

http://www.fredericksburg.com/life/artist-s-beloved-belmont-was-hopping-each-easter/article_99fd7984-e92b-5c36-9c23-bba4bf33f429.html

Artist's beloved Belmont was hopping each Easter

Apr 19, 2011

By JENNIFER MILLER STROBEL

Gari Melchers was off on one of his painting missions, this time to Bermuda, where the island scene inspired the artist's work with watercolor and gouache.

This was in 1927, when handwritten letters were the only way to keep in touch with his wife, Corinne, back home in Stafford County.

Belmont, their picturesque estate, overlooked the village of Falmouth, the Rappahannock River and the city of Fredericksburg just beyond. Daffodils and tulips lined the garden walks with a palette of color.

Melchers had Easter on his mind when he sent his wife the 1927 letter--embossed with Old Battery, Mangrove Lake, Bermuda--on March 28.

"If you give me instructions," he wrote Corinne, "I can go to a five-and-10-cent store in New York and blow a few dollars on favors for the children's Easter party."

(Melchers, an artist of international stature, had a studio in New York City.)

It's anybody's guess how much time he had to get home from Bermuda by way of New York with a supply of Easter favors for the 1927 party, but Mrs. Melchers undoubtedly had the annual affair well under control.

She'd been organizing the elaborate events since soon after their move to Belmont in 1916, with the

list of young guests reaching about 50.

The first known reference comes in a letter Gari Melchers wrote her in 1918, saying, "I hope you have a nice Easter party and with such unusual attractions and charming people you might succeed."

She evidently worked hard at succeeding.

March 31, 1931, she wrote in her diary: "Finish and mail Easter invitations, nearly 50 and spend entire afternoon buying toys for the Easter party."

A talented seamstress and artist, she wrote on April 2 of the same year: "Re-dress and re-paint the Punch and Judy dolls." The Punch and Judy puppet shows were a staple in the entertainment lineup.

She would enlist helpers, and, in the margin of an invitation list, penciled in the name of Eliza Embrey to operate the Punch and Judy show. She hadn't come up with the second helper, though--that space is filled with a question mark.

She hosted the parties through many years, skipping 1932, the year her husband died, but subsequently resumed the parties and continued at least until 1936.

Daffodils and tulips, reminiscent of the couple's years in Holland, set the scene for the festivities. As stated on the invitations, the parties took place on Easter Day, starting at 3 p.m.

Corinne Melchers died in 1955. The University of Mary Washington administers the estate and galleries, which are open to the public.

Michelle Crow-Dolby, education coordinator, shared the images and anecdotes from Belmont's archives.