A Brief History of Chinsegut Hill

By Andrew T. Huse

When the manor house was first erected in 1842, Florida was a much different place. Central Florida had only recently been wrested from the Seminole Indians and their allies, and the U.S. grip on the region remained tenuous. The Armed Occupation Act, passed by congress in 1842, opened central Florida to homesteading. The Florida frontier was still a violent place, with the Seminole Wars added to the natural dangers of wild animals and disease.¹

The opportunities offered drew settlers to the area, and Colonel Byrd Pearson was one such person. Pearson hailed from South Carolina and staked a claim to 5,000 acres in Hernando County south of Lake Lindsey. He named his plantation Tiger Tail Hill, cleared the land, brought slaves, planted sugar cane and built a sugar mill. When his crop of sugar cane failed, Pearson turned to raising cattle and cultivating cedar trees, citrus, and cotton. In 1849, Pearson erected the east wing of the dwelling that would become Chinsegut Hill Manor House. By 1850, the Armed Occupation Act succeeded in drawing enough settlers to ward off further incursion by Indians, and Hernando County’s population consisted of 602 settlers and 322 black slaves.²

Pearson sold the property to fellow South Carolinian Francis Higgins Ederington in 1851, who renamed the hill Mount Airy. In 1852, Ederington moved his family, livestock, slaves, furnishings and equipment to Mt. Airy. Over the next two years

² Stanaback, p. 14, 18.
Colonel Ederington constructed the main portion of the manor house. He and his family are buried on a small plot near the manor house, worn by time but still quite readable.\(^3\)

Colonel Russel Snow was another immigrant from South Carolina, settling in Hernando County in 1861. That same year, he enlisted in the Third Florida Infantry to fight in the Civil War. After returning home from the service in 1866, Snow married Charlotte, Francis Higgins Ederington’s youngest daughter. Snow soon gained control of the 5,000 acre plantation and renamed it Snow Hill. Having learned dentistry, surgery and veterinary medicine during his service with the Florida volunteers, Snow practiced these professions at the plantation. In the 1870s, Snow added the verandas and a dining room to the house. In the late 1800s, Snow began raising sugar cane on the shores of Lake Lindsey. He expanded the house further in 1889. In 1890, Mallory and Earnest Snow ran the property for their invalid father. At the turn of the century, Snow completed the third floor. Some of the Snow family is buried on the site as well, beside the Ederingtons.\(^4\)

By far, the most significant historical figure to own Chinsegut was Raymond Robins (owner, 1904 – 1954). Born in 1873 in New York, Robins led an unhappy childhood in which he spent most of his time living with uncles and cousins. While living with his cousin beginning in 1883 at the age of nine, Robins became acquainted with Hernando County. While in the area, Robins discovered Snow Hill and vowed to own it some day. With the help and encouragement of friends, Robins became interested in self-education and nature. Robins was determined not to fail economically or mentally.

\(^3\) Stanaback, 295.
as his father and mother had, respectively, before him. He worked odd jobs beginning at age 17, from a local postmaster to the mines of Tennessee and Colorado.\textsuperscript{5}

After being cheated in a business deal, Robins determined to study law, which he began in 1893. He entered Columbian University’s Law School (now George Washington University) in Washington, D.C. and received his LLB Degree in 1894, after completing the three-year program in one year. Robins later gained a reputation as a good lawyer in San Francisco and participated in political campaigns for the Democratic Party.\textsuperscript{6}

Robins had always dreamed of living with his sister, Elizabeth, who served as the only mother figure he knew. When she refused to give up her successful acting career in London to live with him, a restless Robins sailed to Alaska to prospect for gold and spent some time working as a missionary in 1897. A series of spiritual visions, near-death experiences, missionary works, and his acquaintance with a Father Barnum revitalized his faith in Christianity.\textsuperscript{7}

After a visit in Alaska by his sister Elizabeth, Robins relocated again, this time to Chicago. Robins began his career in Chicago running the Municipal Lodging House, a settlement house for the unemployed and homeless. He became heavily involved with reform movements there, including the elimination of corruption and increased assistance to low-income workers. In 1904, he married Margaret Dreier, a fellow activist from New York. Born in 1868 from wealthy German parents, Drier was a major activist in her own right, having a long history of social activism in New York City.\textsuperscript{8}

