

PRESENTATION #5

THE STORY OF MISTS

After I was a participant in that glorious "Rose Marie Tour" at Lake Tahoe organized by the wonderful Marjorie Hadlock in 1996, I began to understand that neither club members nor their fans really had much definitive information about the Hideaway Home that Nelson found and leased for him and Jeanette.

Nelson felt that they had to have a place of their own where they could have complete privacy and be free to enjoy their lives together without interference. It appeared that there was endless speculation as to whether or not there even was such a place, or where it was located. My memory was stirred, but I was not familiar with the term "Mists" that they now used to describe this home. However, I did recall going with my Dad to deliver Mr. Eddy's latest radio recordings to a place that was located in a remote area above Sunset Boulevard. As a matter of fact, over time, we made many visits to this particular property. Of course, my father was very strict about my behavior and as we would approach his current home. I would get a little lecture to remind me that in

addition to how I should behave with Mr. Eddy, he made it loud and clear that under no circumstances was I to get out of our car unless "it caught on fire!". That up in the hills there was a lot of wild life and it might be dangerous." That was enough to deter me! I was not about to tempt fate!

I began to assemble research data about this place that Dad referred to as 'Nelson's Retreat'. This story begins in 1923 when Fred Thomson, silent film cowboy star, and his award winning screen writer wife, Frances Marion, decided to build their estate to accommodate not only their family, but the horses Fred owned that he used in his films. They were attracted to a hill top and negotiated to purchase just a few acres. It was fairly cheap. They then decided that was not large enough, and subsequently purchased additional acreage, but by now the price had jumped considerably.

Mr. and Mrs. Thomson ultimately purchased 24 acres in an area now known as Holmby Hills, which is part of Beverly Hills. This was in 1923 and the area was covered with the natural growth of chaparral and wild trees. The property they selected for the site of their estate was at the very top of a hill identified as "Smokey Mountain".

Once the Thomson's had found the property, they employed an up and coming California Architect named Wallace Neff. This was to be his first commission to build an estate for movie people. Wallace Neff designed a massive 20 room, 10,000 square foot Mediterranean Villa and all of the out-buildings required. In order to build this estate, they dynamited away the top of the hill to make a flat area on which to build. It required over a year or so to complete the estate. Fred and Frances called their estate "Enchanted Hill" and it launched Neff's very successful architectural career.

Wallace Neff was born to a wealthy Altadena, California family. He studied abroad and at MIT. He opened his office in Pasadena, CA in 1922. His first major commission was in 1923 from Fred Thomson and his famous screen writer wife, Frances Marion. Fred had graduated from the liberal arts college, Occidental, and took further degrees at Princeton University. Fred became a fully ordained Presbyterian Minister but with Mary Pickford's help, turned into a very popular silent film cowboy star.

Most of the acreage was used for Fred Thomson's large stable of horses he used in his films, including his famous trained horse "Silver King". It included stables, exercise

ground, shade trees, waterfall, riding ring, and the usual pool, tennis court, barbecue area, small lake with fish, etc. It became a social hub for the celebrities of the time until Fred's untimely death on Christmas day, 1928.

It was early on in the Nelson & Jeanette romance that Nelson realized they needed a more private environment where they could be alone and have the freedom to live a more normal life. This need for privacy was a dominant characteristic of Nelson. On the other hand, Jam was already indoctrinated with the Hollywood lifestyle that included its lack of privacy. But her Nelson was not happy with having to take his Jam to the home he provided for himself and Isabel, or to being forced to book hotels or Inns so that they might be together.

One of the first attractions for Nelson to being in Hollywood was that he recognized that most people here lived in homes not apartments. It was a thrill for him to finally move into a real home! Even Louis B. Mayer was taken by surprise when he was driven by Nelson's new home to recognize that Nelson had a very lovely and expensive, yet unpretentious, home.

Louis was slow to learn that Nelson was already a "millionaire". For a man so young to attain that status during the deep depression was nothing short of amazing. Louis soon recognized that this "Classical Concert Singer" must be paid very well in his chosen musical profession. But Nelson's seven year contract with MGM did not allow for the studio to touch any of his earnings made outside the studio. His Jam had taught him well, and Mayer bemoaned that his highly paid attorneys had not caught this oversight.

Mr. Mayer was confused when Nelson openly challenged some of his edicts regarding his behavior with Mayer's personal pet Jeanette MacDonald. Mayer's cadre of male stars never challenged Mayer's rules regarding their conduct, except Nelson. Nelson could care less if he was dropped by the studio. Nelson had a well paying career he loved, and his salary from the studio was less important to him when it came to a choice between his love for Jam or the studio.

