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# From White City to Green Acres: Bertha Palmer and the Gendering of Space in the Gilded Age

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From White City to Green Acres:  
Bertha Palmer and the Gendering of Space in the Gilded Age

by

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of the requirements for the degree of  
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## **Abstract**

Throughout an adult life that witnessed drastic cultural upheaval between the Civil War and World War I, Bertha Honoré Palmer (1849-1918) was continually called on to deploy her Victorian values in response to modern events. Being a woman only complicated this negotiation. But being a child of the American frontier granted her a latitude and mobility that were rare for women of her class and era – allowing her to challenge gender boundaries and occupy more than one cultural space at a time. Most of what has been written about Bertha Palmer’s life has been exceptionalist in approach and tone, ascribing her outsized social and political successes to her physical beauty and perfection of temperament. I believe Bertha Palmer’s importance as a crucial transitional bridge between True Woman and New Woman has been underestimated in this discourse. Near the end of her life, a move to Florida offered her the potential to resolve the inside/outside, domestic/public, feminine/masculine dialectics that lay at the heart of her restless movements. These contradictions and dichotomies that Bertha Palmer embodied on a grand scale do more to make her knowable to us today than the record of her words and actions can accomplish. Both her Victorian reticence and her modernistic construction of a seamless public façade have a way of hindering our best efforts to understand her motivations – especially the choice to move to Florida – despite a wealth of biographical material, including her correspondence housed in Chicago and Sarasota history centers, and contemporary news accounts. In the end, the cultural history of the Gilded Age gives us the only reliable lens for penetrating the veneer of Bertha Palmer.

## **Introduction: A new true womanhood**

In October 1893, the wife of a prosperous Chicago merchant stood in the cavernous morning room of her castlelike home on Lake Shore Drive, wearing a tiara and wielding a silver gavel, to pose for a full-length portrait by the Swedish painter Anders Zorn, in town for the World's Columbian Exposition, known popularly as the "White City."

For today's visitors to the Art Institute of Chicago, where the painting now hangs, the impression *Mrs. Potter Palmer* invokes is perplexing – neither Victorian nor modern. Most casual viewers identify the portrait's subject as a princess or a queen. They note the white dress and tiara, but do not perceive the gavel; if they see it, they describe it as a scepter or a wand.<sup>1</sup> Those unfamiliar with the story of Bertha Palmer tend to see beauty and magic; those who know of her historical role can find evidence of wealth and power.

The matriarch of a family known for the Palmer Hotel in Chicago, she was among a very select elite of American women in the Gilded Age who managed to transform their communities prominently and permanently, despite a cult of domesticity that largely confined females to matters of the home in an era of rapid industrialization, professionalism and elevation of the middle class. Hers may not be a nationally recognized name, but in three specific spheres – Chicago history; Sarasota, Florida, history; Impressionist art history in America – her achievements are amply acknowledged.

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<sup>1</sup> Long, Timothy A., *Bertha Honoré Palmer*, an exhibition catalogue. Chicago: Chicago Historical Society, 2009, 27. Long describes "a regal portrait in which Palmer wears a tiara and carries a scepter."

The Zorn portrait, part of the Palmer family's extensive gift to the Art Institute of Romantic, Barbizon and Impressionist paintings, does not rise to the aesthetic level of most of that collection. But its ambiguity is arresting, even troubling. Some of its elements are conventional for a turn-of-the-century society portrait: the domestic interior, the white dress, the muted palette. Others are decidedly unconventional: the distance of the standing figure and the inaccessibility of her gaze; the lack of detail as to domestic furnishings or jewels or dress; and the unusual division of the background into geometrical segments of dark and light.

With her diaphanous dress and her body's suspension in the center of an elongated canvas, the Bertha Palmer we see here is quite literally a floating signifier – of wealth and femininity, certainly, but also of power and mobility. The arrangement of her figure and features into something that corresponded to an 1893 ideal of European-American loveliness personified by “the Gibson Girl” seems deliberate. And that sexual appeal was to persist for some time in an America where white racial privileging prevailed: In 1965, a reproduction of this painting was used to illustrate a *Chicago Tribune* feature entitled “Beauty as the Men See It.” The caption read:

Mrs. Palmer was painted in the gown and jewels she wore when she officially opened the Columbian exposition here in 1893. Fashions of make-up, coiffure, and dress have changed many times since then, but the beauty of the former manager of the institute's women's board is as modern as that of any woman of today.<sup>2</sup>

Such uncritical acceptance echoes the painting's initial reception when it was displayed in the Woman's Building for the closing days of the fair, and the enthusiastic response to later showings at the 1894 Salon in Paris and in New York. I believe this is because beauty predominates on the canvas, while the suggestions of power or even hubris – the silver gavel in her right hand, the starkness and isolation of the standing figure that were more expressive of

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<sup>2</sup> “Beauty as the Men See It,” *Chicago Tribune*, Sept. 12, 1965, K5.

political or royal privilege than of a wealthy matron at home – seem to have been successfully subverted. The portrait remains an emblem of Bertha Palmer’s intriguing ability to be several things at once.

