



Picked up from the ashes of the 1972 fire that destroyed the Middelbrook house, this little watercolor sketch might be Marguerite Middlebrook's portrait of her sister Cecilia.

Summary:

The Middlebrook Sisters and their "Haunted House"

Jim Barnes September 2002 – alterations 1st January 2011; minor revisions and pictures added-- 7th May 2017

The House

The two-story farmhouse of Dr. John H. and Mary Armstrong Stevens, built soon after they bought their land in 1871, is the oldest known exact building site in the western half of the William Myers Section. The Stevens farmhouse was, my research concludes, located at modern *Middlebrook Place*, though the evidence for this is entirely indirect and the records contain irreconcilable contradictions.

Suffice it to say here that Dr. John H. and Mary A. Stevens arrived in Dallas in the summer of 1870; and in October of the following year they bought 120 acres in the northwest quarter of the William Myers Survey where they ordered a two-story house to be built. In her new home, Mary Stevens successfully bore two children: Walter Armstrong Stevens in 1874 and Annie Lucille Stevens in 1875. And in this house Dr. John Horace Stevens died from a sudden heart attack on Thanksgiving Day of 1881.

Annie and Walter grew up in the house. They must have loved to play along the Coombes Creek and to visit the Reverchons' botanical garden located upstream, as well as their grandfather's home downstream. But their widowed mother eventually decided to remarry; and so in 1888 she sold a three acre parcel, including the house, to John T. (J.T.) Duncan and his wife Mattie, neighbors who already owned land north of the modern *Remond Avenue*. Duncan was a farmer and raised livestock. After living there for twenty-one years, the Duncans sold the house to Dr. Edwin Middlebrook in 1910. Then, for its final sixty-two years, the house was occupied by the Middlebrook family, especially our central topic, the two Middlebrook daughters, Cecilia and Marguerite.

Oddly, evidence suggests that the Middlebrooks never knew the Stevens on a direct personal basis, despite the fact that the Stevens' farmland surrounded them on three sides. In the 1960's, Cecilia told a neighbor that J.T. Duncan had built their house. By the end of the Second Millennium no one remembered exactly where the Stevens' farmhouse might have been. Both Ralph Churchill, the attorney for the last surviving member of the Stevens family, Eleanor Stevens Chadwick, and Judge Fite, 4th generation Oak Cliff resident and real estate salesman, each told me that they did not believe that the Middlebrook Sisters house had been the Steven's farmhouse. The location of the Stevens' farmhouse had been forgotten.

The J.T. Duncan Family

Originally born in North Carolina, John T. Duncan was a citizen of Mississippi during the Civil War, in which his family suffered greatly. He and his brother, Joseph S. Duncan, moved to Dallas County during the 1870's. A delightful picture of Duncan is published in a *Dallas Herald* newspaper account of an 1875 Christmas party held in a small country schoolhouse where J.T. Duncan played music as a member of a string band. In 1888 Duncan bought Widow Stevens' farmhouse and its three acre site.

In the 1892 *Memorial and Biographical History of Dallas County*, Duncan's house is explicitly described, but J.T. Duncan, not the Stevens, is credited with having built it. (I take this as an error.)

Dallas City Directories indicate that by 1900, Joseph S. Duncan had moved away from the Grapevine area to live near his brother. By then, J.T. Duncan's son, John Asbury Duncan, lived just to the north of *Fort Worth Avenue* and was employed in the new telephone industry. Joseph died in 1906 and was buried in the Western Heights Cemetery.

J.T. Duncan's wife Mattie Duncan (Martha A. Terry Duncan) died in Mineral Wells in 1915. Walter A. Stevens was an honorary pallbearer at her funeral service. She was buried in Oak Cliff Cemetery. In 1916, J.T. Duncan served as an honorary pallbearer at the funeral of Mary Armstrong Stevens (remarried as Mrs. Charles B. Stephenson). They had known each other for over forty years. As late as the 1920 federal *Census*, and the 1920 *City Directory*, J.T. Duncan remained in the neighborhood, living again just to the north of *Fort Worth Avenue*. He was then age 75, remarried to a woman aged 57 and they moved to Mineral Wells.. No record of J.T. Duncan's death was found.

