

## Chatham Journal: 1988

by Gary Phillips

We had lost our beautiful house on the river to a bridge project, with its wooden floors and long porch over the water and the room Giles was born in, so we cut the house apart and carried it to an old farm in Silk Hope, where we began to slowly rebuild it.

In the meantime we lived in a two-room cabin with no indoor bathroom, the five of us, sleeping in a family bed and bathing the boys in a #3 washtub.

One of the first mornings deer came curiously to the edge of the natural courtyard. In the middle of Adam's 5th birthday party the locust trees around our little cabin exploded with flying squirrel babies being chased by a long blacksnake. It was better than fireworks, and he thought we planned it.

We didn't know how to manage construction and we didn't know our lead carpenter couldn't read or write, the notes we left him crumpled in his jeans like captive birds. The rains held us up and the money ran out, but we could still make the little cabin warm with our Chinese import wood stove and we slept the brave exhausted sleep of frontiersmen, all in a pile in the upper room.

The boys were content, sometimes intoxicated with joy at this life their parents worked every day to end.

### ▶▶▶ BRIEFS

#### Free Computer Classes at Chatham Community Library

Learn a new skill this spring! Chatham Community Library is offering a series of free computer classes in March and April. The names, dates and times of the classes are listed below. You can find a full description, including topics covered and prerequisites for attending, by visiting [www.chathamnc.org/computerclasses](http://www.chathamnc.org/computerclasses).

- **Drop-in Computer Assistance**  
Wednesday, March 14, 4–5 p.m.
- **Microsoft PowerPoint, Part 1**  
Wednesday, March 21, 3–4:30 p.m.
- **Microsoft PowerPoint, Part 2**  
Wednesday, March 28, 3–4:30 p.m.
- **NEW! Intro to Facebook**  
Wednesday, April 4, 3–4:30 p.m.
- **Drop-in Computer Assistance**  
Wednesday, April 11, 4–5 p.m.
- **Computer Basics, Part 1**  
Wednesday, April 16, 3–4:30 p.m.
- **Computer Basics, Part 2**  
Wednesday, April 23, 3–4:30 p.m.

The Drop-In Computer Assistance sessions (March 14 and April 11) do not require registration. For all other

classes, space is limited and you must register in advance at [www.chathamnc.org/computerclasses](http://www.chathamnc.org/computerclasses) if you wish to attend. For more information, call 919.545.8086 or email [reference@chathamlibraries.org](mailto:reference@chathamlibraries.org).

All classes take place in the computer lab at Chatham Community Library, 197 NC Hwy 87 N in Pittsboro, on the campus of Central Carolina Community College.

#### Nature Journaling for Kids

Friends of Lower Haw River State Natural Area is offering free Nature Journaling for Kids programs on March 25, April 8, and April 22 from 2:30 to 4 p.m. This is an opportunity for kids to put away their phones, escape from the internet and enjoy the renewing power of nature. We will walk in the woods, paying attention to the plants and critters. We will sit by the River and talk about what we see, hear and feel and about how these things fit into the lives of people. We will choose something to draw and talk about drawing as a way to pay close attention to an object. We do not need to be artists or even good at drawing to benefit from this experience. These Sunday afternoon programs are for kids age 7–11. Each child must be accompanied by a parent or guardian but a parent may bring more than one child. Pre-registration is required. Contact Nancy Strong [nbstrong@nc.rr.com](mailto:nbstrong@nc.rr.com) to sign up, or for more information. Visit [www.lowerhaw.org](http://www.lowerhaw.org) to learn more about Friends of Lower Haw.

## Trauma-Hardened by the 1923 Yokohama Earthquake

**Part II** Ruth Collier was more graphic than her father in detailing the family's predicament—the struggle with the 1923 earthquake. She admitted that she was “scared silly” when it hit. She was playing the piano, which left her abruptly and skidded to the far corner of their large living room. Foolishly, she dashed out the door and down their five front steps to find out what was happening. By that time, her mother had dropped her knitting to the living room floor and run to call her daughter back. Just as Ruth regained the threshold, part of their tile roof collapsed and fell on the steps she had left moments before.



She “missed being killed by a second”! Her brother had difficulty getting out of his back bedroom, and both he and Mrs. Collier were slightly injured. The three of them waited two and a half hours with no word from husband and father. Finally, acquaintances yelled that they must get away from fallen wires and advancing fires.

Japanese neighbors saw Mr. Collier arrive and ran to tell him that Mrs. Collier and his children had left for the Race Course and Golf Links, ordinarily a short walk away. He found them there among countless American and European refugees.

