

## ***Marjorie Merriweather Post: The Life Behind the Luxury*** **Q&A from December 9, 2019 Volunteer Education Sessions**

Below are answers Estella Chung provided to volunteer questions related to *Marjorie Merriweather Post: The Life Behind the Luxury* (2019).

### **1. What was your research process?**

I was hired by Hillwood to write this biography along with other curatorial projects in 2007. Research for the book started immediately, first at Hillwood's Archive and Special Collections, and then to other places that were either formal research institutions, or places that were part of Post's life. Simultaneously I combed through Hillwood's Oral History Collection, conducted my own oral history interviews on behalf of Hillwood, studied our material culture holdings, and the Hillwood's outbuilding and mansion. Additionally, I spent weeks between 2008 and 2017 at the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan. The Bentley holds the Post Family papers, rich with documents from Post's estates and scrapbooks with news articles following her as a public figure. For the outline, I surveyed all of the gathered research and spent two months meshing the research with the typical questions visitors ask at Hillwood with interesting new material I found from 2007 to 2017. This process created the chapter themes. Writing began in earnest in 2018, right after New Year's Day. I had a word count goal for every week, and a schedule on when each chapter would have to be done to keep the book on track. I sent the manuscript to the publisher just before Christmas that year.

### **2. What sets this biography apart from others written about Marjorie Post?**

This book was strongly informed by Hillwood volunteers! Their observations, their questions, their interaction with visitors. Also being a publication of 2019 (the others are from 1995 and the 1970s), this book takes a fresh look at Post as her own person, and her substantial contributions to the world, in a way that is now possible in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **3. What is the succinct way to explain Hillwood's (and Marjorie Post's) relationship to the Smithsonian Institution, if visitors ask?**

The Smithsonian and Post came to an agreement that Hillwood would be a gift to the nation in 1968. Post also gave the Smithsonian substantial gifts to their collections outside of Hillwood. After Post's death in 1973, it became apparent the Smithsonian could not run Hillwood, and the estate returned to the Marjorie Merriweather Post foundation in 1976. The return to the foundation was a matter of finances – the Smithsonian could not manage running Hillwood at the level the estate needed. The foundation opened Hillwood as a museum in 1977. Today, it runs as a public charity.

### **4. What is the best way to approach the impact C.W. Post's suicide had on Marjorie Post with visitors? What is the best way to approach discussing the lawsuit that awarded Marjorie Post control of the Post Cereal Company after C.W. Post's death? What is the significance of Marjorie Post owning the company since she was six years old?**

With our 21<sup>st</sup> century visitors, we share that C.W. Post died in 1914 by his own hand, and his death and funeral was national news. His will immediately went into probate, with his wishes for the company to go 50-50 to his second wife Leila Post (Marjorie Post's step-mother) and to daughter Marjorie Post. Legally, the company belonged to Marjorie Post since age six due to her mother Ella Merriweather funding the start of the business, and giving ownership to daughter Marjorie Post. What I should have spelled out in the book, is that this was due to C.W. Post financial status that he could not own the company, due to financial woes. In the end, Marjorie Post was publicly declared the sole owner of the business and widow Leila Post received six million dollars. Leila Post remarried and became a significant philanthropist in Battle Creek, Michigan as Leila Montgomery.

### **5. What is the best way to approach Marjorie Post's divorce with Herbert May due to his homosexuality if visitors ask?**

Here is the known information: Marjorie Post and Herbert May entertained and hosted philanthropic events together, donating their time and money to support education and the arts. Daughter Dina

Merrill thought May to be the perfect companion and husband for Post's later years, as he also loved to dance and entertain like her mother. Post found herself shocked to learn that Herbert May was gay, leading to divorce in August 1964. She was seventy-seven.

**6. Were their pre-nuptial agreements between Post and her husbands? Was Post's money from the husbands?**

No pre-nuptial agreements were found, and it appears Post's wealth came from the business she owned and exceptional financial management of money from the Postum-General Foods companies.