The Middlebrooks

Much remains unknown about the Middlebrooks; but I will now tell their tale as best I can. Dr. D. Edwin Middlebrook, a medical physician, was born in Minnesota in about 1859. His parents were both from Connecticut. Edwin's wife, Julia Frances Callahan, was born in Chillicothe, Illinois, on the 10th of November 1861. (The 1920 *Census* has a different year for her birth: 1859.) Her parents were Irish immigrants. Her father, Thomas Callahan, had been born in Cork, Ireland; her mother, Celia Hood, in Dunmore, Ireland. Edwin and Julia married in about 1887. In Kansas City, Missouri their three children were born. Their first child, Cecilia A. Middlebrook, was born on September 29, 1888; their only son, C. Edwin Middlebrook, was born four years later; a second daughter, Marguerite Louise V. Middlebrook, on April 15th of 1895. Cecilia started public school in Kansas City at age 6 in 1894; but the next year she was enrolled as a student in the public school at Princeville, Illinois, near her mother's birthplace. Apparently the family had moved back to Illinois, close to mother Julia's hometown.

In 1902, Cecilia Middlebrook, then fourteen years old, entered a Roman Catholic convent, *Villa de Chantal*, located far upstate in Rock Island, Illinois. We don't know if Cecilia had planned to prepare for a religious life as a nun, or whether this was purely an educational move; but her stay was short. She left the convent after that first year.

The 1910 *Census* listed Dr. Edwin Middlebrook, age fifty-one, as living alone, a "retired physician" in the far West Texas city of Pecos. Later that year he bought J.T. Duncan's farmhouse and relocated his wife and three children to Dallas. Soon he bought two other Dallas city lots and a 51 acre tract in the Trinity River floodplain east of Wilmer (Dallas County). There was another farm in Ada, Oklahoma. Then, in 1913, Dr. Middlebrook sold one of the vacant city lots. This may be an indication that finances had already started to slip downhill. At any rate, by the spring of 1916 Dr. Middlebrook, realizing that he had a terminal medical condition, relocated himself back to Fort Worth where he died on May 3rd. A downtown Dallas funeral service was held for him at Loudermilk Chapel; the Chapel's hired chaplain presiding. Edwin Middlebrook's body was buried in Oakland Cemetery, without any tombstone.

At first I imagined that Dr. Middlebrook must have been somehow estranged from his wife and children. Perhaps he had been a philanderer who deserted his family to live out his dream of the Wild West. Then it dawned on me that Dr. Middlebrook must have been a sick man, likely with an incurable case of tuberculosis, a common disease of the early 20th century. He could have contracted it through his

medical practice, known that he had become infectious to others so wished to risk neither his family nor his patients to unnecessary exposure, and tried to rid himself of this sometimes-curable killer in the dry desert air of Pecos. My own physician, Dr. Gustafson, a professor at Southwestern Medical School, agreed. He further suggested a less likely alternative would have been that Dr. Middlebrook had some sort of cancer for which he would have lacked the modern tools necessary to diagnose his own malady.

Dr. Edwin Middlebrook's death at age 57 was a financial disaster from which his wife and daughters never recovered.

The Middlebrook Sisters

In 1918 son Eddie Middlebrook was living in Crested Butte, Colorado, apparently working some sort of "investment" deal (his aunt in Chillicothe died owning Colorado mining stocks). He was twenty-five years old. The "Colorado investment" failed. Two years later, the 1920 *Census* listed him living back in Dallas with his mother and sister Marguerite. Marguerite's letters in 1920 tell of him having some sort of mysterious "*girl trouble*" and of him leaving home shortly thereafter. Eddie married and had one child, daughter Edwinna. He organized a successful retail store in Kilgore, Texas. He divorced and married a second time.

For Dallas females of 1916, the economic marketplace held little significant opportunity. Mother Julia Middlebrook seems to have never worked outside of home. Her daughters had little systematic formal education. Marguerite was listed in the *City Directory* as an "artist" but there is no indication that she ever sold any artwork. She wrote about taking general academic classes. There is a badly damaged receipt for instruction at some unidentifiable "College..." in Dallas. But throughout her life, Marguerite never seems to have had any paying job.