In her telling, Nipper adds a coda, humorous in retrospect, to the reunion scene. She remembers Mr. Collier catching sight of his family from the top of a hill and running down it toward her mother. She remembers his arriving and—“fainting dead away” from relief that his family was safe.

The Colliers remained there during the long afternoon, watching fire and smoke and hearing the exploding oil storage tanks. They knew the exact moment when Japan's largest arsenal/naval base was destroyed. Fortunately, the wind carried the smoke away from them until around five o'clock when the burning straw, paper, and embers began to rain a witches' stew that continued through the night. The Collier family and others found a spot in a neighbor's yard but could not sleep because of the vibrations, stifling smoke, and rumblings. They drank water from a well and fed the eight children among them with food foraged by the servants.

Around eight Sunday morning, a messenger brought word that all American and European refugees were to go to the waterfront to board the steamship Empress of Australia.

It had been scheduled to leave at noon on Saturday, but its propeller had been damaged by another steamship, the Steel Navigator, and it had been towed from the danger zone.

The group that included the Colliers left for the ship around noon on Sunday. The scene was wasteland, and they learned later of many friends and acquaintances who had perished and of families separated. Slabs and monuments in the Foreign Cemetery were thrown up to twelve feet from their settings. They passed through an area of looting and fighting. The word Chosen was spit from all sides as hundreds of Japanese men, armed with clubs and iron bars, searched for Koreans who had escaped from the collapsed prison a few miles from the area. Nipper remembers some Koreans shouting, “Give us money or your life!” Her family hid behind some thick shrubbery until they passed by.

At length at the waterfront, the Colliers threaded through thousands of Japanese refugees and were taken by launch to the steamship. After some twenty hours aboard, comforting the sick and dying as best they could, they were transferred, around nine A.M. on Monday, to the President Jefferson, which belonged to the American Shipping Board and had sailed from the Philippines to help. They left Yokohama's harbor at noon September 3 and arrived at Kobe the next day to disembark those without American passports. On the fifth, they returned to Yokohama, where, on September 8, they remained in the harbor for three hours. Though no one was allowed ashore, they watched workmen clearing debris and saw the grayish red rubble that had been Yokohama. With 158 refugees, in addition to her full complement of passengers, the President Jefferson steamed from Yokohama at noon, September 6, and arrived in Vancouver and Seattle on September 16. Jake Collier had radioed Goodrich headquarters that he and his family were safe, but the message had not been received; the entire family was listed among the many missing. The family boarded the train and reached their home, Akron, Ohio,

on September 21; they were met by relatives, friends, and well-wishing strangers.

Jack Collier and his family were tested again, in 1929, and were again not found wanting, though Ruth remembers the toll on her father's spirit. They were in Kitchener, Ontario, when that very different kind of collapse, equally traumatic, occurred. Jack and many of his fellow workers were let go by Goodrich. He ended his career working for United States Rubber in Detroit.

In 1973, George Stead was invited to speak at an all-Japanese dental meeting in Tokyo. Because this was the fiftieth anniversary of “her” earthquake, Nipper decided to go along, and they toured the country for some two weeks. The day before they were to return home, George was feted at a banquet in the Tokyo Hilton. A Japanese host expressed the hope, in his toast, that this first visit of the Steads to Japan would not be the last. In his response, George indicated that this was not his wife's first time in Japan and mentioned the circumstances. The next morning, when they returned to the hotel from a shopping trip, they heard, “Paging Mrs. Stead. Paging Mrs. Stead.” The Vice-President of Yokohama Rubber Company showed Nipper a list with six names, for no one knew her maiden name. “Mr. Jiles H. Collier” was at the top. With great bowing and ceremony, he presented her with flowers and announced, “Mr. Collier taught us how to make tires.” Nipper corresponded with the emissary every Christmas as long as she was able, but she never mentioned her father's lament during World War II, “Damn it! I taught them to make tires!”

In her new home in Wilmington, Nipper experienced six hurricanes and was evacuated three times. She shrugged them off; she was trauma-hardened by the Yokohama Earthquake of 1923.

*Dr. Lynn Veach Sadler, of Burlington's The Village at Brookwood, a former college president, is widely published in academics and creative writing and works as a writer and an editor. A version of this column was published in The Lone Wolf Review, 3.2 (2000).*

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## CHATHAM County Line

“where all voices are heard”

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Chatham County Line is a community newspaper serving all of Chatham County as well as the southern part of Orange. Our mission is to inform our community by providing a forum “where all voices are heard.” We seek all views and ideas about our community, and we report on important matters — including our cultural life — comprehensively and in-depth. Our commitment is to create the best-written, best-edited and most stylish community newspaper anywhere. Chatham County Line is published ten times a year.

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