

## Grey Gardens

### “A True Fable”

## A Story of Magic, Music, Movie and Memoir

### Art and Story by: A.F. Wargo

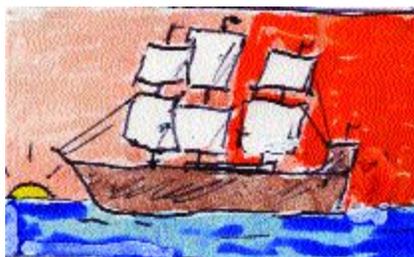


A.F. Wargo -Self Portrait

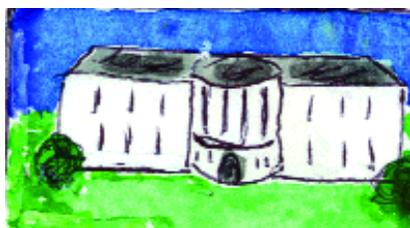
Michel Bouvier in the early 19th century was a cabinet maker from Provence. In his early twenties Michel as a foot soldier fought with Napoleon during the defeat at Waterloo. The Bourbons came back to the throne, and Michel was fortunate to escape by ship to America. He landed in Philadelphia and opened a custom furniture shop and created some commissions for Joseph Bonaparte, the Emperor's brother who had escaped France with a great fortune and built a palatial estate in Delaware. During the Presidency of John Quincy Adams, Michel built 24 chairs and a table for the White House. Over 100 years later his great great granddaughter and First Lady Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy would sit on these chairs and not know that Michel had made them. Michel became very successful and invested in real estate and built a palatial 20 room mansion with a chapel and stables.



One of Michel's sons, Captain John Vernou Bouvier, was severely wounded in the Civil War. One of his daughters married a son of the Drexels, one of our countries wealthiest banking families. He bought 2 sons seats on the New York Stock Exchange. Michel Bouvier, the founder of the family in the United States, died in 1834 and left an estate worth over \$10,000,000. His son, Michel Charles Bouvier, called M.C. was able to profit many times from his estate share. He lived in gilded splendor in Manhattan in two joined brownstones with 10 servants as well as a uniformed coachman and a footman for his horse drawn Braugham. M.C. donated a superb altar to New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral. He did business with the Vanderbilts, the Drexels and the Rockefellers.



M.C. died in 1935 and left the bulk of his larger estate to his nephew, the only male heir of the third generation, John Vernou Bouvier Jr. He was the father of Edith Bouvier (called “Big Edie”) and the grandfather of “Little Edie”, her daughter as well as Jacqueline and Lee Bouvier, “Big Edie's” nieces.



John Vernou Bouvier Jr had married Maude Sergent the daughter of a very successful paper manufacturer. One year later they had a son, John Vernou Bouvier 111. Two years later there was another son, William and then in 1895 a sister Edith. Edith Sergeant Bouvier would eventually live in “Grey Gardens”. A decade later Maude had twin daughters, Maude and Michelle.

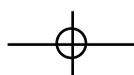
As Edith grew up, she developed into an accomplished pianist and also a gifted singer. Edith's brother, John Vernou Bouvier 111 would marry and his daughters, Lee and Jacqueline Bouvier would eventually rise to the heights of national and international fame – one a Princess and one a First Lady of the United States.

