

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
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ELIZABETH TALIAFERRO CLOSE

. . . was born in Galveston in 1897. In 1919 she married Edward Bennett Close, descended from Thomas Close, one of Greenwich's founding fathers. Their twins were born in Greenwich in 1924: Edward B., Jr., and Dr. William T. Close.

From the early 1920's until 1941, the Closes spent winters in Paris, where Mr. Close was managing governor of the American Hospital. When World War II began, he became associated with the American Red Cross in Washington; then in 1945 was sent to France by the State Department.

When the war ended, the Close family returned to Greenwich and were active in such town affairs as the Red Cross chapter, the Republican party, and Christ Church. At the time of his death in 1955, Mr. Close was in his sixth term as chairman of the Planning and Zoning Commission.

Since then, Mrs. Close, known to her friends as Betsy, has continued her active life and remained on the family's Hermitage Farm.

This interview was conducted for the Friends of the Greenwich Library by Peggy Ekberg at Mrs. Close's home on April 23 and May 16, 1975.

BACK COUNTRY CHURCHES
and
ROUND HILL LIFE IN THE 1920's

An interview with
ELIZABETH CLOSE
by Peggy Ekberg

EKBERG: Mrs. Close, tell me about the first time you heard that there might be a back country church built in Greenwich.

CLOSE: If you mean the first time that what was to become Saint Barnabas Church was considered, I'll tell you. But first, there were three churches in that area which had been there, and active, for many years: Calvary Church, Episcopal; Round Hill Church, Methodist; and North Greenwich Congregational Church at the corner of John Street and Riversville Road, which was formerly called Quaker Ridge Road.

In the mid-fifties Dr. Appleyard of Christ Church got together a small group of people in his office at Christ Church and said that a mission church was being considered in connection with Christ Church, to be formed in the northern area of Greenwich, the so-called Round Hill area.

So I went down, among others, and discussed this project with Dr. Apple-
yard. The only people that I remember at this moment that were also on
the committee were John Rote, who now lives on the corner of Clapboard
Ridge Road and Round Hill Road, and, I believe, Donald Hyde. There were
a few others; that must be in the Saint Barnabas Church records, however,
or Christ Church records.

We met a number of times and finally got together a list of people
who would be interested in having the church out here. Because it's about
seven or eight miles in to Christ Church, some of the younger people felt
that it was a chore to get the children down there and back--the gasoline
and the time it took to get back and cook their meals and everything--and
that it would be very helpful to have a mission church out here.

So after getting together a group of people--I don't believe there
were more than ten or maybe fourteen people that started this--the next
thing that we had to do was to survey the area and find out where we could
begin the mission. After quite a lot of interviews with people to see if
it was convenient, the Greeffs, Mr. and Mrs. Teddy Greeff, lent us their
tack house. It used to actually be used for tack for horses many years
ago. That's on John Street a little beyond Riversville Road.

EKBERG: It's such an original thought to have a church in a tack house. How
did it come up?

CLOSE: Well, the way it came up was that we were interviewing different
Episcopalians who were very interested in having the mission up there,
and Katie Greeff was one of the ones that was extremely interested. She
just had the brilliant idea of saying, "Why don't we use the tack house,
because it's not in use now." And so we accepted that with great joy.

And then Mr. and Mrs. Linen, who lived across the street from the Greeffs, had a kind of amateur theatrical setup in one of their barns. They had gotten some old pews which they used in that barn, and they donated them to us to put in the tack house. I'm not sure whether they donated them or lent them to us; my impression is that when we didn't use the tack house any longer, we returned those pews to the Linens. And so we got the pews.

And then we built little altar rails and a kneeler all in one piece. Somebody built the altar; I think it was Fred Hansen, who was vitally interested in that. He, by the way, gave the beautiful marble altar at the present Saint Barnabas Church. Everybody contributed a little bit. We had an organ, a folding organ that you could carry around, and I played at the services.

EKBERG: You played the organ at the old Calvary Church, too, didn't you?

CLOSE: Yes.

EKBERG: Where did you find the organ?

CLOSE: Well, I can't remember whether we bought it or somebody lent it to us.

I'm not quite sure. Somebody must have given it to us, because in that period we didn't have any money to buy anything. But I'll never forget one day up there in the tack house when there were maybe about sixteen or twenty people by that time at the service and we had a young minister.

EKBERG: Was that Mr. Hardy? The papers say that he was the first vicar.

CLOSE: I don't think so; I think we had somebody else to start with. But we were having a service, and there was a long prayer. I think it was just after the collection, and then we were supposed to sing the collection hymn that's so familiar to us all. And I got so involved in the prayer,

sitting there at the organ, that when the time came for me to play the hymn for them to march up with the little collection, nothing happened-- and nothing happened. I had, I guess, left my body; I was just sailing around in heaven or something.

There must have been a full three or four minutes, and everybody knew I was deep in prayer because my head was down and I wasn't anywhere near playing the organ. Finally the young priest said very quietly and gently--everything was so tiny there, you could hear what he said--"Mrs. Close, it's time for the hymn." Whereupon everybody laughed, including myself. It was a happy group of people, but they teased me about that for years. They said, "If you're going to play the hymns, don't say your prayers from now on." And this was the whole atmosphere of everybody that was involved.

