The House That Robert Ruark Loved
by Lucy Ann Glover

I got to thinking about all the things that had happened to me with that House as a base; all the things I had done, all the things I had learned in that House and from that House. Most of the things that I value today had started in that House, started when I was a small, fat, cowlicked boy with lop-ears, spending as much time as I could in it. That House combined Christmas and Thanksgiving and Easter and summertime, in an ordered world of guns and dogs and boats and fish and ducks and quail. It was a cathedral of ancient times, when children were accorded dignity according to how they earned it, and adults were merely small boys grown older. That was not just a House, that House was Me.

From The Old Man's Boy Grows Older

The above picture shows the house - or as the author would have written, the House - as it looks today.

Photograph courtesy of Nancy Beeler.
In 1959, Robert Ruark’s novel, Poor No More, was published. A highly promoted bestseller, it received only lukewarm praise from the critics. In the region in which Ruark grew up, it received no praise.

The novel chronicled the life of one Craig Price, a ruthless, destructive business man for whom greed was the driving force. The characters who populated the book seemed, with few exceptions, created for the sole purpose of providing the protagonist an avenue for exploitation. This novel, which was partly autobiographical, contains portions that depict, with a gentleness missing in the remainder of the book, life in the small town of Southport, North Carolina, in the early days of the century. Within that town stands the house in which Ruark’s mother was born and in which he spent most holidays and vacations with his maternal grandparents, Charlotte Morse and Edward Hall Adkins. In his writing, the house occupies an almost maternal role, offering the nurture, warmth and stability that one might expect from a mother. It is in the passages devoted to this early life that one glimpses in Ruark any sentiment or nostalgia.

Because of the attachment, Ruark catches the reader by surprise in the first third of Poor No More by revealing that Mr. Price “rebought his grandfather’s old house in New Truro, North Carolina, completely redecorated it, and then summoned officials of the company which insured the house against fire, the village’s fire department, and the local constabulary…. Price walked inside the house. He returned unhurried. In a moment a fat greasy tongue of smoke licked out the open windows. In a short moment more huge flames seized the sky as the entire building caught, cracked, and roared into holocaust. In less than an hour the roof had caved, and the house was a smouldering heap of fragrant ash. Price… watched it burn with a curious air of satisfaction.”

The question that arises: Why? Why destroy - if only in print - the one remaining symbol of the boyhood described in his author’s note in the opening pages of The Old Man and the Boy. “Anybody who reads this book is bound to realize that I had a real fine time as a kid.”

In his sequel, The Old Man’s Boy Grows Older, published in 1961, Ruark wrote an entire essay on the restoration of the house, which had been lost to the family in the Depression years but subsequently purchased by Ruark in 1949. He described it warmly as sitting “proud and freshly painted today on its corner. Its flowers are cherished; its interior restored.”

Thus, the house received in the author’s treatments a significance rarely found in the structures that form the background of literary efforts. Like the boarding house in Thomas Wolfe’s You Can’t Go Home Again, the Southport home of the Adkins family achieved prominence beyond its hundred plus years because it nourished a major American writer who gave it character-like status in his works.

Pre-Depression Years

The two-story, multi-gabled house, built in 1890 by E.H. Adkins on the corner lot at 119 North Lord Street, is described by Carl Lounsbury in The Architecture of Southport as follows:

Machine-sawn brackets are paired beneath the cornice. Lancet windows are surrounded by round-edge shingles in the gables. The two porches along with the bay windows repeat the ornamental motifs of the gables thus giving the irregularly-shaped house a cohesive appearance. The interior woodwork consists of narrow machine-cut beaded boards set diagonally for wainscoting or used for ceilings over the bays. The door and window architraves arch slightly above and bow at the sides. The treatment is ubiquitous in houses in Southport of the 1880-1920 period and has been named the Southport bow.5

It was in this house that Charlotte Morse and Edward Hall Adkins brought up their son, named for his father, and their two daughters, Mae6 and Charlotte Morse, the latter born in Southport in January of 1893. When Charlotte married twenty-four-year old Robert Chester Ruark, also of Southport, on November 26, 1914, the couple moved to Wilmington where Robert, Jr., was born one year and one month and three days later. His certificate of birth shows the parents’ address to be 1421 Orange Street.

