

Who Was Marjory? Part I

Marjory Stoneman Douglas was, and forever will be immortalized as, the woman who saved the Everglades - the only Everglades in the world.

Marjory Stoneman (1890-1998) was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, to Florence Lillian Trefethen, a classical violinist and successful businessman Frank Bryant Stoneman. An only child, her family moved to Providence, Rhode Island, when she was three.

Two of her early memories when very young seem prophetic and display an instinctive awareness of nature's interplay with mankind. After her father read to her *The Song of Hiawatha*, she recalls she burst into sobs upon learning the tree had to give its life to provide Hiawatha with wood for a canoe. On her first visit to Florida when she was four, prior to embarking on a family cruise to Havana, she clearly remembered picking an orange from a tree at the Tampa Bay Hotel. She later reflected on that writing: "I never forgot the quality of the tropic light."

During the nationwide depression known as the Panic of 1893, financial insecurity touched most families including hers. Frank attempted several business endeavors but none succeeded. Lillian, as she preferred to be called, whose mental health often was unstable, was affected by their insecurity. She left Frank in 1896 and took Marjory, now age six, to live with her own parents in Taunton, Massachusetts. Marjory's new household consisted of her grandfather, her French grandmother, and an unmarried aunt. A voracious reader at her early age, Marjory found solace in reading.

In high school, she began writing. One of her stories, "An Early Morning Paddle," about a boy who watches a sunrise from a canoe, won a prize from the *Boston Herald* in 1907. She enjoyed school, doing research in the Taunton public library, and was influenced by the well-educated women who taught her. She was especially close to her mother and had fond memories of her childhood, especially of her education.

As her mother's mental health began to worsen, she became dependent on Marjory. Caring for her mother, as well as family legal and financial responsibilities beyond her years, weighed heavily on Marjory. But her aunt and grandmother asserted the practicality for her to begin her own life. They suggested she leave for college and assisted her with some of their savings. She chose Wellesley College close to her mother and family. She majored in English, was a straight-A student, excelled in writing, edited the college literary magazine, and became active in the women's suffrage movement.

During her senior year Lillian developed breast cancer. Marjory went home to arrange for surgery and to be with her then returned to complete her classes. After her graduation ceremony, with her BA in English in 1912, Marjory's aunt informed her the cancer had metastasized. Within months her mother died and Marjory attended to the funeral arrangements. She spent the next few years out on her own with college friends, working, but without purpose or direction.

In 1914 Marjory Stoneman met Kenneth Douglas. He was thirty years her senior, impressed her with his manners and showered her with much attention. Within three months they were married. He had represented himself as a newspaper editor but it soon became apparent he was a con artist with a ploy to swindle her father, who was now living in Miami.

After Lillian took their daughter and left Frank, the cold, gray, depression-laden days of the north left him with nothing. He left for warmer weather in Florida. He attended law school, was admitted to the Florida bar and practiced law in Orlando.

But he saw how the Orlando freezes of 1894-95 ravaged the orange grove areas left abandoned by the early settlers. He learned of development said to be taking place further south in a town of a few shacks called Miami. He took a trip there and the warm tropic sun made an unforgettable impression on him after a life of cold, gray days.

When a client who was a printer was unable to render payment for legal services, he offered an old flatbed press for his debt. Frank accepted. Revisiting an experience he had during his college days when he printed a junior newspaper after having worked in a print shop where the smell of printer's ink captured him, he took the old press to Miami and made a newspaperman of himself for the rest of his life. He founded and published Miami's first daily newspaper, a little four-page edition he named *The Miami Evening Record* in 1903. In 1910 he renamed it *The Miami Herald*.

Frank became aware of his daughter's situation and Douglas's scheme to swindle him. He invited Marjory to come to Miami and join the editorial staff of his newspaper.

In 1915, Marjory Stoneman Douglas left for south Florida to be reunited with her father, whom she had not seen for twenty-five years. He had recently married Lillius ("Lilla") Eleanor Shine, a great-great granddaughter of Thomas Jefferson. Marjory found family and later would write that Shine "remained my first and best friend all my life in Florida." She joined the newspaper's staff as a society columnist and turned her passion for writing into her life's work.



In 1916, during the war, Marjory set aside her writing to join the American Red Cross who stationed her in Paris. When the Armistice was signed she cared for war refugees. "Seeing them displaced and in a state of shock," she wrote, "helped me understand the plight of refugees in Miami sixty years later."

After the war, Douglas served as assistant editor at *The Miami Herald*. Her daily column "The Galley" was topical - any topic Douglas chose - it was a pulpit for her views. And as Miami's population grew to almost 100,000 her first decade, from little more than 5,000 when she arrived, her columns began to promote responsible urban planning, support women's suffrage, civil rights and better sanitation. They opposed Prohibition and foreign trade tariffs and publicized the ravages of poverty.

In the 1920s, she wrote a ballad lamenting the death of a 22-year-old vagrant who was beaten to death in a labor camp. It was printed in *The Miami Herald* and read aloud during a session of the Florida Legislature, which passed a law that banned convict leasing, in large part due to her writing. "I think that's the single most important thing I was ever able to accomplish as a result of something I've written," she wrote in her autobiography.

She left *The Miami Herald* newspaper in 1923 and became a freelance writer of short stories published in popular magazines, e.g., the *Saturday Evening Post*. Many of her stories won awards. Her fiction settings were mostly South Florida, the Caribbean, and Europe during World War I. Her protagonists often were unconventional women or oppressed youth who encountered social injustices.

To be continued in Who Was Marjory? Part II - April 2018

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