

## Chapter 18. A Move to Clemson University

It is not easy to leave a professorship of twenty-five years at a distinguished university. We academics love our lives. It is a privilege to be able to spend decades prospecting along the boundaries of knowledge and striving to pass on that which we acquire. Rice University was a wonderful place for me to do this. It has become one of our universities of distinction, and it has the luxury of being able to support excellent teaching while restricting teaching load so that scholars have time for original scholarship. Rice does these things extremely well. Many professors, probably most, are unwilling to leave such an ideal setting. Our universities become part of our identities, and the most meaningful parts of our aspirations are linked to our intellectual home. Leaving can seem to be a loss of self. But in the 1980s that is what I was doing.

There comes a time when one wants a fresh start, and perhaps also a geographic change to a setting that tugs more at the heart. Since our 1983 wedding, Nancy and I sensed the weight of so much personal history in Houston. My failed marriages and their many artifacts lay all about us. All of my friends had come to know me with previous wives, and we shared a palpable wish for freedom from that. It was the desire to go forward in our lives in a totally new and secure relationship outside of the ruins of past mistakes. To relocate seemed the way to focus on our lives without constant reminders. So during the 1980s we agreed to check out other university opportunities that met our goals. Those goals were very clear: a comparable position in another fine university, one that needed me for its goals, but also one in which I could pursue my research ambitions; a suitable setting for a team working on data from *Compton Gamma Ray Observatory*, where I was Co-Investigator; a more rural eastern or Midwestern setting; near to natural outdoor spaces that alleviate the oppressions of unending city and unending summer. To seek such opportunity at the highest level we had to activate the plan long before I seemed near retirement, while the fire for research and leadership was still strong. Near age fifty is such a time. So in response to job advertisements, we visited several universities that had interest in me and that we felt might match our goals.

Emotional aspects of personality enter such decisions. I had clung to many things, fearful of their loss. One great early loss had been the farms of my families, my emotional bases in Iowa. And I feel sure that covered a deeper more infantile clinging. So I had clung to Grandma Kembery's farm, to my dying Grandma Clayton, to the elm trees on Fontanelle square, to our De Soto that brought us to Texas, to University Park Elementary School, to summers back on the farms, to the world of Sherry Lane, to my golf clubs and my stamp collection, to old family photographs and to the thousands of new ones that I took to remember my children and my scientific colleagues and mounted into picture books, and on and on. I am still surprised that I did not similarly cling to Rice University. But by then something had changed, some umbilical need had been cut, some childish personality traits discarded.

On the other hand I possess the personality of an adventurer. I was the first among our kin to attend university, to seek a graduate degree, to move away from Texas to California, to surf in the Pacific and to climb mountains in the Sierra Nevada, to sample Europe with seven-year periods of residence in England and then in Germany, to divorce, even to intellectually leave the earth for science in space. I was never bound down, restricted by my losses. I flew forward. If there is paradox in me, it was the competing

tugs of parental influences. Surely adventurousness derived from my father's lead, who left farm life and thereby took us from the farm. It derived from a father who flew airplanes, and who challenged me, "OK then. You fly it."

The fourth of the universities to which we made recruiting visits was Clemson University in the northwestern foothills of South Carolina. From the moment we descended over snow-flocked farms and forests and landed in Greenville, the area captured our joint romantic sense of a simpler world. And Clemson reached out for us with a sincere hospitality for which the south is known. Clemson University wanted me to establish a leading astrophysics research group within their department of Physics and Astronomy. I outlined a program that I called *Nuclear and Gamma-Ray Astrophysics* that was unified by the discipline of nuclear physics in the universe and whose research would probe the nucleosynthesis of the elements, the gamma-ray-line astronomy of radioactivity, and the isotopes within stardust. Clemson University had rich century-old traditions as the land-grant university of the state of South Carolina. It began romantically on the plantation estate of John C. Calhoun (1782-1850), the celebrated US senator, Cabinet Minister, Vice-President and political philosopher who had led South Carolina during slavery and whose son-in-law Thomas Green Clemson had, after the devastation of the Civil War, donated the entire plantation to the state of South Carolina for a school for the scientific study of agriculture. The small town of Calhoun later changed its name to Clemson.

During that recruiting visit, Nancy and I had time free to explore the housing and the towns in the area. We did not find here the trendy affluence of the rural northeast, but rather simple small towns of late Victorian vintage facing troubling economies. They did remind me of the homes and businesses of boyhood Fontanelle. We had been sent a small tourist flyer about "Silk Stocking Hill" in Seneca, seven miles west of the university. We turned slowly onto West South First Street, creeping along in admiration of the solid old fashioned homes. After one block of what seemed to be a park, I pulled to a stop before the first house on the right.

"Wow. Look at that one!" I exclaimed.

"It's wonderful", Nancy said.

The large and stately Victorian home was not only grand but seemed to be a part of that park. Suddenly Nancy pointed to a small handwritten sign on a wooden stake by the front walk: *For Sale by Owner*. Amazed by that sign we stepped out of the car and looked around briefly, two hearts beating hard for this solid and distinguished home that



*George Warren Gignilliat House, Christmas 1989*

seemed with each glance to have our names written on it. Somewhat perplexed at the lack of an answer to the phone number, we entered the Lunney Museum across the street. Its curator, Betty Plisco, said,

“Oh yes, it’s Thomas Gignilliat who has the house for sale. He lives just next door to the house”. She gave us his phone number.

After arranging an interview, we visited Thomas Gignilliat in his lovely Georgian Revival home from the 1920s. Thomas, who was to become a great friend, confirmed that the house was for sale. It had been built in 1898 by his grandfather George Warren Gignilliat, the leading businessman of the town of Seneca following its establishment in 1873 after two railroad lines crossed here.

“The family calls it *the big house*”, he commented, offering the first clue that this was a precious home to a large family of descendents. After explaining that I expected to be offered a professorship at Clemson University, and that we were very interested in buying the house, I asked the price, somewhat holding my breath.

“\$150,000”, Thomas replied.

We were stunned. Another grandson of the builder, Frank Adams, came over to guide us through the house. As we walked through we became increasingly certain. The floors were solid and a beautiful mix of narrow-gauge oak and “heart pine”, the dark, hard center of the hardwood longleaf pine from which great southern homes were constructed. The twelve-foot ceilings and two sets of mahogany “pocket doors” took our breath away. Excitedly we noted that the house was in original structural condition. Because only the family had lived in it until now, no amateur architects had modified it at any point. The load-bearing walls of the walk-in basement were solid and plumb. Original glass-plate windows, some topped by stained-glass uppers, gave charmingly wavy views of the glorious grounds around.

“We want to buy it,” I said to Thomas. Our minds were made up.

When he explained that the price did not include the park to its east, I immediately said that we wanted the entire land belonging to this historic house included in the sale. This was the surrounding four acres of what had originally been shown on the sale plat for the town as a small thirteen acre farm adjacent to the downtown square. Thomas’s father, the builder’s son, had acquired the western nine acres when he built his house next door. The Gignilliat family had built seven of the houses on Silk Stocking Hill.

“I have not yet officially been offered the professorship, but I expect it very soon”, I warned.

“Well, I won’t hold you to it if you don’t get the position”, Thomas offered. “And we can include the whole four acres”, Thomas added, apparently having decided that we were what the family wanted for Gignilliat House.