

Harriet Baird Cavallon – Tribute by Linda Webber Sturtevant

May 20, 1939—August 7, 1987

Harriet was born on May 20, 1939 in Georgia and spent her early years on St. Simon's Island, where she attended a one-room schoolhouse, living with her mother and sister there while her father served in the navy during World War II. The family moved to Atlanta, where she went to the Westminster School. Unlike most of the girls in her class there, her goal was to go north to Mount Holyoke. Her determination paid off, and she and I became roommates in Brigham in September, 1956. The red haired, green eyed southern belle I discovered occupying our room (and "our" closet) was to become my lifelong and dearest friend. At first, I didn't know what to make of her cashmere, monogrammed twin sets and pearls, but quickly found that underneath the charming, ladylike exterior lay a strong young woman, who was focused, disciplined (she exercised every day...while I lay on my bed and watched, bemused), committed to her education and her religion. To say nothing of boys at Yale, Amherst, etc., who spent much time calling, writing, and sending her flowers. She worked and played hard, and seemed to know early on, while the rest of us were changing our minds on a daily basis, that she would be a Political Science major and spend her junior year abroad. She managed to get through Freshman Week tests with aplomb; all except Speech; her southern accent was too much for the powers that were, and she had to take a not-for-credit course to become a Yankee. Without a fuss, she managed to "correct" all those soft syllables and pass the course. However, as soon as we got on the plane to Atlanta for spring break, she took off her hat, and gloves, kicked off her heels and started talkin' the way she was taught to begin with!

We spent sophomore year in Porter, where Sandy Germond Pritz met her and comments, "She seemed the quintessential southern belle. Lovely and graceful with a soft and warm manner, she nevertheless broke forth with delightful humor and even a little mischief. I was always amazed that someone who polished her nails to perfection could think and talk so insightfully about political science and other erudite matters" Paula Ham Johnson and Nancy Morgan, roommates with us in Porter, echo the sentiment, describing Harriet as, "impeccably dressed in lovely sweaters and pearls, wearing her trench coat in such a stylish way; even her gym suit was pressed"! Nancy comments that when she went on one of her frequent trips to

Yale, Harriet would share her notes from the Saturday 8 a.m. class they both took, “perfectly written, verbatim, in the loveliest handwriting”. They both were the lucky recipients of the Bairds southern hospitality that spring vacation. The same year Helgard “Sam” Wienert lived around the corner from our room. She fleshes out the woman Harriet was becoming, “Always elegant, even during exam time; never seemed harassed and always looked terrific, while many of us (I certainly did) looked as though we had fallen out of bed. She never gave the impression of vanity, just class. I still remember her ability to empathize ... when I was at Holyoke I had been in the States not quite three years. Everything seemed terribly strange to me. Even my accent was “off”. I used to wear lederhosen, imagining they looked like Bermuda shorts. I felt as though I had landed on the moon. Harriet made me feel as though she understood how strange I must feel and treated those damn lederhosen as though they were the latest in Bermuda fashion. Her unfailing courtesy and ability to take distance from a lot of vacuosity (is there such a noun?) always impressed me. (I wasted energy in silent fury and hurt). She was nice--in the very best sense of that word.” Betsy Piper Martin met Harriet junior year in Paris and Geneva and spent Christmas with her family in Italy and Austria, New Year’s Eve at the Vienna Symphony. She describes Harriet as, “One of those organized and put together individuals who stood out in the college setting. She had a great zest for life and could manage and somehow fit more into her agenda than one would have thought possible. Everyone whose life she touched must have felt her talent and ability and sorely missed both when they were no longer with us.”

Predictably, her junior year was full of adventure and romance. While in Geneva, she met Mike Cavallon; they skied in the Alps; took a train full of other students to Moscow (very scary in those days), and a smitten Mike followed her train to Spain on his Lambretta. She returned to MHC ever more anxious to explore the world and declined the Poli Sci department’s invitation to take honors. She was the only girl I know who could not be intimidated by Miss Lawson, and found Comps just another exam to be aced. Joan Steiger tells of a Poli Sci road trip to Washington to meet some very powerful people, such as Barry Goldwater, John McCormick, “Scotty” Reston... “A small group of us banded together for an eight hour drive down and back. It was not a comfortable ride because the car was more than filled with our luggage and us. But it was lots of fun and produced much laughter ... I’ll always remember Harriet, the only southerner on board. We were enchanted by her voice and loved listening to anything and everything she had to say. Even without that incredibly pleasing and cultivated drawl, Harriet would have been fascinating to listen to. By the time we reached Washington she had us in the palm of her hand. Each of us had lodgings in different houses around the District. So there was a question of how to plan the route and who would be first to be