Another thing that happened there was that there was no room for a Sunday school, so the Sunday school was in my cottage here on John Street. We started at nine o'clock in those days--the church, too--and I had to get up at the crack of dawn to clean my house up to let the children in.

EKBERG: To mess it up.

CLOSE: Don Hyde was the Sunday school teacher, and there were only a handful of children. Maybe he had an assistant; he could tell you that. After two years that we had it in my house, we finally found a place in the old polo club which was across the street from the Greeffs' property. It doesn't exist anymore, but there was a polo club and a polo field, and they found that they were able to use part of that for the Sunday school.

One of the reasons they wanted to get it out of my house is that

one of the chief interests of all the children were the bathrooms in the house. They had to keep going to the bathroom all the time, and it was almost impossible to control this flow of children saying, "Could I be excused, please?" Anyway, for two years I had the Sunday school here in my house, and the whole thing was a very joyous, happy occasion. Those children are grown now and have children of their own. Among them are my own grandchildren.

Playing that little organ makes me recall Calvary Church. When I first came here in 1920 as a bride, there was a darling old man called Johnny Gus Husted who lived across the street from where Calvary Church was. Now it's just a little cemetery, but in those days it was a little old church. It was not in use when we first came up here, but Mr. Close and I instigated Sunday vesper services there. We got a young priest from Riverside named Father Liebler, and we engaged him to come for Sunday evening vesper services.

One of the reasons we didn't make any effort at all to open the church for Sunday morning services was that everybody in the neighborhood had a hunt on Sunday morning or they went horseback riding. This whole country, which was not built up then, was full of people that spent their time with horses, on horses, or having horse shows or hunts, and so forth. You couldn't get anybody to go to church. The Round Hill Church wasn't open at all then.

One of the reasons that the Round Hill Church is open and running now was due to Mr. Close and me. That church had been closed for years and opened once every other year or so--only one service that nobody really attended--in order for the Methodist Church, to which it belongs,

to keep their legal hold on that church. It hadn't been cleaned up or done anything to, and when Mr. Close and I decided to get married, Mr. Close, who already owned this property here on John Street that I'm living on, decided that it would be nice to be married in that little church.

So we had it opened. I don't know where he got permission, but it must have been from the Methodist Church. We had it opened, cleaned up, and we had the wedding there. We brought out a Methodist minister from the Methodist mission way downtown in New York. After he came out and performed our marriage service, some of the people around here got the idea that it would be nice to open that church, and he was the first person they asked to come out. He and his family moved to Greenwich, and that was when the Round Hill Church was actually re-established, in 1920 or 1921.

EKBERG: You've actually got connections with all three of the back country churches.

CLOSE: I think it would be interesting to say why Mr. Close and I, being very ardent Episcopalians, were married not only in the Round Hill Church, but by a Methodist minister. Mr. Close had been divorced [from Marjorie Merriweather Post], and in those days you had to get special permission from the presiding bishop to be remarried in the Episcopal Church. Not just the bishop of the state, but it had to go through a long process. Mr. Close was told that it would come through perfectly all right, but that we'd have to wait about six months or maybe a year, and he didn't want to wait that long. So we were married with an Episcopal service. As a matter of fact, the prayer book belonged to my great-grandmother.

Since I am now a great-grandmother, you can imagine how old that book was.

EKBERG: Do you still have it?

CLOSE: I can't find that book, but I have hundreds of books that belonged to my mother, and I haven't been able to go through them since she died, which was not too long ago. So I may still have it, or I may have given it to one of my brothers after Mother died. It was an English prayer book, as a matter of fact. It was printed in England, and the whole service was Church of England. But that's just incidental to Round Hill. I'm wandering around because I've wandered around Round Hill so much.

Now, the Calvary Church. We started those services maybe a year or so after we were married, and I got all the information about that church from Mr. Husted, who lived right across the street. Everybody called him Johnny Gus. He was up in his nineties when I first knew him, but he was an interesting old man, and I used to go over and sit on his steps and have him tell me stories about Round Hill and the early days when he was young. And he had the original Bible of Calvary Church. It's now owned by Saint Barnabas.

When Calvary Church was closed for lack of funds, it still had the lovely altar equipment that had been sent over from England. It had an organ in it that had been built in this country, but all the material was sent over from England. You had to have a little boy at the back of the organ, pumping it, in order to play it at all, and I used to sit there and play. In those days I was very involved in music, mostly because I sang, but I had played the piano since I was six years old, so I was able to work out this organ business. It was very simple organ

playing, I must admit.

But anyway, we used to have about twenty-five or thirty people that would come to those vesper services. Johnny Gus always used to come, and Father Liebler. And by the way, I think Father Liebler is still alive. [He was, until November 21, 1982.] After he served his term in this area, he left and went out West, and I believe I got a notice where he's still active in an Episcopal church on an Indian reservation.

EKBERG: How old would he be now?

CLOSE: Well, he was a very young man when he came; he probably was around my age. Now he's still probably around my age--if he's still alive. I've often thought of writing to him because he christened my twin boys in Calvary Church.