\textsuperscript{5} Stanaback, 295; Neil V. Salzman. Reform and Revolution. p. 9, 17, 22, 25.
\textsuperscript{6} Salzman, 26-31.
\textsuperscript{7} Salzman, 33-34, 39-40.
\textsuperscript{8} Salzman, 68-69, 80-81.
With Raymond’s sister Elizabeth, the newlyweds purchased Snow Hill from Ernest and Mallory Snow in 1904, fulfilling his childhood dream of owning the estate. Robins renamed the estate “Chinsegut Hill.” The word is of Inuit origin that he learned in Alaska, meaning “The spirit of lost things,” or “a place where things of true value that have been lost may be found again.” The couple invested much energy into the grounds, forming a spiritual bond with the land. Raymond named a nearby tree “The Altar Oak,” where he said mass every Sunday. He greeted each new day by climbing a staircase he built onto the tree he would call “The Ascension Oak.” From his platform in the tree, he meditated and watched the sun rise.

The couple made steady improvements to the house, including: kitchen installed in the east wing (1905), widow’s walk and ventilator added (1910), west chimney added (1910), study expanded (1910), music room added (1910), four bathrooms added (1914), additional land acquired (1917), car port added (1925), and a fifth bathroom, electricity, and a well added in 1933.9

By 1910, the couple became more heavily involved in politics, particularly in the Illinois Progressive Party, with Robins later serving as chairman. He also became involved in several of Theodore Roosevelt’s attempts to be reelected President on the Bull Moose Party ticket. Robins ran for office and supported political allies—and still found the time to have a nervous breakdown in 1916. The eruption of World War I was especially difficult for the Robins’. Margaret was still devoted to her fatherland of Germany, while Raymond and his sister (who still lived in London) sided with the Allies. Only time and perceived German atrocities would smooth over the conflict.10

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9 Salzman, 79, 81.
10 Salzman, 149, 159, 174.
After having seemingly failed in domestic politics by 1916, Robins unexpectedly set foot on the international stage. In 1917, Theodore Roosevelt arranged to have Raymond appointed Commissioner of the American Red Cross Mission to Russia. His role would be largely as an unofficial ambassador and observer for the U.S. Although Robins had strong progressive tendencies, it should be pointed out that he was never pro-communist. Still, before embarking for Russia, Robins took part in a Chicago movement to prevent Anti-Czar Russians from being deported. Upon arrival, Robins took charge of the Red Cross’ food distribution network. Clearly, the provisional government that replaced the Czar was still in charge, but not for long.  

In 1917 and 1918, Robins met a variety of Russian dignitaries, beginning with Czarist princes and ending with Bolsheviks such as Trotsky and Lenin. Robins gave numerous public speeches on the streets educating the populace about American democracy and speaking out against Bolshevism.

When it became apparent that the Bolsheviks would seize power, Robins put aside his differences and met with their leaders. Other American dignitaries could not bring themselves to meet with the enemies of capitalism, a fact Robins attributed to a close-minded condition he called “The Indoor Mind.” He explained, “The Indoor Mind … gives itself to the 7 percent [the ruling class] … to drawing-rooms, dinner-parties, tea-tables, palaces, boulevard restaurants.”

Robins spent much of his time out on the streets, in factories, touring farms and conversing with workers and soldiers to acquaint himself with their views. Robins met with Trotsky and Lenin regularly, at one point meeting with Lenin three times a week.

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11 Salzman, p. 175-76, 181-82.
12 Salzman, p. 191-92.
He was the only American officer who attended personal conferences with Lenin, discussing politics and the aims of the ascendant Bolshevik revolution. Lenin and Robins looked past their respective ideologies to form a strong respect for one another, and even a friendship. By all accounts, the two men liked one another, and Lenin himself said so on several occasions.

When Robins heard from his wife that she had just planted an acorn on Chinsegut Hill, Robins suggested they name the tree it “The Lenin Oak,” after his brilliant friend and as a symbol of the founding of the Soviet Union. The tree still stands today. In

Robins did not get along nearly as well with Trotsky.13

When the November revolution of 1917 was complete, Robins took a larger diplomatic role in his mission. The official American ambassador to Russia quietly sent Robins on trips to talk to the Bolsheviks. The ambassador could not have made these trips on his own, especially as the U.S. plotted against the budding U.S.S.R. Raymond became the chief U.S. liaison to Russia and was heavily involved in peace negotiations between Germany and Bolshevik Russia. He was determined to prevent Russia from signing a separate peace, and by pledging U.S. aid, opened up a small chance of cooperation that never came to fruition. Instead, the U.S and its allies considered military intervention against the U.S.S.R.—against Robins’ ardent wishes.14