**7. Internet sources (like Wikipedia) cite Marjorie Post promised and then rescinded funds to build the Merriweather Post Pavilion. If visitors ask about her support—financial or otherwise—of the pavilion, what is a good answer?**

Marjorie Post did not provide specific funds for the Pavilion, and to date, records of her offering funds or rescinding them have not been found. She was one of the symphony's strongest advocates and financial supporters for three decades, to honor that, the Pavilion bears her name.

**8. What is your advice for how to tell Marjorie Post's influence on the Bird's Eye purchase, because the story of her eating a frozen bird is legend?**

Mark Kurlansky, the author of *Birdseye: The Adventures of a Curious Man* (2012), analyzed the business deal and available documentation, he came across various iterations of a well-recounted tale of Marjorie Post and a Birds Eye frozen goose that he found problematic. In brief, the business legend as told in many publications suggested that in the mid-1920s Marjorie Post and E.F. Hutton had eaten and enjoyed a Birds Eye frozen goose aboard their yacht. Post was so impressed with the taste and technology that she pestered her husband about purchasing the business. As Kurlansky observes, there are not only problems in the details of the story, but it also paints Marjorie Post as "self-indulgent" and acting "on a whim." Rather, Kurlansky saw a story about Post and Hutton brokering the deal and finding the funds to pay for it. Likely, the business acumen of company president Colby Chester, who worked closely with Post and Hutton, also played a part in reaching an agreement. In 1929, after the Frosted Foods purchase, the Postum Cereal Company became the General Foods Corporation.

**9. What are your tips for discussing Marjorie Post's philanthropy relating to young people?**

Post lent her business acumen and substantial financial support to a variety of cultural, artistic, and educational institutions, especially programs for young people. It was her pleasure to give. A few specifics include:

- The Washington Ballet: As a board officer, Post cut the ribbon on the ballet's school building in 1963 and also unveiled a plaque that read, "Dedicated to ballet and the academic arts, this institution is the first in the United States to offer these studies in one curriculum." The foundation for the ballet purposefully set out to open a non-segregated school and to provide scholarships "to be awarded without regard to race."
- The Boy Scouts: Post's activities on behalf of scouting ranged from Texas to New York to Washington, D.C. She generously supported scouting facilities, from lakes to camps to office space. In honor of her gifts Lake Merriweather, the center of several Boy Scout camps in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia is named after Post. In 1955 Post was delighted to help make possible the capital area Boy Scouts' move to new headquarters at 1742 Connecticut Avenue NW, complete with a scout trading post for supplies, registration information office, and council administration space for a staff of forty-five. In 1972, the scouts bestowed upon Post the Silver Fawn, an international honor awarded to one woman each year.
- Her alma mater, Mount Vernon Seminary and Junior College (class of 1904): In her day, the school offered the rare opportunity for higher education for women – she was very loyal. One of her notable contributions to the school was during the Great Depression, when she covered faculty salaries and other financial obligations to keep it in operation. Providing leadership and perspective, she told the alumni group when it was time for the seminary to become a junior college – "If we do not bend with the times, we will break."

- Music for Young America/National Symphony Orchestra: Post served on the board of directors for the National Symphony Orchestra for more than three decades, from 1942 to 1973, setting records in individual giving. Over 60,000 children from forty-three states enjoyed the Music for Young America concerts during its first season – funded by Post.
- C.W. Post College–Long Island: Post became pen pals with the presidents of the fraternity and sorority, responding to their letters and taking time to acknowledge their achievements. Post planned and funded educational trips to Washington, D.C., for the brothers and sisters with the highest scores and best financial practices, the latter meaning that their sorority or fraternity and accounts were paid in full. While in the capital, they would naturally visit key historical and cultural sites, as well as Hillwood. Post had also delighted in extending this educational indulgence to twenty-four Battle Creek High School teens, chartering a DC7 for the occasion, as her own private turbo-prop only seated seventeen. She joined them on the bus she chartered as they toured the nation's capital.

