

Remembering Dorothy: A Readington Oral History

**Barbara Krasner
History Intern, Readington Museums
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The name Dorothy Stickney is forever memorialized in the name now given to the farmstead at 114 Dreahook Road in Stanton, a village within Readington Township, New Jersey. That name is the Bouman-Stickney Farmstead, the major building of the Readington Museums. The name bears the surname of its first owner, Bouman, and its last owner, Stickney, before the township purchased the building and land in 1997.

For purposes of historical inquiry, the Readington Museums undertook an oral history project to unearth recollections about Broadway actress Dorothy Stickney, who together with her husband and fellow thespian, Howard Lindsay, retreated to the “farm” as she called it, her oasis from the fast-paced Manhattan life.

The oral history project launched in February 2015 with the hiring of a history intern to establish and implement the project. This work included developing release and deed of gift forms; creating a topical discussion guide; discussing possible interview candidates at Museum Committee meetings; and scheduling, conducting, audio recording, and transcribing interviews. Further work may include indexing and stories for online use.

Interviews were conducted in April and May 2015. They were held mostly in the Bouman-Stickney Farmstead, with the exception of the interview held at the home of Henry Robert “Bob”

Arduin at his home at 115 Dreahook. The remaining four interviews were held with Ryman Herr, Mary Harrison, Marilyn Herr, and Ken Stadnik.

While the main intent of the interviews was to gather information on Dorothy Stickney, the Museum chose to also pose questions about growing up in Readington. That information is not included in this paper; it will form the basis of an ongoing oral history and will be posted as anecdotes for the Museum website.

A Bit of Background about Dorothy Stickney

Dorothy Stickney was born in 1896 in Dickinson, Dakota Territory. It became North Dakota. Her parents came from Vermont. She suffered from eye ulcers for fourteen years. Sufficiently healed, her father, a doctor, sent her to train at the North Western Dramatic School in Minneapolis.

She wanted to act. She first met Howard Lindsay—actor, producer, librettist—in 1924 in the office of producers Max Gordon and Al Lewis. According to Lindsay biographer Cornelia Otis Skinner, Stickney had been trying for three years to get her lucky break. She thought she had it when she received a contract to replace June Walker in Owen Davis' *The Nervous Wreck*. But Dorothy was frightfully thin and had a “pinched little face.”¹ Davis refused to have her in his play. Managers and agents constantly told her she wasn't the type for the role. In response, Stickney wrote a poem. Frustrated with the lack of a theater career, she turned to Lindsay for advice. He took her to lunch. He later recalled, “she could have been a pretty girl except that her face was too drawn and taut, partly due to unfulfilled ambition, partly to her present despair...She wanted to act. It wasn't a case of wanting to be an actress. She wanted to act. There is a vast difference.”²

¹ Cornelia Otis Skinner, *Life with Lindsay and Crouse* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), 55.

² *Ibid.*, 57.

Lindsay told her to give up acting and return to Dickinson. She thanked him—and never followed this advice. She was cast as an ingénue in a summer stock production in Skowhegan, Maine. The locals liked her. He arrived there in the production’s third season as the producer. He wanted to recast the play, but he was told he could not touch Stickney. That got his goat.

He took her to lunch. He found her to be a dedicated worker. They often played opposite each other and they began to cling to each other offstage as well. They married in 1927.

In 1936 they bought an old brownstone at 50 West Eleventh Street. But, according to Skinner, they bought the Stanton farm in 1932³, a “wild expenditure”⁴ during the dark days of the Great Depression.

The oral history participants and their connection to Dorothy Stickney

Ryman Herr and Marilyn Herr remember when Dorothy Stickney and Howard Lindsay came for Sunday dinner at the Herr family farm, Stonehenge, in the early 1960s. Ryman Herr’s parents were also friends with the Lindsays. Bob Arduin lives across the street from the farm, although he never personally met the Lindsays. Mary Harrison heard stories about Dorothy Stickney from her friends, Alex Fondace and Bill Marchant, who at first lived in the guest house and then in the main house. Harrison eventually introduced herself to Stickney at Fondace’s memorial service at the Stanton church in 1993. Finally, Ken Stadnik rented the studio, as he calls it, from Stickney in 1976. He had first met her on official police business. Kids had vandalized the house and stole some items—more on that later—which were later recovered.