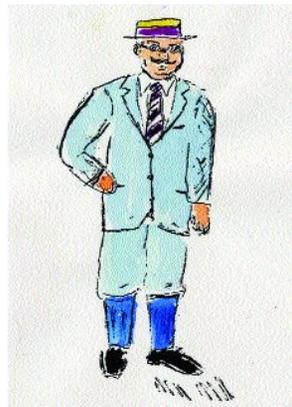


Edith Bouvier married Phelon Beale, a lawyer from Alabama at St. Patrick's Cathedral. They had 2 sons and 1 daughter. Edith, who was called “Little Edie”. There was a divorce and Edith Bouvier Beale, known as “Big Edie” remained at her “Grey Gardens,” East Hampton estate. Here she gave parties which were frequented by an assortment of poets, musicians, painters and writers – a bohemian lifestyle that infuriated her father John Jr. Grandfather Bouvier had a 14 acre estate in East Hampton called Lasata. It was an idyllic wonderland for the Bouvier children and eventually grandchildren. The massive mansion had 7 bedrooms and was covered with ivy. It had a large living room with a Steinway piano which was played by Edith Bouvier, a large dining room and a solarium. On her Steinway, Edith would perform arias and the popular songs of the day, by Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin, Gershwin etc. The grounds at Lasata were tended by 2 full time gardeners and behind the mansion was a superb Italian garden that had won many horticultural prizes. It had box hedges and a brick walkway in the style of a Renaissance villa.



There was a 4 car garage with a chauffeur's apartment above and a stable with a riding ring. There was a red clay tennis court, a cutting garden and orchards of peaches and pears. Here at age 5 “Big Edie's” niece Jacqueline Bouvier became a determined equestrienne and won many blue ribbons in East End horse shows. These were golden summers and a lifestyle that would slowly cease to be – a grand but simple life of beauty, grace and luxury. Grandfather John Jr. would die in 1948, Lasata would end, and “Grey Gardens” would begin its decline.





“Grey Gardens” would have many visitors as the years went by such as “Big Edie’s” nieces, Lee Bouvier Radziwill and Jackie Bouvier Kennedy, who frequented there throughout their lives. Jackie would then continue these visits with her children, Caroline and John Jr. (who were accompanied by 2 secret servicemen throughout the grounds of Grey Gardens). In 1976, the great documentarians of “Cinema Verite” Albert and David Maysles would come to Grey Gardens and immortalize “Big Edie” and “Little Edie” Bouvier Beale in the now world famous film “Grey Gardens”. The film has been viewed in every major film festival throughout the world on the 5 major continents. In 1976 the London Times stated: “Extraordinary, one of the oddest, most beautiful films ever”.



Lois Wright, writer, artist and close friend for decades of the Bouvier Beales lived at “Grey Gardens” for several years in the mid seventies and was there while the Maysles Brothers filmed their documentary over 6 weeks. She is in the film’s birthday party scene. Lois was also there in the late 70’s with “Little Edie” when “Big Edie” died.

After “Big Edie’s” death, Ben Bradlee of Washington Post fame and his wife, writer Sally Quinn, bought the estate and through careful restoration brought the 28 room mansion back to its former glory.

During “Big Edie’s” long residence at Grey Gardens it became the refuge for many generations of destitute cats and often over 40 cats were living there at the same time. There was also a family of raccoons living in the attic being fed stale bread by “Little Edie”.

For the last decade Frances Hayward, animal advocate and founder of BEKIND Organization (which rescues destitute cats and dogs and helped during Hurricane Katrina) resides at Grey Gardens, East Hampton. Frances gives superb parties with musicians, poets, writers, sculptors and artists as in the glory days of “Big Edie”’s Grey Gardens.

Today, Lois Wright, writer, artist and 19 year local TV host, adamantly states: ‘Big Edie’ and ‘Little Edie’ have been protectively watching over everything from the loving restoration of the Grey Gardens estate, to my memoir ‘My life at Grey Gardens’\* to the ‘Grey Gardens’ off Broadway musical and its moving to Broadway in October 2006, to the new ‘Grey Gardens’ screenplay and film, written and directed by Michael Sucsy starring Jessica Lange and Drew Barrymore which is about to begin filming in August 2006 – it’s only the beginning!”



...To be continued

Fore more information on the Bouvier family, John H. Davis, Jackie Kennedy’s cousin has written several books:

- “The Bouviers, Portrait of an American Family” - 1969
- “The Bouviers, From Waterloo to the Kennedys and Beyond” - 1993
- “Jacqueline Bouvier, An Intimate Memoir” - 1996

<http://www.amazon.com> [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com): my life at grey gardens \*\*\*\*\* review by Kent Bartram

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