released from the car, which, by this time, was decidedly uncomfortable. There was no debate, and geography played no part in the decision. Harriet had the honor of being dropped off first. And when we reached her destination, we saw to it that she didn't carry a single bag to the doorstep. We were all her happy and willing handmaidens. And of course we missed her as we proceeded to the remaining drop-offs, where each of us carried her own luggage, while the rest waved goodbye from the car, never having the slightest notion of helping. I don't know when it dawned on us what had happened. Harriet, at least as smart, strong, and capable as the rest of us had just done what apparently came as second nature to southern ladies. She gave the impression of being completely helpless--but delightfully so. We felt compelled to assist with the heavy lifting and were ever so grateful to her for allowing us to help.

For the past 45 years I have tried to emulate Harriet. And only now that I walk with a cane am I able to be convincingly helpless. But I'll never have Harriet's charm or personality. I content myself that it's because I've lived in the northeast for 67 years too long. Ahh, southern womanhood--Harriet showed us what it's about"!!

Eager to follow her dream, she went home to Mama Baird, who put on a fairy tale wedding for Harriet and Mike the summer after we graduated. She was regal in satin and lace! Off they went to the Far East, Ceylon, and then seven years in Bangkok. There she gave birth to Chel, Neal and Mary Ellen, her adored children. The family returned to Massachusetts, moved on to Chicago, and then to Sydney (Australia). A wonderful story about Harriet Down Under came from a friend there, regarding a party which included "our wild, strange, heavy drinking friend"... "as we were sitting around in a group of 10 or 12 eating dinner on our laps, Les came up the stairs stark naked and proceeded to lie on the floor in the middle of the circle. Needless to say, everyone was a bit embarrassed, but immediately Harriet calmly asked Les to sit beside her. She fed him off her plate and talked him into putting on his clothes, to everyone's great relief." That would be Harriet, through and through! They next settled in Wimbledon, England for seven years. Chel attended Kings College, but Neal was not admitted because he was dyslexic. Having her son denied entrance was not on the cards; Harriet worked a deal with the school administration whereby Neal would be taken by her every day of the week for an hour's tutorial, which she saw to with typical determination. Her belief in her son paid off when he graduated salutatorian of his class in high school in Georgia. And, as his father comments, "You can imagine the bonding that took place between them". Her journey came full circle when they moved back to St. Simon's, Georgia, a place she had always loved. Mike observes that whenever his job made a move inevitable, Harriet handled the entire

operation seamlessly; always in control, the children accepted change as the norm and quickly adapted to each new environment.

Her decorative skills also went into play in each new domicile. She collected Asian antiques, which lent an exotic air to her surroundings, and she was a skilled and energetic house painter, turning her latest residence into a warm and inviting home. She visited me once in New York when I was working on an old bathroom. As soon as the obligatory house tour was over, she rolled up her sleeves, had Mike on one end of a very heavy radiator, which “had to go”, and turned to the job at hand. Before we stopped to make dinner, my master bathroom was transformed by walls covered with real paper wallpaper, perfectly aligned, and she and I were caught up with each other’s lives.

In St. Simon’s, her two younger children went to Frederica Academy where Harriet became president of the parents’ association, and, true to her love of theatre and dance, was inspired to organize the “Fishnet Follies”, put on by citizens of Glynn County to raise money for the school. Mike describes it as “the beginning of Harriet’s final glory”: she turned into a dancer in the ladies’ chorus line and the show was such a hit, it was repeated twice more in the years to follow. There is now a Harriet Baird Cavallon scholarship at Frederica Academy.

Her life was cut short by breast cancer 20 years ago. She left us all a legacy of the steel magnolia in full bloom: love of beautiful things; an understanding of the ironies of life and a methodology for coping with them; abiding friendship, and above all, total devotion to her family. We who loved her will always keep her in our hearts, and smile as we remember her.