Throughout an adult life that witnessed drastic cultural upheaval between the Civil War and World War I, Bertha Honoré Palmer (1849-1918) was continually called on to deploy her Victorian values in response to modern events. Being a woman only complicated this negotiation. But being a child of the American frontier granted her a latitude and mobility that were rare for women of her class and era – allowing her to challenge gender boundaries and occupy more than one cultural space at a time.

Most of what has been written about Bertha Palmer’s life and works – even to the present day – echoes that 1965 review of her portrait. It has been exceptionalist in approach and tone, ascribing her outsized social and political successes to her physical beauty and perfection of temperament. Perhaps this is because many of the most complete assessments were made in the decades just after her death, in the reactionary period between the rise and fall of the New Woman and the emergence of second-wave feminism in the 1960s. The result was a series of flowery cardboard portraits bordering on hagiography, nurtured by Palmer’s protective descendants and not of particular interest to academic historians except in the fields of art and fashion.

Since the publication of a popular and detailed 1960 biography using primary sources, she has largely been known to cultural historians as a conspicuous consumer and philanthropist whose pivotal cultural impact on the 1893 Chicago world’s fair was diminished by a fixed perception that she failed to see the point of women’s suffrage.

I believe Bertha Palmer's importance as a crucial transitional bridge between True Woman and New Woman has been underestimated in this discourse. During her lifetime, her keen involvement in Progressive politics always seems to have been packaged in the outer trappings of True Womanhood – as in 1907, when she entertained a meeting between the National Civic Federation and Chicago trade unions in “her stately and luxurious home.”<sup>3</sup>

News coverage in her time described Bertha Palmer's clothing, her house, her travels and parties and art collection in great detail, while giving her husband – who cared less for public life than she did – credit for their achievements outside the domestic and social spheres. Despite many attempts to penetrate more deeply the masculine realm of civic engagement in Chicago, she was limited to leveraging political power from her roles as a tastemaker and hostess.

And after her death in 1918, the cultural consensus seemed to relegate her to a domestic interior, and restrict her performativity to that of a lovely and gracious socialite. In 1922, the Chicago Herald and Examiner published a series of remembrances by Mrs. Carter H. Harrison Jr., wife of the city's mayor, who professed to know Bertha Palmer more intimately than she really did, and made much of her late friend's possession of “the smallest waist in Chicago:”

Her hair was heavy and lustrous; and possessed the natural wave so dear to the feminine heart. Her white throat and shoulders were models of grace and her slender figure made her a joy to look upon. ... Mrs. Palmer was really a radiant being. I believe that no one who ever saw her will dispute this assertion. She was the embodiment of feminine loveliness.<sup>4</sup>

In 1921, her only niece described her accomplishments as president of the Board of Lady Managers of the World's Colombian Exposition in terms of Bertha Palmer's ultrafeminine, and non-threatening, personality. She, writes the niece

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<sup>3</sup> Mason, Amelia Gere, *Memories of a Friend*. Chicago: Lawrence C. Woodworth, 1918, 112.

<sup>4</sup> Sarasota History Center, Rollins Coakley Collection, Manuscript 39, Box 2, Folder 10.

... was accustomed to her role, and played it easily, gracefully, and without for an instant being flurried or ever showing fatigue. She was forty-two then, and radiant, with fresh skin and brilliant eyes, in the prime of her great beauty. Calm, amiable, quick, and capable, she managed her heavy duties with a gentle manner and sweet smile which bewitched her aids and made them doubly willing and enthusiastic.<sup>5</sup>

Woman-on-woman adulation in this vein has become a sort of theme through the decades since Bertha Palmer's death, with uncritical repetitions of many anecdotes that appeared in the 1960 biography, *Silhouette in Diamonds*. This discourse in itself may have discouraged serious inquiry. Even a 2007 master's thesis – titled, reflexively, *Mounted on a Pedestal*, retains much of this 19<sup>th</sup> century insistence on a stilted yet breathless presentation of Bertha Palmer's flawless public persona, describing her as “a pacesetter of haute couture,” known for “her gowns, her jewels and her lavish parties.”<sup>6</sup>

