

BEFORE THERE WAS AN OLDFIELD

Long, long ago and not so far away, the water was colder and deeper along our coastal Carolina shores but, between 2000 BC and AD 20, sea levels had risen to within feet of their present depths and the extensive estuary system was in place. Early Woodland settlers lived along the shores and left behind numerous shells rings and bits of man-made pottery. There followed thousands of years of Native American habitation, then hundreds of years of European explorers, exploiters and settlement. Milestones were the Royal Proprietors, colonial governors, the Revolutionary War, the supremacy of Sea Island cotton, slave labor and ultimately the Civil War which brought the whole convoluted political, social and economic pyramid tumbling down. What happened next might easily be compared to descending into the Dark Ages of medieval Europe. **The Beaufort Times** opined that, after the Civil War “many of the large plantations became white elephants to their owners. Farmers began to abandon these once fertile lands and to seek employment elsewhere and the places grew up in thick woods.” Without its profitable plantation system, land reverted to smaller, less profitable farms, Beaufort County lost its luster, people became more isolated, economic opportunity dried up and the population stagnated.

It's not surprising that we residents of Oldfield in Okatie, South Carolina don't embrace and celebrate a local history. Our story is confused by centuries of title, name and boundary changes, wars, social upheaval and loss of historic records. I find myself writing this narrative to try to make sense of our splintered and sleepy past. Perhaps, the story will come easier with the telling of some more recent stories about people and events.

Beaufort County was sluggishly emerging from its post-Civil war dormancy as it approached the 20th century. The trend in land ownership was consolidation of previously sizable individual plantations into even larger tracts, held by corporations, developers and wealthy non-Southern capitalists.¹ The land was used for timber harvesting, naval stores production (turpentine and rosin), as livestock rangelands for cattle and swine and as hunting preserves. Former rice fields lent themselves to duck and quail hunting while deer, turkey and feral hogs thrived in the marsh and woodlands. Two examples of hunting preserves that are still intact today are right next door, in Ridgeland: the privately owned 6,000-acre Chelsea Plantation² and the member-owned, 50,000-acre Okeetee Hunt Club.³

From outward appearances, time was at a stand-still in Beaufort County well into the 20th century. World War I, the Great Depression (the area was already depressed) and World War II did not alter the culture of the area. The future-Oldfield land reappears in county records after World War II in a 1950 land deed, documenting that John and Sara Helmken of Savannah bought 550 acres where Oldfield stands today. Another clue of habitation, comes from a Helmken family friend, Charlie Golson who remembers that the Helmkins had an “inconsequential summer house” down by the water that he, Charlie, used to visit. I wonder about that house.

ADDITIONALLY

¹ One northern landowner observed in 1939 that on his newly-purchased 19,000-acre timberland tract, “there was absolutely nothing on the place but the one log cabin where we'd lunched and a leaning, abandoned barn. We were told that before the Civil War, the sandhills, swampland and flatwoods areas that made up the place had been several different plantations where rice and cotton had been grown. But there is no longer anything to show where any residence had stood.” Such a no-man's land was our corner of Beaufort County.

² **Chelsea Plantation** was established in the early 1800's. It was a working plantation in the beginning; in the late 19th century it became the private Chelsea Hunting Club. After the original house burned in 1936 Marshall Field, III (heir to the Chicago department store fortune) purchased the 5,892-acre property from the Chelsea Hunting Club for his family. They built the present house in 1937 (below). In 2016 the Plantation was on the market for \$32,775,000 but the listing has been withdrawn.



³ The **Okeetee Club's** 50,000 acres are primarily dedicated to quail hunting, timbering and preservation. Founded in 1894, the membership hovers around 20.

Another player in our story is industrialist Herbert Lee Pratt of Brooklyn, New York. He made his fortune at Standard Oil and started buying abandoned plantations in and around Ridgeland, South Carolina during the 1920s, for hunting and commercial timbering. After Herbert Pratt's death, his son's widow, Pauline Pratt continued to expand the family land holdings in the area with the 1967 purchase of the Helmken's 550-acre tract which she called Indigo Plantation.⁴

The next owners were recently married Colonel Edmund Griffin of nearby Cotton Hall Plantation and Robin Carrier Griffin from Kentucky horse country. Looking for land on which to develop their own plantation, they purchased Mrs. Pratt's 550-acres on the Okatie River in 1971. The Griffin's Indigo Plantation lifestyle was nostalgic and luxurious. Mrs. Griffin, working with architect Carl Helfrich of Savannah, designed and had built her dream house - a Caribbean Georgian-inspired mansion. Indigo Plantation was a working plantation. There were stables, kennels for hunting dogs, outbuildings for tractors and farm machinery. There were horses and hogs and sheep grazing, with fields of corn and soybeans being grown to feed them.⁵

Robin Carrier's daughter, Noel, still lives part-time in the Beaufort area. She is generous with stories about Indigo Plantation. "When we first moved to Indigo Plantation," she recalls, "there was a decent-sized summer cottage near the water where Mrs. Pratt occasionally stayed." "That house was moved to the other side of the pond and became the manager's house. During construction of the big house, my mother and the Colonel built an octagonal, pre-fab house, right on the water to live in. It was on stilts and we called it the tree house." While Noel talked about the tree house and big house being built and various outbuildings close by, she studied a current Oldfield plat map. "Right here," she reminisced, while pointing at the cul-de-sac end of Carrier's Bluff, "there was a hand-dug well and we unearthed lots of really old broken pottery and utensils there."

The Griffins divorced before their 10th wedding anniversary. Robin Carrier, by then, sole owner of Indigo Plantation, moved out, leaving Noel in residence. Property managers and staff continued to run the plantation while Noel lived in the big house and picked up where her mother left off socially, with parties, tennis, boating and hunting.

Hilton Head land developer Bobby Ginn bought Indigo Plantation from Robin Carrier in 1982⁶ to develop into a horse farm and weekend retreat for his wife and two sons. On site were the 1974 house, a 9-stall stable, a tennis court, a caretaker's residence and a lush camellia garden. The plantation entrance was still on the Camp St. Mary's side of the property, on an old 1894 easement. Ginn re-routed the entry onto Highway 170, enlarged the property to 927 acres and built 6 miles of fencing to enclose pastureland.

After the personal bankruptcy of Bobby Ginn and two years of negotiations, Cherry Point Ltd. Partnership bought the 927-acre Indigo Plantation on February 6, 1989 for \$3.5 million. The plantation's next chapters would bring property decline, county controversy and ultimately, new beginnings.

⁴ Pauline's second husband was renowned landscape architect Richard Webel. They married in 1969. Today in Ridgeland, one can visit the Pauline Pratt Webel Museum and Library which she funded.

⁵ As reported in the society pages of the Hilton Head News in 1978: "An exceptionally beautiful setting overlooking the Okatie River provided one of the highlights of a visit to Hilton Head Island for a group of New Yorkers and several island residents last week. The mistress of the manor and owner of Indigo Plantation, Robin Carrier Griffin entertained the group with a luncheon on the piazza of her exquisite, rose-colored stucco-finished plantation house, surrounded by more than 500 acres of ponds and fields."



⁶ 1974 house front and river facades. Photos from Sotheby Park Bernet brochure, about 1982. Plantation being offered at \$1,650,000.