Nothing seemed to go the way Robins had hoped. The Bolsheviks seized power and bowed out of the war. His work with the Bolsheviks—both public and secret—aroused the anger and suspicion of Russians, Americans and allies alike. Although the U.S. government had used Robins as an “unofficial” diplomat, it simultaneously resented

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14 Salzman, 264-65, 273, 283.
him for overstepping the bounds of his supposedly humanitarian mission. At the heart of the backlash against Robins were his suggestions of cooperation between the two countries, and they were many: U.S. military and economic aid to Russia, assistance in building a rail network, and an advisory role toward forming a Red Army. Furthermore, Robins’ unofficial duties often enraged the official ambassadors who were prohibited from having contact with the Bolsheviks. In any case, Robins knew that he had ultimately failed in fostering cooperation between the two nations, and he was recalled to the U.S.\textsuperscript{15}

Robins returned to become heavily involved in domestic politics, but excessive stress caught up with him in 1921 when he had another nervous breakdown. Beginning in 1923, Margaret too became more deeply involved with national politics. President Harding invited her participation in a labor conference, and she attended the second International Congress of Working Women in Geneva. Raymond was considered for a cabinet position in the Harding administration, and dined with President Coolidge in the White House. In 1924, the Robins’ chose Chinsegut to be their year-round residence.\textsuperscript{16}

After his return to the U.S., Robins campaigned tirelessly for several international issues: opposition to the “imperialistic” Treaty of Versailles; support for economic cooperation between the U.S. and U.S.S.R; opposition to the League of Nations, who did not recognize the Soviet Union; and support for the outlawry of war through international law. These campaigns occupied most of his time in the 1920s, and he spoke tirelessly to promote them. He argued that by condoning Versailles (which encouraged imperial Japan and engendered German resentment) and Soviet isolation (which ruled out

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{ibid}.  
cooperation with one of the most powerful nations on earth), the U.S. and its allies encouraged another bloody world war.

He lost out on almost every issue he espoused, but history vindicated the rightness of most of his views. Even prohibition of alcohol, a domestic issue that he strongly supported, would ultimately fail. In 1928, Raymond sees the Pact of Paris signed, a treaty for the renunciation of war. However, the treaty was only a moral declaration and did not provide ways for enforcement. That same year, Herbert Hoover called on Raymond to help plan his presidential campaign.¹⁷

The stock market crash in 1929 wiped out the Robins’ savings. After a few failed attempts at selling the estate, Robins used his connections with the Hoover administration to donate Chinsegut Hill (2,080 acres) to the Federal government as a wildlife refuge and experimental agricultural station. According to the agreement, the Robins’ could live there, free of property taxes, until their deaths. Raymond augmented their small savings by going on speaking tours, such as one supporting Prohibition in 1931. He also floated his name as a replacement for Presidential candidate Herbert Hoover in 1932.¹⁸

The once-rich couple would eke out a slim existence for the rest of their lives largely dependent on the kindness of friends. The federal government appointed W.F. Ward as the caretaker of Chinsegut, and he oversaw the establishment of horses, cattle, pasture grasses, trees, avocados and other fruits. Government funds also supplied the deep well and electricity installed in 1933. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) constructed bridges in the area, a lodge, and two cabins that still stand today. The R.T. Long cabin is named after the overseer of the property, and the Wash House allowed

¹⁷ Salzman, p. 304, 330, 331.
¹⁸ Salzman, p. 344-46.
government employees (like those of the CCC) to clean up after work. In about 1940, the government installed the Central Florida Experiment Station to research cattle and grass breeding.\textsuperscript{19}

Margaret entertained many prominent guests on the grounds over the years, including Soviet ambassadors, Jane Addams (founder of Hull House), William Jennings Bryan, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Edison, J.C. Penney and family, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, Mr. And Mrs. Claude Pepper (senator), Margaret Bondfield (British Secretary of Labor), Harold Ickes (US Secretary of the Interior), Sherwood Eddie, Roger Babson, Danile A. Poling, and many others.\textsuperscript{20}

Robins recovered from another mental breakdown in 1932 in time to fulfill his dream of returning to Russia, this time a three-month visit to campaign for U.S. recognition of the U.S.S.R. After having heard so much bad press about the U.S.S.R., Robins was not prepared to believe that any of it was true—he wanted Soviet recognition at all costs. As a result, he became a loyal vessel to project the image that Stalin wished to portray about the troubled communist state. Robins interviewed Stalin and attended various celebrations before returning to the states to mount his new campaign for recognition. With Robins’ help behind the scenes, Franklin Roosevelt finally chose to recognize the USSR on November 16, 1933—but not without personal prodding from Robins.\textsuperscript{21}

Robins returned to the lecture circuit to try to make money. Then, disaster struck. In 1935, Robins fell thirty feet while pruning a tree and broke his back, paralyzing him.

