

Beyond Lucknow: The Tobey Family



A page from a Tobey family scrapbook. Private Collection.

This post is part of a series that explores the Lucknow Estate in the years after Tom Plant died and his wife Olive left the mountaintop home. Tom's death in July 1941 occurred only months after the death of Joseph Emery, the mortgage holder of the Lucknow Estate. The executors of Emery's will then foreclosed on the property. Fred C. Tobey of Plymouth, New Hampshire purchased the estate as a summer home in 1942.

In the years after Castle in the Clouds opened to the public, Tobey descendants visited the property and reminisced about having Thanksgiving dinner in the dining room, and playing around the pool table. Below you'll find an interview with Elizabeth (Libby) Tobey Gonnerman, one of Fred and Susan Tobey's daughters, originally published in *The Weirs Times* in June of 1992.

An Interview with Elizabeth Tobey Gonnerman

By Lorrie Baird. *The Weirs Times*. June 18, 1992.

Speak of 'Lucknow' to Elizabeth Tobey Gonnerman of Laconia, and the mist of countless happy memories shine in her eyes. The estate of Thomas G. Plant now known as 'Castle in the Clouds' is much more than a tourist attraction to 'Libby' as she is known to friends and associates. The estate was the summer home of her parents, Fred and Susan Tobey for 15 happy seasons. To others, it may be the Castle in the Clouds. To Libby, it has always been, and shall remain, 'Lucknow'.



Left to
right: Ruth
Tobey
Hampson,
Elizabeth
Tobey
Gonnerman
Erb, Milli
Tobey at
the Tobey
Family
reunion at
Lucknow,
July 2002.

Libby's story goes back to 1941 when her father, Fred C. Tobey, a highly regarded self-made real estate developer and lumber magnate, purchased the entire estate at auction as a summer retreat and for lumbering purposes. He was one of the few people who was a close friend of Thomas Plant and frequent visitor to Lucknow.

Fred C. Tobey was himself a fascinating man. He would never disclose how much of a fortune he had built from the age of 12 when he began lumbering and running logs down the Penobscot River in Maine, but it was rumored that he was one of the wealthiest men in New Hampshire. At one point he owned the entire township of Elliotville, ME, all 15,000 acres, which he lumbered for two years.

The purchase of Lucknow came as a surprise to his daughter Libby who was living in Boston and married only two years at that time. "When are you coming for a visit?" her father asked. For Libby and her six siblings, Fred Jr., Dorothy, Oliver, Guy, George and Ruth, it was the beginning of a magical era of summering at Lucknow.

People knew the estate as the home of Thomas Plant and then as the tourist attraction 'Castle in the Clouds.' "Few people realized that it was the summer home for fifteen years to this large brood of children, spouses and grandchildren, who had a tremendous amount of fun there," she recalls.

When J. Paul Sticht, representing Castle Springs L.P., purchased Castle in the Clouds in 1991, he began an extensive plan to restore the estate to its former elegance, along with developing Castle Springs, a bottled water plant [drawing water] from the pure spring on the property. His son, David, visited Libby and inquired about the Tobey's life at Lucknow. Libby was gratified to see that the Stichts took such interest in life at Lucknow beyond Thomas Plant experiences.

Now, for the first time in 36 years, Libby Gonnerman revisited every room in Lucknow, to observe the restoration process and share her personal memories.



PAVED ROADS AND OPEN VISTAS

"It's nice to see that the road is paved and that they are widening it," Libby observes as we wind our way up the back road to the mountain estate she once called summer home.

As we pass the upper gate house, Libby chuckles and recalls an adventurous summer when she lived at the guard house from April to August with her two little boys, Tobey and Michael, before daughters Susan and Holly were born. Tobey Gonnerman now in his forties, has accompanied his mother on the visit, but admits remembering little of his summer at the gate house. "It was chilly in the gate house with its walls of stone and I didn't know anything about tending a wood stove," Libby admits. "I spent a lot of time at the big house with Mother."

We park at the stables and Libby immediately notices that the brush and secondary trees have been cleared away for a better view of the castle. "I'm not sure I can get used to it looking quite so....open," she confesses.

We are warmly greeted by our hosts, Castle in the Clouds Attractions Manager, John Lowell. As we drive to the mansion, he explains that through selective cutting, the house and surrounding vistas were opened for better viewing. When a beautifully constructed stone retaining wall pops into sight, which would otherwise be covered with brush, Libby agrees with enthusiasm that the thinning process was a wise decision.

ANOTHER WORLD, ANOTHER TIME

"Stepping into Lucknow was like stepping into another whole world," recalled Libby as she walked through the heavy hand-hewn front door into the foyer. This time, she stepped into a work-in-process.

The fact that the restoration process was not complete at the time of her visit, didn't concern her. As a successful Realtor, Libby has developed a trained eye for potential results. She was gratified to see the work taking place and observes that she had refrained from visiting the castle since it had fallen into disrepair. Libby beamed when shown the complete restoration of the outside pergola, the repair on the rafters and the fact that the replacement gutters would be wooden, as they were originally.