What happened to Calvary Church then is not too clear in my mind, because Mr. Close and I began spending our winters in France. We came back for one winter when the children were born. We were married four years before the children were born, and we'd come back here for the summers and we kept the little church going. But eventually we stayed over there permanently for quite a number of years; and during the time we were over there, there was a fire which burned Calvary Church, if not completely down, almost completely down.

But the Bible was always kept in the Husted's house, even after Mr. Husted died. His daughter kept all of that, and she kept telling me, "Mrs. Close, there's a trunk that Father had with all the records of that church." And do you know, I just never got ahold of that trunk. But the Bible I did get hold of, and Saint Barnabas Church has it now as one of its mementos and treasures.

EKBERG: Were the pews from that church the ones that were used in the temporary building on Lake Avenue that Saint Barnabas used?

CLOSE: No, I don't think so. The Linens lent us ours. Maybe those were the same pews that came over from the Linens. Eventually I'm sure we gave them back to the Linens.

Anyway, to get back to Calvary Church, the church was closed after we left because there was nobody that was interested in keeping it going. And I'm not sure that Mr. Close didn't pay the salary. . . . No, there was some money that belonged to that church; it was about ten thousand dollars or something like that. When the church was closed down by Dr. Wilson, who was then minister and rector of Christ Church, we heard that he sent the altarpieces down to some very poor church in Florida and made a present of them to that church.

Calvary Church after it burned down was just an old wreck, you see, and a lot of it fell through and fell in. But I've always understood and been told of the bell that the Round Hill Church has now, that somebody went down there to Calvary Church and picked it up. It wasn't stealing it or anything; I understand that somebody said, "I found a bell. Why don't we use it?" That may or may not be true, but I've always been under that impression.

EKBERG: That ought to be checked out.

CLOSE: There's no way to check it. Nobody's going to tell you whether they took that bell or not! Then eventually the whole thing was torn down, but there was this fund that was in trust in the parish of Christ Church. When Mr. Close and I came back here to live permanently, Mr. Close was treasurer of Christ Church for years and years. His family had always

been associated with Christ Church. So he had the records, and he found in the records that there was this little trust fund. So with that money he got permission to clean up that little cemetery--there was already a little cemetery there--and pay somebody to cut the grass. Not keep it the way we do now, but keep it up.

So when Saint Barnabas was a going concern and I was on the committee that ran it--it wasn't the vestry in those days--I remembered this, and I brought it up. And when Saint Barnabas became independent from Christ Church and became its own parish [in 1967], I said, "We ought to have that money which is in trust turned over to Saint Barnabas Church, and we can do something with that cemetery from the interest that comes in on that fund." So they went about it, and they legally got it changed and fixed.

So that is how Saint Barnabas and Calvary Church are all a part of the same parish now, and the funds from Calvary are now in the hands of Saint Barnabas Church. They have used them very wisely, and they fixed this little--I don't know whether they call it a cemetery or what they call it now, but anyway, it's beautifully taken care of.

And there are still places for burial there. I'd love to be buried there, but I can't because Mr. Close is buried in Christ Church churchyard, back in the old cemetery. There are a lot of old Closes buried there and we have a plot there, so I'll have to be buried there. But it's a dear, sweet area up here.

EKBERG: Now let's get back to the tack house, because that's the next step historically, from Calvary to the tack house. How did they heat the tack house?

CLOSE: Well, we had a stove in there. I've forgotten what kind of a stove,

but it had a long pipe, I remember. We had a stove in there, and Fred Hansen used to go over early and get the whole thing heated up and started and brush the snow. Somebody came and wiped the snow off the steps in winter.

And it got so that more and more people kept coming to that service. It grew and it grew, and it prospered and it prospered, to the point where it was really too crowded. It prospered to the point where we were able to purchase the land on which Saint Barnabas is now built. We put up a temporary building and moved the church over there. As I remember, the lovely cross was hand-done by Mr. Obrig. He was the member of the church who made that lovely cross. It's still in the Sunday school. It's a black one.

EKBERG: The cross that's on the wall there?

CLOSE: Yes. We brought that over and we used that. Christ Church helped us tremendously. They gave us a certain amount of money every year because we were still a mission, and we got very ambitious and kept wanting to get it to the point where we could be independent of Christ Church. And, of course, they would have been delighted, too, because it didn't cost them any money. But for several years we were still a mission church of Christ Church.

Well, it just simply began to grow, and people began to respond. The most wonderful group of families, young families, who have been there ever since it started and are older now, took over. The young men, who were young business executives, took over, and this is the way this thing has developed.

It's an unusual parish, and in looking for a rector, we had to keep

in mind that it wasn't [appropriate for] anybody that had had an experience with a small town, because this parish of Saint Barnabas is in some ways unique. There is no village connected with it. There are no people of a village. Christ Church has the town people around it, you see, and a lot of other churches--Riverside, Cos Cob--all those places have commercial areas. The only commercial area in this whole place is the Round Hill Store.

So the people that you were dealing with were not part of a small town at all. They're people that came out here to live. Most of them are young--or now, older--top executives in business and extremely good church people. And that's where the growth of this thing has been extraordinarily quick compared to a lot of other churches. We were able to raise the money because there was a certain amount of money in the congregation, you see. We have people that are not well-to-do that belong to the church and all that, but most of them are people who are good church people and also good businessmen and women. And I think that's unique in some ways, don't you?