Wilmington city directories locate the Ruarks at a total of three addresses on Orange Street until 1919 when they moved to 117 Nun Street7 where they remained until an unknown date in 1920. They moved to Market Street in 1922, their residence listed as RFD #1, which seems likely to have been the same address as the 1930 entry of 2911 Market Street. The spacious two-story brick house became home to the paternal grandparents, Hanson Kelly Ruark and Caroline Effie Grissom Ruark, who occupied a suite of rooms on the second floor, as well as to young Ruark and his parents. In those years leading to

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1 Southport is renamed New Truro in Poor No More; Wilmington, Kensington.
4 Robert Ruark, The Old Man’s Boy Grows Older (New York: Henry Holt, 1961), 290
5 Carl Lounsbury, The Architecture of Southport (Southport Historical Society, 1979), 49.
6 Mae Adkins McKeithan is sometimes referred to as May.
7 This is the address which Ruark mentioned in Women in conjunction with Mary Black Boiles Davis pushing him off the porch.
the Depression Robert, Sr., an accountant for J.W. Brooks, a wholesale grocery firm located on the Wilmington waterfront, provided an affluent life that included servants, two cars, and frequent entertaining. The period was marred by Charlotte’s inability to bear another child. In March of 1927, the Ruarks adopted an infant son, David Orrell.

The house figures in the heavily autobiographical novel The Honey Badger, but Ruark describes it without the affection expressed toward the Adkins residence.

The family remained in the Market Street house until 1933 when finances forced them to move. Soon after their departure the residence burned to the ground, never to be rebuilt. It seems likely that the destruction of the Market Street house served as a precursor to the burning of the Adkins/Price house in Poor No More.

Readers of Ruark’s works know that he was no stranger to exaggeration nor to the manipulation of occurrences and characters. His descriptions, however, of the house in Southport suggest a truth that goes beyond the architectural details. Of the exterior, he wrote in Poor No More:

Old Sam Price owned the only strip of private concrete in the town. It was fifty feet long, and stretched across the front of his house and side yard. The square, two-story house behind the sidewalk was proud and yellow on the best corner in town, sheltered by a grove of moss-bearded live oaks. The sun-reflecting, crushed-oyster shell street which spread past its veranda traveled two long cheerful blocks down to the waterfront.9

His detailed description provided the reader the flavor of the property as he continued:

In the side yard to the right of the house there was an enormous waxy-flowered magnolia tree in which lived a succession of mockingbirds, who kept the night nervously vibrant with their scattered silver notes of song. Behind, a large Smyrna fig tree dropped its bursted purple fruits at precisely the same time the glossy-green June bugs came to eat them. In back, Miss Caroline cherished an arbor which produced the only Malaga grapes in the community, and which were very highly regarded by a profusion of scarlet tanagers, sparrows, bluejays, and catbirds.

Underneath the house there was a sanctuary for small boys...who could always find something new and different to do under the house on rainy days.10

Ruark sketched a household of warmth and comfort as he led the reader inside the home:

Sam Price’s hard-pine house was classic of its time. The front room constituted the parlor, which bore the stuff aspect of a room in which only the preacher on his monthly visit could expect to be comfortable. A large stove wearing the trademark Kalamazoo provided

8 Three stillborn infant boys are buried in unmarked graves in Oakdale Cemetery.
9 Ruark, Poor, 7.
10 Ruark, Ibid., 8.

heat, and the furniture was of the plus-prickly horsehair type which does not invite a visitor to tarry. The pictures were mostly of small fat children being protected by large shaggy dogs.

The other rooms accepted casual warmth from the fireplaces. The only comfortable downstairs room was the kitchen, which reached futilely toward the dining room via a sort of pantry, in which the family generally took its meals. The kitchen, which owned a large wood-burning stove gave onto the back porch, which contained a pump shelf and granite wash-basin in which it was customary to wash your hands before meals. A soiled roller towel was fixed to the outer wall of the kitchen. As a modern addition the porch also contained a toilet in which Miss Caroline kept the

In the side yard of the Adkins-Ruark house in Southport Jack Newton faces toward the camera while his friend, Billy Watts White, plays with a toy. This picture, taken about 1939, is used courtesy of Brooks Newton Preik.
Cubeb cigarettes which were supposed to relieve the asthma which afflicted her, and made her more tempers.

Two steps away was a closet in which bad little boys were sometimes locked for their sins, and the punishment was made less unbearable by reason that Sam Price kept his arsenal of shotguns and rifles there.