Sister Cecilia wrote that she stayed at home during her early years in Dallas, studying "the botany of Texas". In the 1960's, Cecilia told neighbors that as a youth, she had been trained to play the piano. But with the family savings rapidly dwindling, in 1918, two years after her father's death, Cecilia enrolled in the Buford-Reed Business Training College. In November of that same year, she traveled to Washington D.C. where she immediately obtained a job with the War Department. We have a copy of her application, written in her own hand.

For the next five and half years Cecilia lived in a women's dormitory and worked for the War Department, the Quartermaster Corps of the Army/ Real Estate Service/ Division of Purchase, Storage, & Traffic (Appropriations for Storage & Shipping Facilities). She was a Clerk in the office of the Chief of Staff, praised in employee reports for her proficiency in "digesting correspondence". Besides her new clerical career, we know that Cecilia also took classroom courses at George Washington University. Furthermore, in the 1960's Cecilia reported that she had worked at the Library of Congress. But there is no employment record at the Library; perhaps it was academic or personal research work. Cecilia must have been a voracious reader.

We are fortunate to have preserved five letters written between the Middlebrook sisters during the years 1919-1920, when Cecilia lived in Washington D.C. They reveal the sisters' sophisticated artistic aspirations and high-minded aesthetic ideals, shining through the gathering clouds of a financial doom that they themselves could not foresee.

Marguerite's preoccupation with oil painting is the central topic of the letters. Cecilia supports her sister with flattery and small criticisms, sends books about technique, and discusses art theory. Back in Dallas, Marguerite is apparently a student of John Breckinridge (J.B.) Martin, a self-taught Oak Cliff artist and sometime assistant to famed Dallas painter Frank Reaugh. In her letters Marguerite talks about visits with "Ed", apparently Edward Eisenlohr, one of Dallas' greatest painters. She writes about a visit

to the legendary Frank Reaugh, then age 60. Viewing one of her paintings, Reaugh and J.B. Martin praise her by calling her "Little Hale", a reference to the highly acclaimed Dallas painter, Hale Bolton, who had recently died at age 30. She was a member of the Art Department at the Dallas Women's Forum, a group of women who meet monthly and who painted together. She was Secretary of that subgroup. Marguerite exhibited at the State Fair. She painted landscapes in oil, which she wittily calls "*ile*".

Marguerite's theoretical approach to art was evolving. She readily agreed with visiting Russian artist, Peter Plotkin, that the "Old Masters" had dull colors and trite sentimentalities, not as attractive or honest as the newer landscapes with their brighter hues. She held herself and other artists as superior to ordinary people who did "*not observe the beauties one could see if they looked at nature for the sights we artists do*". The letters give tiny glimpses of the Middlebrook house. There was "the Red Room" and several rooms opening "en suite". Marguerite painted the kitchen tan with shiny black enamel trim, using some black automobile paint that her brother had left behind. She wrote about photographing a winter ice storm where the West Wind made the big trees along Coombes Creek, "*the gigantic monarchs*", groan under their icy loads.

The letters hint at the economic trouble that their father's death had left. There is talk about selling "the farm". "*It seems we can get along a while longer. Anyway, until things are settled in a 'lasting quarter' are we sure it will not be wasted, as the Colo. Investment was*". Cecilia sends money. Marguerite promises to pay her back.

Marguerite developed a crush on a young man. Her cruel mother would try to stop her, but she would be married to her new lover, she wrote. Love would triumph! But there is never any indication that her targeted lover had any interest in her at all. The way Marguerite describes it convinces me that she is not a typical 23 year old female. Jane McDaniel, who lived directly across the street from the Middlebrook sisters for thirty years, believed that Marguerite was mentally deficit. Cecilia told her, Jane recalled, that if they sold their house on *Plymouth Road*, she would have to have Marguerite "committed".

In 1923 the Middlebrook family sold the last of their city lots in Oak Cliff Annex for \$1,850. Cecilia was then earning \$1,400 per year working as a clerk.

