

ENTERTAINMENT

Chasing Shadows: Nightengale's journey, from Berlin to bees

by Pam Richardson Guest Columnist

Published 10:41 a.m. ET Dec. 30, 2020 | Updated 11:47 a.m. ET Dec. 30, 2020

A few rotting pilings and some joists from a long-gone elevated walkway are all that remain of the landing at an old apiary off Depot Creek just after it leaves Lake Wimico. Deep mud and thick vegetation along the creek bank deter exploration, but about 600 feet into the woods lies an ancient shell mound, visible on Google Earth.

A century ago, the old shell mound was home to a small cabin and a collection of beehives owned by Clara Nightengale of Apalachicola.

Clara Victoria Elisabeth Korte was born in Germany in 1869 and died at Alligator Point in 1969. Her long life was marked by her share of work, love, success and heartache but, unlike many. Clara possessed an adventuresome spirit, a sense of can-do and derring-do, that led her to experiences from which others might have shied away. A great-nephew describes her, quite simply, as a “marvel.”

In 1888, 19-year-old Clara married Paul Arnold Nachtigall in Berlin. Three years later, she traveled in steerage aboard a steamship bound for New York with husband Paul, a locksmith; their 1-year-old son, and Paul’s father, a carpenter. The ship’s manifest gives the family’s destination as Minnesota, evidence their arrival in the town of Clarissa, Minnesota was not accidental, but planned. Somewhere along the way the family’s surname was anglicized to Nightengale.

Clara and Paul settled in and had a few more children, but then something awful happened. No details have survived among the descendants, only the oft-repeated story that “their first crop of children froze to death, and then they moved to Florida.” (Not far from Clarissa, there is a cemetery that contains a headstone engraved with “Unice Nightengale, August 1896 - May 1897,” and alongside it three unmarked graves, but we have no verification any of these were Clara’s children.)

Why the family chose to come to Apalachicola is a mystery, but come they did. In 1900, Paul Nightengale was living here with his brother and their mother, both of whom had followed their family to the US. The two young men had jobs at a door factory. Clara is not on that census and may have been en route from Minnesota. We know she was in Apalachicola by at least 1902 when she conceived and gave birth to her daughter, Beatrice, who joined her sister Frances, the only surviving child born in Minnesota. This was also the year Paul's father died in Minnesota.

Around 1905, Paul got a job working for the railroad, helping to bring the first train to Apalachicola. Buried away in family papers is a photo of him on a handcar, lean, mustached, and smoking a corncob pipe. One of his pleasures was boating, but this, sadly, led to another tragedy; in 1908, he got caught on the water in a severe storm and drowned. Clara, not yet 40, had left her homeland, moved from one state to another, and lost several children, her father-in-law and, most recently, her husband. On top of her grief, she had to figure out a way to support herself and her two girls.

Inexplicably, no members of the Nightengale family are found on Apalachicola's 1910 census. Paul's mother had presumably died and his brother had gone off to Iowa. However, during the ensuing decade, Clara began working as a "practical nurse," and it is likely she also started up her apiary.

By 1919, she had enough money to buy a house at 56 Seventh Street in Apalachicola. The front door of the house faces Gorrie Square and the alley between Sixth and Seventh streets, so Clara used "6½ Street" as her address for the next four decades, renting out part of the house to supplement the income she earned working both as a nurse in a private home and as an apiarist. Exactly how much time she spent there is, however, debatable.

Some specific information about the goings-on at Clara's apiaries comes from a 2004 master's thesis by Kelly Hockersmith, then a student of archaeologist Dr. Nancy White at the University of South Florida. Hockersmith interviewed local beekeeper L.L. Lanier, Jr and local historian George Core, both now deceased. These two men, along with an unidentified "informant," attested to the location of Clara's apiary and a "nice" one-room house on the old shell mound on Depot Creek. Picking that site was intentional as it protected both the cabin and the bee colonies from inundation when high water in the Apalachicola River caused the creek to rise. Lanier said Clara entered the honey business to put her daughters through college. Since Frances entered nursing school around 1910 and Beatrice did the same about a decade later, it's a good bet Clara started keeping bees at some point in that 10-year period.

Beekeeping is hard work and requires a lot of brawn when barrels filled with 600 or 700 pounds of honey have to be moved around. Clara stood 5 foot 6 inches and was of stocky, muscular build, but even with her fierce independence, she needed help. This was all the more evident after the time Clara went solo to her apiary, broke her arm, and had to get back to town in her boat all by herself. George Core revealed that Clara began living with, but was not married to, a German named “Mr. Beneki... a little bald-headed fellow [who, in contrast to Clara] was not outgoing at all.” He had an apiary on Clark Creek on the other side of Lake Wimico, and it appears the couple spent time at both places although they favored Clara’s Depot Creek residence which she called “the Ranch.” Beneki turns out to have been Gustave Henry Benecke, six years Clara’s junior, a beekeeper who lived in Apalach with his immigrant parents until their deaths in the early 1920s.

