

Recollections of the Webster House

by Alex Hiam

As young boys in the 1960s my twin brother, Jerry, and I wandered the Webster gardens at will. My great-grandmother was Jane Hovey Webster but Jerry and I called her Tудie. I loved Tудie's Japanese garden, winding mysteriously downhill through rocks and dwarf evergreens, dappled by shade from Japanese maples, but the blue garden with its formal rows of perennials bordering a wide croquet court was my second favorite. Of course the rose garden was the grandest, with its numerous paths paved with crushed clamshells. We rather haunted it, I'm afraid, and may have made a poor impression on the visitors as we fished lucky pennies out of the blue-tiled fountain basin. It was always sunny and warm when we were there (at least in my recollections), and I recall the grounds more clearly than the house itself.

Once, Tудie took us to see her neighbor Mrs. Woodruff, whose rectangular garden was enclosed by a thick, yards-high hedge all around. Within it the chipmunks and chickadees were very tame and would take food right from your hand if you sat very still for long enough.

We only rarely entered the Webster house by its wide front door. It had, I think, a few steps leading up to the entry area, a sort of vestibule. Ms. Shay, Tудie's secretary, had an office through a door to the right right before the vestibule opened to an interior living room, quite large, ending to the left at a long, curved, turret window-seat with cushions. The room also had a grand fireplace with a fabulous bas relief in plaster. Framed and mounted rather like an inset panel above the fireplace was an art work of swim-

ming fish made of plaster and hand-blown glass brought back from some long-ago world's fair. But we would hurry forward, out through French doors (there were multiple sets, I think) to the enclosed porch that spanned a good portion of the western side of the first floor and offered expansive views of Quisset Harbor and Buzzards Bay beyond.



"There was always a twinkle in her eye and a smile for us children," said Alex of his 2016 sketch.

There, comfortable and smiling in a floral dress, Tудie would serve us tea in the afternoons and teach our little sisters cat's cradle (a clever game with a loop of string that few people do any longer). She would be seated on a buttery-yellow wicker chair, part of her large set of painted wicker with, of course, roses on the cushions. Tea would be tailored to our childish tastes: Ritz crackers baked with peanut butter and bacon bits, tiny jam sandwiches, and so forth. Tудie

would beam benignly at us; she was well into her eighties but quite alert and fun. It was obvious she loved children.

Her husband, Edwin Webster, whom we referred to as Pa, had died in 1950, seven years before Jerry and I were adopted. I recall Pa's large, brass telescope on a wooden tripod, still there from when he would have used it to study the races or watch a guest arrive by yacht. We weren't supposed to fiddle with it: I think it took fingerprints quite well and distinctly. Off to the right (the northwest side of the first floor) was a long dining room enjoying another view of the bay, this one through turret windows wrapping around the head of the table. I don't know how many people that table seated, perhaps 20 or so. It was not as large as the dining room I remember in Tудie's Chestnut Hill house where we would have Easter dinner, nor as large as her far more formal dining room in Boston where, before dinners were served, we boys would press one of the dark wood panels in the dining room and open it to the "secret" stairs that wound up to the dusty attic high above. But the dining room at Quissett was my favorite, because it was light-filled and scented by fresh sea air. On the rare occasions when we children were permitted to actually dine there, everyone was in a holiday mood.

Beyond the dining room, the kitchen took up the northeast corner of the first floor. It was full of massive metal equipment such as one normally saw in a commercial kitchen and was manned by a cook



Jane Hovey Webster portrait by J. S. Sargent, 1920.

and an assistant or two. A side door with steep stairs led down from the kitchen to a narrow service drive, and that was where we usually entered, begging homemade cookies on the way in.

Inside, the house was grand but in a casual, informal way. I suspect it had some kinship to the big country homes of England's Arts and Crafts movement, but my childish recollections are a bit fuzzy on architectural details. Up the main stairs there was a long hall of bedrooms. There were more on the third floor, presumably, but those must have been for staff. My brother and I shared a room that had

a stunning view across the bay and, to our delight, two lamps whose bases looked just like light buoys, complete with blinking lights and painted numbers. I have one now in my writing studio. Besides our memories, what we have left of that house are just a few things, like Tудie's big seashells, some simple old oak chests and chairs, and a few lamps. Oddly, I cannot even seem to find any family photos showing the interior of the house. How could it have disappeared so completely?

I don't believe my mother got on well with Tудie, who had raised my father after his parents died, and might have seemed a rather intimidating grandmother-in-law. So sometime in my childhood, my mother stopped staying at Tудie's and decamped to a rented summer house nearby. It had originally been the stable to the old J. K. Lilly estate and abutted Tудie's rose garden to the south, so we could still walk over

to use her beach or to visit her for tea. Because Pa had died years earlier, in our time there were no longer large gatherings of Boston luminaries. But there was still a residual staff for Tudie's quieter summer vacations. And the gardens were immaculate. One of the maids would meet us occasionally in the evening and take us eel fishing with her off the dock. Quite an adventure!

My brother recalls the garden sheds and long greenhouse across the street behind the carriage house (still standing) and tells me that the gardeners raised all the annuals for planting out in spring and refreshing the beds through the summer. Pa had converted more than half of the carriage house floor to cement to accommodate visiting autos. He'd specified that a huge parallelogram-shaped truss be added to the second floor so that there would be no need for posts anywhere in the garage. I recall watching Tudie's chauffeur hose down her black Rolls Royce there.

We used the carriage house for decades after the main house was demolished. It has one turret, mirroring the turrets of the main house but on a much smaller scale. The window sashes in that turret and the wood-frame, copper-mesh screens were built on a curve. Even the wavy old glass panes have a curve to them. The main house was full of that sort of detail. I found it hard, as an adult, to protect those curved window panes from my own children.

I always enjoyed going to Eastman's hardware store on Main Street each spring to order another gallon of trim paint for that carriage house. It was a cedar-shake building with sea blue trim, a color that one could match simply by asking at Eastman's for Webster Blue*. The main house, as early photos show, was also originally shingled, looking more like an English country cottage than the faux chateau in pale pink stucco that Tudie transformed it into. But

the stucco turrets certainly looked lovely looming up behind her rose garden.

The basement of the Webster house had a large, rather dark, casual room for kids, dug into the hillside, with two doors and a row of windows facing the bay. It was full of the biggest seashells I'd ever seen, along with old oars, tennis rackets, and the like. The tennis court's fence was covered with a thick growth of rose vines, making it easy to lose balls forever. We played tennis until all the balls were lost, but we preferred to use the extensive grounds for hide and seek.

Old timers around Quissett are still liable to accost us Hiams with bitter comments about the demolition of the house and its lovely grounds. Shortly before my father died, I asked him about that decision, and his comment was that if he'd known how valued and valuable such old houses would become decades later, he would never have torn it down. It was demolished in the era of modern one-story, redwood-planked architectural homes, like the one where my parents lived when I was little, and they did not think that a huge, drafty, somewhat derelict old pink-stucco-covered-with-creeping-ivy mansion on a hill was worth the expense and hassle of keeping up and cleaning or cooking in it, sans staff. But we all miss it terribly, and I wish I could pop back and shoot a dozen rolls with the little Instamatic I had as a boy, so I could share more of its details with you now.

**The cover of this issue is Webster Blue.*

About the Author

Alex Hiam, the great-grandson of Edwin and Jane Webster, is a writer who lives in Amherst, Massachusetts..