"I can't wait to take friends and family up here again." She says enthusiastically. Libby was happy when the former owners, the Robies, opened the estate to the public. It is an opinion not shared by my siblings. "Oh there's Dad's office" she says of the room off the foyer, where he often took care of 'disciplinary matters.' "You never wanted to get called into Dad's office," she chuckles. Unlike Thomas Plant who was retired, Fred Tobey often traveled widely on business and was rarely at Lucknow.

Libby fondly recalls the huge animal rugs that once graced the main hall, particularly the bear rug, because the children used to take turns sitting on it. "Mother scolded us because we closed the jaws," she says with a mischievous grin.

What she doesn't remember are the now-famous griffins that were once a Castle in the Clouds trademark, or the suit of armor, purportedly worn by Mr. Plant. "If they were here they were stored away," she says with slight disdain. "I remember everything at Lucknow as glamorous and refined."

So refined, in fact, that one painting which graced the main hall brought a price tag of \$300,000 when her brother sold the inherited piece. Libby has several pieces of furniture and one of three Ming vases that once adorned the stair landings at Lucknow.



It is the library that is Libby's favorite room. Here she visualizes rainy days and her family playing games on a table in front of the beautiful marble fireplace. The room was filled with puzzles that "everyone was required to work on." She is pleased to hear that John Lowell had authorized that visitors be allowed to enter the library, which was previously roped off during tours.

In the octagonal dining room, a table shaped to fit the room sat 21 family members, Libby recalls, leaving barely enough room for the maids to serve. Unlike Thomas Plant, who shunned most company, meals at Lucknow for the Tobey family usually included a crowd, but were somewhat formal. "When we were growing up, our parents talked. We listened. That's the way it was back then."

The Tobey family often ate informal breakfasts in the servants' dining room, but they never used the servants' staircase to the upper floors. When asked what the staff numbered while she was there, Libby replies, "We didn't have 'numbers' we had people. We were taught to respect those who worked for us."

Every guest room in the main house holds memories for Libby. She is enthralled with the beauty of the hardwood floors, which fan into a graceful pattern in the octagonal bedrooms. She has never seen them before. They were always covered with carpets.

When her family visited Lucknow, Susan Tobey rotated guest rooms, even forfeiting her private suite. "We fought over the needle showers and who was going to use the full-sized mirror or sleep in the guest room with the three-sided view, as any family would." Libby observes. "It's wonderful to see most of the original furniture here."

She doesn't remember family members being impressed that President Theodore Roosevelt had slept in the octagonal guest room. She does recall the family ruffling her mother's composure with unending use of the intercom system.

HEAVEN ON EARTH

It is in Thomas Plant's master bedroom, known to Libby as her parents suite, where memory evokes strong emotion. It is Susan Tobey, not Thomas Plant, Libby sees sitting at the dressing room table, or reading on the lounge (which now graces her own bedroom).

"See this window that opens up full length? There's no balcony here. It was wide-open and one day my little son Michael, was found standing at the opening." From the window to the courtyard below, the drop is sheer. Not one of Libby's fondest memories of Lucknow.

Libby quickly regains her ever-present grace and composure, walks into the master bathroom and says with a sweeping gesture, "Welcome to the most beautiful place in the world to brush your teeth." Indeed. Lake Winnepesaukee and the mountains beyond are breathtaking. Heaven-like. Susan Tobey often said, "Heaven just can't be more beautiful than this." Looking through the English casement windows to Lake Winnepesaukee and the mountain vistas beyond, few would argue the observation.

Thomas Plant was its creator. Later it was Susan Tobey who became the heart and soul of Lucknow. It was she who oversaw the planning and voluminous plantings in the gardens around the estate, often working side-by-side with the staff. She personally cared for the plants growing in the spectacular curved 100-ft greenhouse, the remnants of which can still be seen today. So beautiful was Lucknow that in 1953, the Tobey family were asked to consider lending the estate to President Eisenhower as his summer retreat. Susan Tobey was against the idea, and won the decision to keep Lucknow for the family.

It is with some sadness that Libby speaks of the changes she saw in her mother through the years. At first, Susan welcomed all visitors and lavishly entertained garden clubs at Lucknow. As she grew older, she, like



Thomas Plant, became more reclusive, Libby speculates. "Dad was rarely there, and I think she must have been afraid of trespassers."

In 1956, Susan Tobey was pronounced terminally ill. "The word 'cancer' wasn't uttered in polite company then. Because she was so ill, Dad sold the estate without consulting her. But she recovered, and Dad had to tell her that he had sold Lucknow. She lived ten more years, and I never heard Mother utter one word about missing the estate." Libby pauses to reflect a moment and adds, "I do remember her saying, 'I don't want to die, because who would see to it that Lucknow stays this beautiful?'"

May she rest in peace, for Lucknow has regained its full splendor and will be enjoyed by visitors for generations to come.

Becoming Castle in the Clouds



Aerial photograph of Lucknow Estate from Tobey family scrapbook. Private collection.

In the years after Plant's death, the Lucknow Estate served as a beloved home away from home for the Tobey family – including Fred and his wife Susan, their seven adult children, and numerous grandchildren –for 15 years.

In 1956, Fred Tobey sold Lucknow to James Foss, who sold it to Richard S. Robie less than a month later. As a result of this sale, the estate was renamed Castle in the Clouds and opened to the public for the first time.