Over to the right was the sitting room - a dingy little cubicle which held one comfortable chair, one uncheerful fireplace, and a hand-cranked big-horned gramophone on which the old man played his favorite music. The music consisted of such lugubrious ballads as "The Wreck of the Old Ninety-Seven," "Birmingham Jail," and the "Sinking of the Titanic." 11

A House in Foreclosure

The house had served the Adkins family for almost forty years when Charlotte Morse Adkins died on April 28, 1928. She was too know the second phase in the life of the house, which began with the crash of 1929 and from which the family never recovered. Captain Adkins died August 7, 1932, at his daughter's Market Street residence. Funeral services were held at his Southport home conducted by the local Methodist pastor with pallbearers whose names testify to his long association with the river pilots. Among the honorary pallbearers was R.R. Stone, "the rich old fellow who held the mortgage" 12 and "who just naturally foreclosure it, as was his right." Ruark continued in The Old Man's Boy Grows Older.

Well, the family busted up and scattered every whichaway... nobody like ever making any money at all, so the old fellow who now owned the House decided to rent it, after a decent period of mourning, but he swore he'd never sell the old place to anybody but a member of the family, so long as he lived. He loved the House, too, most as much as and maybe more than some of the people who had eaten and drunk in it and hunted and fished out of it. 13

Deed Book 59 of Brunswick Court shows that by decree of Superior Court, dated April 8, 1935, in an action entitled "R.R. Stone, plaintiff vs Mae Adkins McKeithan, Admix., Charlotte Adkins Ruark and Dr. E.H. Adkins, Defendants," the property was advertised and on May 9, 1935, at noon, it was sold at public auction for cash for $2,516.30.

In Poor No More, Ruark described the fate of the house under the new ownership:

It got rented. It got rented to trash - poor white and trash. It had their dung in the fireplaces, and dirty paw prints on the walls. The wiring hung in loops. It smelt like a nest of goats. The roof sagged and the porch was falling down. It was a poor house, a lonely house, a house that had been used and abused. It stank. The weed-choked grass was unmowed, the cement sidewalk cracked, the fig tree ruined, the garage a rotting wreck. Everything in and around this house had been soiled and fouled by the dirty hands of other people, unworthy people, and in the process the only youth I care to recall was filthed. Sullied, perhaps, is a better milder word. 14

Wilmington author and editor Brooks Newton Preik, whose family was among the tenants of the house, refutes this description, and recalls that her father, a friend from childhood of Ruark, Sr., felt betrayed at the twisting and abuse of local lore that Ruark employed in the writing of this spite-filled book. The Newton family lived in the Adkins house during the years of World War II. They had wanted to purchase the property, but for reasons unknown to Mrs. Preik, they were unable to. The Newtons moved at the end of the war. The house continued to be a rental property for several years and may have seen some deterioration, but the extreme that Ruark put forth seems born out of an angry imagination. Mrs. Preik's comments point out the danger of reading as literal truth any of Ruark's passages that are heavily autobiographical.

Ruark described the house again in The Old Man's Boy Grows Older. His depiction is less angry but hardly kind:

It was a sad House as so many houses become pathetic, when they are no longer filled with tumbling children and sprawling dogs. The Old Man's house had been filthed and abused. For seventeen years the strangers who lived in it beat it up. The rosebushes died and the chandelier, with the tinkling glass prisms, fell down - that chandelier which had seen Christmas dinners with loaded boards of wild turkey and venison, standing just a wiff away for Galena's kitchen, which came the odors of spicy fruit cake and frizzing ham and baking cookies. 15

Ruark relates in his essay that he saw the house in the described state soon after World War II before he had attained the success as a nationally syndicated writer that enabled him in October of 1949 to purchase the property:

I went to see the man people called a skinflint, and told him that I was the Old Man's boy grown considerable older. He said he remembered me. I don't know if he actually did. But this old man - he was sere and crisp - frail as a leaf before it falls - that people called a skinflint said he would be glad to sell me the House back, and for exactly as much as the amount of the mortgage for which he had foreclosed it!

Perhaps he was a skinflint, but he could have gotten three times as much as the mortgage warranted, for the country was fat with postwar prosperity and housing was acutely short. Skinflint or not, he had awaited death on the strength of his promise to keep the House in the family. I bought back the House, not because I could use it but because I need it.

