

A NORTHERN VIRGINIA MYSTERY STRANGER THAN FICTION

By

Eleanor Lee Templeman*

One evening in 1982, I received a long distance phone call from Mary Lee, the lovely young daughter of Mr. and Mrs. O. Lee Martin. She had grown up across the street from me in Bellevue Forest in North Arlington. Following her marriage some years ago, she and her husband, Bill Smith, bought a farm out in Loudoun County, sixty miles west of Arlington, on the far side of Leesburg near Hillsboro. Even though they both held positions (she was then teaching), they personally restored and painted the charming large Victorian house which they named "Hemlock Hill" for the two handsome trees standing at the gate.

On the phone, Mary Lee asked me, "Does the name of Robert Lee Reading mean anything to you?" He was my father! She replied, "I have a present for you: the copper engraving plate of the invitation to the wedding of your parents!" They had found it with some odds and ends tucked under the eaves in the attic of their home. That day, she had scrubbed and polished it, then held it in front of a mirror so that she could read the inscription.

My parents, Nellie Beaumont Clarkson and Robert Lee Reading were married March 7th, 1905 at Saint Paul's Episcopal Church in Haymarket, attended by eight bridesmaids, maid of honor, eight ushers, and best man. The Lieutenant Governor of Virginia had given the bridal bouquet. The engraving plate for the invitations had been returned to Mother's parents, as is the custom.

Following a brief honeymoon, my parents made their home in Redding, California, where my father held the position of Shasta County Engineer. We lived there until I was twenty-one in 1928, ten years after the death of my father. My widowed mother and I then came East to be near her brothers and sister, and for me to take a course in commercial art, which I practiced for sixteen years.

Meanwhile, soon after Grandfather Clarkson's death in 1915, the Haymarket house was sold and Grandmother then lived nearby with Uncle Carl Clarkson's family. Grandmother died in 1921, and shortly thereafter, the family moved to Mt. Kisco, New York where my uncle surveyed and supervised the construction of Whippoorwill Country Club and its golf course. They left many possessions in Haymarket, locked in the upper floor of a storage building which was shortly broken into by thieves and vandals. Among the items stolen were the things which Grandmother had been keeping for Mother, in anticipation of her eventual return to Virginia.

How did the copper wedding invitation plate get from Haymarket, forty miles southwest of Arlington, to an attic sixty miles northwest, a distance of one hundred miles? The people from whom the Smiths bought their farm were honest farmers who had lived there for many years, and as far as is known, had no connection with anyone in Haymarket. The astonishing fact is that the plate eventually fell into the hands of someone who could identify it and return it to me! Very few Arlingtonians, particularly of the younger generation, knew my maiden name. It remains a mystery how Mary Lee connected the surname of Reading to me. In the countless millions of places that the stolen plate could have gone, how did it get into the home of a young friend?

*Eleanor Lee Templeman is a commercial artist, photographer, historian, author and publisher. In 1983 she received a national award for four decades of personal commitment to the preservation ethic.

*Doctor and Mrs. Henry Mazycki Clarkson
request the pleasure of your presence
at the marriage of their daughter
Nellie Beaumont
to
Mr. Robert Lee Reading
on Tuesday the seventh of March
nineteen hundred and five
at six o'clock
Saint Paul's Church
Haymarket, Virginia.*