



# WILTON MANORS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## HISTORICAL NOTES

JULY 2018

### INTERVIEW WITH GRACE NEWTON

Under the auspices of the Friends of the Wilton Manors Library

July 24, 1975

INTERVIEWER: JETT SCHMELZ

Historical Society Representative: Pat Miller

Both Ms Schmelz and Ms Miller were members of the Wilton Manors Historical Society. Ms Miller was the wife of William Miller, the City Attorney.

Transcribed by: CBE Students at Fort Lauderdale High School

Edited by Benjamin B. Little  
Wilton Manors Historical Society

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*As part of the nation's Bicentennial in 1976, The Friends of the Wilton Manors Library undertook to record oral histories of longtime residents. Jett Schmelz was the primary interviewer. Pat Miller of the Historical Society assisted with this interview.*

*The interview was about two and a half hours, starting at 2:00 p.m. Ms Schmelz and Ms Miller occasionally got off topic. Ms Schmelz did not always follow-up as she might have. The Editor has taken minor liberties to maintain continuity, make minor grammatical corrections, and add clarifications.*

*Grace's husband is Robert, referred to as "Newt" in the interview.*

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The interview took place at Grace Newton's Wilton Manors home, called the "Turning Point," where six children lived with her and her husband, Robert, whom she called Newt. Her home was at 61 NE 24<sup>th</sup> Street, apparently at the northeast corner of NE 24<sup>th</sup> Street and NE 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue. This would have been diagonally across from the old Baptist Church. It is unclear how much of the existing building is part of Newton's "Turning Point."

Grace was born June 19, 1917 in Robinson County, Tennessee. Her maiden name was Grace Head. She arrived in Broward County by car in March 1946. She went to school in Tennessee and Kentucky. She had two years of college in Nashville at Vanderbilt.

She had been born with a Clubfoot. She had to have many operations before she could go to school. Her mother finally found one which would accept handicapped children. When she was six, she got sleeping sickness and slept from one March to the next. Miraculously, she recovered and thanks God. At Saint Mary's Academy, she spent a great deal of time praying for all the sick people and the people she knew. She would often faint at her desk and wake up in the Chapel with a nun praying over her. She thought that this was God's way of preparing her for what she would do later in her life. Her lack of education was compensated by the education God gave her.

## The Girl Scouts

Some of the girls in town had found out that Grace had been a Girl Scout and asked her to start a troop in 1948 or 1949. She did, and she recruited others to help. She was a charter member of the new Wilton Manors Woman's Club and they volunteered to sponsor the new Troop.

Grace put a notice in the newspaper inviting mothers and daughters to a "tea" at the old Village Hall (now the Public Library at 500 NE 26<sup>th</sup> St.). Enough girls showed up to form a Brownie Troop and a Junior Troop.

She was a political activist. She was active in getting the Village incorporated in 1947 and demonstrated in front of the School Board to get an elementary school in Wilton Manors in 1951.

In 1954, the Broward County Commission voted to make Grace a member of the Broward County Hall of Honor. It says: "for extraordinary good citizenship, good fellowship, devotion, and dedication to friends and community." Typically, Grace's reaction was: *"But you know that's just my way of life."*

Girl Scouting was her way of life. She was sent to the Edith Macy Training School for Girl Scouts in Pleasantville, 40 miles north of New York City. This was a special honor because she was fortunate enough to be sent there when there was an international encampment for 30 nations around the world. She was there for 26 days.

Grace says: *"We learned to share our differences instead of comparing them. This is, what I think, the whole world should do because there were people from Egypt and from Korea and from Japan and from all kinds of places." "People of different races were excluded from groups, but we took anybody red, white, or blue. We didn't care what color they were and what race or anything because in our troop we were all Girl Scouts."*

Grace first met Dorothy Tommy, a shy little Seminole girl, on a trip to the Seminole Indian village with members of the Woman's Club. They took toys for the children. Grace and her husband went back several times. Dorothy's father was a Baptist Preacher who had not



Grace at some Girl Scout Event  
She seems to have been camera shy  
and the Historical Society is looking  
for a better picture.

started his education until he was 40. He would travel Broward County and would bring Dorothy to visit. Grace invited Dorothy to become a member of her Girl Scout Troop.