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11 Ruark, Poor, 7-8.
13 Ruark, Grows Older, 286.
14 Ruark, Poor, 205.
15 Ruark, Grows Older, 288.
Ruark ended this essay, published in 1957, on the happiest of notes:

The House sits proud and freshly painted today on its corner. Its flowers are cherished, its interior restored. A woman who was born in the House, my mother, is its chatelaine. My father watches television in the back living room. The Old Man’s House is free of strangers and makes a happy harbor for cheerful ghosts. The magnolia and the mockingbird are safe again, and the flowers bloom, and I somehow thought the the old man might like to know it.  

In short, a nationally recognized writer restores his parents to the family home where they might once again know warmth and security and loveliness. The house, now in Adkins-Ruark hands, knew a physical resurrection. The family who occupied it was destined to continue on the self-destructive course begun in the Great Depression. The house entered its third phase - the phase of Robert Ruark ownership.

A House in Ruark Hands

The downward spiral of the Ruark family began before Robert, Jr., entered the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. With the emergence of supermarkets, jobs were cut in the J.W. Brooks brokerage house and the position held by Mr. Ruark was eliminated. In 1931, when Ruark graduated from New Hanover High School in Wilmington, an advertisement for Jefferson Standard Life Insurance Company in the school’s yearbook attests to young Robert’s father’s position as a special agent. Although he would eventually become a certified public accountant, steady employment eluded Robert, Sr.

Charlotte Ruark contracted measles in 1930 and the disease left her asthmatic. For relief, doctors prescribed narcotics to which she became addicted. It was during this decade of the 1930s that both parents developed an addiction to alcohol as well. The family - all grandparents dead and Robert, Jr., at the University in Chapel Hill - embarked on a nomadic existence that makes them difficult to trace.

For several months, in Ruark’s senior year, the family rented an apartment near the university but after the fall quarter they returned to Wilmington. The city directory shows them dwelling during 1936 at 145 South Third Street while Ruark, Sr., was employed by Tidewater Power Company. Conversations with local citizens reveal other addresses within New Hanover County, including the vicinity of Wrightsville Beach and an upstairs apartment at 2303 Market Street. They disappeared from the Wilmington City Directory by 1938. Brooks Newton Preik recalls that they resided in the Kate Stuart House in Southport in the early 1940s.

The Pilot of Norfolk, Virginia (November 6, 1949), noted:

Columnist Ruark’s parents have made their home in Norfolk since August, 1948. His father is a public accountant who left Wilmington, N.C. during the war to become a field auditor for the Rural Electrification Administration and later an examiner for the Federal Power Commission. His mother, whose wit is as sharp as his, is presently a patient in a Richmond hospital. She has been seriously ill for several weeks.

Robert, Jr., married Virginia Webb in August of 1938. Evidently she tried to support her husband in the care of his parents. This letter from Virginia, dated 16 December 1950, reveals the deterioration that had occurred in both parents and the frustration the couple experienced in trying to manage a situation clearly beyond their control. It also reveals a generous side to Ruark that is not well known, for he had begun covering his father’s bad checks and debts as early as 1942. He continued to

16 Ruark, Grows Older, 290-291.

Robert Ruark, Jr. at age 19, pictured in the Yackety-Yack, is courtesy of the North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina Library at Chapel Hill.

17 “Columnist Bob Ruark Issues Another Collection.” (Norfolk, Virginia) Pilot, 6 Nov. 1949, in Robert Chester Ruark, Jr., Papers in Folder 150 (B) #4001, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
The Ruarks house at 2911 Market Street in Wilmington burned in 1933, never to be rebuilt.
Picture courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. John M. Bates.

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Do so until his father's death. Paralleling this responsibility, he took on the thousands of dollars expended for his parents' medical care - a medical care that could only be described as extravagant. Virginia wrote:

_I have had another call from South Carolina. Dr. Yost is justified in complaining that your continued letters and telephone calls demanding that Charlotte be released to you are upsetting to Charlotte and retarding the effectiveness of her treatment._

Charlotte was then residing in a sanitarium called Edgewood in Orangeburg, South Carolina. Virginia's letter continues:

_Charlotte has been in a sick woman and probably would have died unless Bobbie had taken over. And you would definitely have been in jail. Now by what right do you think you can demand Charlotte's release, question Bobbie's judgment, quarrel with the doctor's decision, and generally make a nuisance of yourself? I assure you that I am tired of the repeat and repeat of the same pattern of our getting yourself and Charlotte in such a disgraceful shape that your son must bail you out. You have been mostly responsible for nearly driving your son insane. He was as close to insanity after your next to the last breakup as any mental case ever seen. We are both sick, weary, and disgusted with opening the many, many letters beginning - 'I am writing to you concerning your father's indebtedness...'. We have not given you your current address to any of these people in the hope that without the responsibility of Charlotte you could make a new start and possibly pay off your indebtedness._

