

A Journey Into the Past

Betty L. Smelser

A FEW years ago, while visiting in South Carolina, I was privileged to see Windemere, the ante-bellum home of a locally prominent but otherwise unknown South Carolinian family. Since I possessed an active interest in Civil War history, the prospects of viewing an original, unrestored Southern home filled me with delight. When at last the big day arrived, I, armed with a miniature Confederate flag, set out on my journey into the past.

The house lay several miles east of the main road and was approached by a rough dirt path of uncertain origin. Tall pine trees lined the path on both sides, forming an arch of dense, green gloominess discernible even to me. The poignant scent of honeysuckle, roses, and various wild flowers filled the air with almost nauseating intensity. My heart throbbed with each step; my mind raced on and on, wondering what to expect. Then I saw it. Windemere. From a distance the mansion was a masterpiece of mid-nineteenth century Georgian architecture complete with stately white columns, typical boxy main section, and two end wings attached on either side of the main part. Here and there a rabbit jumped playfully in the brush, and birds sang happily in their tree-top homes. The whole scene was, in a glance, serenity personified.

However, the superficiality of my first impression became evident as I drew closer. Then I saw the scars which years of war and poverty had inflicted on that once gracious manor. The elements had replaced the puritan whiteness of its outer walls with the filth and decay of time. The numerous windows which had seemed so beautiful from a distance were huge, black eyes, staring sightlessly into the darkness. Cautiously, I approached the door but could go no further. For some strange reason I was absolutely unable to open that door. However, in order not to say I was afraid, I mustered all of my nearly lost courage and peered into one of the glassless windows. As I gazed at the cold, barren room before me, I could almost hear the music, the laughter, the tinkle of crystal and china which once echoed through the halls. I imagined long-tressed girls in hoop skirts and handsome frock-coated lads dancing together to the rousing tune of the Virginia Reel. Suddenly my reverie was broken by the shrill hoot of an owl nearby, and I felt the presence of tiny unseen creatures in the brush around me. I noticed that night was closing in around me; so I turned my back on Windemere and days gone by and hurried to the safety and security of the twentieth century.