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Pola Negri in 1927

Pola Negri Slept Here? Unraveling the Mystery of a Screen Siren's Stay in Arlington

BY JENNIFER SALE CRANE

With Arlington having few Hollywood connections to boast of, save Forrest Tucker, Warren Beatty, Shirley MacLaine, and Sandra Bullock, the story about a modest stone bungalow nestled in the Gulf Branch stream valley off of Military Road is curious indeed. According to a long-held local legend, silent film star Pola Negri once stayed there.

Local accounts have varied—some say the house was rented by Negri as her “Virginia hideaway,” others think it was built as Negri and Rudolph Valentino’s love nest, and played host to Hollywood-style pool parties.

The cozy bungalow at 3608 N. Military Road,¹ with quite a few additions and alterations, is now home to the Gulf Branch Nature Center, established in 1966 and operated by Arlington County Department of Parks, Recreation and Cultural Resources. The swimming pool, filled in and planted with a garden, can still be identified by the exposed segments of its curved concrete walls.

The Nature Center’s connection to the early Hollywood star was investigated in the 1970s by Cornelia B. Rose, Jr., a founding member of the Arlington Historical Society. Rose’s documentation leaves a few questions unanswered. But despite the lack of unequivocal primary source evidence, the story of Pola Negri and the Gulf Branch Nature Center has become an important part of the oral tradition of Arlington County.

Could the Gulf Branch Nature Center bungalow really have been the Virginia hideaway of the infamous silent film vamp? This article examines the limited evidence available in the context of Pola Negri’s life and her known whereabouts in the 1930s.

Pola Negri: Star of the Silent Screen

Silent film actress Pola Negri left an indelible mark on early Hollywood. Born Appollonia Chalupiec in Poland, Pola Negri became a popular stage and film actress in Warsaw and Berlin before moving to the United States. She had her first American hit with her role in “Passion” (1922), and made over twenty films for Paramount Pictures, including “Forbidden Paradise” (1924), “A Woman of the World” (1925), and “Hotel Imperial” (1927). Her exotic looks and uninhibited vamp style made her one of the most popular sirens of the silent era.

Negri's romances with Charlie Chaplin and Rudolph Valentino and her sensational behavior—reportedly parading down Sunset Boulevard with a pet tiger in tow—were widely covered by the Hollywood rags of the day. By the time the film industry had transitioned to "talkies," Negri's popularity had eroded. A 1932 *Washington Evening Star* article, headlined "Screen Vamp Called Passe," referred to the actress as "once the brightest, sleekest star in all the ranks of Hollywood."² She spent the late 1930s living in France and making films in Nazi Germany for UFA Studios. Negri returned to the U.S. in 1941 and retired to San Antonio, Texas, where she died in 1987.³

Spread of a Local Legend

Pola Negri's alleged stay in Arlington has captivated local residents for decades. In the spring of 1963 the *Washington Post* promoted a local homes tour which included Negri's "Virginia hideaway:"

The Virginia hideaway of onetime film star Pola Negri will be one of five houses on tour Thursday, April 25 to benefit the Florence Crittenton Home. The fieldstone house at 3408 N. Military Rd. is now owned by Mr. And Mrs. Jeff [sic] Davis, who have filled it with European and oriental treasures.⁴

The story is entrenched in neighborhood history, as found in the Bellevue Forest Neighborhood Conservation Plan, which states, "During the early 1930s silent film star Pola Negri rented the house."⁵ The Nature Center staff have also embraced this aspect of the building's history, screening Negri's films during an annual "Pola Negri Night."