The collection of their stories creates a composite, yet incomplete portrait.

³ At least three different years have been reported for the purchase of the property: 1932, 1934, and 1935. The Readington Museums report 1935. That will be used as the standard.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.

Retreating to New Jersey

After Lindsay's passing in 1968, Stickney relied on a chauffeur to bring her out to the farm. But when she and Howard were acting, they took a train from Flemington Junction to New York and the chauffeur brought them back to the farm after the play. Stadnik says, "I guess they got a taxi to Flemington, because she sent the chauffeur back. So I don't know if it was regular or five or six days a week or just after the day off, I don't know, I can't be sure of that."

Earlier, after the final performance of the week, the Lindsays brought their guests to the farm in a limousine. En route they sipped martinis.⁵ Before World War II, the Lindsays had a bigger limousine. Stickney refers to a Ford in her memoir, *Openings and Closings*.⁶ During the war, they had a Plymouth.

The House, Buildings, and Property

Stickney points out in her memoir that she did not fall in love with the farm immediately. "It took me two trips from top to bottom and about twenty-five minutes. Here was a Cinderella of a house waiting to be cherished and loved and put to rights,"⁷ she writes.

The house and its nonnegotiable 60 acres of land cost \$6,000. The house had no electricity, telephone, or much plumbing. By the time Lindsay made the initial down payment, Stickney knew she would unwall the kitchen fireplace, put red calico curtains on the windows, and turn the attic into two bedrooms.⁸ Lindsay paid off the mortgage in October 1935, according to Stickney's diary

⁵ Readington Township Historic Preservation Committee and Readington Township Museum Committee, *Images of America: Readington Township* (Portsmouth, NH: Arcadia Publishing, 2008), 70.

⁶ Dorothy Stickney, *Openings and Closings: Memoir of a Lady of the Theatre* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979), 99.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁸ *Ibid.*

entries⁹. Entertaining was important to them; they wanted their friends to see and love the farm as they did and they often hosted guests.¹⁰

The Lindsays invested in the property. They built a studio for Howard to do his playwriting, according to Stadnik, who later rented it at Stickney's request for \$50/month. They added heat. Stickney painted. There was a garage with an apartment over it. Here the cook and chauffeur would stay. While Stadnik rented the studio, a Croatian couple occupied this apartment of two small bedrooms, a small sitting area with perhaps three chairs, and a bathroom. This was across the brook and was not connected to the studio. There was a set of outside stairs. An inside set of stairs was installed after a fire.

There was also a wood shed with stone footing. That structure burned twice.

Mary Harrison moved to 120 Dreahook Road in 1988. The property bordered that of the farm and Harrison hoped she could ride her horses around the perimeter of the fields. She rode her horse down the driveway and met Alex Fondace, one of Stickney's friends. He considered himself to be the caretaker of the property. He shared tea, stories, and scrapbooks with Harrison.

Creating a Community

Dorothy Stickney escaped to her Jersey farm from about 1935 to 1984. By the time she stopped coming, she was nearly 90 years old. While she lived in Readington, she made friends and maintained those friendships. For example, she invited Ryman Herr's father, Ryman, and his mother, Ann Cowles Herr, to a New York performance after the run of *Life with Father*. Says Ryman Herr Junior, "They reported to me later that there was a long-extended applause and that he thought that Dorothy Stickney and her husband invited all their friends...a good round of applause for this initial showing."

⁹ Ibid., 100.

¹⁰ Ibid., 101.

