

Life at Belvedere in the 1960's - a visit from the former caretaker's granddaughter

Charles Patterson
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Claire Nelson with other staff relaxing in the Agora House (Play House). An original painting by artist Andrew Wyeth hangs over the fireplace.

Within a short period of time after my coming to work at Belvedere in 1978 (1978-1995), I found myself fascinated by the history of the property. At one point, probably around 1980, a few of us working here got together and reached out to the former caretaker and his wife, Bulow and Claire Nelson. The Nelsons were living in Briarcliff, NY, at the time.

They were gracious enough to invite us to their home and share some of their memories and experiences while living here and taking care of the property. A number of the old photos from that period have been displayed from time to time. Mrs. Nelson loved photography and lent us a collection of her slide photos that she took during their time working here. I was able to have those slides copied so we could keep them in our own archive. The Nelsons lived on the property and cared for it during ownership by both the Bronfman and Cole families. Prior to working for Dr. Cole, Mr. Nelson worked on a number of other estates in the area adding to his numerous tales.

Dr. Cole



Weather vane over the Training Center garage reflects Dr. Cole's love of artwork of the American West.

Dr. Philip G. Cole had probably done the most work in the design and build of the Belvedere property as we know it today. He purchased it in 1929 from author, explorer, and outdoorsman, Caspar Whitney, after his passing. Dr. Cole named the property Zeeview, and set about creating the beautiful landscapes we are familiar with. The two large rocks in the lawn behind the main house, now referred to as Holy Rock or Father's Rock and Mother's Rock, Dr. Cole had shipped in from Montana and placed specifically at their current locations. He had moved here from Montana and is said to have like that particular type of rock (that he knew from Montana) so much that he wanted to see them here in New York. Dr. Cole had a famous collection of artwork depicting the American West, now on display at the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa, OK. It is also represented in the weather vane atop the Belvedere Training Center tower.

After Dr. Cole's passing, the property was purchased by the Bronfman family (of Seagram's whiskey fortune) who used it mainly as their summer home.

Learning History

Dominic Barber, with the help of Paul Fontaine and a number of other staff, has been gathering more and more information on the history of the estate. His research led him to get in touch with Lisa Nelson

Peterson. Lisa is the granddaughter of the former caretakers, Claire and Bulow Nelson. She grew up on the property for most of her childhood. Dominic and I were able to meet with Lisa this past week. She shared many great memories of her time here, as well as telling a number of stories and sharing information about the property that she had learned from her parents and grandparents. Dominic was able to show her around the property, which was a great joy allowing her to reminisce on her own experiences here.



Lisa Nelson Peterson enjoying Belvedere, 1963

"Behind Estate Gates" LisaUnleashed.com

Lisa currently lives in Connecticut. She is a journalist and media consultant and has been active with the American Kennel Club for many years. On her blog, Lisa shares her writings and her affection for horses and dogs. www.lisaunleashed.com

Lisa's blog has a section entitled "Behind Estate Gates" where she shares some of her experiences and memories from Belvedere, as well as stories from her parents and grandparents. This is well worth reading by anyone with an interest in Belvedere.

Lisa has promised another visit when she can bring her father along as well. Her father (now 79) knows even more about the inner mechanical workings of Belvedere and I'm sure will have many other insights as well.

Here is a short excerpt from Lisa's blog:

My early childhood memories are filled with my grandfather's stories of society weddings, bootlegging trips from Canada and driving captains of industry's wives to West Palm Beach, Florida each winter. But his favorite tales came from his childhood, growing up on the "Meriwether" estate in Pocantico Hills, next door neighbor to Kykuit, home of the Rockefeller family. David Meriwether Milton, a direct descendent of Meriwether Lewis, of Lewis & Clark fame, named the family homestead after his famous namesake.

I grew up on the fabled 'Zeeview' estate, built in the late 1920s by noted Western art collector Dr. Philip Gillett Cole. My young days in the 1960s were spent playing alone among wisteria-filled rock gardens, the orchard, the lake, the stable, the carriage house, and the dog kennel. By now, my grandfather "Papa" had become the superintendent of the estate, now called 'Belvedere' when the Bronfman family moved in. My favorite place to play – behind estate gates – was in the children's log cabin next to the lake complete with a replica of the bridge where the headless horseman chased down Ichabod Crane.

Read more at lisaunleashed.com

Take a tour



A great way to spend a couple hours with your family would be to take a tour of Belvedere. Learning about Rev. Moon's history here, as well as the early history of the property, is truly a valuable experience. Tours of the Belvedere main house were recently offered at the Family Hyeo Jeong Festival, but if you weren't able to make it then, you still can. Contact Dominic Barber (dominicbarber@gmail.com) if you would like to arrange a tour of your own.

On display

Items on display in the Main House include parts of the original gate that show Dr. Cole's appreciation of Washington Irving's stories including Rip Van Winkle and the Legend of Sleepy Hollow.



Dominic recently obtained, from the Irvington Historic Society, a copy of a Christmas card created by Dr. Cole. The card was made around 1930, and used by Dr. Cole to invite his friends to "Zeeview" for a Christmas party.

This card is also on display in the Main House. When I looked closely at it, I had to laugh. It shows that Dr. Cole must have had a great sense of humor. Characters (resembling those in the popular *Where's Waldo* books) can be seen in numerous amusing situations around the property.



Christmas card from Dr. Cole humorously shows caricatures of workers helping to build and landscape Belvedere property, ca 1930.



Enlarged area showing swimming pool that was later filled in, as it was too close to the horse stables and garage (Training Center).



Enlarged area showing workers blasting a hole for installing the Holy Rock behind the Main House.

Making connections

Making connection with Lisa Peterson and hearing her stories has been wonderful. We want to welcome more people with connections to Belvedere and continue to learn more about this beautiful property and all that has gone on here in times past. Hopefully we will continue to collect stories and tales from the history of Belvedere and be able to share them with everyone.