



The family of Walter and Pauline Janney in their garden. Left to right:
Priscilla, Walter Jr., Mr. Janney, Peggy, Marian, Mrs. Janney, Anne, Wistar.
Photo by H.P. Rolfe, 1923. Courtesy Marian Janney Ware.

Conversations With Him

Wistar Janney

Editor's Note

The "commemorative occasion" for which *Conversations With Him* was written was the 100th anniversary of the birth of Walter C. Janney, an investment banker from Philadelphia, born in 1876. The birthday celebration was held at the Janney's summer home in Gansett on June 25, 1976. The house was built in 1927 on ten acres of land purchased from Sarah Bryant Fay, with the understanding that she could continue her daily summer drives to "my Point" as long as she wished. Before the family's move to Gansett, they had spent four happy summers at the Quisset Harbor House. While there they lived in The Cottage, after the DeWitt family's occupancy and before the Sawyer's.

In the personal recollection of his father, Wistar Janney, the youngest of the six Janney children, brings to the reader a sense of a life-style that has almost vanished. Leonard Woolf wrote in *The Pageant of History*: "Nothing makes me feel that the dead and the past were once living so much as the casual picture or recollection in a diary, a biography, or an old letter. . . . It is to them that I go to get a vivid understanding of that communal life of the past which I call history." Here is such a recollection.

M.L.S.

When my sister Marian conceived of this commemorative occasion, she suggested that we might put some thoughts together to share our memory of WCJ with the grandchildren and possibly even their children. After all, they had no knowledge of the man and, with the possible exception of Walter, Anne and Paula, no first-hand association. I thought it was a great idea. I told her I would have it done sometime last February or March. As I sit here trying to compose this afternoon, it is now the fifteenth of June. I have spent the last few hours thinking of other things to do, any way to avoid actually coming to grips with the task.

Why the difficulty? Well, my first realization was that I didn't really know the gentleman. The more I rifled my memory, the more I found that I could only recreate a series of contacts. Hence my title: "Conversations With Him."

My second realization was that I had difficulty determining how to refer to him. Not Daddy, because that did not accurately reflect his dignity. Not Father,

since that was too formal. His nickname in college, I am told, was "Old Ivory," after the Ivory Soap advertisement, meaning 99 and 44/100's percent pure. He was not one with whom to exchange what he would call smutty humor, to use strong language, or to relax with feet on table, drink in hand, and familiarly exchange dreams, desires or past experiences. When I was face to face, I was on guard, lest I give him an unpleasing insight into the kind of person I was. His censure was painful, easily achieved, and worth working and contriving to avoid. His standards seemed absolute, incorruptible, inflexible. Anything he touched turned to excellence. He personified the last judgment. One Cape visitor described the portrait in the hall as Justice Without Mercy. From where I sat, based on my concept of his justice, I was a continual miscreant.

So perhaps it will come as no surprise that conversations with him were simply mutual, inept attempts toward guarded contact, usually resulting at best in monologues—his, of course.

I remember somewhere back there, coming down to breakfast about 9 a.m. in Weldon. It had to have been during school vacation, because except for his regular semi-annual visit to boarding school, which I attended from age eleven, vacation provided the only opportunity of sharing this event. Breakfast in Weldon was an experience in elegance. The appointments were of museum quality—rare old prints on the walls; deep carpeting capped with oriental rugs; striking grandfather's clocks and others chiming from distant mantels; sideboards, table, chairs—all collector's items; the silver, old and faultlessly gleaming; and the old man sitting there with the morning light streaming onto his *New York Times*, a Cuban cigar in a white cardboard dispensable holder clamped between his teeth. He was always impeccably attired, sartorially correct, capped with a pink carnation in buttonhole—freshly provided him from his greenhouse by the loving hand of the head gardener. Shoes burnished. Eyes bright and clear. If this morning he were ultimately off for Janney and Co. in the city, he wore a comfortable business suit—cuffless trousers, of course—and a four-in-hand tie.

The size of his wardrobe challenged imagination. In 1931 we landed in Boston after a year's experience as a family abroad. I was privileged as son to pace the customs shape-up with his counting the family's distinctively broad orange-striped luggage—trunks, steamer trunks, suitcases—48 in number! It boggled an eleven year old's mind. I pointed to one large, unfamiliar, flat trunk and asked, "What's in that?" He replied somewhat sheepishly, "My shoes." Years later, in London, I ordered a custom-made pair of shoes at Peel's—the ultimate. The old salesman, after taking name and address, quizzically reminisced that in 1926 in Philadelphia, a man of similar surname had browsed long through Peel's traveling wares and had "given him quite an order—26 pairs." He then brought me the book with the tracings of my father's feet.