It was in 1949 that Ruark purchased the Adkins house, a move he ascribed in _The Old Man's Boy Grows Older_ to a personal interest. "I had a fixation on that house." His correspondence to his father makes clear, however, that he had another purpose in undertaking the restoration of the property. Dated September 28, 1954, the letter moves rapidly from an affable beginning to a body of unfeigned anger:

_First off I want you to know that I am delighted that you and mother are moving into the house at Southport which is why I bought it in the first place. The house is yours for as long as you both shall live..._ Ruark wastes little time detailing the frustration with which he lives in dealing with both his parents and with his adopted brother David:

_As you are doubtless aware I bought my grandfather's house expressly for the purpose of containing you and my mother in your old age. At the time I was heavily beset financially what with maintaining you and mother in assorted sanitariums for alcohol and drugs, educating David and paying off bad debts and worthless checks. Whether or not you

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18 Virginia Ruark to Robert C. Ruark, Sr., 18 Dec. 1950, Folder 183, Southern Historical Collection

19 Ruark, _Grows Older_, 288
can believe it my experiment in being a good son cost me just on $100,000, a severely damaged nervous system and a monumental debt from which I have only just emerged. At 26 when I entered the navy I was paying off one of our Morris plan notes, and have more or less continued in the same vein since then.

Immediately I was out of the navy and embarked on what seemed to be a promising career my time was equally divided between work, my wife’s illness and the gay childish pranks that you and mother indulged in which always wound up with me finding out policeman [sic] with one hand and looking for sanitariums whilst trying to get a column written so I could eat too. During this period I undertook to educate your son, not mine, and to give him something of the home-life and security which you and mother in your late adolescence were unable to afford. At no time during this period did I receive cooperation. What I received was collect phone calls and urgent telegrams and long, generally lying letters. Since I must admit that mother’s skill in covering up the fact that you were a hopeless drunkard during that period was rather magnificent, almost as magnificent as her guile in covering up her own fondness the bottle, as well as some minor vices, such as narcotics.

Three pages later, Ruark advises that he will continue to send an established amount of money:

... plus the enclosed check for $150 to cover the costs of your moving. If I find when I return in November that you are either working or unable to work I will readjust the money allowance accordingly. In the meantime, I should very much not like to hear about any checks bouncing about, since I have often and painfully pointed out that to write a check when you have no money, is exactly the same crime as stealing from someone’s purse or pocket.

You may count on your old age as secure within my power if any sort of cooperation is shown, but I know Southport and its assorted temptations, and I do not intend to finance either a free restaurant, a home for stray, a hangout for drunks....

He concludes:

I hope you will be very happy in Southport and mine and Virginia’s very best wishes to go to you both for a long and pleasant old age in the house of my grandfather.

The letter refers to a projected moving date of sometime before October first which would have placed his parents’ arrival at approximately the same time as the arrival of Hurricane Hazel. Although this storm was of devastating magnitude along the North Carolina coastline, the Adkins house withstood its onslaught with comparatively small damage. In his column of November 22, 1954, Ruark wrote:

My grandpa builded a house upon the sands some 75 years ago, and he builded it in a little town called

Southport, North Carolina, which took the full force of the last hurricane. I have just received some pictures of what the gale did to some other houses in town, which was plenty. But grandpa’s house is still there, solid on its stilts.

Extant family correspondence in the years following the senior Ruark’s move to Southport is meager and concentrates largely on the medical problems of the parents. An exception is a letter from Charlotte to her son dated November 25, 1957. She wrote:

The pecans have shown this year a result of fertilizing, we have saved the small tree by tree surgery, and have a bumper crop. We have long stem roses, as in the spring, beautiful chrysanthemums [sic] and will have camellias by Thanksgiving. There are beautiful blooms still outside on the yuccas [sic]. In January I shall plant the climbing roses. Nothing has done so much for this place as the lattice fence, both in beauty and usefulness. Tomorrow is our forty-third wedding anniversary, and we both are fine. We have had a very colorful life together, good and bad, for which I am thankful. Only through comparison do we gain sense of value. Life is one continuous fight, and only those who lack an inner strength of purpose fail. I have never enjoyed anything so much as the porch. Thank you with all my heart for affording me that pleasure. It is proving to be a year-round asset. Words fail me when I think of the care you have, and are giving me, which has enabled me to really live in happiness in my 79 years of age, for neither of us are old.... I love you very much. Mother.

