

**Sandwiching in History  
Johnswood  
10314 Cantrell Rd., LR  
June 3, 2011  
By: Rachel Silva**



### **Intro**

Hi, my name is Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Welcome to the Sandwiching in History tour of Johnswood! I'd like to thank Judge Robert Brown and his wife, Charlotte, for allowing us to visit their beautiful home today. Johnswood was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1994 for its association with Arkansas writers John Gould Fletcher and his wife, Charlie May Simon, and because it was designed by architect Max Mayer.

### **Architecture**

In 1941 John Gould Fletcher and Charlie May Simon commissioned their close friend, Max Mayer, to design Johnswood. The house is predominantly Minimal Traditional in style with some Rustic and Colonial Revival characteristics. The Minimal Traditional style was typically used during that time period because money and construction materials were scarce during the Depression and throughout WWII. The original house consisted of the main side-gabled section of rough-cut sandstone, the screened porch, and the weatherboard section on the west end. The carport was added later, and when you walk through the house, you'll see a garden room and master bedroom addition built by the Browns.

### **Max Mayer**

Max Mayer was born in 1887 in San Antonio, TX, and graduated with a degree in architectural engineering from Texas A & M before studying in Europe. The time he spent in Paris and Rome gave him a profound knowledge and appreciation for the classical style of architecture. Throughout his career, Mayer remained a traditionalist, insisting that ornamentation was essential to a building's design. Mayer came to Arkansas in 1914 and worked for the well-known architectural firm of Mann and Stern until 1921. After establishing his own practice, Mayer became famous for his Period Revival designs in the Heights and Hillcrest neighborhoods. Described by his peers as a Bohemian and a very fine artist, Max Mayer was extremely dedicated to each project. He drew all of his plans himself, never employing an assistant or draftsman. He was also an accomplished violinist. [In the 1930s Mayer worked with Louise Loughborough to restore the houses that became the Arkansas Territorial Restoration, now Historic Arkansas Museum in LR. Mayer died in 1947.]

Mayer was a close friend to both Fletcher and Simon, and the three were part of a small intellectual circle in Little Rock in the 1940s, which also included famous artist Adrian Brewer. In her book *Johnswood*, Charlie May Simon described Max Mayer as both an artist and an architect, adding that "And because he was also a dear friend, I'm sure he took more pleasure watching our house go up than he did the expensive and pretentious ones for which he was paid a larger fee."

### **John Gould Fletcher**

John Gould Fletcher was born on January 3, 1886, in Little Rock. He was the son of Captain John G. Fletcher and Adolphine Krause Fletcher. After the Civil War, Captain Fletcher started a lucrative cotton brokerage firm and purchased the historic Pike-Fletcher-Terry House in 1889. [P-F-T House built by Albert Pike in 1840.] John Gould Fletcher had a very sheltered childhood. He was educated by tutors and was rarely allowed to leave the grounds of the mansion. He was often tormented by the sounds of other children playing nearby because he was not permitted to join them. Isolated as he was, Fletcher developed a very good imagination.

He lived in the Pike-Fletcher-Terry House until 1903 when he left the state to attend Phillips Andover Academy in Massachusetts. The following year, he entered Harvard University. But instead of pursuing law or business as his father hoped, John Gould took up the arts and began writing poetry. After receiving an estate settlement following his father's death, Fletcher left Harvard without a

degree in 1908 and moved to Europe where he lived for the majority of his adult life.

In Europe, John Gould began publishing poetry and was influenced by a group of poets known as the Imagists. Imagism was a strand of modernism that favored free verse and clear, sharp language as opposed to the flowery, abstract speech of Romanticism. Simple, commonplace objects were the subject matter of Imagist poetry. John Gould befriended Ezra Pound, the founder of Imagism, and Amy Lowell, one of the chief exponents of the movement to the United States. Both had a great influence on him as a poet, but he also wrote in a Romantic style that put him at odds with some of the modernists.

Throughout the 1920s Fletcher adopted a more avant-garde style that was intended to shake readers from their complacency and confront a grim society corrupted by the excesses of industrialism and politics.

John Gould had long suffered from bi-polar disorder and after a suicide attempt landed him in a hospital in late 1932, he left Europe and permanently took up residence in LR.

In 1933 Fletcher read an article called “Retreat to the Land” by Charlie May Simon, and he was determined to meet her. The two met in 1934 but did not marry until January 18, 1936, on the heels of Fletcher’s divorce from his first wife. John Gould continued to write poetry while living in Arkansas including the epic poem “The Story of Arkansas” written to commemorate the state’s centennial celebration in 1936. In 1939 he became the first Arkansan to win the Pulitzer Prize for his work *Selected Poems* (published in 1938), and he was also inducted into the National Institute of Arts and Letters. In 1946 Fletcher was honored with the designation as the first Poet Laureate of Arkansas. A year later, he authored a history of Arkansas, entitled *Arkansas*, which for many years was the most readable and accessible history of the state.

John Gould Fletcher published 10 volumes of poetry between 1915 and 1947. He also wrote works of prose, an autobiography, a history of Arkansas, and numerous other poems and essays.