Grace's husband (Robert) built their house. It became the first Baptist church in town.

Wilton Manors, in the early days, was a little country community where everyone just rolled up their sleeves to help out with community projects or to just party. Barbeques were held on NE 26<sup>th</sup> Street while the Village Hall was being built (now the Library). They later moved to where Pantry Pride/Food Fair would subsequently be built on Wilton Drive. Grace served coffee, Nancy Sawallis served corn on the cob, and Newt Newton grilled chicken. Everyone in the community participated.

Grace remembers: *"And the most fun we ever had was at our Halloween Parties. We'd dress up, and each year Newt and I would dress up as a team of some kind, and Mr. Hagen<sup>1</sup> would walk up to see what Newt looked like and he would get so tickled he couldn't quit laughing. They would just stand there and laugh all evening at each other.*

*"I want to tell you about one party that Louise Turner<sup>2</sup> was at and she was just a riot. She was a lot of fun anyway.*

*"She came dressed as a Suwannee River woodswoman. She had a gun on her shoulder and sun bonnet, and she was really dressed up; and she sang 'Molasses, Molasses, Icky, Sticky, Goo.'" And I never will forget that.*

*"And she was so funny; she had an old brown jug in one hand and a gun over her shoulder.*

*"She had a beautiful voice, and could have done something classical, but that was beautiful to me. I'll never forget that, 'Molasses, Molasses, Icky, Sticky, Goo.' And every time the kids get icky on'em, I think of Louise singing that old song.*

*"And she had a great big iron pot that we could fry fish and chicken and things in that she brought down from Suwannee River cause that's where she came from."*

When the Village had grown to the point where the NE 26th Street location became too small, the barbeques moved to about 2020 Wilton Drive, where City Hall is now.

*"One of my little Brownies got scalded up there on her legs, she has scars. And that's the reason I remember that one so well. She was the little Dillard girl."* It may have been boiling water from the wieners.

## Starting the Baptist Church

Grace and Newt received an invitation in May of 1953 to visit Joanne and (UNKOWN) Perrine to discuss starting a Baptist Sunday school in the afternoons. They were very young (she was 18) and the Newtons assessed that they were too inexperienced to pull this off on their own. They found an empty store on Wilton Drive and started up a few Sundays. Afternoons were not working and they needed to be sponsored by a church. The First Baptist Church in Ft Lauderdale, Doctor Hansen, told them to wait two years. Wilton Manors was just too small.

So, they started it up in their house and within 20 weeks had 65 members. They hired a student minister who did morning and evening services at the Newton's home, and

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<sup>1</sup> Former President of the Village Council and major land developer.

<sup>2</sup> Wife of Dave Turner, first Mayor and a major land developer.

Wednesday night prayer. It became so successful that Doctor Hansen became interested and performed the first baptism in their pool.

The church moved to the big castle (Gateway Towers) at Five Points. Reverend Dawson came and pastored the Mission. In 1955, they bought the property from Mr. Cobb at the corner of NE 24<sup>th</sup> Street and NE 1<sup>st</sup> Ave. Grace was anxious that the building of the Baptist Church coincide with the month that Solomon's Temple was built.

As of 1975, Grace was still the Church Clerk. As she puts it: *"I think that 'jerk' would be a better name for it."*

Grace pushed for a children's chapel. One of her inspirations was the Children's Chapel at the National Cathedral in Washington, D. C. She started working with younger children and mentally and physically handicapped children.

She convinced a girl 16 who had polio that she could walk without crutches. She eventually began walking without braces. The teacher for the pre-school children asked Grace if she would work with the retarded<sup>3</sup> children.

Grace did not want to take this on without some training. She had lots of encouragement and help. Someone gave the Church money to send her and Newt to Ridgecrest, a Baptist Training School in North Carolina for two weeks. They were subsequently sent to other places to train, including Stetson University. This training was recurring, because the science of dealing with retarded children was progressing.

