

Banjo Town 1921-29

by Isabel Kuemmerle (Jenkin) Mahoney (1919-2009)

From a series of letters, c.2000, to her son, Jim Mahoney.

Edited by Phil Graham, 2022. [Notes & corrections in parentheses.]

My dad was William Stockton Jenkin, 1891-1974, and my mom was Matilda Morrison Hemphill, 1891-1968. During my childhood my father found a job with Curtis Publishing in Philadelphia after the regular workers went on strike and Cyril [Cyrus] Curtis got mad and sacked them. He worked his way up the ladder and eventually became Color Pressman, while my mother did the laundry for The Big House [Ardrossan]. I was about one or two years old when we moved to 19 Newtown Rd, Ithan [later #724], and lived there for about 10 years. We were driven there by Mrs Wilson, an early neighbor friend of my mother's who had already moved to Ithan some years earlier. In all the years they knew each other they addressed each other as Mrs Wilson and Mrs Jenkin.

We had a wonderful childhood in Ithan – open fields to run in, with horses and cows close by. The house seemed huge as a child but having been back as an adult I found it small. The house at this time consisted of a living room (called a parlor then), dining room, kitchen and three bedrooms upstairs. There was an out house in the back yard, and a bathroom inside for washing. We had no electricity or central heat and used kerosene oil lamps in the evenings, but the light was so poor we did our homework and pleasure reading before dark. Maybe those oil lamps were responsible for our having to be in bed by 7pm and up at 7am. My brother Stockton and sister Elinor were the oldest and could do their homework at night. There was an oil lamp on the table and each would move the lamp closer, scaring my mother for fear they'd knock the lamp over and set the house on fire.

In summer and winter my mother cooked on a big black coal stove. By that time Aunt Fannie Elliott as well as Aunt Bella Kuemmerle, both widows, lived with us, so by the time we left we had grown to five adults, including Uncle Joe who came to recuperate and slept in the parlor, and eight children [Stockton, Frances, Elinor, Minerva (Mertie), Isabel, Marjorie (Marge), Matilda (Tilla), and Alma] – a total of 13 in a three bedroom house. Another sister, Lois, was born after we moved away.

When I was five, Marge was born, Jan 3, 1924. Aunt Bella gave me a quarter every day for pushing the coach with Marge in it until she went to sleep. I'm sure she'd have gone to sleep anyway but it was a job designed to teach me you had to work for what you got.

Each house on the Robert L Montgomery Estate had a job that went with it. Mr Wilson was the chauffeur, another house went to the gardener, and another to a man who cared for the cows, milked them and delivered the milk to customers. I forget what the other houses did. My mother, as I said, took in washing from The Big House in order to qualify to live there and we also had to pay a high rent for those days, \$45.

[It had been \$30 in the late teens.]

c.1927: L-R – Our friend Anna McKeown (#728), Mertie, baby Tilla or Alma, & Isabel, all outside 724 Newtown Rd; 720 showing behind.



There was no such luxury as a washing machine or dryer in those days and since the Montgomerys had four children and quite a few adults, plus all of us for our mother to keep clean, doing the laundry was a big job. Water was carried in from the well, heated on the coal stove, scrubbed on a scrub board, and then rinsed. There were big banquet clothes, bed linen, etc. and I still remember the huge hampers of soiled clothes being delivered. In order to keep the damask banquet cloths from freezing to the line in winter, thereby breaking fibre and causing a rip, my mother had to put a small piece of cloth on the line and another over the cloth before putting a clothes pin on! And all this had to be ironed. In those days she heated the irons on the coal stove, being so careful they weren't hot enough to scorch, but hot enough to get the wrinkles out. Just folding all that was a job in itself. My aunts helped with that, as well as keeping all of us amused.

Our years in Ithan were happy, carefree days – as usual no money but a lot of happiness. We had a pump organ which my mother played and we all sang. Aunt Fannie had a beautiful alto voice. We had no need for TV, radio or friends because our family was so happy together. Our evenings were great. Frances, Mertie and I were always referred to as the three little ones even long after we were no longer little. All one summer long we walked 4½ miles to attend Bible School in Wayne and 4½ miles back. At the end we received a Bible because despite the nine-mile round trip we had perfect attendance!

