

Only the memories remain

Ellerslie mansion once home to F. Scott Fitzgerald

He looked around him wildly, as if the past were lurking here in the shadow of his house, just out of reach of his hand.

— F. Scott Fitzgerald in "The Great Gatsby"

By CAROL CHILD

Special to Brandwine Crossroads

F. Scott Fitzgerald came to live in Wilmington in March 1927. With him he brought his wife, Zelda, and his little daughter, Scottie. They stayed two years.

The feudal atmosphere in Wilmington under the du Ponts, thought Maxwell Perkins, Fitzgerald's editor at Scribners, would provide the creator of "The Great Gatsby" with the tranquility he needed to finish his new novel and give him material for future work.

For \$150 a month, they leased Ellerslie, the white three-story Greek Revival mansion on the Delaware River in Edgemoor. Wilmington attorney John Biggs, Fitzgerald's former Princeton roommate, found the house for them.

The Fitzgeralds were charmed. "The squareness of the rooms and



News-Journal photo

Ellerslie as it appeared in F. Scott Fitzgerald's day.

the sweep of the columns were to bring us a judicious tranquility," Zelda wrote.

At Ellerslie, in the deep night, amid the whispering old oaks, beeches and horse chestnuts, you might glimpse the suggestion of a figure, perhaps Gatsby himself, standing on the pillared portico of the magnificent house, lifting his arms outstretched toward the dark water.

Built in 1842, Ellerslie was to be the gracious summer home for Edward Robinson of Philadelphia and his bride-to-be. But the couple

never lived in their new home. He sold the house when she jilted him.

For the first few months, life at Ellerslie floated along on the wings of a dream. Fitzgerald wrote to Ernest Hemingway: "Address for a year — Ellerslie Mansion, Edgemoor, Delaware. Huge old house on Delaware River. Pillars, etc. I am called 'Colonel.' Zelda 'de old Miasus.'"

Scott and Zelda devised a system of calls and echoes so they could find each other among the 14 of the 27 rooms they kept open. Scottie romped the broad green

lawns with the Wanamaker and du Pont children. The outsized furniture Zelda had designed arrived from Philadelphia.

And from the second-story bay window room where Fitzgerald wrote, he could see the lights far away across the river.

The dream drifted into summer. But summer was the spawning ground for yet another attack of the Fitzgerald discontent. Fresh from their racy adventures in New York, Zelda was finding the staid little red-brick town clutching the sides of the hills stifling. "Wilmington has turned out to be the black hole of Calcutta," she said.

She decided she wanted to dance with the Russian ballet. At 28, an age when the careers of many dancers are over, Zelda began classes with Catherine Littlefield of Philadelphia. In Ellerslie's front hall, at the barre she had erected before her huge gilt mirror (Fitzgerald called it her whorehouse mirror), she tortured her body from morning until night, day after day, always to the sound of "The Parade of the Wooden Soldiers."

The incessant noise drove Fitzgerald wild. It bombarded the walls, marched up the grand circular staircase and whirled about the cupola. He wrestled with his novel, "The World's Fair," which, in con-

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Memories where mansion stood

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contrast to the very structured "Gatsby," he regarded as a series of sideshows. He was attacked by a nervous irritability.

There were too many interruptions, too many excuses, like so many unpacked moving crates stumbled into in the night. "Terrible incessant stoppies begin," he wrote in his ledger. He drank, he smoked, he thought his tuberculosis had become active. He changed from Chesterfields to the milder Sanos.

The invitations went out and the crazy weekends began. The guests who remembered them — sometimes with pain — included Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, Thornton Wilder, Edmund Wilson, Charles MacArthur, movie starlet Lois Moran ("Stella Dallas"), who would become the model for Rosemary Hoyt in "Tender Is the Night," and polo star Tommy Hitchcock (a Fitzgerald idol who suggested to him a kind of Tom and Daisy Buchanan glamour). Jay Gatsby would have been pleased.