Anecdotes about the Pola Negri house are mentioned in several oral history interviews archived at the Virginia Room in Arlington County Public Library's Central Branch. In her interview, Mildred Walz, who lived near Military Road in the 1950s in the Colonial Village and River Crest neighborhoods, recalled:

Well that [Gulf Branch Nature Center] used to be out in the woods because there was nothing built up. At the time that was built there were no houses along there. And the story goes, which you probably know, that there was some wealthy guy who built a retreat for Pola Negri, the early film star, and that little stone house was their retreat in the woods.⁶

Thomas Richards, a longtime Arlington County Board Member who was instrumental in the County's acquisition of Gulf Branch parkland, included another detail to the story in his interview:

Immediately upstream was an old house that was alleged to have been owned by silent movie star Pola Negri, a friend of Rudolph Valentino. She is supposed to have planted the rhododendron... Yes, I say, it is alleged.⁷

William Hughes served as director of the Department of Recreation & Parks in the 1960s during the formation of Gulf Branch Nature Center. His oral history interview transcript also includes a mention of Pola Negri's connection to the house:

We bought a house off of Military Road, an old, probably ten or fifteen acre site, which is now the Gulf Branch Nature Center, and here again, it's using a single family house as a recreation center, in this case the nature center. There was somebody who was quite noted...Pola Negri, who lived in the house...The house itself had apparently some fancy parties thrown over the years and goes way back in history.⁸

From its inclusion on the 1963 home tour, it seems that the Pola Negri story may have started or picked up steam during the ownership of the Davis family, who purchased the property in 1945.⁹ They may have originally heard the story from previous residents Joseph and Lillian Bley, who owned the prop-



The Gulf Branch Nature Center

Jennifer Sale Crane

erty during the time of Pola Negri's alleged stay in the early 1930s. Without documentation or oral histories from the Davis or Bley families, the origin of the story is difficult to determine.

A Virginia Hideaway

During the time of Pola Negri's alleged stay in the early 1930s, the modest fieldstone-and-quartz house in its secluded spot in the Gulf Branch stream valley had all the right qualities for a woodland retreat or hideaway, with rustic architecture, densely wooded privacy, and even a pool.

The single-family dwelling was constructed circa 1920,¹⁰ probably by Thomas B. Jewell, who owned the property during that period. Construction dates prior to 1935 are difficult to determine since Arlington County did not issue building permits until that time. The picture on page 49 shows the central block of the house, with porch overhang and shed dormer, flanked by later additions but still readable as a house despite its 1960s rehabilitation as a nature center.

The property's twentieth-century history starts with Thomas B. Jewell. In 1899, Jewell inherited a large tract of land north of what was then called Falls Branch, now Gulf Branch, from the estate of his mother, Emma Jewell.¹¹ Howell & Taylor's 1900 "Map of Alexandria County" shows the 158-acre tract straddling Military Road.

In 1927, Jewell sold 12.2 acres of the tract, which included the land in the vicinity of the house, and extending north on the west side of Military Road, to Aaron Lane Cricher.¹² Cricher and his new wife Edith remained residents of Washington, D.C.,¹³ and less than a year later, in May 1928, sold the 5.2 acres on which the house sat to Joseph Lee Bley.¹⁴ Lillian C. Bley, widow of Joseph Bley, owned the property by 1935, as seen in the Franklin Survey Company Property Atlas of Arlington County.¹⁵ Bley sold the land to Norman L. Meyers in 1937.¹⁶ Manuel John and Elaine Davis purchased the property in 1945.¹⁷ John Davis then inherited the property from his father in the 1950s, and sold the six-acre property to the Arlington County Board in 1965 to form part of the Gulf Branch Park.¹⁸

In the 1930s and 40s, the property was dubbed "White Pines" or "White Pines Villa," as noted in a 1930 National Geodetic Survey record and a 1943-49 Franklin Survey Company Atlas. In or before 1930, the Public Building and Public Grounds, an agency of the federal government charged with building the George Washington Memorial Parkway, installed a survey marker on the Gulf Branch property on a concrete pier of the swimming pool in front of the house. The survey record for the marker states its location:

In Cherrydale in Arlington County, 0.4 mile south along Military Road from the junction of North Glebe Road, on the grounds

of White Pines Villa (the entrance is through a stone gateway with White Pines carved on the face of the north post), about 100 yards west of Military Road, at the outlet of the swimming pool, and in the top pier.¹⁹

A photo found in the Gulf Branch Nature Center's vertical files, dated 1945 and possibly from the Davis family, shows a wintertime scene of several people ice skating on the frozen swimming pool. No trace of the "White Pines" sign remains today.