In the summer at Gansett he sported a bow tie from one of the great collections of this century. Even on his regular afternoon sails, he wore that bow. Come to think of it, the only times I might have seen him without a tie were when he was golfing, swimming, or playing one of the few tennis games we had—in which he always conned me—and on those also few but devastating occasions when he was forced to come down to unlock the front door for me in the middle of the night.

On this lovely, sunny, carefree vacation morning in June, with the disturbance of my entrance into Weldon's dining room, he briefly lowered his newspaper, gave me a warm, fatherly good morning, and then, with an attempt at humor, asked if I was up for all day. That put me ten points down—not an atypical daily start. In an effort to recover and to show off some of my newly acquired schooling, I brightly remarked that the stock market seemed to be doing rather well. Again the paper lowered, and peering at me in some disbelief he snorted, "What do *you* know about the market?" (Game; set; match.) My reply has faded, but that particular conversation was dead. He raised the paper; I nursed my fresh orange juice and turned inward to the consolation of Mary Spady's bacon and eggs, relieved in the knowledge that quite soon he would leave to keep the daily appointment with the landscape architect or gardener, to stroll about the grounds giving this order and that, before climbing into his enormous, black convertible Packard to drive into town.

Weldon was his personal achievement; a 75-acre estate which he, more than the architects, landscapers or other professionals he had used, honed to royal 18th century perfection; and which he had furnished to exquisite, even breathtaking, colonial taste. I accepted it without particular note or question. It was all I was accustomed to. But, I did have a particular appreciation for the massive, oak-paneled, front door with its

polished, brass hardware. Whenever I came home—and shut that well-fitted and machined portcullis behind me—I was safe, if only momentarily, from all the mistakes, unfinished homework, outstanding debts—in fact, all my sins of the moment. The paternal symbolism of that front door was heavy. After all, it was his castle, in which I enjoyed total protection, save from the master of the keep himself.

He obviously was a successful family provider and he spared no expense. The opportunities he provided were always first class. He cherished his children. In our Bicentennial year I might characterize his politics as slightly right of George III. He worried how changing times and ideologies would affect the fortunes of his family without him. He was such a nut about income taxes that he took one problem to the Supreme Court and—you guessed it—won.

There were scheduled, stereotyped, end-of-vacation conversations with him, which I did not relish. His view of how I might most profitably spend my last night before returning to the academic rock pile necessitated descending into the seldom used, dark study at Weldon and together spending a couple of desperate hours. Here came the great monologue from which he would dart unanswerable questions—"Why don't you have a more positive attitude toward your studies?"—"I'm worried that you don't seem to develop friendships with the leaders of your class."—"I just don't understand how you could . . ." Ultimately, the message was always that I was now going back to the most important term of the most important year of my rather questionably developing future. I can see he was trying to point me towards greater maturity and self-esteem; and perhaps I recognized the effort then, even as I shut my ears and offered a proper grunt should his sentences stop and he appear to be awaiting some acknowledgment. He was a trying parent, sincerely trying. He cared.

Conversations caused by particularly egregious acts called for more specific expiation. Once, when I was fifteen, there was a tiny misunderstanding, ultimately resulting in telephonic contact to the effect that I was in a Philadelphia police station at 2 a.m. on New Year's when I had been forbidden to be out at all. As I remember it, the timbre of his voice took precedence over police power, and I wended home. To this day, I can clearly feel the pall, the crash of silence, the very suspension of life that hung through Weldon's halls, pending the moment of accounting. He never let you down in these sessions; after all, you asked for them.

For many years we attended church as a family. It was not my favorite ritual. When I was small, I could casually crawl around during prayer, even as far as a neighboring pew. That couldn't last, and soon I was forced to sit quietly and straightbacked beside him. He was a very affectionate man and he often held hands then with whichever children were adjacent. In Philadelphia, the family kind of alternated between church and Quaker meeting, which I preferred since there was so little interruption. At Gansett, it was just church. But somehow the readings from the Bible there followed an annually repetitive pattern, so that every summer I got to hear how Joseph's older siblings stole his coat of many colors and sold him into slavery. Following that shocker usually came the parable of the talents, from which I learned that the timid could expect to be cast into outer darkness where there was weeping and gnashing of teeth. Not all Sundays were restful.