Such professions dwell on the outward performativity of Bertha Palmer and downplay any sign of ambiguity or inner conflict, missing an opportunity to read into this exceptional yet emblematic life the tensions and stresses that made her time so interesting. Beneath the confident material display of an industrial age that dawned so blatantly in 19<sup>th</sup> century Chicago, momentous anxieties accompanying the rise of technology and the “iron cage” of knowledge workers can be discerned in a documented life of privilege and responsibility like hers. Her many gender-determined advances and retreats – from a feminine domestic sphere to the masculine outside world and back again – echo the larger world's vacillation between triumphalism and escapism that T.J. Jackson Lears would characterize as “the ambivalence of antimodernism.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Princess Cantacuzene, Countess Speransky, née Grant, *My Life Here and There*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1921, 155.

<sup>6</sup> Black, Hope L., *Mounted on a Pedestal: Bertha Honoré Palmer* (2007). University of South Florida-St. Petersburg, Graduate School Theses and Dissertations. Paper 637. <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/637>, ii-iii.

<sup>7</sup> Lears, T. Jackson, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of America Culture, 1880-1920*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981, xii.

Bertha Palmer's sometimes confrontational public engagements – and disappointments – can be seen as attempts to pave over what Carroll Smith-Rosenberg described as “the role changes and conflicts bourgeois matrons experienced between the 1840s and 1890s:”

Painful discontinuities existed between the ideal and the real world in which the bourgeois matron lived. The tensions that existed between the two central roles the bourgeois matron was expected to assume – that of the True Woman and that of Ideal Mother – exemplify these disjointures, which were simultaneously social and psychological. The True Woman was emotional, dependent, and gentle – a born follower. The Ideal Mother, then and now, was expected to be strong, self-reliant, protective, and efficient caretaker in relation to children and home.<sup>8</sup>

Smith-Rosenberg describes this conflicted evolution of True Womanhood, imposed by an industrial age that forcibly redirected masculine stewardship away from the private home and into economic productivity, in the context of a discussion of hysteria – an offshoot of the very “American Nervousness” that even a paragon like Bertha Palmer might succumb to, as we will discuss later.

But there is evidence that Bertha Palmer saw more clearly than most women the possibilities for operating within these shifting confines of True Womanhood – for circumventing what Gaston Bachelard calls “the dialectics of inside and outside”<sup>9</sup> – without embracing what she saw as the doomed strategy of New Womanhood. And, for her time, she was correct in this judgment; Smith-Rosenberg writes that by the 1930s the educated and post-Progressive New Woman, “shorn of her political power and public influence, had become a subject of misunderstanding and ridicule.”<sup>10</sup>

In 1910, the novelist Edith Wharton expressed the cultural terms of the tricky tightrope walk between True and New Womanhood: “The ideal of the American woman is to be

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<sup>8</sup> Smith-Rosenberg, Carroll, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985, 198-9.

<sup>9</sup> Bachelard, Gaston, *The Poetics of Space*. Translated by Maria Jolas. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994 (1958), 211.

<sup>10</sup> Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*, 246.

respectable without being bored.”<sup>11</sup> The text of Bertha Palmer’s life can be read as this disciplined yet restless enactment of her social role – a series of calculated transactions that were subtle tests, and never outright violations, of the Victorian cultural boundaries that determined her status from the outset.

She parlayed the beauty of her body into a series of lavish homes, a famous art collection and a prominent role as social arbiter in Chicago and beyond. She then attempted – failing and succeeding repeatedly – to trade these assets for political influence, international leadership and a hand in shaping the American frontier. At the end, Bertha Palmer was driven back into an indoor life and the limitations of her own body – not because of cultural gender constraints, but by a publicly unacknowledged case of breast cancer that resulted in her death at 69.

I first became intrigued by the life of Bertha Palmer during my regular hikes on a trail called Old Ranch Road in Myakka River State Park, next door to my home east of Sarasota. The 1,900 acres of parkland that were donated after her death had been her cattle ranch, a tiny part of the Florida real estate holdings she snapped up between 1910 and 1918. I wanted to know how a Gilded Age widow of vast and independent means, with luxurious homes and unchallenged social standing in Chicago and Europe, would come down to the far less fashionable coast of Florida and fall in love with a rugged, tropical tangle of pine scrub and oak hammocks. Was she looking for an adventure, or retreating from one?