During these early days, Nelson had become a friend of the writer, Frances Marion. Nelson quickly became part of her artistic circle of good friends. There he learned she had sold her famous estate, "Enchanted Hill". She gave him

the directions to the property and indicated that even if he might not want the mansion, he would probably approve of the vacant Estate Keeper's House as a suitable Hideaway. Nelson saw the property and recognized that it would require a significant amount of money to renovate the structure. He signed a lease for this, the Estate Keeper's House either very late in 1935 or very early in 1936.

As soon as the lease was signed, Nelson took Jam there to spend a few weekends with him in the house. The lack of any heating, except for a few fireplaces, was too much for her. She was freezing. Nelson quickly had his contractor install an electrical heating system. Since both Nelson and Jeanette were singers, they could not risk catching colds or sore throats!

What appealed most to Nelson was that this old estate had been hidden and mostly unoccupied for a long time and it served Nelson's need for privacy. The entire estate could only be accessed through a security controlled driveway that encircled the entire 24 acres. It was essential that this place remain a secret and only a handful of extremely close friends knew of it. Nels and Jam's perseverance in hiding their new home paid off.

Had it become public knowledge, both he and Jam would have been in deep trouble and their film careers put in jeopardy.

It was not until late in the 1970's that there was even a hint of the existence of a Hideaway Home. Those who believed in their love affair also believed such a place existed. Those who denied the existence of any love affair dismissed it as a false rumor and that no such place existed.

I would like to note here that over the years, my father worked for Nelson by recording Nelson's radio performances for him, as well as maintaining his recording equipment that he had built for him. We became very familiar with this Hideaway Home. Dad hand delivered each new recording session to Nelson and quite often it was to this Hideaway Home that he had up in the hills above Sunset Boulevard.

I distinctly recall going with my father the very first time he had to follow Nelson's directions to this "Retreat". I remember telling Daddy that this was a very scary ride because estates were few and far apart. I was sure we

were going to get lost! I also recall Dad's salty comment as to "how did Nelson find this damn place!"

In that era, this was quite a trip up to the turn off into the old estate. Every so often, I would ride along with Daddy and sat parked in front of this special house. I do not recall any particular name for the house. My father always just referred to it as "Nelson's Retreat" even though Dad knew it was where Nelson and Jeanette spent precious private time together. No doubt Nelson made it clear that no mention was ever to be made about this place, and Dad was well aware of the disaster that would ensue if the studio ever found out about it! Fortunately, the Studio never did know about its existence, at least while they were under contract!

My father always took special care to protect Mr. Eddy! Theirs was a loyalty bond that was occasionally tested, but Nelson had confidence in Dad's loyalty to him. Loyalty was another very strong characteristic that meant a great deal to both Nelson and Jeanette. In my quest to document as much as possible about what I can recall, is an article about that specific relationship and how each responded to the test.

It was not until I joined the MacEddy Club did I learn of the name "MISTS" from Sharon Rich's book. Only when I became interested in researching the history of this unique place in their lives did that term make sense to me. It seems Nelson, ever the poet, found that old Smokey Mountain on which the old Enchanted Hill estate was built, was very often shrouded by typical Southern California early morning fog. Nelson and Jam began to call their Hideaway place "Misty Mountain", but then shortened it to just "MISTS" as it often presented a "misty" appearance to them.

As I have said before, I believe that for the fifteen years they had this home, it was the most beautiful time they had together. For the first time in Jam's life, she delighted in turning into Nelson's wife that she longed to be. Nelson was eagerly immersed in being in charge of the entire renovation and looking after his beloved garden and being what he always wanted to be, Jam's husband! To them it was living their dream as real people did!

She would work one hour or so on her music, and then Nelson made her rest. Nelson also worked for one hour, but added on two more hours for himself because he had radio commitments to meet.

Isabel and Jam's loving sister, Blossom, attended to the overall upkeep as they did not want any strangers having knowledge of who the occupants were. Their due diligence did pay off. It remained a closely guarded secret for many years even long after both Nelson and Jeanette had passed. Amazing!

*Nelson was kept busy with radio work that he always enjoyed. Strangely enough, Jam was never comfortable with radio work unless she was working with Nels. He understood that she was always nervous in that venue. Whenever possible, he would be with her to calm her. Those that made it a point to observe them carefully, always reported how when it got close to time for her to sing, she would reach out and lay her hand on his upper leg. In turn, he would lay his hand over hers and press her hand down. When the announcer started to introduce Jam, Nels would whisper in her ear the magic words he always said to her,
"Sing Well!"*

As much as she needed his approval, so her approbation meant everything to him. Usually when he returned to his seat beside Jam after his song, she would pat his knee,

and it meant the world to him. The only damper on the radio appearances was when Ann Eddy put in an appearance, and parked herself in the audience. I recall attending a few of Nelson's radio shows and if Ann was there, he never so much as glanced at her. He never acknowledged her presence!

