Excerpts from:

“For Better or For Worse: The Odyssey of an Army Wife”

By: Dorothy Ulrich Troubetzkoy

Originally published in University of Chicago Magazine, December 1944, and January 1945.

(1997, I happened upon an appealing poem about Greenfield Lake written by someone with an altogether unfamiliar name: Ulrich Troubetzkoy. The discolored copy in the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society archives was a 1943 Sunday Star News reprint, the first publishing being noted as the Christian Science Monitor. I wanted to use the poem in the book, Along the Cape Fear, and I knew I would need to ask permission. I decided to find Mr. or Mrs. Troubetzkoy.

Where would I locate a writer with such an unusual name? New York seemed a good place to start, but even with all their telephone entries, there was no residence for a Troubetzkoy, just an art gallery. I wrote, asking if there was an Ulrich there, but my letter was forwarded to an absentee owner in Paris. Yes, it was an unusual name and a small family, but he didn’t know any Ulrich. Then I wrote to the Christian Science Monitor. Their copyright official answered, saying Ulrich Troubetzkoy’s last known address was Richmond. I called the only Troubetzkoy listed (Serge) and, by telephone, met two very charming people. Ulrich, the woman, agreed to send written permission to use the Greenfield poem and said she would send me more poems written about the Lower Cape Fear.

She lived in Wilmington while her husband trained at Camp Davis. In the course of the conversation, she startled me. “My husband Serge is a Russian Prince.” A few days later, while searching for publishable photographs at Cape Fear Museum, I happened on several snapshots of artist Claude Howell and some friends at Wrightsville Beach in 1942. Beneath one of the photos, Claude Howell had written, “Serge is a Russian Prince.” I wanted to scream with
delight. There were the Troubetzkoy’s I had been trying to picture since our conversation.

Much correspondence followed, as Ulrich shared the other poems, as well as a brief history of their life since the War. Not only had she become an accomplished writer with many distinguished publishing credits and awards to her name, she had remembered her Wilmington friends; staying in contact with Claude Howell, Mr. and Mrs. J. Laurence Sprunt, Miss Sue McQueen, the Emersons and several members of the MacMillan family. Ulrich also expressed regret that she could not find a copy of a local wartime narrative she published in a University of Chicago periodical. However, through the magic of the Internet I found Krista Ovist, a reference assistant at the University of Chicago Library, who located the following article.

—Susan Taylor Block

"An Army wife is neither a civilian nor a soldier, but something between the two."

Compared to us the Wandering Jew and the Flying Dutchman led placid and sedentary lives. In two and a half years we have traveled the length of the Eastern seaboard, from Fernandina, Florida, to Bailey’s Beach, from the Atlantic to the Pacific and from the Great Lakes to the Gulf. We have been in twenty-eight states and the District of Columbia, but the range of our adventures has been broader than the geography. We have eaten out of mess kits in the rain and dined by candlelight in Newport. We have lived in all sorts of places, talked to all kinds of people, and learned more about America than in all our peacetime travels.

The Army wives who took their husbands “for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer” during the last few years could seldom realize how much worse or how much poorer things might be when they too had joined the Army. But few of us are sorry and most of us have had the greatest adventure of our lives. We haven’t had time for glamour and couldn’t keep up with Broadway or our class reunions, but we’ll never envy the wives who stayed at home.

Serge appeared before the officer candidate board on the last day of July and a month later received orders to report for the anti-aircraft school at Camp Davis, North Carolina. Whatever else might be said for the life, the Army always arranged to send us everywhere in season.

In Wilmington, North Carolina, I suddenly joined that one-third of a nation which is ill housed. The desk clerk at the Hotel Cape Fear couldn’t find my reservation. In fact, he had a singular difficulty finding anyone’s unless a telegraphed confirmation was brandished in his face, but I finally talked him into giving me a room for three days. Room 301 was a cozy nook with left-over whisky and beer bottles, unwashed glasses and a pervasive smell of stale smoke. On the desk I found an ironic message: “The directors of this hotel would be pleased to receive directly from its guests any comments or suggestions relating to the operation of this hotel.” For once I was tempted to use “the envelope which requires no postage,” but of course it wasn’t there and there were ashes in the ink.1

At the Army listing bureau, I was greeted pleasantly but ominously by Mrs. Harris who went through a file of cards, shaking her head and murmuring: “I don’t think you’d like it there...a home for

Miss Sue McQueen holding her great nephew, William Parsley Emerson, Jr., in 1952.
waitresses..."and so on. She telephoned a few places and put down the receiver with more headshakings. The next time I saw Mrs. Harris she too was in search of a place to live.