Bertha Palmer managed to pursue the nontraditional aspiration of land acquisition and development while preserving – even to this day – her reputation as a nearly slavish embodiment of True Womanhood. It was a reputation she brought down on the train from Chicago, along with an entourage that included her father and brother as trusted consultants. But however

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<sup>11</sup> Wharton, Edith, *The Custom of the Country*. New York: Charles Scriber’s Sons, 1913, 274.

respectable and celebrated her arrival in Florida – for all the local fanfare and speeches and special arrangements for her comfort – in spirit, she was executing the same quintessential American escape from hegemonic constraints that have populated and shaped this nation.

When we look at the pattern of Bertha Palmer’s life, we see that whenever her ambitions were thwarted or discouraged, she did not respond by retreating to the domestic sphere. She traveled; she moved. Her faith in the curative, even transformative powers of mobility can be seen as an essentially American answer to dilemmas both personal and political, from the colonial migrations to the Westward expansion, with periodic echoes of the same impulse throughout this nation’s history. Morris Dickstein makes note of the mobility dream resurfacing in the throes of the Great Depression:

The fantasy culture of the 1930s ... is all about movement, not the desperate simulation of movement we find in the road stories, but movement that suggests genuine freedom. ...Not money and not success, not even elegance and sophistication, were the real dream of the expressive culture of the 1930s, but this dream of mobility, with its thrust toward the future.<sup>12</sup>

The geographic trajectory of Bertha Palmer is also inseparable from the gendering of space in our nation’s history. Annette Kolodny tells us that the generations of westward-pushing Americans who preceded Bertha Palmer’s lifetime perceived the taming of the frontier according to gender: Men saw a beautiful virgin wilderness to be ravished, conquered and exploited; women saw a rough and daunting terrain to be domesticated with homes, communities and gardens.<sup>13</sup> Somehow, Bertha Honoré Palmer managed to have it both ways. The home and garden remained her sphere of influence, yet Chicago’s ingrained turn-of-the-century cultural traditions and Florida’s cycles of unquenchable land development became her ultimate legacies.

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<sup>12</sup> Dickstein, Morris, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009, 360-1.

<sup>13</sup> Koldodny, Annette, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984, 3-12.

Informed and greatly influenced by the “cult of domesticity” that elevated 19<sup>th</sup> century women to a more prominent but rigidly defined role in the nation’s economy, Bertha Palmer certainly began her married life in 1870 as a dutiful and earnest conspicuous consumer. Like other wealthy American women, she used her increasingly discerning purchases of artwork to cross the boundary between private and public space.

But in the last portion of her life, while not fully relinquishing her culturally formed interests in house decoration, socializing and philanthropy, she began to interact with the Southwest Florida frontier in a mode that Kolodny would have characterized as masculine. She saw the swamps and pinewoods and palmetto scrub as terrain ripe for ravishment, conquest and exploitation. She would leave her mark on Florida, not as an art connoisseur and socialite – as she is best remembered in Chicago – but as a promoter of tourism and real estate development and as an innovative farmer and cattle rancher.

What circumstances and social influences propelled this deeply conventional, upper-middle-class American woman across such a forbidding gender boundary before her time?

To understand such an emblematic act of cultural negotiation from the White City to the green acreage of Florida, the first chapter of this work will investigate the tensions between private and public space, and between True and New Womanhood, that marked Bertha Palmer’s adult life. The second will explore a pattern of engagement and withdrawal that expressed anxieties and ambitions aroused by industrialization – seen through the prism of her successes and failures in the masculine space of politics.

Chapter 3 looks at a pivotal relationship with one of her Chicago neighbors, which facilitated her deepening interest in civic engagement along with a possible romantic attachment, and marked a division between her years as a society wife and as an independent widow. The

fourth chapter interprets her move to Florida as a pursuit of antimodernist “vitalism” that offered her a way to reconcile warring cultural impulses that had continually marked her uneasy shifts between private and public life.

And the final chapter will show how a painful and fatal illness relegated Bertha Palmer once more to the domestic confines she had striven so deliberately to outmaneuver, and forced her to enact in her last two years the post-Victorian personification of neurotic vasillation and invalidism known as “American Nervousness.” Cancer would become for the twentieth century what tuberculosis was in the nineteenth – a mark of weakness and shame, and an occasion for withdrawal from the public eye. Bertha Palmer’s very Victorian response to this modern disease once again set her adrift in the liminal space between two cultural expectations. Breast cancer cast her into the abject role of a neurasthenic in private. But the wider world would be informed that this robust Florida rancher had died suddenly of pneumonia, and would honor her accordingly.