**10. Why did she get the French Legion of Honor? Was it the field hospital? Was she the sole funder of the field hospital?**

The Legion of Honor, awarded in 1957 to Post, did not specify a specific reason for the distinction. For the hospital, on August 7, 1917, the SS *Finland* departed with supplies, arriving in France thirteen days later. In a white stone school building, the first hospital in Savenay, France, was begun. It was officially called Base Hospital No. 8. The hospital began receiving patients in September 1917. Starting in August 1918, it focused on patients being evacuated to the United States. Auxiliary buildings gave Base Hospital No. 8 a capacity of 2,460 beds plus surgical units. By November 1918, it had evolved to the point of the American Expeditionary Forces calling it "one of the largest and most important hospital centers in France." By the end of its run in January 1919, Base Hospital No. 8 had cared for 35,244 sick and wounded.

**11. Why was the yacht named Hussar?**

In the matter of traveling by sea, Marjorie Post mused about her and E.F. Hutton's floating conveyances in an interview: "Then there was. . . [a] motor boat, which was called *Hussar III* ... and then came the schooner which we built, a three mast, a beautiful ship [*Hussar IV*]. ... In the meantime, we were working on the plans for the square rigger [*Hussar V*, later *Sea Cloud*]." The numbers of the various *Hussars* were often mixed up or omitted in news accounts. Post and Hutton divorced in September 1935. Post explained, "After the divorce, when I took it into my hands, I renamed it the *Sea Cloud* because the *Hussar* name was very definitely connected with Hutton, and I felt that if he was going to have another boat and so forth, he'd want the name."

**12. Is the *Hussar V* [Sea Cloud] model on view in the first floor library the one Dina received from the captain?**

Why yes it is! Dina Merrill concluded, knowing her affection for the *Hussar*, "[Captain] Lawson built me this beautiful model of her," she said. "I love it." Note the model has a black hull. The *Hussar V* became the *Sea Cloud* in late 1935, keeping its majestic black hull. Then in March 1939, in addition to overhauled diesel engines, the *Sea Cloud* debuted its new "spring dress of white and gold."

**15. You mentioned Mamie Eisenhower and Eleanor Roosevelt in the book; do you have other references on Presidential and First Lady references with Marjorie Post?**

Yes, there are archival documents relating to Presidents and First Ladies from Roosevelt to Nixon. The inaugural committees for Presidents Roosevelt (1941), Truman (1949), Eisenhower (1953, 1957), Kennedy (1961), Johnson (1963), and Nixon (1969) all "requested the honor" of Post's presence at the ceremony and related events. Marjorie Post and Joseph Davies hosted Truman at their Washington home Tregaron. Marjorie Post spoke to and received an award from the Variety Club at the request of Dwight Eisenhower in 1961. Marjorie Post was of the same generation as Rose Kennedy. They knew each other socially, and Post's daughter Dina Merrill was close in age to Jacqueline Kennedy, Rose's daughter-in-law and first lady. Lady Bird Johnson visited both Mar-A-Lago and Hillwood. First Lady Pat Nixon thanked Marjorie Post for the gift of French candlesticks to the White House Collection.

**16. Can you speak more to Marjorie Post's ancestry?**

Charted ancestral lines of Marjorie Merriweather Post go back to Sweden, France, Russia, Scotland, England, and Connecticut USA.

**17. What happened to the Boulders?**

The building only partial burned, and is now a private school in Connecticut.

**18. When the Smithsonian returned Hillwood, did that impact the jewelry Marjorie Post had gifted earlier?**

Good question. No, the jewelry Marjorie Post gifted the Smithsonian was a separate, legal transaction from Hillwood. Does that include the Habsburg Veil? Yes

**19. Is it fair to say Marjorie Post start the national gem collection?**

According to Liana Paredes in *Spectacular* (p. 17), " Marjorie Merriweather Post was de facto one of the major forces behind the creation of the Smithsonian's National Gem Collection. She led by example, writing letters to potential donors asking them to consider donating their jewelry to the Smithsonian."

**20. Is it true that Marjorie Post feared for Dina during the Lindberg baby incident and that is why Dina spent so much time on the Sea Cloud?**

I have not found writings that support or disprove the claim.

**21. Was the Sea Cloud the first naval vessel that was racially integrated?**

Yes.

**22. After "living" with Marjorie Post though 12 years of research, what did you take away, personally, from the process?**

I learned you do not have to be saintly to be a giving human being—one can enjoy their glam (at any level) and also contribute good to the world (at any level). We all can be Marjorie Post, elegant and thoughtful, in our own way.