Frances, eldest of Clara’s daughters, left home first. Then, in 1925, Clara’s youngest daughter, Beatrice, married George Benedict, son of the Rev. George Benedict at Trinity Church (after whom Benedict Hall is named) and moved to Tallahassee. With no one left to take care of, Clara’s time was her own. Prohibition was in full swing and Core reported not only was there a still at the Depot Creek apiary, but that both Nightengale’s and Benecke’s apiaries catered to moonshiners.

“Most of the apiaries way back (in the 20s) were blinds for whiskey making,” Core said. “You had to have something sweet to make moonshine... but back then you couldn’t get sugar [supplies had been exhausted during World War I], so they used honey and syrup. In our area, moonshine was the number one money crop, number two was the cattle and hogs, and number three was the timber.”

Where something illegal is going on, there’s always trouble, and the Ranch was not immune. The details are sketchy, but apparently Core came across some 1930s court records in which a man told a jury he had found a badly wounded man, who later died, at Mrs. Nightengale’s apiary. The backstory, according to Core, is that an Apalachicola man named Humphrey was the kingpin or lieutenant in one particular moonshine distribution organization used by Clara and Benecke. But when a competing Port St. Joe mob started paying a few more cents per gallon than Mr. Humphrey was paying, murder was the retaliation. Neither Clara nor Benecke played a role in the gangland-style crime, but the Ranch was where it happened.

Lest we get a lopsided view, Clara’s life was also filled with many quiet and ordinary moments, like the ones remembered by Charlotte Griswold Klassen in a 2015 Apalachicola Times article. As a young girl in the 1930s, Charlotte joined Clara on visits to her bee dock up

the river and sometimes spent nights at Clara's house where she "would spend hours in the evening... practicing her cursive writing by the light of a kerosene lamp."

Clara was also given to singing German songs, and her grandchildren often visited her at both her Apalachicola and Depot Creek homes, said Clara's great-granddaughter, Mary Adore. In fact, Hockersmith's thesis includes photographs of both a harmonica reed and a porcelain doll's leg found at the shell mound on Depot Creek. George Core described Clara as "always" making cakes and pies for people and helping with church functions, like ushering at funerals. Hockersmith also noted fig trees were planted at the Depot Creek shell mound, indicating Clara may have been enjoyed gardening.

Today, Dolores Roux remembers Clara as a headstrong, no-nonsense, and outspoken woman, a "real character." She chuckles as she recalls two memories of Clara. The first happened in 1957, when Clara was almost 90 years old; she sent Dolores a wedding present with a sympathy card attached to it. Some thought Clara's "mistake" was due to her increasing blindness, but Dolores was quite sure it was no mistake at all. The second memory is of Clara, in her elder years, being unable to pull the starting cord on her boat's engine and so rowing herself from Depot Creek all the way down to Dolores' husband's fishing shack at Big Oaks to get him to do it, a distance of nearly nine miles!

Clara's great-granddaughter Mary Adore, now of North Carolina, says her father told her long after Prohibition was repealed, people in the Big Bend area bought from their own liquor suppliers – even through the '40s and '50s. Whether or not Clara continued to keep a still and make moonshine at the Ranch is unknown, but she definitely stayed in the bee business. When she became a US citizen in 1939 (interestingly, just a few months after Hitler invaded Poland and started World War II), her naturalization papers recorded her occupation as "Bee and Honey Production," her age as 70 years, and her weight as 165 pounds. No stories survive of Clara in the war and post-war years, but with her strong constitution and her tendency to spend more and more time at the Ranch, she may well have worked with her bees into her 80s.

Gustave Benecke disappeared without a trace. As an old woman, Clara summered with Beatrice's family at Alligator Point, and finally when her sight and hearing were nearly gone, she said goodbye to her beloved Depot Creek and went to live with them in Tallahassee. She turned 100 in Feb. 1969 and died peacefully four months later. Her obituary says only that she was a retired nurse, born in Germany, and a longtime resident of Apalachicola.

Mary Adore describes Clara as “kind, generous, and full of wisdom.” She had a large store of sayings and one of her favorites became a family watchword: “Take what you can get.” Mary Adore says that Clara’s flexible use of this expression could mean either “don’t let an opportunity pass you by,” or “be grateful for whatever comes your way.” Fifty years after Clara’s death, Mary still hears her great-grandmother’s often repeated advice: “Take what you can get, child. Take what you can get.”

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