THE IDEAL LITTLE GIRL Pt. 2

The documents presented here include an interview with three women from prominent southern families and an excerpt from a book of manners directed especially to little girls. Helen Starrett refers to the speech of little girls, their companions, their reading habits, and their quiet comportment—all of which have direct reference to Scout!

The section indicates, as does *To Kill a Mockingbird,* that the expectations and realities of little girls were often two entirely different things.

INTERVIEW: A PERSPECTIVE ON THE 1930s

Like Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird,* the three women in this interview grew up in the deep South of the 1930s. All three were members of what could be described as prominent southern families. Mary Anne Norton Meredith's mother was a large landholder, her father a successful merchant in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Camille Maxwell Elebash, also of Tuscaloosa, was reared by a grandmother and mother, both of whom were landowners, and by a father who was a professor of engineering and a pioneering aeronautical engineer at the University of Alabama, a businessman, and World War I navy pilot. Cecil Butler Williams grew up in Jacksonville, Florida. Her father, a practicing attorney, was one of Florida's most prominent state senators. The three women discuss many of the issues raised in *To Kill a Mockingbird:* how they defined a "good family" (the topic that was so dear to Aunt Alexandra's heart and so baffling to Scout and Jem); the poor whites in Alabama and Florida (very like the Cunninghams in *To Kill a Mockingbird)-,* their relationship with African-Americans; and the expectations and realities of those who would grow up to be proper southern "belles." The interview took place in 1993.

Interviewer. In historical and fictional stories about the South in the time in which we're interested—the 1930s—one hears frequent reference to what were called "good families" or "old families." What is your understanding of that term?

Mary Ann: Gee, I never really thought about it.

Camille: Nobody had very much money. In the Depression years. If your father had a job, you had a good family.

Mary Ann: Yes, if your father was gainfully employed.

Cecil: Yes, if your mother stayed at home and everyone had a maid or two.

Camille: And a cook.

Mary Ann: And a nurse *and* a yard man.

Cecil: But that did not mean you were a wealthy family.

Mary Ann: Good families were all good church members.

Camille: We considered ourselves a "good" family, but we were land poor. We owned a great deal of land but it wasn't bringing in any income in the thirties. There was just no cash flow. On the other hand, there was not much tax on land.

Mary Ann: That describes our situation as well at that time.

Cecil: I guess I was a city child. Land ownership didn't enter the picture much, though I suppose ours was considered a good family. My father was a lawyer. We had some land in the county that my father went hunting on. But I never thought about land. It just wasn't part of my life.

Camille: I think "good" families were differentiated by a certain accent, too.

Mary Ann: It was the way people talked.

Camille: It was the pronunciation of "I." Didn't say "niiice" and "whiiite," dragging the "I" sound out.

Cecil: I think yours and Mary Ann's background are different from mine, growing up in a larger town.

Interviewer: In that your father was a lawyer, perhaps your experience is much closer to Scout's in *To Kill a Mockingbird*
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Cecil: That's true. Yes, I think so. My father was of the old school. Integrity was the byword. They looked down very much on those who cheated and stole, especially from the poor. And I remember him talking about one well-off family who did just that and became very prominent later. It was an attitude. You never cheated anybody, and especially anybody lesser than you. And you never said a cross word or spoke badly to someone who couldn't speak back to you.

Camille: Yes, I think "good" families had a strong sense of responsibility to the people whose lives they could affect. I know when the Depression came and my family's bank failed, their main concern was to see that other people got their money back even if they lost out themselves.

Mary Ann: This is interesting, I think. I had a grandfather who was on the board of that bank. And they all felt the responsibility to pay back that money.

Cecil: I think among people like ours in the South, there was the idea of *noblesse oblige.*

Interviewer: Did you know people in the 1930s who were like the really poor whites of Old Sarum *in* Harper Lee's novel?

Cecil: Oh yes, in north Florida where I grew up there were extremely poor people out in the country. My aunt and uncle had an orange grove which we visited occasionally, and there were some really, really poor people in part of the woods. They were so thin and so pale. You never see anybody that looks like that any more.