Checking-out time was posted on my door as 7 P.M., but at six they tried to move two astonished soldiers in with me. They dropped their luggage apologetically and bolted.

In desperation, I boarded one of the rickety buses for Wrightsville Beach and got off at the “Ocean Terrace.” I had gone from one extreme to the other, for now I had a hotel of my own, the whole rambling summer hotel to myself except for weekends when the soldiers, including Serge, came down from Camp Davis. It would soon be too cold to stay, but it gave me time to gather my wits for a new assault on “the port city of pleasure and progress.” Meanwhile, I enjoyed the luxury of breakfast in bed and, in fact, I stayed there most of the day, wrapped in blankets like a Taos Indian, furiously writing poems and articles to keep warm.

The first time I went to Camp Davis, the bus burned up and I rode to camp in an Army truck. The sergeant at the Service Club said: “I can tell you’re not a Southern girl because you didn’t get scared and go all to pieces.” I told him there wasn’t time or I’d have been terrified. When we joined the cafeteria line, the hostess looked me over and exclaimed: “Were you the one? You don’t look like anyone who’s been in a burning bus!” I’ve wondered ever since how I was
supposed to look.

I certainly picked the wrong buses that day. On the way back, I was stranded in a blackout at Winter Park for three quarters of an hour.

The next time I went to Camp Davis, the Norfolk Special left me in a swirl of dust at Holly Ridge. It would be a good place to mail Christmas cards, but that’s about all that could be said for it. Except for bus station and post office, it had nothing but beer joints and cheap “military” stores which sold lurid souvenir pillows for “Mother” and “Sweetheart,” sleazy sweatshirts stamped with the much-abused U. S. eagle, insignia, equipment and souvenir gadgets. When I applied for a guest house pass, the officer in charge asked, “Where are you from?” in a tone which implied at least Tobolsk or Smipalatinsk. The MP’s gave me the once-over and before me stretched the sands of Camp Davis where I always half expected to see a mirage.

The public address system, with its overload marches, announcements, bugle calls and songs from the hit parade, almost made me feel as though I were back at the World’s Fair. In the Guest House I paid my 50 cents and was warned to prepare for a roommate. Unlike Camp Stewart, all but the lounge was “off limits.” While I waited to register, I saw an unusual relic enshrined in a glass case. It was an ordinary paper drinking cup, smeared with lipstick, which bore the inscription: “This priceless item was discovered amid the ruins of the chamber which authenti-
cated historical records prove to have been occupied by BETTY GRABLE."

I took refuge in the Service Club library and, by the time Serge arrived, was making considerable headway in a biography of Catherine the Great and becoming slightly alarmed to discover that we had shared a number of childhood characteristics. What an Army wife old Catherine would have been!

We've been standing in line for everything we wanted during the last few years and the Service Club cafeteria was no exception. Then, one could scarcely settle down to a leisurely meal when other hungry soldiers and civilians hovered over us with trays. Nor was the Service Club lounge designed for private conversation, with its competing noises of piano, juke box, jitterbugs, crooners, ping pong and a continual buzz of voices. The theater queues were usually so long they discouraged all but the most bored and most hardened movie fans. The PX too was crowded, but offered such special attractions as films and Coca Cola, which were scarce in town. (I was amused to discover that in the Commissary such items as chocolate bars, cigarettes and chewing gum were kept in a "sensitive items" cage.) The Guest House lounge was far too small to accommodate all its guests and their soldiers and my room was "off limits," so the nearest thing to privacy was a walk to watch the stars over Davis as the loudspeaker regaled us willynilly with the latest boogie-woogie.

Saturday night my roommate arrived from Youngstown, Ohio, and she had the worst case of poison ivy I have ever seen. Otherwise, she was an exemplary roommate who disappeared in the morning and returned just before lights out.

Serge was in classes when it came time to leave and as I was lugging my suitcase out of the Guest House, one of the clerks came running after me. "I'll bet you can pronounce all the characters in War and Peace, he said, and presumably on the strength of that accomplishment offered to send for an Army carryall, so I went in more style than I had come.