Later in life, John Gould Fletcher suffered from arthritis, insomnia, and bi-polar disorder. His depression worsened and on May 10, 1950, he drowned himself in a shallow pond near Johnswood (the pond was located down the hill where I-430 is now; it is no longer there. I-430 was built from about 1969-1971). He is buried at

Mt. Holly Cemetery, and a branch of the Central AR Library System is named in his honor. Fletcher is considered one of Arkansas's most notable literary figures.

### **Charlie May Simon**

Charlie May Simon was born on August 17, 1897, near Monticello, AR, to Charles Wayman Hogue and Mary Gill Hogue. Her father published a book about his upbringing in 1932 called *Back Yonder, An Ozark Chronicle*, which was a successful book in its day. The Hogue family moved to Memphis when Charlie May was just 3 years old. She was educated in the Memphis public school system and took art lessons. She later attended the Memphis Normal School (now Memphis State University). Charlie May attempted to publish a novel but was discouraged when a publisher rejected her manuscript. So she focused on art.

She first married Walter Lowenstein but was widowed in her twenties. She wanted to immerse herself in the world of art, so she took the financial settlement from her first marriage and moved to Chicago and then to Paris. In 1926 she married Howard Simon, an artist who became the illustrator of her books. Thus she became Charlie May Simon, the professional name she used for the rest of her life.

About 1931 Charlie May and Howard moved to Arkansas and built a cabin on a remote ridge in Perry County. Simon returned to writing during the cabin years, and it was during this time that she authored her classic children's book, *Robin on the Mountain*. Charlie May and Howard Simon divorced in 1935, but he continued to illustrate her books.

Charlie May Simon married John Gould Fletcher in 1936. Although they were from vastly different backgrounds, the two writers appreciated each other's work and enjoyed swapping stories about their younger years.

After John Gould Fletcher's suicide, Charlie May remained at Johnswood. She traveled extensively and continued writing. In all, her literary career spanned more than 40 years and produced 29 published works, including 2 autobiographical novels, an adult novel, 8 biographies, and the numerous children's books for which she was best known. In 1971 the Arkansas Dept. of Education named Arkansas's Children's Literature Award in her honor. Simon died on March 21, 1977, and is buried in Mt. Holly Cemetery. She lived at Johnswood until her death.

### ***Johnswood***

In 1953 Charlie May Simon published an autobiographical work called *Johnswood* reflecting on the time she and John Gould Fletcher lived in this house. The book conveys the deep sense of understanding that existed between Simon and Fletcher and their intense love for each other. It also tells about the heartbreak and sadness she felt living in the house without Fletcher. But in the end, Simon learns to embrace her memories of the past and decides to stay in the house, where she remained until her death in 1977.

But the book also contains very interesting descriptions of the house itself, this part of town during the 1940s, and of the writers themselves.

Hwy. 10 (or Cantrell) was a narrow, winding road, and Johnswood was about 8 miles from downtown, which meant it was out in the country. Fletcher and Simon enjoyed their house in the thick pine forest because it separated them from the hustle and bustle of city life. In 1941 their closest neighbor lived in a small cabin on the south side of Hwy. 10. And about a mile down the hill toward the Arkansas River, other people lived in unpainted shacks along the railroad right-of-way. Charlie May loved these cabins and shacks and the people who lived in them. She herself was born in a one-room cabin and had a humble upbringing. On the other hand, John Gould was born into wealth and lived in the largest house in town. So he took a keen interest in these people and their stories, songs, and way of life.

Simon and Fletcher believed that writing was an individual pursuit. So after eating breakfast together, they would retire to their studies (on opposite ends of the house), and write for several hours. In the afternoon and evening, Charlie May worked in her garden or the two of them went on a picnic or took a walk. They both loved to walk the grounds and point out flowers, birds, and other wildlife. The Fletchers had two pets while they lived at Johnswood, the Airedale Sister Sue and a Persian cat, Missy.

Simon wanted to cut some trees down so they could see the river, but Fletcher hated the idea. He could not stand to see trees cut down, saying that certain ones deserved to be “spared.” But they did it anyway.

Fletcher insisted on the house being aligned on a N-S axis and even visited the construction site with a compass in hand. And he always slept facing south (head to N and feet to S). He was very superstitious or maybe saw a lot of omens in different actions...

They had a servant named Thelma for awhile. During WWII, the Fletchers often invited soldiers from Camp Robinson into their home to talk about poetry or other intellectual topics.

Fletcher was associated with the Southern Agrarian movement, which advocated the South's return to an agricultural economy and resisted industrialization. This went hand in hand with Fletcher's disdain for mechanization. He often spoke about the dangers of mechanization because it made society move too fast, and people forgot how to think for themselves. They also began to undervalue essential elements of our heritage and culture like traditional stories, music, art, etc. Fletcher was very interested in Arkansas folkways.

**Turn over to Bob Brown—tell about how they acquired the property and his play called “An Evening at Johnswood”**

### **Interior Details:**

The Browns added the master bedroom and connecting garden room about 1977.

The walls were originally white with unpainted pine trim.

Browns cut the doors in half to make several sets of little French doors because they are in such tight spaces.

Several rooms of the house were originally lined with bookshelves. Fletcher and Simon owned over 8,000 books.

Fletcher's study was on the east end of the house, while Simon's study was on the west end.

They called the screened porch the “gallery” because that was the term used in their childhood.

Bob says that John Gould haunts the house.

The front east room was the bedroom.