In the 1935 Franklin Survey Company's "Atlas of Arlington County, Virginia," the house at 3408 N. Military Road has a simple rectangular footprint, colored blue to indicate stone or concrete block construction.²⁰ The map shows another, slightly smaller wood-framed structure sitting at the rear or west line of the property, at the end of the long driveway, possibly a garage. Another smaller wood-framed structure sits between this structure and the house. This may be the pump house which is still found on the property today.

The 1943-49 Franklin Survey Company Atlas depicts the house in similar rectangular form as the 1935 map, outlined in blue to indicate stone veneer.²¹ A notation next to the house indicates its name as "White Pines," consistent with the name of the property noted in the 1930 National Geodetic Survey record. The two wood-framed structures in the 1935 Franklin map are still present on the west side of the property. A 1959 Sanborn Fire Insurance Company Map of Arlington County documents the house's irregular footprint, indicating additions and porches and stone veneer cladding.²²

Situated in an idyllic woodland area overlooking Gulf Branch, with the Potomac River to the east, the house was ideally sited to serve as a weekend or vacation retreat. The style of the stone house echoed the "rustic architecture" made popular by the National Park Service and Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1920s and '30s, which emphasized harmony with the natural environment and use of local materials like stone and timber. Arlington was still a sparsely populated rural community in the early 1930s, and it is easy to see how anyone, possibly even a fading Hollywood star, might view the little stone house on Gulf Branch as the perfect "Virginia hideaway."

Why Would Pola Negri Visit Northern Virginia?

From the *Washington Post* and *Washington Evening Star* archives, we can document two visits by Pola Negri to the Washington, D.C. area. The first visit was in late August 1932 as part of a traveling vaudeville act and personal appearance circuit. An August 25, 1932 *Washington Post* story hailed her impending arrival as "Pola Negri's first visit to the Capital in the flesh."²³ A *Washington Star*

photographer caught her at Hoover Airport as she stepped off the Ludington Line plane from New York. The accompanying article reveals her stay in Washington as part of a 17-week "personal appearance tour," giving interviews in her hotel—assumed to be in Washington—about actors' working conditions in the age of talkies and her plans for a comeback.²⁴ In the act at Loew's Fox Theater, she performed a "dramatic playlet" titled "Is This Love?" with several other Hollywood stars.²⁵

Negri's second documented visit to Washington was in early May 1934. Local rumors swirled that she might be in town. The *Washington Post* was skeptical of Negri's presence, reporting:

(Negri had been slated to appear at the National Theater in a November 1933 performance of the play, "A Trip to Pressburg," but cancelled suddenly because of health issues, greatly upsetting her local fans.)²⁷

But the *Washington Post* was mistaken. Pola Negri was indeed in the Washington area in May 1934. *Evening Star* reporters scooped the story and tracked her down at Gray's Hill Inn near Mount Vernon on the shore of the Potomac River.

Although Gray's Hill Inn was in Alexandria, not Arlington, the story of her stay there reveals a possible reason for her visit to northern Virginia. The *Evening Star* observed and photographed Negri at Gray's Hill Inn spending the day with Weldon Heyburn, a native Washingtonian whose real name was "Spanny" Franks.