They wanted for the Church to have a little school, but that was voted down by the City Council. The Council told them to just go home and do what you want to.

Grace and Newt had always wanted a little girl and vicariously enjoyed many neighbor girls. They would go to the Pediatric Care Center and bring little children to the children's Chapel. One day, Newt returned and announced that he had found the girl Grace had always wanted. She was only three. Grace describes: *"And they sent a high chair with her, she was so tiny. She was just like an infant at three. And she'd been suppressed because they had so many children, they had to harness her down and keep her in the play pen, or something because she was quite active, and when we looked at her she was so beautiful."*

Adoption at that time was a challenge, but with help, they managed it.

Grace was having Sunday School classes for retarded children at the Church.

## Turning Point

Mrs. Pope (?) talked Grace into getting interested in retarded children. Grace says: *"Well, all this group of people that she knew, the Association for Retarded Children, Dr. Conti, the school board; and a lot of people who knew me, and I didn't know them, came over and had a meeting at the church with us in the Pastor's Study, and Brother Booth helped me as much as he could. ... And, they said that they would incorporate the organization. It's a group of organized people, that's just all what the Turning Point is, a group of organized people. And then we wanted to give our residence, our space, for the use of the Children. We wanted them to live with us because two people in a house this size thumping around gets a little noisy, you know. You just feel lost."*

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<sup>3</sup> This a word which is no longer acceptable but was common usage in Grace Newton's time.

*“And so not having the children we wanted, we really and thoroughly enjoyed them. And Newt was getting to the age that he needed to come down off the scaffold. He worked in masonry contracting for so long, and I was worried for fear that he would fall and hurt himself, as some of our friends had done that.”*

Grace and Newt were set up to take high functioning retarded children who could live in a group home.

*Grace says: “They are the nicest children. And eventually some of them will reach the point where they can make their way in society and, after all 25% of the people in this world are retarded anyway, so you won't notice them out there. But, in order to help them make their way in society, those who are not too retarded are placed in residential settings such as ours. Ours was the first of this kind in this area, and now they're doing it all over the state of Florida.*

*“So that's one step forward that Wilton Manors had that no place else in Florida had, like this. This was the place. And it was difficult to tell them that we only take children who are under 12 years old. And if they grew up in this setting, they can stay the rest of their lives, but we won't take them over 12. And then remember, I'm licensed for six and never will take more than six.”*

Grace tried to hire some people for things like the laundry, and the cleaning, and the grocery buying, those things. But she was so fussy, she wound up doing it over. She wound up training the children.

*On food shopping, she says: “This was a joke on me, grocery buying. When I first married, Newt let me go to grocery once. Well this is the truth. I was brought up in the country where you had everything, you took the wheat to the mill and then brought home barrels of flour and all that, and we had everything to eat and we hardly ever went to the store. And when we did, Papa John went, that's my foster father, I call him Papa John. He'd go buy coffee, sugar and a few other things, but I didn't know about buying groceries, and Newt let me go the grocery when we first married, and I made such bad job of it, that he'd never let me go again.*

*“He buys the groceries, but this turned out to be a tragic thing, and I'm going to tell every young bride I see to never let your husband take over the grocery buying. When Newt fell and broke his hip, in September, this last year, that was the worst test I ever had in my life. All the years I'd been married I never had to buy groceries and I knew the value of nutrition for the children.*

*“I had to study this nutrition, and they have to have a high protein diet and no artificial stuff. And I almost hit and made an exit through the roof of Pantry Pride. I read on the label, ‘Artificial Margarine’ (Laughing) Well, it was tragic. To me, margarine's artificial butter, but that artificial butter had artificial margarine; (Laughing) and I almost went through the ceiling.*

*“I spent hours reading labels. So that, instead of being a kindness, it turned into a kind of tragedy. I spent most of the time reading labels.*