Both Ryman and Mary Harrison spoke about the rebuilding of the Stanton church. Stickney helped to raise funds by reading poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay in the church. Stickney had developed her own one-woman show, *Lovely Light*, featuring Millay's poetry and letters. The show ran in the early 1960s. Says Stadnik, "I believe she actually paid, donated to the church, Stanton church, for the steeple."

The Stanton church also figured into another event: a 1993 memorial service for Stickney's friend, Alex Fondace¹¹, who together with his partner, playwright Bill Marchant (who penned the play *Desk Set*), lived at the farm. About two weeks after Stadnik, who was then chief of police, found Fondace's body in a bedroom by breaking through the roof, a memorial service was held. Mary Harrison attended. She says, "...that was the first time I actually met her... I didn't really get up close to her until we were in the Fellowship Hall and she was sitting down along the side and I had, you know, the presence of mind to go up and introduce myself to her. She was a gracious lady, very gracious lady from the old school."

Yet, Stadnik attests the Lindsays didn't mix much with the locals. He says, "Their world was in New York City, you know, and they'd be, people used to live up at the end of the road here, driveway on the left, a stone house they were quite friendly with Dorothy, and she was quite friendly with, he was a historian, he wrote history books. Joe Furnace, he lived near the Stanton Grange, his property down by the Hunterdon County Park System. He would always come over when Dorothy was here. He'd usually be here for a day or a couple, for dinner, watch TV or something."

A Tête-à-Tête at Stonehenge

¹¹ Alex's surname needs to be verified.

Around 1963, after a closing on the farm¹², Stickney and Lindsay joined the Herr family for Sunday dinner at their farm, Stonehenge. Ryman Herr Senior served as the Lindsays' attorney on the property. Ryman Herr Junior's wife, Marilyn, was from western Minnesota. She and Stickney struck up a conversation after dinner, sitting by the fire in the living room. Marilyn Herr remembers: "I'd always been a bit of a theater buff so I was familiar with the fact that she had played Mother in *Life with Father* and so it was just small chit-chat, the details of which I don't really remember, other than that we rather connected about being mid-Westerners." Marilyn Herr found her to be friendly and outgoing. Stickney invited her to come over sometime. That Marilyn Herr didn't is a regret she still harbors. She says, "that 'sometime' didn't give me a date or any particular, you know, invitation, it was just general, but it sounded genuine. Of course, I've kicked myself ever since that I didn't do that, because I realize that sometimes people living out here end up knowing people would like to meet other people." Stickney proved herself to be down to earth and put the twenty-seven-year-old bride at ease. Says Marilyn Herr, "I [was] not particularly worldly wise and would have been, I suppose, a little bit shy. But I didn't feel shy with her."

Entertaining

Stickney was noted for her Thanksgiving dinners. Not that she cooked anything herself. She'd bring her cook with her. In fact, according to Stadnik, Stickney brought a couple who cared for every need, from cooking to cleaning to driving and medical assistance. By the time Stadnik came to know her, she was a widow and about 80 years old. But Thanksgiving celebrations were always held at the farm. According to Mary Harrison, Stickney would give a reading at the table from a Plymouth Plantation pilgrim. Harrison has a copy of this letter. Stickney mentions Thanksgiving in her memoir. She writes about a specific dinner around 1974 when she, three writers,

¹² Why a closing was necessary is unclear, since Lindsay paid off the mortgage in October 1935.

a literary agent, and a publisher “had it to perfection with the turkey, the cranberry sauce, the mince pie, the laughter and the warmth of long-time friendships, as well as the warmth from the huge fireplace.”¹³

Though Stadnik was not part of the Thanksgiving affair, he did join Stickney on a Wednesday night or Friday afternoon. He says, “Dorothy enjoyed bourbon, bourbon and water on the rocks at five o’clock, almost every day. We had a cocktail or two. She was such a sweet lady. She was a generation half past me, but ... we would have a good time.”