The *Evening Star* reporter noted the two had "played a skit together on motion picture theater stages" the previous season, probably referring to the 1932 vaudeville show at Loew's Fox Theater. As reported by the *Evening Star*, Negri was first spotted at Gray's Hill Inn climbing an apple tree, then played "some



Courtesy Washingtoniana Div, DCPL
Pola Negri emerging from a plane at Hoover Airport, *Washington Evening Star*, August 26, 1932

kind of an afternoon game” with Heyburn on the picturesque grounds of the Inn. After graciously answering a few of the reporter’s questions, Negri and her companion departed for a walk in the woods. Besides Weldon Heyburn, there may have been an even more compelling draw for Negri’s visit: the picturesque northern Virginia scenery. “I love this country. I want to buy some land here. I want to live like your George Washington. Oh yes, I love it here very much.”²⁸

The May 6, 1934 *Evening Star* article paints a picture of a film star on retreat, staying far away from the Capital city. Negri’s mention of George Washington could imply that she visited Mount Vernon, a popular tourist attraction both then and now. When the *Evening Star* reporter first arrived at Gray’s Hill Inn, a woman who turned out to be Negri’s secretary initially turned them away, claiming Negri was not staying at Gray’s Hill Inn. Could the press intrusion have led Negri to seek a more private hideaway in Arlington’s Gulf Branch stream valley?

A few weeks after her stay at Gray’s Hill Inn, the May 25th *Fairfax Herald* displayed a brief front page feature on Negri’s visit:

According to report, Pola Negri, the film actress who has been spending some time in Mt. Vernon district, contemplates buying land and erecting a house overlooking the Potomac. When she completes making a picture at Hollywood, and other contracts, she will return to Virginia.²⁹

According to *Washington Post*, *New York Times* and *Washington Evening Star* news reports of the era, Negri suffered from periodic appendicitis or gall bladder attacks throughout the early 1930s—in December 1931, March 1932,



Courtesy Washingtoniana Div, DCPL
Pola Negri and Weldon Heyburn at Gray’s Hill Inn, Alexandria, Washington Evening Star, May 6, 1934

and November 1933. The reports typically mention her as resting or recuperating at her primary residences in Santa Monica or New York,³⁰ but Negri's ongoing health issues could have been another reason for her to retreat to a "Virginia hideaway" like the Gulf Branch house.

The C.B. Rose Letter

The only documentation to support this long-held story of Pola Negri's stay at the house on Gulf Branch is a February 5, 1972 letter from Cornelia B. Rose, Jr., a prolific Arlington historian during the 1950s–1970s, and a founding member of the Arlington Historical Society. In her letter to "Alice"³¹ in the Parks & Recreation Division, Rose says she has some recent correspondence from Pola Negri's secretary regarding the "persistent rumor that the house now used for the Nature Center in Taylor Run Park was once a 'hideaway' for Pola Negri."³² Rose then quotes from the letter she received from Negri's secretary: "Miss Negri did indeed rent the house you mentioned, in the Spring of the early '30's. She cannot remember the exact year."

Rose confidently ends her letter, "So now we know for sure." But Rose's letter leaves some questions unanswered, and raises new ones. In the letter, Rose refers to the wrong park—Taylor Run Park instead of Gulf Branch Park. This was likely a simple misstatement by Rose. She may have been thinking of [Zachary] Taylor Park, south of Gulf Branch on Military Road, or possibly Taylor Run in Alexandria. We also don't know how specific Rose was in describing the house on Gulf Branch in her letter to Pola Negri's secretary. If she described it as a vacation cottage just outside Washington, on or near the Potomac River, this could also describe Gray's Hill Inn. The headline on the May 6, 1934 Evening Star feature on Pola Negri reads, "Pola in Virginia Cottage."

Rose's original inquiry to Negri's secretary may have included more clues to assist the investigation. Unfortunately, the original letter Rose received from the secretary has not been found in Rose's papers, held in the Arlington County Public Library's Virginia Room. Nor has it turned up in the Arlington Historical Society's collections. Negri's memorabilia collection is held by St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas, but it does not include any personal correspondence. According to St. Mary's special collections archivist, Brother Robert Wood, Negri instructed her secretary to destroy her letters and other personal papers upon her death.³³

The C.B. Rose letter holds one more important clue: Negri's secretary said she "did indeed rent the house you mentioned." One doesn't usually "rent" a room at an Inn, so the secretary's phrasing may show that she was indeed referring to the Gulf Branch house and not the Gray's Hill Inn.