My second welcome to Wilmington was no warmer than the first had been. Again the Hotel Cape Fear failed to find my reservation, though Serge had made it in my presence long before, but they condescended to give me a room. Number 526 smelled rather strange but, in my innocence, I supposed it was furniture polish until I saw a dazed little bug walking uncertainly up the wall and found others, in various stages of fumigation, nestled in the candlewick spread. I called the office and announced that I had several of the little creatures captured in Kleenex in case they wanted to see them. No, it was a delicate subject, proof of which they preferred to ignore, but they sent a porter promptly to escort me to another room. It was rather dingy, but I satisfied myself it was not infested with anything more lively than grime, kept my suitcase locked and resigned myself to an uneasy night. The next morning I had no luck persuading the manager to suspend the three-day limit and I'm afraid, under the circumstances, my efforts were somewhat half-hearted.

After nearly three weeks, I hadn't found a permanent room. There were two days to go at the Hotel Cape Fear, no room at the other hotel in town and even the parks looked crowded. But the stars were still with me, in their facetious way, and when I went to the "Governor Dudley" for lunch, Mrs. Johnston took pity on my plight and started telephoning in my behalf. The lady on Third Street was going to the beach and couldn't see me until the next day. With Miss Sue, it was another case of gentlemen preferred,
but Mrs. Johnston thought some fast talking might help. I walked downtown with my fingers crossed and, when I called back at 8:30, Miss Sue had agreed to take me on probation for a week.4

It was worth waiting for those large sunny quarters overlooking the Cape Fear River. We thought we had only rented a room and bath but found, to our grateful surprise, that it included the hospitality of the house and the friendship of those who lived there: Miss Sue; her sister, Mrs. Emerson; Mrs. Emerson’s daughter Jane; and Jane’s mischievous black cocker spaniel puppy, “Topper,” who had such a bewitching personality that I even forgave him for chewing up a precious spool of Scotch tape.5 Whenever we entertained, Miss Sue insisted that we use the living room and her silver trays and they invited me to lunch so often that I invented errands to keep from overtaxing their generosity. When it rained, I found my breakfast on a tray in front of the fire so I wouldn’t have to go even two doors away to the “Governor Dudley” where I had breakfast and dinner. It was one of the happiest homes we had in the Army and when we left almost a year later it was like saying goodbye to our own family.

The first time Serge came to the Governor Dudley, he found me at the table with two colonels, a major and their wives, who had invited me to join the family when Serge was late. But Serge said it looked to him as though I were getting along in the Army much faster than he was.

Governor Dudley, who once lived in the historic house, was the governor of North Carolina who made that earth-shaking remark to the governor of South Carolina, so I referred to the slow week of school as the “long time between drinks.” While Serge slaved away at height finders, aerial photography and gun matériel, I thumped on my typewriter, worked in the Filter Center, took an occasional bus trek out to camp, and loafed in pleasant company. Serge usually arrived late Saturday and when there was a study hall, left early Sunday afternoon. In spite of the short time, we found ourselves fast becoming acquainted and sharing the gaiety of parties at home or at the country club or whenever a friend launched a Liberty ship. Helen MacMillan inadvertently christened me along with her ship, so I suppose I should add “James Iredell” to my already ponderous name.6

Among our pleasantest recollections are the visits to Orton and Clarendon on the Cape Fear. At “King” Roger Moore’s historic colonial plantation we were entertained by the Sprunts, hospitable owners of pillared Orton and its famous gardens; at Clarendon, by novelist Inglis Fletcher and her husband.7

Like most Army couples, we had our money troubles at the most awkward times. Toward the end of OCS, when we had counted on pay and allowance not only to see us through the month, but to buy Serge’s uniforms for graduation, I had not yet received a dependent’s allowance, though Serge had been applying for some time. Now we were told that the personnel section had “mislaid” the photostat of our marriage certificate. All the money we had was a small check from the Herald-Tribune, but one can’t live long on the profits from a quarterm. There was nothing to do but send for another photostat and tell our troubles to sympathetic John Lane in the hope that he could snip some of the red tape.

December third was Serge’s graduation day and, as the time drew near, I began to get jittery about his assignment. It came a few days ahead and was a pleasant anticlimax to my fears, for he was to report back at Davis.