Camille: In my case, I had a lot of contact with both black and white sharecroppers. My grandmother lost all her cash money when the family bank crashed. She had a place where she farmed. The one north of here had white sharecroppers and the one south of town had black sharecroppers. And the white sharecroppers were just as pitiful as the black sharecroppers.

Mary Ann: Oh yes, they were terribly malnourished and diseased. Many had hookworms.

Camille: And what a friend of mine used to call turnip green arms— extremely long, very thin arms.

Cecil: Have you ever read Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings's stuff about Florida? The poor whites I knew were just like that. But they were very proud. They wouldn't take handouts. And I'd also see these same poor people from the hill when we visited up in North Carolina. They were just as bad off and fiercely proud.

Camille: There was a difference between genteel poverty and dirt road poverty.

Interviewer: By which you mean a kind of *Tobacco Road* type of poverty?

Mary Ann: Camille and I went to school with people like that in the thirties.

Camille: When I went to Stafford School, I always took two lunches, one for myself and one for someone else.

Mary Ann: Of course. They were HUNGRY.

Camille: This is what's funny. I still feel a moral responsibility to those sharecroppers who worked for my grandmother. They still call me when they need me. I still send checks to them.

Cecil: Yes, because your family was responsible.

Camille: Not many years ago we got a job for one woman whose family farmed on our land. She couldn't read. And do you know that her great-grandfather was headmaster of an academy before the Civil War?

Cecil: Good gracious!

Mary Ann: Then she came from educated people.

Camille: Yet by the thirties her family was sharecropping on my grandmother's farm.

Interviewer: What happened? Was it the war?

Camille: My husband always said it was the Civil War. They just went back to the dirt. And they had fought in the Civil War even though they never owned slaves. Many of these men died in the Civil War. There were lots of widows left with absolutely nothing except a houseful of children to rear. And do you know it was the blacks who took care of these poor white families. They cut wood for them and shared with them and looked in on them. I had experience with another class of poor white people in the thirties in that we lived so close to the railroad station. I remember seeing the bums coming up the street from the railroad station. And I remember seeing our backyard filled with these poor men, eating what my grandmother had given them. They never asked for a handout. They would only ask for work—if they could chop wood, for example.

Mary Ann: Our mothers belonged to an organization called the Junior Welfare, a precursor of the Junior League. They helped take care of children whose mothers had to work and helped get food and clothes to the needy. And there was such need.
Cecil: Yes, I always thought it was funny that my mother went to help take care of children whose mothers had to work and left her own child to be taken care of by a nurse!

Interviewer: Were you allowed to play with the children of poor whites?

Cecil: I don't remember any prohibitions about it. It just didn't come up.

Camille: I brought a lot of little children home with me from Stafford School, but I was never allowed to go to their homes. Maybe I was never invited. I did spend one night with the little girl whose father was on the police force. I remember his collection of weapons, including some bloody knives, put a scare into me.

Mary Ann: I don't remember playing with what you call poor white children. I do remember two little girls who lived in town whose family had a very tough time. They lived just behind my father's business and I think they resented my better situation. They threatened to beat me up. I was terrified of them.

Interviewer: As members of prominent families, what was your relationship with black people when you were little girls of Scout Finch's age?

Mary Ann: Your first experience with a black person was with your nurse. And the black people that took care of these little white children instilled *in* us the most wonderful traits. They stood for everything that was honest and Christian.

Cecil: I remember complaining to my nurse Lessie that a little boy had hit me. And she said, "Well, go hit him back." Part of your character came from your nurses.

Mary Ann: And they were really religious.

Cecil: And you minded your nurse.

Camille: I remember the black sharecroppers who worked for my grandmother. She supported them all year long and paid all their medical bills. Then when the farming was done, they split the proceeds. She got half and they got half, with the understanding that their medical costs would come out of their half. And they trusted her implicitly. I loved to go down to Hale County on settlin'-up day when they were paid because I could spend the day with the little black children. And that's where I learned to love to dance.