EKBERG: Yes, I think it is. I think the early church closeness you had, too, from being in a tack house must have had something to do with the communal spirit of the church.

CLOSE: Yes.

EKBERG: Who were some of the young people who were there who are still active?

The Hansens, I know you've said.

CLOSE: Well, the Rotes. And Mr. and Mrs. [William B.] Weaver used to come. They're active in the congregation, but they're not on any. . . . You can find the list of parishioners very easily.

EKBERG: When they started building the Lake Avenue church. . . .

CLOSE: We got Phil Ives.

EKBERG: How did that come about? How did you choose him?

CLOSE: Well, he was an Episcopalian, and he was interested in building the church. He and his wife would come to our services. He's an extremely well-known architect, and he had a feeling about the whole thing and submitted these designs.

One thing about that church which Phil Ives conceived was that it be built of native stone. Not only that, he picked out the stone. It's such beautiful stonework that I'll tell you, people, stonemasons, have come from all over to see how beautifully that's been done. Not only that, he felt the way it curves on the left-hand side of the church, the west side, was a comforting curve that represented the arm of God. Isn't that a lovely thought?

EKBERG: I think that's beautiful. Well, the whole church is beautiful. It's unusual. Was it immediately recognized how gorgeous it would be, or did people feel as though it would be too different from the usual little type of church?

CLOSE: No, everybody saw the plans, and saw not only the plans, but the picture that he had made. And as a matter of fact, the church has grown so quickly that we haven't actually finished the church building because we had to put up a Sunday school, parish house, and we had to have a rectory. And we've got a lot of land there. I think it's eight or ten acres, and, of course, it's in a beautiful place. We had to do all that to have the church functioning.

The proper roof has never been put on. We have a fund to build it; I think it's supposed to be a tile roof, but we haven't gotten around to

that. Inside the church, where you see those beams and everything, there's a design so that those beams are not completely visible. We've never finished that part, and therefore you can see all the lights and so forth. But we had so much to do. We had to have a good organ, which we eventually were able to build--at great expense, but it's a very, very beautiful organ. And we had to build a parish house, which we did.

So there are still things to be done, but there's so many more important things nowadays than spending money on that. The roof will eventually be fixed because there's a fund set aside particularly for that. And I don't know whether a lot of people even realize that the interior isn't finished yet.

EKBERG: I don't think they probably do. Do you mean that when Phil brought the plans over, everybody immediately recognized how gorgeous it was?

CLOSE: Well, I can't say that.

EKBERG: I meant there wasn't any obvious objection to not having a little white church kind of thing?

CLOSE: Well, I don't remember. Maybe people discussed it or something. No, we loved the idea of it being stone. Some people thought it had too modern an aspect.

EKBERG: That's what I was wondering.

CLOSE: To me it never had a modern aspect, and since it's been built, it has less of a modern aspect because it reminds me of some of the old Norman or Scandinavian designs of churches. But that's just me. I've never heard of anybody else saying that.

EKBERG: And it fits right into the whole ecology, which is good.

CLOSE: We've all come to love it, of course.

EKBERG: You were talking about the roof fund. One of the things you were connected with in the very beginning on fund-raising was the horse show. Wasn't that the first way you all raised money?

CLOSE: Well, that was one way. I thought of that. They kept having a horse show, you see, and I'll tell you who was also instrumental in working that: the Kelseys. They are great horse people and had something to do with that horse show, and also they have been very faithful to Saint Barnabas. And I said, why couldn't we make a deal?

I can't remember the details of practically anything I ever put my hand to, because they go so fast and things seem to work out. My memory is a trained memory in that once something's done, I don't keep it in my mind; I forget about it. I do it on purpose, because why keep all that stuff if you can find it somewhere else or written down? It just keeps your mind a little more clear and keeps your body more happy than having it all lumbered up with a lot of unnecessary stuff.

So, anyway, we started the horse show. And I gave a cup called the Saint Barnabas Cup, which lasted for a long time, in memory of Mr. Close. I don't know what's become of that cup.

EKBERG: I knew you had done this, and then when we haven't had any horse shows--at least Saint Barnabas hasn't--I wondered what happened.

CLOSE: Then there was a group of people, and I don't know who they were or why they were, who thought that it was wrong to have a church benefit from a horse show that was given on a Sunday.

EKBERG: Isn't that amazing?

CLOSE: Well, I don't know who it was, and I don't know what group it was. It doesn't sound like Saint Barnabas at all. In the back of my head

I think it was a group of people that were not connected with Saint Barnabas who were annoyed that we had combined with the horse show, which was supposed to be an overall town horse show. I think that there was some--now that we are talking about churches--shall I say, sinful jealousy? This is my impression.

And we decided that there was enough criticism to have to give up our participation in that horse show, which was unfortunate in a way, but we prospered anyway. Rather than have any people that criticized us, justly or unjustly, according to the way they looked at it, it was just as well to have it terminate so that we were not under any outside criticism. And that's why. But we had it for several years, and we divided the money, and we did very well.

EKBERG: It was a nice symbolic idea, with Saint Barnabas--the saint himself, not the church--being part of the country and a farmer, as I think I recall.

