

## Thoughts on Interpretive Approaches to Marjorie Merriweather Post's Biography Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens

*Telling a biographical story is tricky business! There are many choices to make, and some choices can prove more useful than others. Here is some advice on tactics for approaching Post's biography as you develop your tour.*

### **Consider tone**

- Go for respectful...her accomplishments and qualities are still used as the museum's guiding principles (eg. graciousness).
- Benefit of the doubt...life-stories are complex, people are complex and not perfect...consider how you would like your life decisions to be viewed by someone looking back at them.
- She was a white woman born in 1887 and a citizen of the first three-quarters of the twentieth century. She, like us, is a product of her times, and her times are not our times.

### **Importance of facts and sources**

- Beware of analyzing psychology (her thoughts, intentions, emotions, rationales), and crossing into speculation. In many cases we do not have evidence of them, and, more importantly, that work is not ours to do on a 60-minute guided tour!
- Go back to your sources to verify, dig deeper. The readings for this course are an excellent resource to go back to again and again. If you hear a new story from volunteers, visitors, or staff, feel free to ask them where it came from. If it can't be verified, make a judgment call: either do not use it until you can find a verifiable source or use the story stating that you haven't been able to verify it.
- "I don't know the answer to that question" is a perfectly acceptable answer. Following up with what you **do** know can make a connection that is just as satisfying to the visitor. "While I do not know how many bedrooms were here, I can tell you that she was not hosting large groups of people overnight at Hillwood. That meant that the bedrooms were for a conservative number of guests, herself, and her staff." If the visitor is very interested in the specific answer to their question, direct them to submit their question to visitor services staff (located at the front desk), who will forward their inquiry onto the appropriate department.
- Our understanding of Post changes over time. Researching Hillwood's history to understand our past is an important, ongoing commitment. New books will continue to be published (look for upcoming publications in 2026 and 2027) and will add to our understanding of our founder.
- Ask for help if you want a second opinion, run into a sticky spot--start with the volunteer management staff.

### **Big take-aways from the biography**

Here are some of the main interpretative messages distilled from the biography:

#### **Overall**

- Post is a remarkable and influential women of the twentieth-century.
- Post's education, upbringing, skills, and interests shaped her contributions as an astute business executive, deeply caring and generous humanitarian and committed philanthropist.
- Post commanded her wealth from sales of Postum and Grape-Nuts to live a 20<sup>th</sup> century life of luxury, wielding financial oversight of multiple estates, a large staff, and an art collection.
- She derived satisfaction from putting her money "to work," and particular joy out of her ability to give happiness to others, which she did by tending to business, giving graciously, and indulging guests.

#### **Business**

- Post's father C.W. Post instructed his only child in the family business so that she was able, in the aftermath of her father's suicide, to manage the Postum Cereal Company through a leadership change and into growth.
- Her association with what became General Foods was close to her heart: first as daughter of the founder of the Postum Cereal Company, then as owner of Postum Cereal Company, and eventually as a director of General Foods from 1936-58, one of the few women to hold such a position.

## Service

- Throughout Post's life, when it came to times of war, large-scale hunger, and opportunities to be an engaged citizen, she chose to be involved, donating her time, money, and thoughtfulness.

## Giving

- She lent her business acumen and substantial financial support to a variety of cultural, artistic, and educational institutions, especially programs for young people. Her gifts often included delightful and thoughtful surprises. She funded many longstanding efforts that left enduring marks on arts and education. It was her pleasure to give.

## Legacy

- Her lifestyle, collection, mansion, and gardens at Hillwood are here for the public to enjoy, and be inspired and educated by today.