Mary Ann: We were incredibly attached to the black people we knew well.

Cecil: But I read somewhere in a book on the South that while the white people felt very attached to the black people back then, the black people didn't feel that way about us.

Mary Ann: Still, we were taught to be respectful of black people.

Camille: Heavens yes. I would have had my mouth washed out with soap so fast if I had ever referred to a black person with any word other than colored!
Cecil: My parents always used the respectful term "colored."

Camille: My main playmates for most of my childhood were black boys. Black families lived on the street behind us and my two best friends came over from there to play football with me. Their names were Josie and Jessie and they were part black, part Indian, and part white. We played football every day. We thought their mother was mean as a snake and we never knew who their father was. Jessie is now president of a black college and Josie owns a highly successful catering business. And I used to pick cotton with a black man and his children.

Cecil: I played with black children, too, but in my own house. I remember when I was a little girl, I begged Mama to let our cook's little girl come play with me. And Mama invited her over and told me not to let her out of the yard because, you know, someone might hurt her feelings.

Mary Ann: I had black playmates, too. I remember a wonderful black girl who played with my sister and me. She was so much fun.

Camille: Still, you never went to the houses of black people as a guest.

Interviewer: Were you proper, dainty little southern girls?

Mary Ann: I was very fond of dolls. I was kind of a girl-girl. But I also climbed trees. I remember mother saying one day, "Don't you think you're getting too big to be doing tumble-saults on the floor?" But obviously Camille was the real tomboy.

Camille: I only played with boys. I played tackle football with boys until I was about twelve or thirteen. One day when I was tackled, I got the wind knocked out of me, and I went home and put on a dress and never played football again.

Cecil: I played boys' games too, and my best friend was a boy. We had a club and we initiated new members by feeding them leaves of the elephant-ear plant. We'd give them nose drops with mustard in it. It's a wonder we didn't kill somebody with our initiations.

Camille: I remember hating getting dolls and things for Christmas. I wanted trains and trucks and things that the boys got. We ended up using my dolls to re-enact kidnapping. We'd just throw them out the window.

Cecil: I also played jump-rope and jacks, and I skated.

Camille: I remember stopping everywhere on my way home from school. And mother never had to worry about me.

Interviewer: In *To Kill a Mockingbird,* Atticus is reprimanded by Aunt Alexandra and Mrs. Dubose for not dressing Scout properly. Do you remember a special dress code for little girls?

Cecil: I don't remember any taboo against little girls wearing trousers, but we were usually dressed in dresses because I remember my mother saying that little girls should always wear pretty panties because they spent so much time on their heads.

Mary Ann: We definitely weren't allowed to wear pants to school. It was unladylike to be sunburned. But nobody ever bugged me about it.

Camille: Oh, no.

Mary Ann: Never.

Cecil: In those days, blue jeans were really tacky.

Mary Ann: As my husband says, he struggled very hard so as not to have to work in bluejeans.

Cecil: Little girls got dressed up in the afternoons and you went to the park. We usually wore little dresses, except in the summer when you wore sunsuits.

Mary Ann: We were dressed up in the afternoon and taken to town, or we would ride to the end of the trolley line and back.

Camille: You remember our Sunday School dresses? What I hated was when they got a little too small or a litde too shabby, they were converted into everyday dresses.
Mary Ann: Most of our dresses were handmade, smocked. We all wanted to look like Shirley Temple.

Cecil: One exception to handmade dresses were what were called Natalie dresses brought down by these people from New York. They would have special showings, and Mama would buy me one or two Natalie dresses, which you would only wear on very special occasions.

Mary Ann: You never went anywhere barefoot.

Cecil: That's quite true. If you saw someone at school barefoot, that was pitiful. The family never appeared around the house half-dressed. And you were always dressed up for dinner. Of course, it was easy when you had someone else serving you dinner.

Interviewer: Was there a special code of behavior for little girls who were expected to grow up to be southern ladies?