In September of 1924, Cecilia got into a salary dispute with her War Department employers and resigned. Jane McDaniel recalls that Cecilia told her that Marguerite had telephoned Washington and wanted Cecilia to return home because their mother needed more care than Marguerite could give. Their mother had become a reclusive drug addict (according to Jane). Her death certificate states that she had been senile for ten years prior to her death. At any rate, in 1925, the *Dallas City Directory* showed Cecilia back living on *Plymouth Road* in Dallas. She had been in Washington, D.C. for five years.

The Stevens Park Estates neighborhood was starting to be developed by Annie and Walter Stevens. In 1923, they had donated land for the foundation of the City owned golf course, which opened in May of 1924. The new residential subdivision was platted in 1926, and the small sales office building was located right beside the Middlebrook house, on the northeast corner of *Colorado* and *Plymouth Road*, where the church now stands. An undated newspaper clipping, apparently announcing the gift of the golf course property to the City, shows the Stevens family home, cited as still standing in a "good state of preservation" on "the adjoining tract" to the new course.

I have no information about the Middlebrooks from 1925 to 1941. Marguerite was gone from the roster of the Dallas Woman's Forum in 1925. The Great Depression had arrived in North Texas, before the national economic collapse on Wall Street in October of 1929. We simply don't know how the Middlebrooks survived. Perhaps there was money coming from brother Eddie. There is one report that

rooms in the house had been rented out to employees at the new cement factories on the escarpment to the northwest. Economic conditions of the Middlebrooks must have been bleak in the 1930's. By 1957, when I moved to *Marydale* at age six, the Middlebrook house was already a shambles, not a flake of paint left on it, beams of daylight visible through the tattered shingle roof. Maintenance had been disregarded for decades.

The Great Depression and the death of art benefactor Mrs. Aunspaugh, killed off the annual Dallas Woman's Forum exhibitions of local artists. Regardless of what level of talent Marguerite displayed, a city like Dallas would not have been prone to accept a woman artist in the 1920's. Male artists like Frank Reaugh and Edward Eisenlohr survived by living off of small incomes earned by teaching, or by means of substantial family inheritances. Marguerite had neither. We don't know exactly when she accepted harsher reality, stopped spending precious money on paints, and quit dreaming the artist's dream. And we can't see whether her unique and singular madness instilled in her work some spark of greatness because not a single one of Marguerite's paintings is known to survive.

Circumstance forced the Middlebrook sisters to turn their lives into their artwork. It is my view that for them, aesthetic appreciation supplanted the tenants of traditional religions; and that their spirits, though surrounded by deteriorating circumstances, remained buttressed in the calm certainty of the natural beauty that they were able to see in everything surrounding them. That primitive calm would have been necessary. They were no longer "normal"; they did not "fit in".

Neither sister ever married: neither had children.

In the summer of 1969, as men first stepped onto the surface of the Moon, the Middlebrook sisters lived alone on their three acres of untamed wildness; without electric lights, natural gas, modern sanitary plumbing or sewer, telephone, television, radio, modern heating, air conditioning, or automobiles. And they each died without the assistance of modern Medicine.

In the early 1940's, former County Commissioner Vernon Singleton employed Charles Stevens Dilbeck to build him a new home across from the Middlebrook mansion. The Singletons were good neighbors and over the next thirty years the Middlebrook sisters leaned on them. For example, each year the Singletons prepared Thanksgiving dinner for the Middlebrook family and walked it across the street. The sisters waited, decked out in black Victorian dresses with white powdered faces. They looked like *geisha*, neighbor Margaret Guy recalled.

Jane McDaniel, Vernon Singleton's only child, provided much of this book's information about the unique family living next door. She never saw the mother. Julia Frances Callahan Middlebrook died in her home on September 23rd, 1943, age 81. Her death certificate cites "senility" as an accompanying factor to the "heart occlusion" which ended her life.

Vernon Singleton, Jane McDaniel's father, himself died suddenly from heart failure in 1956. Shortly thereafter, trouble started at the Middlebrook house. Teenagers started showing up to pester the "two old witches" and their "haunted house".

