



Environmental Education on the Potomac

When Henry Met Alice...29 Years Later

By Linda Simmons (originally published Hard Bargain News, September 2012)

Alice Lowe wed Henry Ferguson in 1914. The couple began their life together with a wedding voyage to South America, returning home to Washington, D.C. in 1915. For the next three decades they lived, worked, played, and had a creative life together at their two homes on California Street in Northwest Washington and at Hard Bargain Farm in Accokeek, Maryland. Their personal relationship and their shared interests seem to have been many. Their affection for each other appears to have grown, not diminished with time. Some of Henry's love poems for Alice have been recently rediscovered and are being recorded and read to find what they can reveal about these two articulate and intellectually active individuals. One dating from 1943 I found most revealing.

*Nine and twenty years ago,
Two little gutter cats
Started out to see the world
In their best shoes and hats
Later we cruised the Indies
Afterward went to Spain;
Maybe the war will quit next year,
Then we can start again.
My choice would be Atlantis-
Hesprides would be swell-
But if you'd rather see Sangri-La,
T would suit me just as well.*

Their passports and other travel documents record the Fergusons' travels to not only Spain but elsewhere including countries in Scandinavia, and for Henry, the Philippines. The itinerary he offers Alice is revealing of their awareness of current events and thinking and if not personal at least local and national longings.

Henry's offer to take Alice to "Sangri-La" — his personal spelling of "Shangri-la" — tells something about the time when written than might be immediately apparent nearly 60 years later. For the early 21st century reader the word Shangri-la still has a mysterious quality of an exotic Utopian paradise to it. But it is unlikely to carry the same import that it did for Alice and Henry, then living in the nation's capitol during the Second World War.

The imaginary lamasery, Shangri-la had entered the American vocabulary—and imagination — the decade following 1933 when James Hilton's novel, *Lost Horizon* was published. The story was made widely known and popular when in 1937 Frank Capra directed a movie based on the book.

In *Lost Horizon*, the story is told of a British diplomat, Hugh Conway, who discovers Shangri-la, a fictional Utopian lamasery high in the mountains of Tibet. What he discovers there are contented, happy inhabitants who have risen above the war below while preserving precious elements of culture

and human life. They live long, contented lives as long as they remain there and act as stewards of the finest of world culture. Many readers found in this book an open expression of their longing for an end to World War II and Shangri-La became a buzz word of the current longing for peace. Henry and Alice could have known that President Franklin D. Roosevelt renamed the presidential hideaway in rural Maryland Shangri-la. It has subsequently been renamed Camp David.

Henry's seemingly light-hearted offer to take Alice to a mythical place of peace, an exotic paradise, can be seen as possibly offering her an escape to a paradise of peace, tranquility and long life. he might also have been hoping for the return of "The Gang" that lighted group who had once congregated at Hard Bargain but been dispersed after that day in December of 1941 when the Japanese attacked on Pearl Harbor. There clearly was much to long for and look forward to with Alice in 1943.