A letter from Ruark to his brother David, then employed by the Wilmington Chamber of Commerce, and his wife Kay, expresses congratulations on the birth of a baby: "[T]hank God somebody in the family produced something of value." He continues:

I can explain to you in one short paragraph why I did not come to Wilmington, which is merely because it bothers me and there is no good to be served by seeing the old man drunk again, or mother up to her old tricks.

I will continue to supply the money and will continue to count on you to supply the supervision as you are there, God pity you, and I am not, God be thanked. I can see no point in my tearing myself apart over a lost cause, and if my people are not a lost cause I have not met one lately. You cannot say that this is due to neglect from their son, who has taken as much a pounding as any son is called on to take. For your information I have lost all feeling for these people and will continue to look after them until I die, because they never will, but the supervision on scene belongs to you. I gather the old man is sober again because his note of today mentions rather effectively that the house needs

21 Robert Ruark newspaper column, 1954 (Newspaper unknown, exact date unknown) Southern Historical Collection.

22 Charlotte Adkins Ruark to Robert Ruark, Jr., 25 Nov. 1957, Folder 150 (B), Southern Historical Collection.
This letter was written almost ten years to the month after correspondence from an unidentified person who signed as BM. There is a poignancy in the earlier letter that stems from the writer's awareness that beneath the veneer of arrogance and total self-concern there lived a "good son." Dated August 25, 1949, from Saratoga Springs, New York, the letter reads:

I do hope you have made your decision in the South - Sometimes one has to do things that wring the heart but is the best thing for those for whom one has to care.

After you have done it, clear your mind and heart for you are a good son - all your instincts are right - you like to appear a little tough but you are a softy and would not hurt any one except in the public interest - Where it is concerned you are a true newspaper man. All of which means I think you are swell and I am proud of your friendship.

The total deterioration of the family was to occur in the early 1960s, resulting in the eventual release of the Adkins house from the Ruark family. A letter from Virginia Ruark, dated March 4, 1962, outlines the situation:

IHad a letter from Bobby's Aunt Mae and she tells me the following. His father is very ill and hospitalized, the doctor says is dying of lung cancer. His mother has gone around the bottle with the bottle and they have her in a State Hospital... really a mental institution, but she is due for release in two weeks, which is bad news to all. Meanwhile his brother took to the bottle seriously, has turned himself in to the same hospital and his wife has left him, taking the baby. Whew! what a family. I've called Aunt Mae and told her I would authorize what expenses she needs to take care of things... she is the only one in the family that Bobby and I trust, but poor dear she is getting old and this is quite a handful for her.

A letter to lawyer S. Bunn Frink in Southport from Virginia directs:

I would like David Ruark evicted immediately from the family house and at the same time I would like him warned by the police against arson, as I understand he has threatened to set fire to it. I would like him to understand that if there is any damage I will prosecute him to the fullest extent of the law. Mrs. McKeithan has agreed to get the house in order after his departure, change the locks and generally oversee the condition of the house. Mr. Ruark Sr.'s condition I understand is critical.

Robert Ruark, Sr., died on August 25, 1962, at Dosher Memorial Hospital in Southport and was buried from St. Philips Episcopal Church. Presumably his primary residence was the Adkins house. Robert Ruark, Jr., did not attend his father's funeral. By November of that year Charlotte Ruark was a most reluctant resident at Grotten Nursing Home in Wilmington.

In March of 1963 Ruark requested that Mr. Frink initiate the procedures that would result in the sale of the property. His letter to the lawyer reads, in part:

There are a few articles I should like Aunt Mae to take out and keep, either for me or herself, and they are precisely: Small up-right piano... television set (for Aunt Mae if she wants it)...a small Sheraton butlers tray, coffee table... and an antique corner whatnot cabinet which Aunt Mae will recognize. There will of course be some personal things of my mothers, including clothes and possible silver or china which might be advisable for Aunt Mae to remove, but I should like the basic furniture and furnishings to be sold with the house.

