to take us there off and on and I grew to love New York. I still like it. It's been two years now since I've been there. Up until that time, I'd fly up twice a year. My reason for returning to Key West after living in New York for 10 years was due to my mother's age--she was 80 years' old and needed me to take care of her. So, I stayed on here after my children were grown and married, but went back there to every wedding, every celebration, everything that happened.

My house is really not taken care of well any more, but I did clean it this morning as best I could whereas I was expecting a celebrated lady to come and visit me this afternoon (meaning Maggie Kivel). This house is over 100 yrs. old. It was made over to have a couple of bedrooms downstairs but this area we're in plus the bedrooms used to be all livingroom. Have three bedrooms upstairs so I can take care of quite of few people.

It makes me heartsick though; this is a beautiful old home and I'm afraid that it won't be appreciated after I'm gone. My children haven't been here for such a long time and have their interests elsewhere.

Added by Maggie Kivel after interview: Maggie felt that something further should be added with regard to Lotte's dining room. It was a beautiful big square room opening to a lovely patio in the rear where the bands would play in earlier years when they had dances. The room had been painted years ago and in each corner were the signs of the year depicted by various flowers, shrubs, and whatnot painted into ovals, almost like a church sacristy. In the ceiling, there is a huge oval in the center depicting all of our fruits--the mangos, the bananas, the cocoanuts, the papayas and everything else. Now the walls seemed almost a walnut brown and coming down from the walls was a ~~light green~~ paint cascading a light pink paint--looking like flowers or a trellis ~~lattice~~, with trees, fruits, and flowers, - a very gay effect. This was done prior to 1905 and still has a rather leathery touch to it. After coming out of her very modern living room and opening the doors into her dining room, it was a feeling of entering another era.

\*painted lattice, x with painted vines and clusters of red flowers.

(Lotte" Larrenaga - cont'd)

Mrs. Mary Malone (talking with Maggie Kivel) added that she has been told that Mrs. Larrenaga--89-3/4 years old--mounts a ladder twice a year and washes those walls, with ivory soap suds.

These two ladies, Mrs. Malone and Mrs. Kivel stated amazement with the contained activity and appearance of this beautiful lady, "Lotte" Larrenaga. She remains alert, ambitious, and charming--but stated she did not like to tell her story on tape.

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