Nels would usually remain in his dressing room until he got the all clear from his radio manager that Ann had departed. If Jam had been his guest, he would personally escort her out to her car where the fans waited to observe them together. Nels was not deterred by the fan presence and always gave Jam a few kisses, and even though Jam tried to gently discourage him, she got kissed anyway. He even went so far as to step out into Vine Street to watch her drive towards Sunset Boulevard.

"MISTS" served a purpose, a very important purpose, in their hectic lives! Living one life exposed to the world, and another precious, private life, dedicated to their love for one another, was a daily challenge. Nelson was first to cut himself from films. Jam set her heart on getting her Nels back to the Concert platform where she felt he belonged. And, she did do it! Whereas, it took Jam longer to give up her hard earned Movie Star Persona, but now

that Nels had trained her to be a Concert Artist and Opera singer, he had opened a whole new career for her. He was a demanding but gentle teacher, and he would not let her schedule a tour until he felt she was ready!

When she was to debut in her first opera, "Romeo and Juliet", it was Nelson who paid to rent the Metropolitan Opera stage for a full morning to rehearse her. Nels had his friends sing various roles while he sang Romeo (keyed down for his baritone) as he took Jam through the blocking required for the role. This was done with just piano accompaniment. She was as prepared as he could make her! He sat in the audience on her opening night in Montreal. The audience was captivated by her "Juliet", especially her ability to not only act the part but to sing it so beautifully. She later admitted to stealing a few glances to where she knew her Nels was sitting, magnificent in his full evening dress, and it gave her the encouragement to give a fine performance.

Jam was eager to get Nelson back on the Concert Stage. Life in that profession was not easy for either of them. He restarted his career by returning to his 3 month cycle every spring. This resulted in his being very unhappy to be separated from Jam for all those weeks. He would no

more than return to MISTS, when Jam had to leave on her tour that was for a 2 month cycle, twice a year.

Being separated from each other was the worst. Nelson did not adjust well to his routine. She was well aware of this and as much as she longed for his presence, once she got started with her shorter 2 month tours, she did adjust. Nelson did not cope nearly as well. Without her steadying influence in his daily life he floundered. The singing part he loved, but it was the endless traveling and having to face reporters for interviews that drained him. He did keep track of her concerts via newspaper reviews as she did with his. Phone calls helped but they had to be so careful because when operators found out they were in their hotel, they would deliberately eavesdrop into their conversations. This definitely put a crimp in what they could say to each other. Yes, they could and did write letters to one another, but being on the road made it difficult for the mail to keep up with their whereabouts.

So is it any wonder that Nelson was exhausted by the time he got back home? Jam did not fare better, but Nelson usually finished his tour before she was done. One time, her last concert was to be in San Bernardino, California. It is about 100 miles east of Los Angeles. She

was scheduled to take the train into the city the next morning. To her delight and complete surprise, a message was delivered to her manager that her car and driver were waiting outside to take her home. Of course, she knew who the driver was, and cut her fan meeting short. She changed as fast as possible and raced out to find Nelson waiting for her.

The very next day they woke up at their beloved MISTS home with Nelson checking on his garden and Jeanette taking care of laundry, making out grocery lists and essentially returning to what to them was their normal life. Their lives and their happiness revolved around this Secret but Beloved Home, MISTS.

Let us return to what Wallace Neff created for the Thomson's.

Along with the villa and out buildings, including a two-story stable for the horses, the Thomson's also had Neff design and build quarters for at least eight stable hands. To quote from Frances Marion herself: "Lodgings for the hands that looked like a Vanderbilt summer place to me".

This building was identified as The Estate Keeper's House. It was located southeast of the mansion/villa and at least 200 yards or more away from the mansion itself. The interior of this building was the finish of choice in the thirties, namely "Knotty Pine". The first two floors of this 10 room house contained bunk beds for the hands along with other areas.

To the natural growth in the area, the Thomson's had planted several hundred full-grown trees to provide shade. A circular driveway was carved out that encircled the entire security gated and fenced estate. After Fred Thomson's death, Frances Marion, now widowed with two small boys, sold the place in 1929 to an oil baron and his wife for a then astronomical price of \$450,000.