The Haunted House

Most people accepted the Middlebrooks as reclusive sisters living on meager means, who preferred to be left alone. But for some teenagers and a few adults the house fulfilled their fantasy expectations of what a "haunted house" ought to look like, complete with barking black dog, wildly overgrown crumbling Victorian splendor, and two little hunchbacked women. Everything looked like the storybook witches in their haunted house. So, the visitors came. Teenage boys brought their girlfriends, who clung closer at the sight of the miserable house. They drank beer. The street in front of the house would be littered with beer cans and broken bottles. Later drug-abuser heightened the

entertainment. Bravely intoxicated, teenagers assaulted the ladies; yelled at them, spit on them, hit them with rocks or sticks. As the Middlebrook sisters wailed, vandals smashed their irreplaceable glass windows. They even drove a car up onto the property one night and repeatedly rammed the house. Nights were filled with the sounds of automobile horns, loud drunken hoots and laughter. As a boy I would lie in bed and hear strings of firecrackers exploding far at the other end of the block.

The neglected run-down house wasn't really all that unusual during the 1950's. The Great Depression had left several other homes with overgrown yards and unpainted rotting exteriors. One in particular I recall was on the southeast corner of *Center* and *Tyler*. But the Middlebrook house was really big. It was the weirdest. It was the best. It earned a widespread reputation and became a regional target. The sisters were legendary, no longer human.

Jane McDaniel lived across the street in a home behind her mother's that she built for herself in the 1960s. Jane was the Middlebrook sister's closest neighbor and strongest ally. She bandaged the wounded Middlebrook sisters, who were often bruised, cut and bloody. When the sisters were attacked they would scream to Jane for help. Jane telephoned the police. As many as 75-80 assailants were arrested during a typical weekend of debauchery at the "haunted house". "*You call, and I'll haul*", Scotty the policeman cheerfully told Jane. Halloween became so violent and dangerous that the Dallas Fire Department sent guards. The sisters would give candy to children who came "trick or treating" while firemen stood alongside.

No one can remember the sisters ever doing anything unkind, or provocative. Though the police suggested it, the sisters refused to buy a gun to defend themselves. Jane bought a shotgun, but was upset when she used it, nearly killing an intruder. The sisters tried to greet visitors of all ages. Several children in the neighborhood from that era can remember visiting the Middlebrooks. Cecilia was well educated and friendly, a fascinating conversationalist. Marguerite was shy and reclusive. I didn't ever talk to them, my parents told me to leave them alone; but I remember them out on *Plymouth* setting up their mailbox in the morning as I walked to school. Vandals stole the mailbox if they didn't take it inside at night. I remember small old ladies, old fashion full-length dresses and bonnets.

For the most part, neighbors tried to remain uninvolved. But one group wanted to sign a petition urging the City to condemn the house for Building Code violations. Jane angrily told them that she would counter their petition with one of her own and that if they wanted to improve the appearance of the house then they should go buy paint and paint it for the sisters. No action was ever taken.

The stories about the house were absurd. There was a report that they had no electricity because lightning had killed their mother, but most of the tales were less realistic. There was supposedly a lion that lived upstairs. The sisters rode broomsticks. At least one arrested youth told the judge he had been trespassing because he believed that the sisters really were witches. There was a widespread belief that since the sisters didn't spend money on repairs, that they must be wealthy, too stingy to spend their hoarded money.

The Sisters were gracious to Jane. One time, they showed up at Jane's new house with a new serving cart. Cecilia revealed that she had a telescope, and from across the street had been watching through Jane's large windows as she had carried food to her guests. So Cecilia bought her the cart. When Jane's new baby son arrived, Cecilia bought sterling silver diaper pins from Linz Jewelers. Another time, Cecilia had nothing but she wanted to give Jane a gift, so she gave her bulbs of her prize white irises. Jane was the closest neighbor and ally of the Middlebrook sisters.