Several childhood incidents I recall went as follows:

I was four years old. The Montgomerys always gave a Christmas party for the families who lived on their estate. Among other things we were each given a \$5 gold piece – though I'm sure we gave them up for current expenses, or should I say luxuries like food and rent. This particular year they had a magician for our entertainment. He picked me for his assistant and whispered to me, "When I put two eggs in this hat, I'll ask you what I'll get out of it and you'll reply, 'Two rabbits.'" Well I figured he wasn't going to make a fool out of me. So when he asked me what he'd get out of the hat I replied instead, "Two eggs." Everybody laughed, but I cried.



Then when I was six, Aunt Bella took me to Philadelphia. On the way home we were on the P&W (Philadelphia & Western Railway) where children under six rode free. When the conductor asked her how old I was, my aunt said, "five years old". And what did I say? "Oh no Aunt Bella, I'm six years old!" You can imagine her embarrassment.

The only reason I remember the indoor bathroom is because one time I said I'd replace the empty roll of toilet paper. I unrolled the whole roll and started to re-roll it onto the empty one before my mother discovered me completely surrounded by yards and yards of toilet paper. She thought it was funny so I wasn't scolded.

[Montgomery had acquired #724 in 1914 and a full indoor bathroom had been installed in 1918, per Louis S. Adams's Plan for Bathroom blueprint.]

My mother had a miscarriage between my birth and Marge's which upset her greatly. So she was very happy when Marge, then Tilla, then Alma followed in short order. Tilla was a wild one. Because she had so many chores and children, my mother couldn't watch Tilla closely so she put a harness on her and attached it to a

c.1928: Mertie (10), Isabel (9), & Frances (12) Jenkin outside their home, heading to Ithan School at the end of Newtown Rd, now a dental office.

rope connected to a pulley, giving her the freedom of the yard but without escape. We had a fair size garden with a chicken, ducks, dogs and cats. One day my mother, who had beautiful teeth, stepped on a rake and it bounced up and hit her in the mouth, breaking her teeth. Looking back I know she was upset, but so we wouldn't worry she started talking real funny, lisping, etc., saying she'd have to talk that way all the time. She talked so funny that before long we were all laughing, but I'm sure she was crying on the inside!

If we were lucky, on Saturday afternoon we'd be given a dime to go to the Anthony Wayne movie in Wayne, another 9-mile round trip! But it was worth it. We saw a cartoon, news, short subject, serial and feature films, all for a dime! That would be Frances, Mertie and me.

My mother had worked so hard as a child she vowed we would never have to do housework so we had a carefree childhood. As I said we were up at 7am every day of the week. Our breakfast would horrify a nutritionist because more often than not it was "coffee soup," ie. bread broken up in coffee with milk and sugar. Once when I was in first grade we had to draw what we had for breakfast and when the teacher saw my drawing of coffee she held it up for the class to see, and told them one and all that was not a proper breakfast. I was so embarrassed but didn't know enough to draw orange juice, eggs, toast, etc. That was a good lesson as to why honesty is not always the best policy! Some days we had oatmeal and on Sunday eggs, if our chickens had been cooperative. My mother could never kill a chicken, so her friend and neighbor Mrs Wilson killed the chickens for her. We grew potatoes, carrots, etc, so our suppers were good. We carried a lunch and more often than not it was bread, butter and sugar sandwiches. No luxuries like peanut butter and jelly! Elinor said we had running water but I still can't remember it because we got washed in front of the coal stove in the kitchen – the only warm room in the house.