CLOSE: That's right. But you can't go into that if people are not--well, there's a type of religious sentiment that carries people through, and some sentiment is necessary in everybody's lives, but you can't spread that through a town if people don't feel that way. Some people don't believe in saints at all, so you can't just shove even that dear, sweet Saint Barnabas down anybody's throat. It would be just bad.

EKBERG: Was the name Saint Barnabas chosen because this was a back country church?

CLOSE: No. It was chosen because [when] it was inaugurated in the tack house, it happened to be Saint Barnabas Sunday. But it worked so beautifully, you see. Everything about this church has had a practical

significance, and the spiritual significance has emerged behind the practical, which is quite extraordinary. That's the way I look at things, anyway. It was not with any malice aforethought that something was done. It just was an act of God always that seems to have held this thing in such steady progress. It's beautiful. Don't you think so?

EKBERG: Yes, it is.

CLOSE: Well, so that's the horse show. I think we've had other fund-raising things, but that was important in the beginning.

EKBERG: One of the ones was for the roof, the crewel exhibit. Do you remember much about that?

CLOSE: Well, that wasn't very long ago.

EKBERG: It's been longer than you think.

CLOSE: How long?

EKBERG: I'll bet it's been twelve years.

CLOSE: Oh, that's nothing! Twelve years? That's just like after dinner to me. Well, yes, I was involved in that. I have a pair of stools that I did.

EKBERG: Wasn't that to raise money for the roof?

CLOSE: I don't know what it was for. I don't pay any attention to what they raise money for anymore; I just go along because they're so wonderful. About five or six years ago--oh, maybe ten years ago now--I said to Hal Bassage [rector of Saint Barnabas], "I don't want to be on any committees; I don't want to be on any group; I don't want to participate in anything." For a good many years I took care of the United Thank Offering. I was in charge of that for years and sent out letters and everything. I even was asked to give lectures way over in Long Island

and places like that because I had written a history of it. It's really very good, even if I say so myself, because I worked over it a lot.

I've got so many things that I've written and put away. I have a story I wrote on John Street, called "My Street Named John." I wrote it because I was taking a writers' course, but I don't know whether it should be published or not because some of the things that I said in it have to do with people that have moved in and out of this place.

EKBERG: What was this area like when you first came here?

CLOSE: When I came to Round Hill in 1920, there wasn't one tree on Round Hill. There were a few stone walls, and it was an absolutely perfect round hill. And it's the highest hill between, I think, New London and New York. The story goes that the old captains of ships would make their markings in the daytime on the rise of that hill that they could see from the water.

EKBERG: Oh, I hadn't heard that.

CLOSE: Yes, and we were living abroad then when [Dr. Charles V.] Paterno bought that whole hill. Before that it belonged to Mr. [William] Todd, and when he died, I think his daughter inherited it, Katherine Todd. I forget what her married name is now; she lives in Long Island. And that was sold to Mr. Paterno, that part of the hill, and he planted all those trees. Some of them were fully grown trees when he planted them. And he cut off the top of Round Hill in order to build his house. I mean, he flattened it; it's still the highest point.

The night before my twin boys were born, which was June 6, 1924, we had had a big fair where the Evanses live on Round Hill Road now. Mr. and Mrs. Huyler lived there in those days. That house was moved

later, down further on Round Hill Road. Mr. John Cameron Swayze, the commentator, lives there now. That was the Huyler house, but it was up where the Evanses live.

And we used to have the Round Hill Community House. Everybody participated. It had nothing to do with church things; at least, it wasn't supposed to in those days. In those days everybody had a good many servants. They had grooms, they had chauffeurs, they had house servants, and they had farmers and gardeners, all of whom were employed by a few families up here. We wanted a place where they could all meet and have a community connection up here to keep them happy and know each other, and so forth. It was eventually taken over completely by the Round Hill Church, but in those days we used to have a fair for it, and it was always on the Huylers' grounds up there.

That day I was supposed to have the children's grab bag. Everybody came from all over Greenwich to the Round Hill Fair. It was such fun, and Mrs. Huyler started it. She started a great many things, among which was a lot of activity in the Round Hill Church. She was a very, very active person in it. And I was supposed to have the grab bag, and I would suppose I was about seven months pregnant, and I was as big as Round Hill.

So Mrs. [Rhea Reid] Topping, who lived up here--well, everybody still calls it the Topping estate--was an intimate, intimate friend, she and her husband, of Mr. Close and mine. And she said to Mr. Close, "I don't think Betsy ought to have that strenuous job at the grab bag. She looks to me as if she needs some rest. So will you persuade her to stay at home and rest in bed? We'll all come over after the fair and

tell her all about it."

I couldn't have been happier to stay in bed, and after the fair was over, about ten or twelve of them came. They came up into my bedroom, and they were all laughing and talking. A couple of men were sitting in the window in my bedroom on the second floor, and the telephone rang. A man's voice said, "Mrs. Close, you will be fully protected. You have nothing to fear. Don't worry about anything." And he put the phone down. And I said, "That's the funniest telephone call I ever heard in my life."

At that point somebody inadvertently looked out the window, and there was a Ku Klux Klan cross twenty-five or thirty feet high burning on the top of Round Hill. Nowadays people would have panicked. They would have called the police. They would have done all sorts of things. Fifty-one years ago the men just left my house as fast as they could. They went up on the top of Round Hill, they pulled that burning cross down, they stomped it out, and that was that. There was nothing else about it.