*“We divided the chores, he's the cook, he does all the cooking and I just go in the kitchen cautiously because I might not be welcome there; (Laughing) but he does a lot of the other chores, we divide the household duties. Sometimes he'll do the vacuuming and the children do the dusting now. Ann is a very good child for dusting; she's very careful with everything, and we never put the little knick-knacks away. We want our children to enjoy things and they do enjoy beautiful things in the home. We have a lot of antique dishes and things sitting around and they never break them, and they enjoy them as well as we do. I take care of the children's clothes and I've worked out a real neat system. We get up at 6:30 in the mornings to get them on the school bus, so as we fold clothes and get them ready to put'em away, we put them on hangers, put the dresses, underpants, socks and everything right on the hanger, and all they have to do is go and get their hanger and they're ready for school the next morning.*

*"And then we taught them, all except Renee, and she tries, they all make their own beds, but you know they've grown into that gradually. We teach them from the very beginning what to do, and having divided the work equally between us, it isn't really a chore. It's just a matter of management. We try to program the children. Ann's mother says we talk about her like a computer. They are programmed when they're at school each day. I prepare things for them to do when they come home. First thing they do when they come home is take a nap, because they're not as strong physically as most children, and they need that rest after a hard day of school.*

*"And then they get up, and they have a program here. Sometimes they'll color. The library and Woman's Club together helped us get a talking book, and they sit and listen to stories, one of those records for the blind.*

*"We don't return our books very rapidly, because the children are very slow learners, and they sometimes have to listen as many as four times to one book, so they do that, and they like television, and they have records, all kinds. They're on what we call music therapy. Music is the easiest and most responsive way to reach the mind.*

*"We can turn our children on and we can turn them off, with music, too. You know we want them to come alive, we get some lively music and they like the same programs other children like just everything that other children like.*

*"When Ann came to us we were talking about our children. I want you to look here. (pointing to the mural painted on the living room wall above the sofa). This is Ann's picture here, see there she is.*

*"And I started a mural with music in mind. Ann was what some people call a vegetable when she came. She was five years old, and in diapers, she couldn't even cry. She had no powers of expression and wore diapers. Now she's a beautiful little teenager that even plays the organ, and it's hard to believe.*

*"Ann was five, almost six, with no power of expression and could just barely walk. She couldn't cry. To reach her and teach her to talk, I would sing to her and let her hold her dolly and sing "I once had a Dolly all dressed up in White," and she would sing the "Ma Ma," "Mama" part and this is how we began teaching her to talk. And it may seem cruel to you, but in our training we learned to train one area of the mind at one time.*

*"Just one, that's all we would train at once. She had to learn to eat. She couldn't feed herself, and I would feed her. But I knew I had to discipline myself so one morning I left her sitting at the dining table, and I said, 'Today you'll eat because I'm not going to look at you and I'm not going to talk to you.'*

*"She had a way of looking at me you know, and I'd melt and give in and I'd feed her. But this didn't work, so I walked in here and for the first time in her life, I had her for about two months then, she cried. She cried and she cried for two hours. And I called the psychologist and he said, 'Well now you've been praying for this. Don't knock it.' So I said. 'But two hours?' And he said, 'That's all right, look at how many years she has to get out of her system.' From there she began to say little words. Now she speaks very well. She speaks in a monotone as most Mongoloid children do. She's beautiful and she can play the organ, and she won a medal in the Kennedy Special Olympics, a bronze medal for first place in a fifty-yard dash. So, she's walking very well and running too. Then Ted, the one up in the apple tree (in the mural), came from Sunland Institution; and he had never seen a real tree in his life just palms and things.*

*"Ted was almost seven when he came to us, and now he's twelve. We take our children in our camper and we go just everywhere with them. We took them to Maine to a place called the Gatherings up on the bay. In Maine it looks like apple trees grow wild because there were no houses there. Nent and Ted went up in the woods to pick blackberries but when Ted came back he had a basket full of apples. He discovered an apple tree, and now everything, he likes for me to sing 'Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree with Anyone But Me.'*

*He likes everything about an apple tree; so I thought the best place to put Ted in that mural would be up an apple tree.”*

In the mural, there is a little boy, Ted, with his back to us.