Our summers were great though. We were surrounded by open fields where we played every day, made daisy chains, climbed hay stacks and we removed the top rail from a split log fence to make a see-saw. We had elderberry, raspberry, blackberry and currant bushes. Our grandfather came out on Sundays in the summer and we'd pick the elderberries for him which he would take home and use to make elderberry wine. I've no idea how good or bad it was but since he came back all summer I guess it was good. We always had a lot of company on Sundays in summer because all our relatives lived in the city and liked spending a day in the country. I can't imagine how my mother fed them along with the 12 of us because they were lean times. My Aunt Florence and Uncle Harry, my father's brother, visited occasionally. They lived in Asbury Park, New Jersey. All I can remember is he was a big man and had a big mole on his nose. It was he who invented the cigarette dispensing machine but was never able to sell the idea to a manufacturer. Aunt Florence gave me a Christmas present that I loved – a doll's high chair! We played with dolls a lot and dressed up and put on plays – the usual things kids did before TV arrived.

I don't remember it being called *Banjo Town* but there were five houses on our part of the Montgomery Estate. There was a separate small group of houses in back of us called *Banjo Alley* because everybody played a banjo.

Since my sister Elinor and brother Stockton were older they had more freedom. Aleck Montgomery [*later known as Robert/Bob*] was my brother's age and they were very friendly. Years later when my brother was in tenth grade, Aleck, who had stayed friends with Stockton, although we now lived at 634 Haverford Rd, convinced Stockton to leave school and go to work as a board boy for his father's company, Montgomery, Scott. [*A board boy manually updated the price of stocks/bonds on a big display board.*] He had a great job for a 16-year-old, until the Great Depression came and stock companies and many others failed.

Elinor told me the Montgomerys paid for Stockton to go to the Wharton School but I can't believe that. I think by that time I'd have been old enough to recall anything so extravagant. Stockton and Aleck Montgomery remained friends for years and Aleck came to visit us in Haverford frequently.

[The Colonel's wife, Charlotte Montgomery, left a monthly annuity of \$200 in her will to "my friend William Jenkins", Stockton's father, who survived her by 31 years. Although Stockton would probably have attended Wharton in the late 1920s, 40 years before the will came into effect, we can only speculate that the will might have been the formalization of an arrangement she had instigated many years earlier, thereby funding the schooling.]

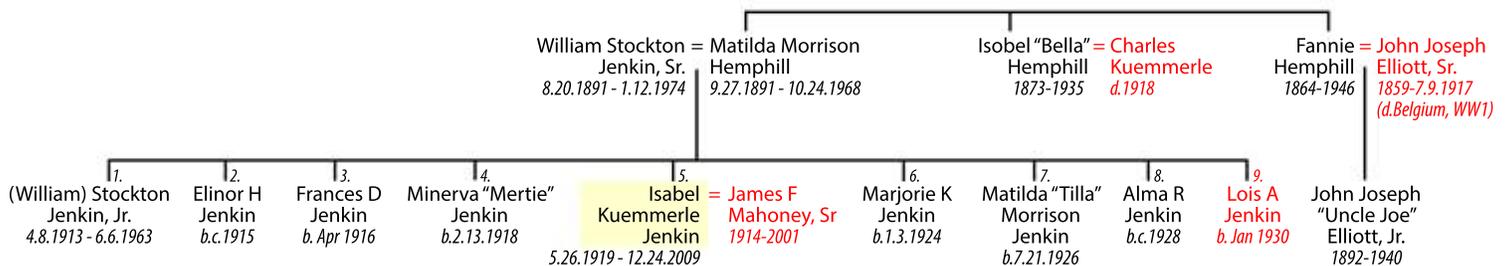
My sister Elinor was friendly with Aleck's sister, Charlotte Ives Montgomery, better known as Flopette.

The Montgomerys had two white donkeys called Sully & Susie, and Elinor and Flopette rode them all over Ithan and Wayne. When my brother was 10 years old, he was put on the train to visit our grandparents who were living in Ithaca, NY. I can't imagine putting a 10-year-old on the train, but at that time he seemed very grown up – 5 years older than me!

In 1929 Mr Montgomery wanted to remodel the house so we moved to 634 Haverford Road. My father was 82 when he passed and my mother 76. They lived full, good lives but of course we still miss them.



Ithan School (Radnor School #2) in the triangle at the eastern end of Newtown Rd, photographed after it had become a private residence in 1967.



Non-residents of 19 (724) Newtown Rd indicated in red