Camille: Well, it was alright for boys to fight, but girls weren't supposed to. It was perfectly alright for my brother to fight, but I was not allowed to. Of course, I did it anyway.

Cecil: Yes, we weren't supposed to, but I did beat up a litde boy once. I remember his mother called to complain to Mama, and for once Mama stood up for me. I remember her saying, "Well, he started it and he's two years older than she is and she is a girl."

Mary Ann: Normally, little girls didn't resort to violence. I only had one fight.
Cecil: Speech was a biggie, really. There were just certain things you didn't say. You were corrected a lot.

Maty Ann: Correct grammar was extremely important.

Camille: We weren't to talk like the black children we played with.

Mary Ann: I can tell you, cuss words were certainly not prevalent. I never heard them.

Camille: I don't remember Mamma and Daddy ever saying a bad word.

Cecil: There were certain coarse words you hear today that I never heard until I was an adult. You were brought up to be a lady, which meant you were not allowed to be coarse.

Camille: Little girls were never allowed to raise their voices.

Mary Ann: That's an important point. Ladies and gentlemen never raised their voices.

Camille: I was never allowed to say "shut up."

Mary Ann: Mainly what you were taught was good manners.

Cecil: And you were never allowed to brag or be sarcastic One word we could never say was "pregnant."

Mary Ann: I knew the word, of course, but I believe I was grown before I ever heard that word spoken aloud. You always said "expecting."

Cecil: There was a certain code of behavior expected on Sundays. We could go down to the beach and get snacks and a coke, but we couldn't drink cokes on Sunday. Many years afterwards I asked my mother why we couldn't drink cokes on Sunday, and she couldn't remember why.

Mary Ann: Of course, we didn't play cards or go to the movies on Sunday.

Interviewer: Movie theaters back then weren't even open on Sundays, were they?

Camille: I think that changed with air-conditioning. People would go to the movies on Sunday to get out of the heat.

Cecil: I don't know that we can say that the three of us were typical of little southern girls.

Mary Ann: It was a carefree time for us. We certainly seemed to live in a kinder, gentler world.

FROM HELEN EKIN STARRETT, *THE CHARM OF FINE MANNERS*

(Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1920)

We must persistently strive against selfishness, ill-temper, irritability, indolence. It is impossible for the self-centered or ill-tempered girl to win love and friends.

One of the greatest blemishes in the character of any young person, especially of any young girl or woman, is forwardness, boldness, pertness. The young girl who acts in such a manner as to attract attention in public; who speaks loudly, and jokes and laughs and tells *stories* in order to be heard by others than her immediate companions, . . . who expresses opinions on all subjects with forward self-confidence, is rightly regarded by all thoughtful and cultivated people as one of the most disagreeable and obnoxious characters to be met with in society.

What are the characteristics of the agreeable and beautiful manners that are the ornament of charm of the well-behaved girl? First, we should place gentleness, quietness, and serenity or self-possession.

Self-control should extend to our speech, temper, and pleasures. To be able to control the tongue is rightly esteemed one of the greatest of moral achievements. . . . There is a dignity about silence under provocation that is impressive and effective.

We may without harm divert the mind for a little each day by light miscellaneous reading, but young people especially need to be warned against indiscriminate novel or story reading. . . . If you discover that your taste is more for the improbable, highly wrought pages of fiction . . . you should summon your self-control and compel yourself to a different sort of reading.

Of course, the main source of knowledge of the more important events that are going on in the world is the daily or weekly newspapers; and yet there is scarcely any reading so utterly demoralizing to good mental habits as the ordinary daily paper.

I should rejoice to see you form friendships with good, high-minded, intelligent, gentle-mannered girls of your own age.

I cannot imagine a really refined young lady chewing gum even in the privacy of her own room, so offensive is it to good taste.. . . She will not rush noisily up and down stairs or through the house . . . startling everyone with unpleasant noises.

Johnson, Claudia Durst. *Understanding To Kill a Mockingbird: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historic Documents*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1994. 144-55. Print.