The Importance of Local Lore

So is the Pola Negri connection an unproven local legend? Or does the C.B. Rose letter offer sufficient proof despite its second-hand account? We know from the May 1934 *Evening Star* and *Fairfax Herald* articles that Negri was smitten with northern Virginia, particularly the area along the Potomac River. Based on the documents and press accounts examined here, this author sees a strong likelihood that Pola Negri rented the secluded Gulf Branch bungalow before or soon after her stay at Gray's Hill Inn. Further research uncovering the original letter from Negri's secretary, as well as any supporting documents or oral history from descendants of former property owners Joseph and Lillian Bley, would provide a more conclusive answer.

The intriguing local tradition of Pola Negri's stay at Gulf Branch is documented back to the 1950s and '60s and long ago secured a foothold in neighborhood and county history. C.B. Rose, Jr., one of Arlington's premier historians, seems to have been convinced of the story's legitimacy. Ultimately, confirming or disproving the story becomes secondary to the value the local lore of Pola Negri's "Virginia hideaway" holds in our personal and collective memories.

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End Notes

¹In the 1930s, the house number was 3408. Franklin Survey Company, *Property Atlas of Arlington County, Virginia* (Philadelphia: Franklin Survey Company, 1935).

²"Screen Vamp Called Passe," *Washington Evening Star*, August 26, 1932, p. B1.

³For biographical information on Pola Negri see Eve Golden, *Golden Images: 41 Essays on Silent Film Stars* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2001); Jeanine Basinger, *Silent Stars* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999); and Negri's autobiography, *Memoirs of a Star* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970).

⁴"Star's Old Hideaway On Arlington Tour," *Washington Post*, April 21, 1963, p. F5.

⁵Bellevue Forest Citizens' Association, *Bellevue Forest Neighborhood Conservation Plan* (Arlington County: Arlington, 2003), p. 40.

⁶ Transcript, Mildred L. Walz Oral History Interview, September 23, 2006, by Rebecca Case, Oral History Project digital archives, Ser. 3, No. 200, Virginia Room, Arlington County Public Library.

⁷ Transcript, Thomas W. Richards Oral History Interview, October 16, 1984, by Edmund Campbell, Oral History Project digital archives, Ser. 3, No. 111, Virginia Room, Arlington County Public Library.

⁸ Transcript, William L. Hughes Oral History Interview, part 2 of 4, June 15, 1993, by Cas Cocklin and Ed Campbell, Oral History Project digital archives, Ser. 3, No. 65, Virginia Room, Arlington County Public Library.

⁹ Arlington County Deed Book 685, p. 384. In addition to 1.675 acres purchased from Lillian C. Bley, Manuel John Davis purchased the adjacent 3.411 acres from Norman L. Meyers. Arlington County Deed Book 667, p. 232.

¹⁰ The Bellevue Forest Neighborhood Conservation Plan cites an unsourced construction date of 1921. Bellevue Forest Citizens' Association, *Bellevue Forest Neighborhood Conservation Plan* (Arlington County: Arlington, 2003), p. 40. A construction date of circa 1920 was also estimated by EHT Tracerics for the March 2009 report, "Virginia Department of Historic Resources Reconnaissance Level Survey: Gulf Branch Nature Center."

¹¹ Alexandria County Will Book 10, p. 391. Also see "Estate of Emma Jewell," *Washington Post*, June 8, 1899, p. 10.

¹² Arlington County Deed Book 270, p. 47.

¹³ A July 1932 newspaper item notes that "Mr. Lane Cricher, until recently a resident of Washington, is a newcomer to Arlington County, now residing on Summit Street. Mr. Cricher is the nephew of Secretary of Labor William L. [sic] Doak." Arlington County Record, July 29, 1932, p. 1.

¹⁴ Arlington County Deed Book 279, p. 185. Cricher retained land to the north of the house, forming a subdivision in 1935 named Rural Retreat Park. Arlington County Deed Book 374, p. 597.