EKBERG: That's an amazing story. Did they ever find out who or why?

CLOSE: There was an old woman who a lot of people called an old witch. She lived in the house that Mrs. Cummings lives in now, and she kept our second groom. We kept a room over there for him; we paid her rent. She only had two teeth, and they didn't match. They didn't meet in the front of her head. And she had an idiot son. None of them ever caused any trouble, but there had been some Ku Klux Klan trouble down on Hamilton Avenue that year--which is 1924--and some of them got the idea that she was an old witch and she was a bad influence and she was this, that, and. . . . Maybe she was. She'd lived there for as long as anybody

could remember that was alive then, and I don't know anything about her background. But the story was that it was to frighten her to behave herself.

Well, anyway, that happened, and I always said that it was the Ku Klux Klan that was responsible for the birth of my twins, because at four a.m. that morning, after all the excitement, I had to be rushed to the hospital two months early. The twins were born. It was seven months. Well, often twins come early, anyway, but they were born. I had to be rushed to the hospital that early morning, and they were born that day. So I always connect their birth, the fiery cross, and that funny, strange telephone call.

EKBERG: Can you figure out what that meant?

CLOSE: It was somebody that knew us. It was somebody in the neighborhood. And I always thought I recognized the voice. I have a fantastic memory for people's voices. Somebody can call me up I haven't talked to in twenty years, and I'd recognize their voice maybe better than I would their faces. And I think I recognized the voice, and it was a man that lived in the neighborhood. He was a workman, and he'd done a lot of work for us. He'd been extremely nice to both Mr. Close and me, and I think he was devoted to both of us. And he knew I was pregnant, and I'm pretty sure I know who he--but I'd never tell. In my life I'd never tell because I'm not positive, and yet in my own mind I am positive.

EKBERG: You think that he was one of the ones who was connected with putting the cross up and was reassuring you?

CLOSE: I think he knew about it. Whether he helped put it up or not, I

don't know, but a lot of them were very sanctimonious old people around here, you see.

EKBERG: The woman called a witch, was she black?

CLOSE: No.

EKBERG: It wasn't a racial thing?

CLOSE: No. But the Ku Klux Klan got the idea that they had to reform people. It was not like the Southern Ku Klux Klan. I can't go into that because I never bothered with it one way or the other. The twins were born and that was that. But that was a very exciting time.

Those days Mr. Arthur Moore, who lived in the house that the Feurbringers bought, and Mr. Close were intimate, intimate friends. Mr. Moore was a great big man, and he had an enormous horse, seventeen hands. And when the twins were born, he came home and jumped on his horse, and he went all over the neighborhood on his horse. He stopped at different people's houses, and he'd say, "Hello, hello! Eddie Close has twin boys." And then he'd gallop away like Paul Revere. Then he'd go to somebody else's house and say, "Hello, hello! Eddie Close has twin boys." And he never mentioned me at all!

EKBERG: Is Mr. Moore the father of Bettine [Close]?

CLOSE: Yes.

EKBERG: So that in the end, then, he became your--whatever you call it when. . . .

CLOSE: His daughter married my son. One of those twins. But before that he was one of the godfathers, not to the twin that his daughter married [Dr. William T. Close], but the other twin, Ted Close. He was Ted Close's godfather, and Mrs. Topping was his godmother.

I want to tell you about a group of old men that lived in Round Hill that were natives. They used to meet in a little house, a shack really, that's now fallen down, and they called it "The Club." And they particularly were friendly with each other in their club. The cider was running a little bit steep. They all loved Mr. Close and they all called him Eddie, so they used to come up.

And I'll tell you some of the names. One must have been related to Johnny Gus Husted, but they all called him "Nip" Husted, and you can imagine what the Nip was for. N-I-P, Nip, and he did. And then there was another one whose name I thought was so beautiful, and that was Gail Farrington. Now, I never knew whether it was K-A-L-E, which I do not think it was, or whether it was G-A-I-L or G-A-L-E. I think it was G-A-I-L. I've always thought that it would be a wonderful name to put in a story because it's so musical and so beautiful. And he used to come up.

I talked to all those old men because if they ran out of liquor, the one person in the neighborhood they'd come up to would be Mr. Close. They'd say, "Ed, you haven't got a little something left over that we could take down to the clubhouse?" And, of course, Eddie always did have. Especially during Prohibition, because my husband had bought an enormous amount of gin and whiskey and champagne and things before Prohibition, because he didn't want to have to buy anything after Prohibition came in. He not only didn't, but we had so much left over after Prohibition. We were then living in France. I came over here, and I sold about six cases of pre-Prohibition gin to a friend of mine who couldn't believe it.

Anyway, that's just about it. They all loved Eddie and they'd known him, so that's how I happened to get to talk to some of these people. Now, Gail Farrington was brought up here, and there were lovely stories about old Leather Man, they called him. This is a totally other story; it's a novel in itself. There was a Frenchman who came over to this country, and he lived in caves and he dressed in leather. He came over here to get away from France. I don't know whether it was during the Huguenot time or what, but everybody knew him, and he would stop at people's houses where they would give him some food. And he was always dressed in leather because he'd been in the leather-curing business in France, and he came over here and he shot deer, or whatever it was, and provided himself. He knew how to cure the hides.

