

IN SEARCH OF THE COUNTESS
By Sybil Needham

The Countess called her new home "Forest Lodge" because it was surrounded by a citrus grove. She bought the property that lies north of Westward Look and east of Oracle Road from Matthew Baird III on April 1, 1934. He had attempted to grow citrus there but the spot was a little too inclined to suffer frost. It was a perfect hideaway, however, for the reclusive Countess of Suffolk and Berkshire. She even bought it under an assumed name - Marguerite Hyde. Her real name was Margaret Howard. She was tall and beautiful and loved fast horses, cars and airplanes.

Lady Suffolk was a widow when she arrived here. Her husband, Henry Molyneux Paget Howard, the Earl of Suffolk was killed in combat in WWI. Their courtship had been a storybook romance that had made headlines on two continents.

Margaret, or Daisy as she was known to her friends, was an American heiress from Chicago. Her father, Levi Leiter, was a business partner in the original Marshall Field store. He left that partnership and opened the Fair Store and speculated in lucrative real estate ventures. As was popular at the turn of the century, he sent Daisy and her two sisters to finishing school in England.

In England, American girls were known for their independence and spirit of adventure. Daisy and her sisters must have been sensational. They were famed for their intelligence and beauty. Sister Mary married Lord Crosone, who soon became Viceroy of India. Nancy married Major Campbell of the Palace Guard and Daisy became engaged to the Earl of Suffolk and Berkshire. Chicago papers carried pictorial features of the weddings.

The new Countess and her husband lived in his 17th century manor house called Redlinch. She bore him three sons. They traveled extensively and visited her sister in India and went on safaris in Africa where Daisy photographed big game. And then the Duke of Austria was assassinated in Serbia and brought on World War One.

The death of the Earl was not the only tragedy that she suffered. We know that both of her sisters died and that there was a serious falling out with her father. He was unhappy that she visited him so seldom so, when he died, he bequeathed her 48 million dollars which stipulated that she had to live 4 months of every year in the United States.

But why did she come to Tucson instead of Chicago? Climate? Health? Romance? Maybe a little of all three. We know that she accompanied an Englishman here and helped him find a place to rent. Colonel Gillette had a respiratory problem which required clean and dry air. Maybe he had been gassed in the trenches during the war. He was tall, handsome and charming. A likely

companion for the elegant Countess. Their relationship was discreet, however, and the rental of the property was kept secret. As mentioned, even the purchase of her property was done under an assumed name.

The Countess herself had a touch of arthritis in her back and took therapy once a week from a local physical therapist.

In 1935, she engaged local architect Robert A. Morse to build her new home. The style was called "International" or "modern". Local sceptics called it "neo-Hitler". It had five master bedrooms, servants quarters, a four-car garage and air-conditioning. Later, she built the servants their own house nearby and had a green lawn planted for lawn bowling. It was never a cozy house. A local interior decorator described it as looking like an institution or a hospital. The Countess spent a lot of money on drapes and other touches to soften the rooms.

She had a Bentley Rolls/Royce and a chauffeur named Stone and was often seen driving around town and shopping in local stores. Howard Rosenfeld was a young man working in the linen department of Levy's Department Store. He was new and not especially knowledgeable in fine linens. She arrived to shop and quickly perceived his ineptness and took him under her wing. He was always grateful for her understanding and they were friends until her death. He learned his lessons well for he married the Boss's daughter Jackie Levy and was a manager for Levy's until it was sold in the 1980's.

Stone the chauffeur may have been a former RAF pilot. He obtained a local pilot's license and Daisy bought a Cessna 180, which she parked in her driveway, and together they flew forays around Arizona, California and Mexico where she photographed local wildlife. In 1969, he was flying her to California to visit her son Cecil when she had a heart attack. The plane made an emergency landing but there was nothing that could be done to save her. She was 88 years old at the time.

In 1957, she felt that Tucson was encroaching on her solitude, so she sold the ranch and bought land near Oracle. The Roman Catholic Church bought the buildings and the rest of the land was sold to a developer named Lusk who named the development Suffolk Hills. She built a beautiful new home on her new property and, as most of us know, that home is now part of the restaurant at Biosphere II.

By all accounts, she was a remarkable woman. She was impulsive. Once she had Stone drive her over to the Nasons, owners and founders of Westward Look. She sent Stone in to announce her. Mrs. Nason, who was busy as the proprietress of a popular resort, said "Tell her to come in." The Countess was so miffed at the woman's failure to come out to greet her that she had Stone drive her home again.

Another time she was visiting relatives in Casanovia, NY. They were very rich and very conservative. She rented a helicopter and landed in their front yard. The whole town was scandalized. I can imagine she enjoyed that reaction.

She liked giving parties occasionally. Once she invited a whole bevy of Tucson debutantes and their gentlemen friends for a dinner dance. An acquaintance of mine was among the young guests but she was so concerned about a spat with her boyfriend that she can remember nothing else about the evening.

There may have been a lot of coverage about Lady Suffolk in Chicago papers but very little was said about her in Tucson newspapers. She must have guarded her private life carefully. As today, the rich and famous regard their abodes in Tucson as places to recuperate from the public's prying eyes. But as a nosy historian, it sure would be nice to know more.