\textsuperscript{19} Money, n.p.; Letter from Raymond Robins to W.F. Ward, May 10, 1932.
\textsuperscript{20} Money, n.p.; Salzman, p. 344-45.
from the pelvis down. He fought against terrible pain and worked through constant treatment and surgery to try to restore some sense of mobility to his life. He installed ramps and handles all over the manor house to enable him to move around and climb the stairs. He designed a sort of standing wheelchair powered by his arms to move about his property.\textsuperscript{22}

Margaret died in 1945 after years of ill health. Raymond went on to promote US-Soviet friendship as the Cold War escalated. He died in 1954. Both are buried beside the Altar Oak under a single headstone, making a total of seven known graves on the site.\textsuperscript{23}

In 1954, the University of Florida (1954 – 1958) signed a four-year lease for the property. UF used the site for a branch library (using Robins’ 8,000 volumes) and botanical field trips. With the expiration of the lease in 1958, UF removed most of the books and furniture to Gainesville and effectively abandoned the site.\textsuperscript{24}

The University of South Florida (1958 – present) took over the site in 1958 by signing a four-year lease just as UF had. A series of events worth noting for the historical record centered upon the Lenin Oak. In 1959, family friend and caretaker Lisa von Borowsky commissioned a plaque for the tree that bore the inscription Mr. Robins had always wanted. She planted it in the ground beside the oak.\textsuperscript{25}

In 1961, John Brengle led a group of Boy Scouts on a hiking trip and saw the plaque. Brengle contacted the \textit{Tampa Tribune} on the matter and journalist Paul Wilder wrote a front-page article with amazed indignation, touching off a statewide furor among Red-baiting politicians. Senator Spessard Holland and Governor Farris Bryant both

\textsuperscript{22} Salzman, p. 363-64.
\textsuperscript{23} Salzman, p. 371.
\textsuperscript{24} Money, n.p.
expressed shock and demanded to know the facts. USF President John Allen disassociated his institution from the plaque, saying he knew nothing about it.\textsuperscript{26}

The U.S. Department of Agriculture ordered Cal Burns, the superintendent of Chinsegut’s agricultural reservation, to demand Borowsky remove the plaque within 24 hours. If she did not comply, they ordered Burns to remove it. Borowsky asked Burns to completely destroy the plaque. Burns dug up the surrounding concrete, tore the plaque loose and melted it down to a nondescript hunk of bronze. He then cast the offending memorial into the deepest part of Lake Lindsey.\textsuperscript{27}

Local American Legion commander John Tracy received a steady stream of angry calls from his membership, and he requested a grand jury investigation. Newspaper writers added their own demands to the swelling chorus. On May 4, 1961, forty-three years and three days after Margaret Robins planted the oak, Borowsky was called in front of the grand jury to be interrogated on the activities of the Robins’ and herself. A week later, the jury returned with a report denouncing communism and praising those who combated the doctrine, reading, in part, “[W]e especially commend those who spend their tireless efforts in ways of combating communism and the influx of communism in our way of life in reporting any unusual occurrence to those in authority.” The official witch-hunt was over, but unofficial resentment lingered for years.\textsuperscript{28}

The university signed a 20-year lease for the property in 1960 (1962?). Since then, the University has expended a fortune in time, money and effort to preserve and restore the property. USF removed the widow’s walk and ventilator in 1963 because of leakage, the only major and permanent change to the property. The federal government

\textsuperscript{26} ibid.
\textsuperscript{27} Clendinen, “An Oak Tree for Lenin,” p. 22-23.
\textsuperscript{28} Cleninden, “An Oak Tree for Lenin,” p. 23
transferred the title of Chinsegut Hill from the USDA to USF. USF removed the outside dining room in 1995. Various people and agencies ran the property, including USF President John Allen (1962), Continuing Education (1965), and the Division of Housing and Food Service (1975), later Auxilliary Services. USF installed six cabins nearby (1975), a dining room (1982), a classroom (1986), a maintenance shop (1986), and a storage shed (1990).²⁹

²⁹ Money, n.p.