He lived in caves, and his territory was between the Hudson River around Tarrytown and all this area here. And there were a couple of caves here that people said he lived in. Gail Farrington used to tell me that when he was a little boy, they lived up on Quaker Ridge somewhere near where the Joseph Reeds or Mrs. William Weaver live now, and they knew when the Leather Man, as everybody called him, would come. And the whole thing was something to do with a girl he fell in love with; his father wouldn't let them see each other, and all that, which brought him to the United States. And I'm told by Gail, who remembered him when Gail was a little boy, that he had learned to speak English, but he had a French accent.

Now, this is a story that has been written up, because I've tried to trace some of it, and somewhere I have a letter from a professor at Harvard telling me something about it. But I could spend my life

looking up things that people have told me, and I'm not about to do that. I haven't got that much longer to enjoy life. I'm not going to be just a file. I don't want to be a . . .

EKBERG: Researcher?

CLOSE: No, I don't mind doing research, but I don't want people to research me as if I were a file, because I'm just not about to be that kind of a person. So anyway, that's another story; that's the Leather Man. Now, some people say that he was found dead in a cave somewhere around this area. Others said he was found dead in a cave in Tarrytown, but the Leather Man is a wonderful story and it is connected with Greenwich.

EKBERG: I don't know where any caves are around Greenwich. You say there are some caves up around Quaker Ridge?

CLOSE: There used to be caves. There was a big cave at the back of our property.

EKBERG: Oh, was there?

CLOSE: Well, they're not underground caves. It's a big hole in the rocks. It's a cave. It isn't a subterranean thing or anything like that.

EKBERG: So it would be a shelter.

CLOSE: It's a shelter, a rocky shelter. So that's that.

I remember a cute story that I'm going to tell you about Nip Husted. Mr. Close and I used to have big Sunday lunches. We'd have thirty or forty people come in for lunch, and they would be all over the place--you know, outdoors, indoors--and they came from various places. We were all in my dining room one Sunday. There must have been about thirty of us there. Some friends from New York and some from New Canaan, and so on. As a matter of fact, Scott and Zelda

Fitzgerald were there, and there were some people from Princeton--an old beau of mine, and he had brought his fiancée. And there were--I can't go into it, but there were about thirty.

We were all in the dining room getting ourselves served when I looked out the window. We had a little gate in front, but nobody ever used it because they used the driveway to come in. But the front gate opened, and here was this old man in his stocking feet with his shoes in his hands, as you'd go into a house so that nobody would hear you. He was tiptoeing up the stone walk to our front door, and Eddie said, "My gosh, there's Nip Husted. I wonder what he wants." And he didn't wonder what he wanted; we all knew what he wanted.

So Eddie went to the door, and Nip said, "Ed, I'm sorry to bother you"--this was in a whisper, by the way--"I'm sorry to bother you; I knew you had company, so I didn't want to disturb you. That's why I took my shoes off." This was around one-thirty or two o'clock in the afternoon, and he said, "We just, um, sort of ran out of a little bit of cheer, and they all said, 'Go on up to Ed's, and he'll give you a bottle.'" So Eddie says, "Well, Nip, don't you want to come in and meet some people?" "No, I don't want to disturb anybody. That's why I took my shoes off." That's a true story; I'll never forget it.

Well, anyway, that's the end of that story. Now to go back to Johnny Gus Husted and Calvary Church. There was a wonderful old lady--she wasn't old at that time, she was maybe in her seventies--and she lived in a house on Round Hill Road which is where the [Merritt] Parkway goes now. They changed the route of Round Hill Road a little bit. Her name was Miss Ferris, and I think she taught piano, and she could also

play [the organ]. A lot of people in those days had these funny old organs in their house instead of pianos, and you pumped with your feet. They were rather large and unwieldy, but they had a lot of stops in them. You pumped with your feet, and it made an organ sound instead of a piano sound.

And Johnny Gus--I'd go over there sometimes and sit, and he'd say, "Sing me a song, Mrs. Close." I was in voice very much in those days, and so I'd sit there and I'd sing him a song, perhaps an old Southern song that I'd learned as a child, and he loved it.

And so he told his daughter, he kept saying to his daughter, Mrs. Howland, "When I die, I want the funeral right here in this house, as much as I love the church across the street. I want to be buried in that churchyard, but I want the funeral in this house here because I've had so many happy times here. And I want Miss Ferris to play my organ"--this was one of those old things--"but I want Mrs. Close to sing at my funeral."

And do you know, when he died they called me up and they said, "Johnny Gus died." I don't know what age he was--his granddaughters can tell you--but they called me up and they said, "Mrs. Close, the one thing we all promised Dad"--or Father, or whatever they called him--"was that Mrs. Close would sing at his funeral." Wasn't that dear?

EKBERG: Yes, that really is.