## **Frequently asked questions on tours about Post's biography and some thoughts and examples...**

- **Post's name: What is the correct way to refer to her?**
  - It changes over time!
  - You may see it many different ways—it's messy!
  - Rule of thumb for us: use full name first (Marjorie Merriweather Post), then use Marjorie Post or Post. (You may see some uses of Marjorie by Hillwood, but that usage is being phased out.)
  - Avoid using Mrs. Post (popular in the past, but can be confusing as she didn't marry a Post)
- **Post's marriages: How many times did she marry and why so many?**
  - Visitors will ask---use the facts!
    - 4 marriages, 4 divorces, from 1905-1964
      - She was married for significant lengths of time with each relationship (last marriage lasted 6 years; earlier 3 ranged from 14-20 years; all years spent married is 50+).
    - To paraphrase Estella Chung: She did not have a perfect life, but she tried her best to make it so.
    - Remember marriages are complicated relationships and we have only 60 minutes on a tour!
- **Post as an employer**
  - **What kind of an employer was she? Was she a "good" employer?**
    - A competitive employer: 35% higher compensation and generous perks; took care of critical-care medical expenses for staff, providing group health insurance in later years
    - Staff response: multiple examples of long-tenured employees; flagpole as gift from staff and contractors on her 75<sup>th</sup> birthday ("I can't tell you how thrilled I am...this is the one important item which has been missing at Hillwood.")
  - **How diverse was her staff?**
    - Post approached the hiring of the interior household staff with the Eurocentric view that was widely adopted by the very wealthy white class in the 1950s, which was in the tradition of the American country estate.
    - Her employees were both local and foreign hires, some placed by international agencies, and, it appears, most were white. (For reference, see photos of Post's staff and a discussion about gardener Henry Rhyne and his brothers in the mansion's Staff Dining Room.)
- **Post and her wealth**
  - **Was she charitable?**
    - No denying: Lived a luxurious lifestyle and enjoyed her life: "I do like beautiful things and it has been my privilege to be able to enjoy them..."
    - Marjorie Post on her father's money philosophy, which she was influenced by: "His theory was that money must be kept working and it must be productive. It doesn't amount to anything when you hoard it."
    - Ardent philanthropist...ranged from supporting arts organizations like the symphony and ballet, to bringing Vietnam veterans and college students to Hillwood. Much of her philanthropy was focused on the arts, youth, and education.
    - Left Hillwood and its collections to the public. She could have made a different choice.

- Look at her intentionality with homes---turn them into government or educational institutions (Hillwood DC: museum; Hillwood NY: college; Mar-a-Lago: wanted to be southern Camp David).
- **Did she use her privilege to help others?**
  - No denying: Lived a life of exceptional privilege
  - She was not a perfect person, but it seems that she had awareness of her privilege and later in life her prescience seems to have extended to an awareness of the value of diversity in her own time.
    - **Promoting Diversity at Mount Vernon College**  
Post was a 1904 graduate of what was then the Mount Vernon Seminary and College in Washington, D.C. and a committed supporter of the school for over 40 years. As a trustee and alum, Post actively supported equality in women's education. In his 1997 oral history interview, Mount Vernon president from 1962-77, Peter Pelham, discussed the difficulties in getting the college to integrate women of color, but added "(Post) was marvelous in her advocacy for Mount Vernon taking a much more diverse role in terms of its admissions." Pelham went on to say: "(Post) was public on the matter. She spoke up very strongly at the board meetings and in other ways at alumnae meetings. And of course, when alumnae were invited here, as they were frequently, for either garden parties or other activities, she made it quite clear as to how she felt on that. So, there was, I think, a nice counterpoint in that sense, and that's what I'm trying to describe of her. There was a larger vision and a view and a recognition of things that needed to be done, at least insofar as Mount Vernon was concerned. And I think this would also have been true if it had been the Boy Scouts or other organizations with which she was affiliated, which was, I think, to her credit -- very much to her credit." Pelham also shared when speaking about Post's support of Mount Vernon Seminary "But I think that her great gift was, indeed, her presence, and the caring that she had. And I think she was also truly interested in the education process and the education of young women. And this is long before feminism became mainstream." (Recounted from Pelham's 1997 oral history)
    - **Support of the Washington Ballet**  
As a dedicated patron of the performing arts, Post supported the Washington Ballet, the American Ballet Theater, and served as honorary vice president of the Washington School of Ballet. Mary Day, director of the Washington School of Ballet, reminisced that Post "did many nice things for the school and the dance company then, the Washington Ballet we called it" and stated that Post was "very interested" in their curriculum of dance and academics. In 1962, Jacqueline Kennedy held the honorary chairmanship of the foundation, when the board set out to purposefully open a non-segregated school and to provide scholarships "to be awarded without regard to race". (See *The Life Behind the Luxury* pgs. 136-137)
    - **Anecdote from couturier Ann Lowe**  
"Lowe was best known for her bridal and debutante work, but she also designed special-occasion gowns for high-profile clients like Marjorie Merriweather Post.... Lowe proudly recalled an incident that occurred in Paris, when she and Mrs. Post attended the same fashion show. Lowe was visiting Paris on a trip as a reporter for the *New York Age* in 1949. Upon running into Mrs. Post at one of these shows, she was deeply surprised to watch her client introduce her to acquaintances around the room as "Miss Lowe, head of the American House of Ann Lowe." It is notable that someone of Mrs. Post's social status would feel comfortable introducing her African American dress designer around a fashion house in Paris with a manner that suggested that Lowe's work was of the same quality as French designers. Lowe recounted this story in several interviews and was clearly amused by the encounter.... This incident also suggests a warm working relationship between the two women." (See *Ann Lowe: American Couturier* pgs. 42 and 47) The gown (48.106), depicted in Douglas Chandor's *Portrait of Marjorie Merriweather Post* (51.156), belongs to Hillwood's apparel collection and is attributed to Ann Lowe.