*“Well, I purposely put his back watching you and the children because he was a little Cretin. A Cretin is a child with a thyroid problem. He's born with no thyroid, and the Division of Family Services had heard about my knowledge of the Cretin child. If you grab it when he's young, he's very very young, you can often take care of it in such a way that it will by-pass retardation. Otherwise they look very much and act very much like a mongoloid child. This little child was seven months old and looked just like a little dried up frog. He was horrible looking when they brought him to me from the hospital. And we started working with him. And he was so beautiful, he grew to such a beautiful child. I took his picture down because it grieved me so.*

*“Well, we kept him a little better than two years, and he by-passed the retardation and they put him up for adoption.*

*“And you see, that's what I was trying to explain to you, one way you want to cry, and Newt and I did cry and still do sometimes. We loved him so and when you are in training, they say never become involved.*

*“But love the child, well now. Love is the strongest emotion so how can you help it but become involved; so we loved him and we still love him.*

*“And we'll always love him, but when he was a baby he'd watch the other children play, you know, and he'd jump up and down and he'd start to play but his little muscles were drawn up; it was a 24 hour a day job. But we by-passed the retardation and we're thankful. We know that God has heard our prayers and helped us.*

*“And this is just a little group. In there are ponies. That you can see the shadows. Ponies and riders. We have ponies, and I have a horse. We board them out and the children ride. They're taught just everything. And one year we went to Assateague Island, off the Virginia coast.<sup>4</sup>*

*“Well, we read the children books and then we go find what we've been reading about.*

*“We bought 7 1/2 acres of land from a man I wish everyone would come to know. Carl Maulden is his name, and he came from Ft. Myers to Bushnell<sup>5</sup>, and he used to be a lineman (telephone). He got tangled in some hot wires and lost both legs and one arm. That man does anything he wants to do, he walks, he drives a truck, ran a dolly, drives a bulldozer, fixes anything he wants to, and has real patience with people who can't do what they should do.*

*“The children will need the woods. We have, one half our land, is a meadow I call it, it's pasture land and the other half is real old live oak trees and then across one side, there is this little jumper creek canal and it has willows and everything and it is a beautiful little creek with spring fed water, clear, and beautiful and wonderful and we're gonna build the most unique house. Mr. Malden already helped us stake it out. The children's wing of the house will have one whole glass wall so that they can sit inside and watch the wild life outside. And I bring this up because we were camping at Wildwood<sup>6</sup> and Rene and the other children found that if they put bird food on the tables outside the camper and then get inside and look outside the window,*

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<sup>4</sup> Right next to Chincoteague Island, made famous by the children's book Misty of Chincoteague.

<sup>5</sup> In Sumter County, in Central Florida.

<sup>6</sup> Near Bushnell.

*they could watch the wildlife: the squirrels and the birds and things. Rene learned to say 'Thoosbay' she calls a bluejay.*

*"So we thought we would have a little wildlife reserve and fix the building so it goes around all glass walls inside and the buildings just gonna wrap around the trees.*

*"We just made a down payment and it may take us forever to pay for it.*

*"And we want to give them more advantages. Now that's the reason that we want to move up there. And they have pecans up there. We have some friends with pecan trees and they pay people just to pick up pecans and anybody can pick pecans off the ground and then they have worm farms.*

*"And we've been learning how to raise worms. Well, the worm is stupid in a way, but he's got a lot in common with people; he likes to eat. Look you can take two little sticks and feed them, see, plant the food and beat the little sticks together and they come up and eat, and then comes harvest time and you beat the little sticks together and they come up and you get them.*

*"That's research, let's face it, that's right. And I bought books, and books, and books, gardening books and when we go up; there we'll still be incorporated, but we're not gonna call it Turning Point, it will be Turning Point, but we're gonna call it TP Retreat, cause in the garden we plant beans, Pole beans, we'll put the sticks up like teepees and let the children play inside and then have beans in there too. And then we're just learning more fun things to do.*

*"And if we're gonna have a second childhood, I think we ought to enjoy it. We're planning to enjoy our second childhood."*

The interview wrapped up after two and a half hours.

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