It was in late 1935, or early 1936 that Nelson Eddy somehow learned that the building designed as the Estate Keepers House for the stable hands, could be leased and he did so. The information about the site most likely came from Frances Marion herself. This property he leased was the "Vanderbilt Summer Place" that Frances spoke of, that he converted over time into a lovely Hideaway Home for himself and Jeanette, as his own "Retreat", which was the name my father called it.

Nelson also remodeled much of the interior including removing the bunk beds from the first and second floors. The space on the first floor where the bunk beds were located became their Living Room while the space on the second floor was converted into two bedrooms. Over the years, he added on to the structure by having a contractor add two more bedrooms and two bathrooms, one for Jeanette and one for his mother as well as a suite for himself that was a combination of study, bedroom, and bath. Nelson also retained the custodian that the former owners used and he provided a bedroom and bath for "George" and his wife. Sadly, George's wife passed early on. Nelson and Jeanette also used the Projection Room as their formal dining room in addition to it being a Projection Room. He also had the grounds, which had become overgrown, converted to a more park like setting. With 24 acres of land, Nelson had a lovely area in which to take his "walks" on which Jeanette often joined him.

Although there still remains a small group of people who deny the existence of the love-bond between Nelson Eddy and Jeanette MacDonald, and deny that the "Hideaway" Nelson and Jeanette called "MISTS" even existed, this needed to be revealed. This article was a labor of interest

and love and should put to rest some of the wild speculations regarding "Mists" but also its ultimate disposition. To my own personal disappointment, I was definitely a little too late to capture that remarkable estate as it looked just before it was destroyed. I thank the Lord that we do have a great color photo taken of Enchanted Hill that does show both the Mansion and the Estate Keeper's building and it appears as both Nels and Jenny would remember it!

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF MISTS BY ISABEL

"The living room walls were paneled in knotty pine - very attractive but they wanted a softer shade - so had the wall painted a turquoise and then quickly rubbed off. It now has a pinkish blue effect - very lovely. The curtains are plaid cotton in delph blue-gray and soft yellow. The divan is covered in yellow with quilted blue cushions. The hooked rugs combine blue-gray-rose-cedar and black - a perfectly stunning color note. Pictures are all in grayish pine frames - one of J in N.M. costume over the desk. One of J and N in R.M. over the radio. On either side of the large windows where the divan is are twelve painted stills

from N.M. – six on either side. J had a lovely one of me made which she has over the fire place. The Victorian arm chairs by the fireplace are covered in rose and cedar plaid. B gave them the radio and one easy chair and I gave them the low stool and covered it with needle point and how J loves that. She herself got the coffee table that sits before the fire place – and on it she has a brass smoking tray – beautiful old fashioned pink and blue tea set and pink vase for flowers. The lamps have pottery and copper bases with plain light colored shades. J has copper candle sticks on the fireplace. The bunks N had taken out and comfortable couch beds installed - table and lamp by each and all very lovely. The breakfast corner is truly a picture in soft yellow-drapes and chair cushions of beautiful pastel print-flower design. On the Dutch sideboard J has lovely silver pieces and old china.

She has brought practically everything from Gables that N ever specially noticed or admired- and as for HIM- well- he has such a glow of possessive pride these days that I can scarcely hold him. J's room, which he furnished himself, is really in excellent taste – settee and bed spreads of cream colored homespun with sprays of evergreen worked through it – green and white hooked rugs and ruffled curtains- or drapes of cream colored background with

sprays of evergreen and white roses scattered through them. The bathroom is a dream with mirrors all over and a huge dressing table complete to the last detail. On the wall of the bedroom J has a picture of her whole family in one frame- and on the dresser is a picture of G - but N put there himself- with the stern reminder to J that G was a dearly loved friend and that she was no more to forget that than was he. I have to laugh at his devotion to G- it has been so extremely ardent since he found out the true facts in that case- (meaning that there had never been any intimacy between Jam and Gene, ever!) also without him at this time he would indeed be in a bad fix.

As for N's room- it is a man's dream- J is such a creative artist and it has everything he could possibly need- and all so perfectly suited to his moody taste- which she knows so well. Drapes and bed spread are of dark green homespun- furniture of cedar and pine in a natural finish- two oil lamps which she had electrified and which he loves because he is such a dreamer and they remind him of his grandparent's home (he says)- the vivid color notes are in the chairs which she had upholstered in a beautiful print with sprays of pine and huge pine cones.