Life at Gansett in the summer was somewhat different in that the standards of measurement turned from academia to the playing fields of Eton. Every Saturday was "sailboat race," with him second-guessing the fleet in his ketch, *Doroteo*. Competition in golf, both tournament and family, abounded. Further, there was a club tennis tournament in both July and August, and he was an avid watcher. The sharp, audible intake of

his breath as you went up for an overhead on a crucial point was not a sign of confidence. He wanted so much for his children to win and, fortunately, he had several daughters who could and did satisfy this need. Suffice it to say, I was a lousy competitor, and a worse loser despite the practice—you can't play tennis behind a heavy oak door.

However, since I was male, I wound up wearing his colors on the Bay; and with good assists from his daughters' bottomless supply of boyfriends, I won enough to jolly him through several summers.

He used almost any pressure he could devise, consciously or sub, to keep his family together with him for the whole summer. His Gansett routine became quite fixed. The great morning foursome; the nineteenth hole where the winners—15¢—bought the losers a milk punch, followed by an old fashioned—\$5. Home for a dive off the float, side stroke to the raft, where incidentally, up to the age of 58, with little or no cajoling, he would perform a backflip off the board. Back in the pantry to mix his own brand of daiquiris in a mammoth glass shaker. He dispensed them on the patio, not infrequently commenting on how "a bird can't fly on one wing." His luncheon admonishment was, "Everybody on the dock by 3 p.m.—I won't wait." He loved that afternoon sail and relished his role as owner-helmsman. Some of our wildest experiences resulted from his desire to exhibit prowess in tacking *Doroteo* into the Cove to shoot the mooring. Fortunately, it was our fleet of boats that were moored closest to his point of aim. What damage occurred when we couldn't push obstacles clear in time was, fortunately, not to the neighbors.

At Gansett he maintained daily telephone contact with Philadelphia. Even so, he never got around to opening his mail and the various stacks on his desk in the living room became quite impressive by, say, 1 August. So

good old Sue Haeberle, the secretary in Philadelphia, would get a three-day pass to Gansett.

Today, the idea of whiling away ten-week summer vacations until graduation from college seems like an anachronism from the roaring twenties. I said he would use any means to keep us there, and he certainly did with me. I tentatively explored the possibility of doing something different, like even working. He inquired innocently how I would support myself. I thought that with my allowance and what I earned, I should get by. Possibly—but the clincher was: "No Gansett, no allowance."

He had had a kind of commitment to me from childhood to take me West either camping or hunting. He bought off on that one with a speedboat. He knew what he wanted for himself, and he refused to recognize a contradiction between that and the maturity he wanted for his children.

Sunday night, of course, was hymns—choice by age, ending always with his favorite "Abide With Me." Anytime I hear it, it's a show stopper. There were always guests, and he loved to show off his singing daughters. Fortunately, they sang well; and he all but purred with pride, love and appreciation.

Money was always a problem between us. Mother would intervene, urging him to explain accounting to me, as though that would solve my extravagances. The one time he tried was devastating; I still don't understand how a debit could be a plus and credit, a minus. Eventually, it was our differences over money that drove me into the Navy—that and being No. 2 in the draft and seeing Robert Taylor in "Flight Command." Compared to my sisters, I considered that I was kept in a state of penury—Mother set their allowances. I would once a year or so wind up with debts that could only be solved with a sudden infusion of capital. He could not accept debt and so I always got

bailed out, if at the cost of a two-hour lecture. I tried several times to fashion a reasonable budget. The last time was the summer of 1940. He agreed my proposition seemed sound, but the first check came in the old amount. I called him and asked, "How come?" He said, "Because." The Navy guaranteed \$15 per month more, and I guess supplied a version of the oak-paneled door. I didn't need his signature on the enlistment agreement, but I was angry enough to want to hit him with it. He sadly asked me if I knew I had signed on for four years. I had my wish and felt lousy.

Our most memorable conversation was by telephone. I was in flight training deep in Texas and had just graduated into a different, more complicated, heavier, scarier airplane. I had a young, smart ass, loud-mouthed, insensitive instructor who kept

shouting at me as he snatched the controls that I was trying to kill him—that I didn't know how to fly the damn thing. He was correct and doing everything possible to keep it that way. Between him and that contraption, I was in daily, stomach-churning terror. I had two choices: crash or resign. What to do? Call Dad, of course. So I called, collect, and poured out incoherently my disillusion and distress. My message was clear. He said only six, cold, unsympathetic words: "It's what you wanted, isn't it?" After I hung up I cursed him. He had cut me loose. It was years before I realized what that answer cost him.

Wistar Janney was born in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania in 1919, graduated from Princeton in 1941, and was a torpedo bomber pilot in World War II. He worked for the Central Intelligence Agency until his death in 1979. Most of his summers were spent in Quissett and Woods Hole.