Fridays the French chauffeur drove to the Wilmington train station to meet the guests. Sundays he drove them back. In between there were dinner dances, polo matches staged with plow horses and croquet mallets and late-night bedside visits by the resident ghost.

If things were getting a little dull, the Fitzgeralds and guests would carouse the town, winding up in jail. It was John Biggs who received the middle-of-the-night phone calls from the Wilmington police to extricate them.

Strewn among the Ellerslie weekends were trips to New York City, where they stayed at the Plaza. Zelda remarked, "We come up for a weekend, then wake up and it's Thursday." On one such excursion Fitzgerald saw a forlorn newsboy standing in the rain and bought all his papers.

In April 1928, bored with Wilmington, they sailed to Paris, where Fitzgerald met James Joyce,

and Zelda, still wanting to work with the Russian ballet, studied with Lubov Egorova. They returned, according to Fitzgerald, "in a blaze of work and liquor" in October.

While at Ellerslie, Fitzgerald turned 30. Something had died. Indeed, a weekend guest recalled one of the parties as being a virtual funeral wake for the passing of Fitzgerald's 30th year. His sense of loss plagued him.

"There was a demon within him to be the greatest writer of his generation. He didn't feel he was accomplishing this," remembered Biggs.

FITZGERALD SAW himself running toward himself and away from himself at the same time. There was a world out there and, somewhere in the shadows of Ellerslie, a hero longing to live in it . . . something from his youth he could almost touch but never quite grasp.

While his world was crashing around him, all of the plot and character charts he had constructed for his new novel, "The World's Fair," stood stacked in some dim corner like so many discarded props.

He got distracted when he started writing. "I get afraid I'm doing it instead of living. . . . Get thinking maybe life is waiting for me in the Japanese gardens at the Ritz or in Atlantic City or on the lower East Side."

It would be a long time before this novel, begun in 1925 and which would become "Tender Is

the Night," finally winged its way into the literary world.

Zelda wanted to build a surprise doll house for Scottie. Fitzgerald and his little girl waited in their car on a quiet red-brick street corner while she disappeared with some papers through a door lettered "Cabinet Maker."

It was a fine November day. The last golden leaves clung to the trees, sprinkling little shadows here and there on the sidewalk. The daddy yawned. A very little boy walked up the street, taking very long strides. He went up to a door, took a piece of chalk out of his pocket and proceeded to write something under the doorbell.

"He's making magic signs," the daddy told the little girl. The daddy then wove a tale of fairy intrigue. The little boy was the ogre and he was holding a princess captive behind the closed curtains of the flat on the corner. The king and queen were imprisoned 10,000 miles under the earth.

"And what, Daddy? What?" demanded the little girl, caught up in the magic. The man continued the story. He wanted to be in his little girl's fairy world with her. A shutter banged closed, then slowly opened. Suddenly the room turned blue. That meant the prince had found the first of the three stones that would free the princess.

He could remember that world but he knew he would never again see it or touch it for himself. "Outside the Cabinet-Maker's" was published in 1928.

In March 1929, the Fitzgeralds sailed for Genoa. In April they

were somewhere in France. By June they were in Cannes.

After they sailed, Ellerslie was acquired by the Krebs Co., then by the Du Pont Co.

By 1935, one year after the publication of "Tender Is the Night," the big square rooms of the sweeping white mansion housed the offices of the Du Pont Co. pigments plant.

In 1962 Ellerslie's pillared portico, riddled with termites, was wrenched from the main structure and destroyed.

In 1972 the grand summer home Edward Robinson had erected for his bride-to-be was demolished.

Now all that remains are Fitzgerald's memories winged aloft by . . . a meadowlark among the smoke stacks."

Beauty Tips

Above-the-shoulder hair length looks better when you're over 50. Sweep hair off the face for #1.

If you wear contact lenses, avoid lash-lengthening mascara; the fibers may irritate your eyes.

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