The 478 Battalion was stationed at Mosquito Junction, a subdivision of Camp Davis and in his whole Army life it was the organization for which, as a whole, Serge seemed to have most enthusiasm and admiration.8

I had a GI Thanksgiving and part of a GI Christmas dinner. Christmas day got off to a bad start. Serge was mess officer in charge of the dinner and celebration, so I planned to go out to camp on the bus. But thousands of soldiers had come to town, only to find that all but two of the restaurants were closed, so I had to wait in line for hours. Of course, dinner was over by the time I got to Davis, but the mess sergeant had saved me a plate of turkey and fixin’s. Afterwards we had a party in the barracks with the other officers, who gallantly said I had brought them a real Christmas. I only wish I could have for they were to spend their next one in New Guinea.

Postscript
In June 1999, Ulrich and Serge Troubetzkoy, now in their eighties, shared the following reminiscence:

“In the hall just outside my room at Miss Sue McQueen’s,” wrote Ulrich, “there was a large chest. To me, it looked like a place to store quilts and blankets. But Miss Sue found a more interesting use for it.
She said it was her Hope Chest, but after she realized there was ‘no more hope,’ she told me she decided to use it for something she liked. I knew she love to give parties, but I hadn’t even guessed, until I raised the cover, that the locked Hope Chest was the place she kept all her Bourbon.”

Ulrich’s husband, Serge, continued: “I recall that at the commissary at Camp Davis there was a case of Bourbon in a corner and I inquired about it. I was told that it was ‘the very last case,’ so I bought it.

“I unpacked it in the room my wife had a Miss Sue McQueen’s in Wilmington and where I stayed when I was off duty. Then I opened the mail I had just received and learned that I was being ordered to Camp Ritchie, Maryland.

“At this point, Miss Sue knocked on the door. When she saw the Bourbon, she asked what I planned to do with ‘all that liquor.’

“I explained to her my present predicament and she offered to buy it instead of our paying the final rent on the room. So the last Bourbon from Camp Davis went into her Hope Chest.

“Years later, after the War ended and I returned from overseas, we went back to see Miss Sue. She still had one bottle, so we all celebrated.”

---

1 The Hotel Cape Fear, at 121 Chestnut Street, is now the Cape Fear Hotel Apartment building.

2 The Ocean Terrace, formerly known as the Seashore Hotel, suffered damage in 1954, during Hurricane Hazel, and burned to the ground in 1955. In 1962, it was replaced by the Blockade Runner.

3 World War II pin-up queen, Betty Grable, appeared on stage at Farnsworth Hall, the assembly building at Camp Davis. One of the GI’s, overwhelmed with Grable and her “Million Dollar Legs”, salvaged the drinking cup after the show and showed it off to a number of people, including Wilmington native Millie Botesky, a Camp Davis employee.

4 Sarah Johnston managed a restaurant at the Governor Dudley Mansion, 400 South Front Street.

---

5 Sue McQueen, her sister, Agnes Emerson, and Agnes’s daughter, Jane Emerson, lived at 318 South Front Street in a rambling house built by Solomon Fishblate in 1878. Virginia Nesbitt Jennewein is the present owner of the house that stands on what was once known as Sunset Hill, a favorite nineteenth century picnic spot before the Fishblate and Honnet houses were built.

6 James Iredell of Edenton was a U.S. Senator
and an associate justice on the first Supreme Court. Helen MacMillan, a Wilmington native and a direct descendant of James Iredell, was an artist. She and her fiancé, John Lane, took the Troubetzkys to Greenfield Lake on a number of occasions. While Helen painted, Ulrich composed poems. (Note: Sarah Johnston, manager of the restaurant at the Governor Dudley Mansion, was also a descendant of James Iredell, and was Helen MacMillan’s cousin.)

His “title” based on ownership of close to 25,000 acres of land, Roger Moore built Orton House in 1725. Orton had passed through the hands of a number of owners by the time the Troubetzkys first visited. After the war ended, James Laurence and Annie Gray Sprunt entertained the Troubetzkys several times at Orton Plantation. Ulrich, a born explorer, enjoyed poking around the thickets, swamps and inlets at Orton, but once found her way blocked by a “sizable alligator stretched out in the sun.”

Mosquito Junction was a low-lying, swampy section of Camp Davis, even more vulnerable to mosquitoes than the rest of southeastern N.C. Government officials ordered the digging of trenches to eradicate the pests, but the insects prevailed.

Catherine Alexius Emerson, Joan Emerson Teer, Ethel and Millie Botesky, Betsy Burney Wright, Joseph Sheppard, Jane Wright, and Mr. and Mrs. John D. Taylor have all been helpful in the creation of this issue of the Bulletin.

- Susan Block