When N brought the cabin the former owners they had a handy man that cleaned and cooked for them and attended to the grounds as well. He has stayed on with N, but now N has had the grounds so improved that it keeps the man busy doing just that. The entire wooded hill on the front side has been cleaned out until it looks like a big lovely park. He was able to get a gas mower so George can cut the grass quickly. As for the house- none of us want a curious woman about - so for the time being- we are doing it ourselves. B and I together manage to keep it in a good condition and occasionally I take Mary up and she gives it a thorough going over even to washing the windows. Of course I don't dare let J do much of anything- for if N ever saw her with more than a dust rag in her hand we would all be murdered in cold blood. However she insists these duties relax her and she loves them. On the day she fixed N's room she wouldn't let a one of us go near her but did it all herself- but she was tired and I persuaded her to rest before he got there- in fact she was in dreamland when he came and I had to wake her because of course I couldn't let him see his room until she could show it to him. Well- he was speechless with surprise- he is always so touched by her every devotion to him. And in just a little while he went off for a walk all by

himself- and we both knew that he was saying "thank you", for when he is deeply touched, he does just that.

I wish it were possible for J's public to see her in her little gingham dress- white sox and low heeled shoes- and a dust rag in her hand- I know they would love her even more than they do - for this dazzling and glamorous girl (as they know her) has such an adorable little girl quality- and she is just as lovely - just as beautiful- whether doing down to earth housework or singing on a opera stage. Of course I know that I see her through eyes of gratitude and love because of N- but I truly believe the angels threw the pattern away when she was made. I have never met her equal before and I don't expect to in the future. I wonder what my son has done to have this girl for his own."

Nelson retained this property to the beginning of the fifties when Jeanette MacDonald broke off her relationship with Nelson and that separation lasted over two years before they reconciled. During that period he gave up "Mists" and the "Mariposa" house as well, because being without Jeanette, neither place had any meaning for him.

Contrary to the well-published MIS-information that Mists was located on the Fred Niblo estate, IT WAS NOT! Neff was also the architect for Niblo, but for Niblo, Neff had designed a Spanish style estate on their own 8 acre estate and it was built in 1926. This estate was below the Thomson property and was located just as one entered Angelo Drive. Both estates used the Angelo Drive access road, but the Thomson estate had its own private road that encircled their 24 acre estate. It was Katherine Hepburn who bought the Niblo estate for a brief period and later it was owned by Jules Stein, founder of MCA, who had it for forty years.

A Mr. & Mrs. Paul Kollsman purchased the original Thomson property. Mr. Kollsman was the inventor of the modern altimeter. He purchased the 24 acre estate in 1945 but honored Nelson's lease on the Estate Keeper's House property. Mr. Kollsman purchased an additional 100 acres of vacant adjoining property so that the estate now contained 124 acres. His widow sold the property to the Microsoft partner of Bill Gates, billionaire Paul Allen. Mr. Allen had the old mansion demolished to make way for his new home. The building identified as "Mists" was

reported as being destroyed by fire, but long after Nelson had given up the lease on that property.

There is a photo that shows the driveway that was the entrance to the Enchanted Hill estate of Fred and Frances Thomson. The estate itself was located almost a half a mile away from the Angelo Drive entrance. This entrance was also the access road to the Niblo Estate, but on its own 8 acres of property.

The entire Thomson Estate was built at the very top of Smokey Mountain. The Estate Keeper's House for the estate was located almost directly across from where the mansion was located, but about 200 or 300 yards away from the mansion.

The Estate Keeper's House for the Thomson Estate was leased by Nelson Eddy in either 1935 but for sure by early 1936. Nelson converted this structure into a Hideaway Home for himself and Jeanette and they took every opportunity to live together as husband and wife for about fifteen years. The existence of this Hideaway Home was a very closely guarded secret and only a handful of people knew of it. Amazingly, neither the building nor its location was known for years and it remained a secret

until around the 1970s, after both Jeanette and Nelson were deceased. Even then, it was highly disputed.

The entrance to the Fred Niblo Estate, was a separate 8 acre property. It was located directly to the right when passing through the Angelo Drive gate. It was never part of the Thomson estate but both estates used this gate to access both properties. It is the Niblo Estate that can still be seen today but the owner is the financial mogul, Rupert Murdoch. It was the old Thomson Estate, their "Enchanted Hill", that Paul Allen demolished and that included the Estate Keeper's House a.k.a. MISTS.

Mr. Allen's actions in deliberately destroying this Cultural Landmark, have been severely criticized by those who abhor his callous disregard for the historic value of this magnificent property which should have been Restored, not Bulldozed!

TO THIS DAY, THIS PROPERTY STANDS VACANT, WEED INFESTED AND FORLORN.