Stickney was known to host Friday potluck dinners for the neighbors, too. These occurred after Lindsay’s passing. Stadnik recalls the Croatian couple that included Franz the butler and his son as well as a later domestic, Helga. He also notes an Argentinian or Brazilian woman.

Stadnik and his wife used to attend Dorothy’s Christmas parties at her home, a five-story brownstone at 13 East 95th Street, right next to Central Park. Al Simon played the piano.

Stadnik notes that at the farm, dinners were simple, home-cooked meals. In New York, however, Stickney would host dinners with several courses, ringing her bell for the butler to serve.

Celebrity Sightings

Bob Arduin has a long walk from his family home—a house his Manhattan-based parents bought in 1924—to his mailbox on Dreahook Road. When he picked up his mail, he often spotted Stickney and “all those pretty young girls.” He recalls, “They’d be, they probably went down to the Stanton store to get lunch, you know, the group, and they’d walk past, they were city girls and I guess every little thing they had to examine and look down in the water at the brook there, and all that kind of stuff, you know, and I’d be at the mailbox.”

¹³ Stickney, 2.

Mary Harrison notes, “A lot of Broadway stars would take a weekend off from the theater or whatever and come out.” Stadnik recalls Lynn Redgrave and her husband, John. Stickney invited Julie Andrews and Shelley Winters to the farm. Ken Stadnik informs us that Miss Andrews stayed for months, perhaps while Stickney and Lindsay were touring. She had starred in the 1957 TV Rodgers & Hammerstein production of *Cinderella*. Stickney played the queen; Lindsay the king. Says Stadnik, “People to talk about her riding horses around here.” He, however, did not personally meet her. Miss Andrews wrote about time out at the farm in her memoir, *Home*.

Oscar Hammerstein spent some time at the farm, too. Stadnik believes Hammerstein wrote the score for the *Sound of Music* here.

Dorothy the Collector

According to Stadnik, Stickney loved to collect. She had a collection of fairy lights—these were candles with a glass bottom and top, carnival glass in different colors. She had maybe thirty of them here and two hundred in New York. She also collected wind-up music boxes. There was also her collection of antique copper pots. It was from this collection of copper pots that some kids stole and dumped in the hedge row. Skinner tells of Stickney’s adventures to look for antiques. She, Lindsay, and Russel Crouse—Lindsay’s collaborator—raced around Readington back roads to find them, because, as Crouse once told a police officer who stopped them, “the lady is in a rush to buy some antiques and we want to get there before they become any older.”¹⁴

Of Birds, Cats, and Flowers

Dorothy Stickney did not like song birds. They woke her up in the morning. Stadnik says, “Being in the theater, you know, they would be on stage until ten or so at night, have dinner and

¹⁴ Ibid., 68.

stuff afterwards, and go back to sleep in the morning. She didn't like it, she didn't like birds." Cats, however, were another matter. Those she liked, especially her own, Madam. As anyone who has been in the farmstead house knows, a cat would be especially practical.

Of other animals, she was perhaps not so fond. According to Stadnik, "She was not a great animal lover. She enjoyed seeing them, but it wasn't something she really waited for every day, to see deer out or whatever. She was nice to them, but it wasn't a high priority on her list, you know, oh yeah, that's nice, I like to see them."

Stickney also loved her flower garden. Not actually working in it, though. But she planned it and worked with Tony from the Flemington Floral Company. She especially liked scented geraniums to place as potted plants along the stairs. Tony would take them back over the winter and store them in his greenhouse.

She grew the herb sorrel in the garden and loved to have sorrel soup.

The Final Curtain

Though these five oral testimonies do not paint a complete picture, they do fondly recall a gracious woman who made her presence in Stanton known. Perhaps other recollections and memories will emerge. Stickney is listed among notable women of Hunterdon County. She died in 1998 as she neared the age of 102. Stadnik perhaps phrases it best: "Dorothy was your friend, Dorothy was your friend forever. She was, you know, she liked you, she just seemed to be very, very friendly and outgoing person." It was not an act.

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