



**Alderbrook** Photo courtesy of Bryn Mawr College.

## ALDERBROOK AND THE MCKAIG FAMILY

*(Notes of speech given by Ed. Thomas on October 10, 1982, Upper Merion Park and Historic Foundation---Installation of Memorial Placques honoring Annah French McKaig and Marjorie French McKaig.)*

The death of Marjorie McKaig just after Christmas of 1979 was a great personal shock to all of us who knew her. Marjorie had always seemed healthy and strong, and able to withstand adversity. In fact, my own first recollection of Marjorie occurred one day in

the winter of 1965-66. Several inches of snow had fallen during the night, and I was just finishing shoveling my driveway when out of the corner of my eye I saw a Jeep coming up the road. It had no top, the windshield was folded down, and it was being driven by two bears, or so it seemed. A second, or maybe a third reappearance in the spring was required to see that it had really been a lady in a raccoon coat with a big scarf around her head, accompanied by a very large, very long haired poodle named Punkin sitting up in the passenger's seat. That first impression of Marjorie McKaig as a strong willed individual who was not afraid of nature's adversities was proven over the years to be accurate. But it was certainly not sufficient. Marjorie obviously loved everything that nature had to offer, plants and animals and especially the land on which they grew.

The lands we are interested in today belonged to Marjorie's ancestors as far back as 1709, according to information given to the "Courier" in 1977. The name "Alderbrook" appeared in the *Genealogy of the Descendants of Thomas French* as the name of Howard Barclay French's summer home in Radnor. Howard Barclay French was Marjorie's maternal grandfather. Not clear in my research so far is whether the previous ownership had been in the French line, or in the line of Howard's wife Ida Colket. Nevertheless, it served as a summer home for their daughter Annah Colket French as she was growing up in the late 1800's. The family spent their winters at their home on Spruce Street in Philadelphia.

On April 1, 1908, the original house burned to the ground. It was soon fully rebuilt, perhaps starting in 1908, since that is the date on a stone high in the east wall. The estate included a lake complete with boat house and a water pumping system. In a 1913 picture in the *Genealogy*, the house looks very much as it does today. One report is that the house was subsequently renovated under the direction of Howard Trumbauer, a famous Philadelphia architect. Or perhaps Mr. Trumbauer had directed the reconstruction following the fire.

In 1914, Annah French married a 1911 graduate of the University of Pennsylvania Law School, Edgar S. McKaig. By 1918, they had two daughters: Annah (now Mrs. William Sellers of Paoli); and Marjorie, born May 19, 1918. The family lived in Overbrook while Mr. McKaig pursued his law practice and a second interest as head of the Commercial Museum, the forerunner of the current Civic Center. Undoubtedly there were frequent visits to Alderbrook for the girls. Marjorie used to share some of her memories of high society parties at Alderbrook during this period. In 1927, the property was willed to Mrs. McKaig, who continued its use as a summer home, this time for her family.

Marjorie's education was not exactly routine, even for a resident of the Main Line. She went for a time to Miss Wright's Finishing School in Bryn Mawr, and she was graduated in 1935 from Westover School in Middlebury, CT. She continued her education at the Ambler School of Horticulture for Women, graduating in 1939. The next stop was the Womens Army Corps, where she received commendations as a dog trainer. Following the War, Marjorie returned to school, this time to the University of Oklahoma for a Master's Degree as a librarian. Her Master's Thesis, as might be expected, based on her interests, dealt with Philadelphia naturalists of the 19th Century.

Soon after the death of her father in the early 50's, Marjorie and her mother removed to Alderbrook on a fulltime basis. Both then continued their participation in organizations and causes related to conservation of open space, and preservation of historically significant buildings. Powell House in Philadelphia and the King of Prussia Inn were two favorites. Marjorie was a well-informed member of nearly every organization in the state that had anything to do with conservation. But apparently that wasn't enough, so in 1964 she and several others formed the Upper Merion Park and Historic Foundation, dedicated to preserving open space and historical places in Upper Merion. Her mother's bequest of forty-seven acres in 1976 really gave UMPHF something to work on, make the best of, and provide for the people of the Township.

And the next giant step was working with the Township government to expand that forty-seven acres by the addition of another thirty, made possible largely by Marjorie's generous gift of fifteen adjoining acres she had purchased herself in the 50's. This exciting project was culminated in Roberts School in May of 1978 when the plaque to Annah French McKaig was unveiled.

Less than two years later, Marjorie had died of pneumonia and the contents of the estate dispersed by auction or sale. As this was happening, I began to wonder if people would long remember what a tremendous effect she and her mother had had on keeping open space in Upper Merion, Montgomery County, and the State of Pennsylvania. I wondered what would happen to Alderbrook, both her pride and joy, and a cause of her demise. Now today, we see two things that will help us to remember, so that we can tell the McKaig story to those yet to come in Upper Merion. First, whether we like the idea of development or not, the developer is perpetuating *Alderbrook* as the name of the McKaig estate lands. Second, the McKaig Nature Education Center will continue to point out the devotion to conservation of natural space so freely given by Annah Colket French McKaig and her daughter Marjorie French McKaig.

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**Alderbrook Today** Photo courtesy of Michael Morrison.

## **The King of Prussia Gazette**