¹⁵ Franklin Survey Company, *Property Atlas of Arlington County, Virginia* (Philadelphia: Franklin Survey Co., 1935).

¹⁶ Bley also owned a small one-acre plot abutting the main five-acre plot on the west side. Bley sold 3.4 acres, including the house, and the one-acre plot to Norman L. Meyers in 1937. Arlington County Deed Book 418, p. 560.

¹⁷ The property was formed from three adjacent lots: the main 3.4-acre lot and a 1-acre lot purchased from Meyers (Arlington County Deed Book 667, p. 232), and a 1.675-acre lot on the north side, purchased from Bley (Arlington County Deed Book 685, p. 364). Together, these lots formed the 6-acre Gulf Branch Nature Center property that was later sold to Arlington County.

¹⁸ A 1965 memo to Riley Matsler, Director of Recreation & Parks, about the land acquisition states that the former owner, Mr. John Davis, mentioned serious roof leaks over the kitchen and periodic blockages of the sewer line. A.L. Ratcliff, "Arlington County, Virginia Inter-Departmental Memorandum," February 16, 1965, Gulf Branch Nature Center vertical files.

¹⁹ National Geodetic Survey, U.S. National Grid Spatial Address 18SUJ162097 (NAD 83).

²⁰ Franklin Survey Company, *Property Atlas of Arlington County, Virginia*.

²¹ Franklin Survey Company, *Plat Book of Arlington County, Virginia* (Philadelphia: Franklin Survey Co., 1943, rev. 1948 & 1949).

²² Sanborn Map Company, *Insurance Maps, Arlington County, VA* (New York: Sanborn, 1929, 1936, & 1954).

²³ Nelson B. Bell, "About the Showshops With Nelson B. Bell," *The Washington Post*, August 25, 1932, p. 14.

²⁴ "Screen Vamp Called Passe," *Washington Evening Star*, August 26, 1932, p. B1.

²⁵ Bell, "About the Showshops," *The Washington Post*, August 25, 1932, p. 14; Bell, "The New Cinema Offerings," *The Washington Post*, August 27, 1932, p. 14; "The Late August Theater," *The Washington Post*, August 28, 1932, p. A3.

²⁶ Bell, "Producers are Optimistic in Stating Plans," *The Washington Post*, May 8, 1934, p. 5.

²⁷ "Miss Negri Plays in English For Two Known Collaborators," *The Washington Post*, November 5, 1933, p. AM2; "Pola Negri at National in a Viennese Play," *The Washington Post*, November 12, 1933, p. F1; Associated Press, "Pola Negri Stricken, In New York Hospital," *The Washington Post*, November 18, 1933, p. 1; "Pola Negri Still in Pain," *The Evening Star*, November 18, 1933, p. A2.; "On Theaterizing a Classic Gem And Icily Letting Public Down," *The Washington Post*, November 18, 1933, p. AM1.

- ²⁸ E. De S. Melcher, "Pola in Virginia Cottage," *The (Washington, D.C.) Evening Star*, May 6, 1934, p. B1. Also see "Pola Negri Spending Few Days South of Here," *The Alexandria Gazette*, May 7, 1934, p. 1.
- ²⁹ "Likes our County," *Fairfax Herald*, May 25, 1934, p. 1.
- ³⁰ "Pola Negri resting, Santa Monica," *The Evening Star*, August 23, 1931, p. B3.
- ³¹ The "Alice" to which Cornelia B. Rose's 1972 letter is addressed is likely Alice P. Letzler, who authored "History of the Park System in Arlington County," with C.B. Rose's assistance, for the 1971 issue of the *Arlington Historical Magazine*.
- ³² Cornelia B. Rose, Jr., Letter to "Alice," February 5, 1972, Gulf Branch Nature Center vertical files.
- ³³ Telephone conversation with Brother Robert Wood, March 16, 2009.