

# Reminiscences of My Boyhood in Roslyn

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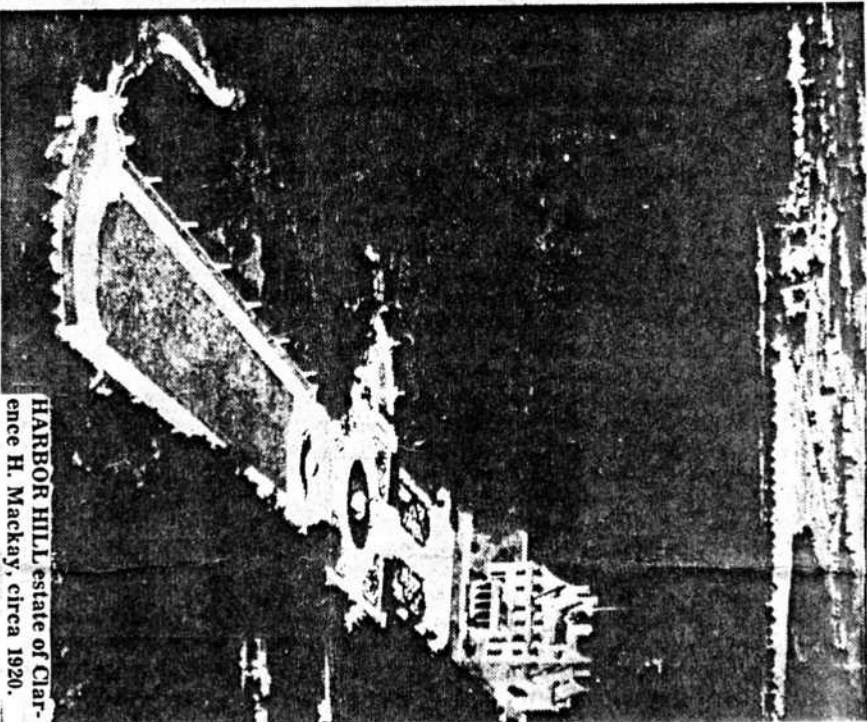
When I was a boy, each Fourth of July was celebrated by Clarence H. Mackay with a fireworks display shot off from the far end of the formal gardens to the west of the big house at Harbor Hill. The rockets burst high in the air above the gardens in full view of all of Roslyn. It was indeed a great sight, and all of Roslyn was grateful to Clarence Mackay for entertaining his guests in a way that all of us could enjoy.

Such a display and such excitement were not lost on my friend Rudy Knoll and myself, especially as we grew older and became more familiar with the grounds of the estate. It was probably in 1920 or 1921, when we were 14 or 15, that we were bold enough to venture up the hill through Mackay's Woods to observe the excitement close at hand.

We knew the place very well, for we often explored the woods and the edge of the gardens. The north and south sides of the formal gardens were bordered by tall hedges, with recesses at regular intervals to accommodate life-size statues which stood on pedestals. We were able to stand behind one of these statues and watch all that was going on. We could hear the music of the orchestra, and see the guests dancing on the terrace by the house. We could see the rockets being fired from the end of the garden. The bursting rockets with their varicolored brilliance lit up the whole area even brighter than daylight, it seemed.

Soon, however, we began to wonder what we would see if we were behind a statue on the south side of the garden. Watching the bright burst of each rocket, we became aware that, when the rockets had expired, the grounds and over-

## A Fourth of July experience



HARBOR HILL estate of Clarence H. Mackay, circa 1920.

spaces were very dark. The only lights were the Japanese lanterns on the terrace by the house and the lights from the house itself. We also became aware that the rockets seemed to be shot off at regular intervals, intervals which seemed just long enough for us to race across the lawn that separated us from the hedge on the other side. We decided to try it. After the next rocket expired, we would run to the other side to satisfy our curiosity.

The rocket burst. The sky and grounds were all aglow with light. The light went out, and all was dark. Rudy and I took off at a dead

never go out. I felt numb from trying to stretch myself out as flat as possible. I did not dare move my head to look for Rudy. I was just plain scared. Then, as quickly as the dazzling light had come, all was pitch dark again. It was too bad no one was there with a stopwatch, for I am sure we crossed the second half of the lawn in better than record time. We got behind a statue and sat and panted.

We had all the experiences we wanted for the day. But the day was not over. We had to get back. We watched the fireworks until they were over and we saw the men leave. The orchestra kept on playing, and the dancing continued. It was late, and we wanted to go home. The question was, how were we going to cross the garden? Somehow we didn't want to run for it across the open lawn.

We followed along in the shelter of the hedge toward the house, keeping behind the balustrades of the formal garden to the east of the fountain. We felt that we could cross in the shadow of one of the retaining walls. (These walls supported the several terraces between the level of the house and the lawn we had crossed before with such traumatic results.) Thus following in the shadow, we would get to the woods which loomed darkly across the gardens. The woods to the north of the main house were screened by evergreen trees, dogwood, and forsythia bushes. Where we had chosen to cross, there were only evergreen trees which had been planted close to the high retaining wall which supported the north end of the garden area. This was an area of the estate which was unfamiliar to us. Thus, we scurried along in the shadow of the terrace, we were unaware of the surprise that lay ahead.

I was just half a step ahead of Rudy. We were hurrying along a paved walk when my foot felt the edge of the pavement (in reality, the edge of the retaining wall). I stopped abruptly. Rudy, close behind beside me, did not put his foot on the edge of the wall. He stepped right off into thin air. I could not see him, for it was too dark. I felt him, however, leave my side and disappear.

I stood very quiet and still. The quiet seemed to last for eternity. At last there was a muffled crash down below. Rudy had landed. In a low voice, I called, "Rudy, are you all right? Where are you?" Out of the dark below me, he replied, "I'm all right. There's a pile of leaves down here. It's all right, just jump." It was a great relief to be assured that Rudy was safe, but I had no intention of jumping blindly into the dark, no matter how reassuring Rudy was. Eventually, after much whispered discussion, I gained enough courage to drop over the wall and hang by my hands until Rudy could touch my feet and guide me down. He had fallen onto a huge pile of leaves and grass cuttings which the gardeners had pushed over the wall, so all was well.

Needless to say, we wasted no time in getting down the hill through the woods to the railroad tracks and home. It was a Fourth of July that we shall never forget.