CLOSE: And so I did. I sang two hymns which the family picked out, and Miss Ferris sat there and played the organ. And it was always a very happy funeral to me because it was all worked out just the way Johnny Gus wanted it to work out. I really felt as if I was a mockingbird

sitting there singing, because it was something that the old man had always wanted. Isn't that lovely to happen to me? You know, it's just one of the highlights, one of the beautiful things that have happened to me, to think that that old man wanted my voice at that moment in the family.

So let's see, what else can I tell you? The Round Hill Store used to be catty-cornered opposite where it is now, and it was moved, I think, before old Grandpa Strain bought the store. It's been several generations, I think three, that the Strains have owned it, but it was a store before the Strains bought it. They were not native Greenwich people, old Grandpa Strain.

EKBERG: You mean the grandfather was the one that came here from someplace else?

CLOSE: Francis Strain's grandfather, yes. I think. It may have been his father, whom I knew, and his mother. I knew them both. But I'm not sure about that; it may have been the grandfather that bought it.

EKBERG: Who owned the store before that?

CLOSE: This is what I don't know. But I know it was catty-cornered to where it is now. That I know. On the property there in the corner. I think it belongs to Mrs. Davey now, that property.

Greenwich in some ways was a kind of a summer resort. An awful lot of people lived in New York and came out here for the summer, particularly some of those big houses in Belle Haven. Now, my daughter-in-law, who was a Moore, her grandfather [C. A. Moore I] owned the property on both sides of Round Hill Road for years. He owned a number of hundreds of acres.

When her father was a young man, they used to drive out in a four-in-hand, and they'd take friends. They'd have this old break, as they used to call the four-in-hand carriage, and they'd all come out with picnics and drive out from Belle Haven in the four-in-hand to have a picnic. He was very good at handling these horses. It takes quite a lot of horsemanship, which he knew.

That was colorful, I think, and something that was done. People used to drive out to this area from down in Greenwich. Most of the big houses were around Rock Ridge and Belle Haven, and they would drive out to Round Hill because it was seven or eight miles. In those days they came out in horse-drawn carriages, but the break, the four-in-hand, was quite colorful. And that was a kind of atmosphere.

Many years later, when I came into the picture, they had a hunt out here, and that was colorful because they fox-hunted all through this part of the country. They used to have hunt breakfasts, and I'm going to tell you that some of these things were quite raucous, because it was during Prohibition and people drank openly, and they didn't have too many inhibitions, either.

And so it was all pretty colorful, and there were lots of parties. The Round Hill Club, of course, was not built then. They had some parties at the Greenwich Country Club, and the Field Club was the center of quite a lot of entertainment in the beginning--before the 1920's and all through the 1920's. They used to have lots of parties down there.

The people that I remember were--well, there is Mrs. Lynch, who was Helen Barrett, and both Mrs. Moores, Mrs. Eugene and Mrs. Arthur Moore. And there's just so many people that I can't go into it all,

but it was a very indulgent social era in those days. And people--the ones that I came in contact with, which were the wealthy people in Greenwich--had plenty to go on. They would take trips to Europe, always on a steamship, and that had been going on for years.

EKBERG: Did most of the men who lived out here work in New York?

CLOSE: A lot of the men worked in New York. When I first came into the picture, which was in 1920, a good many of the young men had come back from the war and they hadn't gotten started in business yet. Some of them were victims of the war because they came back in Prohibition time, do you see? They had enough money to live on for quite a while, and they just didn't get started. And it was somewhat dissolute in lots of ways, if I can be frank about this thing.

But at the same time they were all well educated, and they were all fundamentally good, kind people; and then the men gradually got back into business. A great many of them were family businesses that they went back into, so that they didn't have to go back too quickly. It's a Scott Fitzgerald era, which he wrote about and which we lived through. A lot of that era Mr. Close and I lived in France, after my children were born.

You ought to get in touch with people who know a lot about the lovely yachts that people had and the sailing that was done around here.

EKBERG: Did the people who lived on Round Hill do both hunting and sailing?

CLOSE: No, they were different groups. The Mallorys--Mr. Mallory was a very famous yachtsman, and they won all sorts of cups, the Kaiser's Cup in Germany and all sorts of things like that. They don't live here anymore,

but old Mrs. Mallory lives up in West Redding now. She was married to Mr. Clifford Mallory.

EKBERG: Where did you shop? The country store, of course, wouldn't have fresh produce, or did it in those days?

CLOSE: The Round Hill Store? No, it never had fresh farm produce in my memory.

EKBERG: So you had to go into Greenwich to do most of the shopping?

CLOSE: Yes, but a great many people out here had gardeners or farmers, and we, among other people, had our vegetable gardens. We had beautiful vegetable gardens, and we had our own fresh vegetables. And during the Second World War Mr. Close bought young steers, and we ran them and had them butchered here to keep for our meat. We had plenty of room, do you see? And we'd have a butcher come and kill the steer when he was just about right. A lot of people did things like that, and that was during the beginning of the Second World War.

But [with] the vegetable gardens in the early days, we didn't have to go down to buy. The fruit we bought, but a lot of people had their own peach orchards here and apple orchards here and pear trees, and they had their own strawberries. It was country. There were just not that many people.

EKBERG: So that each estate would be sort of self-contained?

CLOSE: Pretty much, and some of them had their own chickens.

And that's the whole era. That's the whole picture there, and I think that's about all I can do.

EKBERG: Thank you very much.

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