The attacks of the hecklers required that the sisters stay awake at night. They slept during the day and patrolled the property by night, uncertain when attack would strike. No one ever went inside the house except the sisters. When their brother Eddie died in 1954, he requested that his wife, Ruth, look

after his sisters in Dallas. Ruth Middlebrook gave them \$1,000 each month. When she drove from Kilgore to visit, Cecilia would stand at her car window and talk; but never invited Ruth to come inside. Jane, their protective neighbor, was likewise never invited in. Few visitors ever entered. Glimpses through the front door revealed an interior stacked full of books, newspapers, antique furniture and other collected memorabilia. The sisters stopped going upstairs, due to the rotting structure. They slept in chairs, or on the floor, in front of the fireplaces. They burned wood, or coal. They used candles or kerosene lamps. Their broken windows were boarded shut and newspapers and rags were stuffed into the holes to keep out as much cold wind as possible. Using antique implements the aging Middlebrook sisters were left to manage their daily lives and defend themselves against nightly attack.

Marguerite died of natural causes. She went shopping one day, and she fell. (One sister shopped alone, so the other could stay to protect the house from vandals.) Jane's version is that she fell at the store and was given a ride home. Her death certificate says that Marguerite fell in the street in front of her home. At any rate, she lay down in front of the fireplace and she died. She was 72. She lay there dead for several days and neighbors noticed that Marguerite had disappeared. The police were called, but when they came to look for Marguerite, Cecilia demanded a Search Warrant. The County Medical Examiner returned. They attendants who picked up the body had never seen conditions so deplorable, they reported to Jane. Marguerite's date of death was recorded as the 11th of April 1970. Jane went with Cecilia to arrange Marguerite's cremation at Restland Cemetery. Cecilia lived for another year and a half.

In the early morning hours of January 25th, 1972, a jet airliner radioed the control tower at Love Field that the pilot was observing a large fire near the Stevens Park Golf Course. Jane had been out of town, returned home late, and was sleeping too soundly to notice. By the time the Fire Department arrived the Middlebrook house was an inferno. The heat was so intense that the exterior of the house across the street at 1800 Marydale was scorched. They searched for Cecilia in the woods, but firemen found her body in the ruins. Jimmy Lindsey, a neighborhood youth who had recently befriended Cecilia, clung to Jane and together they wept. The destruction was complete.

Jane told investigators that there were thousands of suspects who had been arrested at the house already; so she believed no arsonist would be caught. None were. Jane reports that an investigator told her that gasoline had been poured completely around the house and ignited; yet the official report stated that it found no reason to suspect arson as a cause of the fire. An autopsy didn't reveal any sign of "foul play"; Cecilia had died of burns. W.L. Pardue, who lived at 1800 Marydale was told that the fire probably started in a chimney, presumably in layers of flammable soot caked from decades of use without maintenance.

The site was covered with charred books and papers. Jane picked up a few letters and other interesting tidbits. Cecilia, like her father, her mother, and her sister, had no Will or Last Testament. Despite worry that others coveted their real estate the Middlebrook family had never probated the estate of their father, Dr. Edwin Middlebrook, who had died in 1916. Ruth Middlebrook, Eddie's second wife from Kilgore, volunteered to administer Cecilia's estate. The fantasy of the 'haunted house' lived on. Treasure hunters came to the charred site with shovels to look for the buried treasures that the sisters must have hidden on their property. Jane angrily drove them away. A sad, lonely fireman asked for Jane's okay to take a few of the many antique books littering the landscape. Pressed by the City to act quickly, Ruth hired a professional trash removal firm to scrape up the rest of the mess and haul it away. Eddie's only child, the daughter from his first marriage, Edwinna Morgan, then living on Central Park West in New York City, inherited everything; the 3 acre site of the haunted house, the bank account into

which Ruth had been depositing checks, the farm east of Wilmer, and the farm in Ada. The sisters had successfully hoarded their land for over fifty years. Ruth sold the land, and gave Jane a small "finder's fee" as tribute for her help.

Like her mother and sister before her, Cecilia's body was cremated at Restland Cemetery. Every body was burned to ashes; every thing was gone, up in smoke.



Photograph of one of the Middlebrook Sisters, thought to have been taken about 1970.



—Dallas News Staff Photo by Lee Langum.

Jimmy Lindsey checks the burned remains of the Middlebrook house.

Picture from The Dallas Morning News, 27th January 1972.