In a letter to the lawyer in April, Ruark summed up his position:

I too hate to give up the property, but it serves no useful purpose in my life as my mother is a lost cause, I do not think that I could ever live with all the old ghosts in Southport.

Aunt Mae, working with Bunn Frink, accomplished all that Ruark had requested, but in a letter of April 26 she reported that she had found it necessary to house Charlotte in the Adkins home. Detailing the various residences in which Charlotte had lived since leaving Grotten Nursing Home, Mae wrote:

I simply cannot find anyone to take her in and she refuses to go back to the Nursing Home and I doubt seriously if they would have her. She is the greatest problem I have ever had or hope to have.

Charlotte consented to stay in the house until it was sold, and Mae located a companion who worked half days. Aunt Mae had hopes that Ruark, who resided in Spain, would return to the States and assist her in dealing with Charlotte. Ruark, who by now was divorcing Virginia, and who had his own severe health problems, largely related to heavy consumption of alcohol, refused to return. He promised to discuss the problem with his agent, Harold Matson. Writing to his agent, he said:

[What can be done toward putting her in a hospital sanitorium [sic] but you know the past history as well as I. She gets in and talks herself straight out again. It would be a mercy if she was out of her own misery as well as ours, meanwhile I am frightened that she]

23 Robert Ruark to David Ruark, 30 Oct. 1959, Folder 150 (B), Southern Historical Collection.
24 BM (unknown) to Robert Ruark, 25 August, 1949, Folder 11, Southern Historical Collection.
25 Virginia Ruark to Alan Ritchie, 4 March 1962, Folder 150 (1), Southern Historical Collection.
26 Virginia Ruark to S. Bunn Frink, 12 July 1962, Folder 118, Southern Historical Collection.
27 Robert Ruark to S. Bunn Frink, 15 March 1963, Folder 118, Southern Historical Collection.
28 Robert Ruark to S. Bunn Frink, 3 April 1963, Folder 118, Southern Historical Collection.
29 Mae McKeithan to Robert Ruark, 26 April 1963, Folder 118, Southern Historical Collection.
will burn the house down.  

Ruark thought the Southport house worth more than the $10,000 appraisal figure quoted in correspondence of the following year. Frink explained, “The appraisal, no doubt, appears rather low to you, but the demand for old homes in Southport at this time is almost nil.”  

By the summer of 1963 Charlotte had been committed to a private facility in Durham, for which Ruark agreed to pay $100 a week. The house had not sold in February of 1964 when realtor Dosher Ruark contacted Matson about the state of the property. Aunt Mae had died, her daughter-in-law had cleaned out her apartment and had taken the items that Ruark requested to the Adkins house. Dosher described the condition of the house which was listed for $15,000:

The house needs a new roof, the walls inside need to be completely redone as the paint and wallpaper is peeling off. The house does not have a heating system, there are Gas connections in each room. The outside of the house needs painting, the Porches are pretty well rotted out plus several minor things in need of repair.  

The house remained on the market until after the death of Ruark on July 1, 1965, in Spain. He was six months short of fifty years old. Although his death was directly attributable to internal hemorrhaging, his continued consumption of alcohol had aggravated his deterioration. He was buried in Palamos, Spain, where he had resided since 1952. No family members attended. Charlotte died in Dorothea Dix Hospital in Raleigh on February 15, 1966, and was buried beside her husband in an unmarked grave on the Adkins lot at Oakdale Cemetery. His divorced wife, Virginia, died from lung cancer on July 18, 1966. The Adkins house was purchased for $8,000 from the estate in 1969. Although the present owners have altered the interior, the renovations have left the exterior intact, and the visitor sees the house true to its initial ownership.

There is no one answer as to why Ruark burned down the house in Poor No More. Perhaps the pain associated with it in his years of adulthood overtook the warmth of youth. Perhaps he wearied of the fixation with the house that turned into an immense frustration. Or perhaps he determined to move on.

No matter. The house stands today as a reminder not only of a time and place long passed but also of the writer who depicted in words a particular era and whose Old Man publications have remained in print almost half a century. No small accomplishment.

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30 Robert Ruark to Mae McKeithan, 2 May 1963, Folder 118, southern Historical Collection.
31 S. Bunn Frink to Robert Ruark, 6 May 1963, Folder 118, Southern Historical Collection.
32 Dosher Ruark to Harold Matson, 18 February 1964, Folder 118, Southern Historical Collection

Photograph courtesy of Nancy Beeler.