## Chapter 1: Domesticity and public life

Bertha Palmer was already a famous beauty when she married into money. She would learn to use both the beauty and the money to construct an escape to the world outside her door. But the tension between private interiors and the public space she sought to inhabit and transform would define the pattern of her existence.

Born in 1849 in Louisville, Kentucky, Bertha Honoré grew up with the city of Chicago during the Civil War years, and married the wealthy merchant Potter Palmer when she was twenty-one and he was forty-four. (He later told his sons that she had been just thirteen when he first determined to make her his wife.) It was a union determined by prevailing Victorian values, but it would be conducted in the atmosphere of insistent cultural turmoil generated by the new industrial age.

Warren I. Susman tells us that late 19<sup>th</sup> century cultural leaders dealt with the problem of self by advancing the notion of character. Self-styled American “progressives” like Bertha Palmer saw the concept of a purposeful, disciplined existence – associated in self-help guides, Susman says, with words like *citizenship, duty, work, building, outdoor life, conquest* “and above all, *manhood*” – as a way of sustaining and stabilizing society in the industrial age. The ideal of character, he wrote,

proposed a method for both mastery and development of the self. In fact, it argued that its kind of self-control was the way to fullest development of the moral significance of the self. But it also provided a method of presenting the self to society, offering a standard of conduct that assured interrelationship between the “social” and the “moral.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Susman, Warren I., *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2003, 273-4.

Bertha Palmer's young life was certainly peppered with those catchwords that symbolized character. She received her "finishing" at the Convent of the Visitation in Washington, D.C., where she was honored for "uniform excellence of conduct."<sup>15</sup> It was widely rumored that she entered into marriage with a wealthy, much older man out of duty to her extravagant father, whose real estate speculations tended to be heavily mortgaged, and who never repaid an \$85,000 debt to his friend Carter Harrison, according to Harrison's son.<sup>16</sup> Marrying into money thrust her into a cultural Panopticon where her adherence to the disciplines of True Womanhood and Ideal Motherhood were monitored daily; she was judged and valued chiefly by her acts of domestic consumption.

There is evidence that in the early marriage of Bertha Honoré and Potter Palmer, their inequality of age and fortune affected the power dynamic between them. Her biographer tells of an instance in the late 1870s when her 10-year-old nephew reportedly freed her from her suite in the Palmer House:

One day when Artie got to her door she called out: "Will you do something for me? I am locked in and cannot get out. I'll slip a note under the door. Take it to my brother, Mr. Honoré, and see that no one else gets it or sees you give it to him and he will have me let out." Artie was convinced that Potter Palmer had locked her in.<sup>17</sup>

Such a patriarchal fortress mentality could have easily driven Bertha Palmer to cherish her freedom of mobility later, as she matured. When Potter Palmer built his "castle" on Lake Michigan and moved his young family there in 1885, Chicagoans were fascinated by the house's lack of locks and doorknobs. No one could gain entry to the house unless a servant opened the

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<sup>15</sup> Ross, Ishbel, *Silhouette in Diamonds: The Life of Mrs. Potter Palmer*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960, 24.

<sup>16</sup> Harrison, Carter Henry, *Stormy Years: The Autobiography of Carter H. Harrison, Five Times Mayor of Chicago*. New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1935, 28-9.

<sup>17</sup> Ross, *Silhouette in Diamonds*, 41.

door from the inside.<sup>18</sup> This vigilance can be seen as an expression of a Western cultural fear of “the woman on the outside,” as Mark Wigley describes it:

In Greek thought women lack the internal self-control credited to men as the very mark of their masculinity. This self-control is no more than the maintenance of secure boundaries. The internal boundaries, or rather boundaries that define the interior of the person, the identity of the self, cannot be maintained by a woman because her fluid sexuality endlessly overflows and disrupts them.<sup>19</sup>

By the 1890s, when Bertha Palmer assumed the highly visible and politically charged leadership position on the Board of Lady Managers of the World’s Colombian Exposition, the couple’s partnership appears to have become more equitable as she deployed this “fluid sexuality” to escape domestic captivity. She threw parties to welcome the world into her mansion – parties that her husband tolerated but did not enjoy. Then gradually she joined the larger party in progress outside her Lakeshore Drive door, in a city that was celebrating its comeback from the devastating fire of 1871.

As Alan Trachtenberg points out, this was a time when the channeling of rough industry into cultural and aesthetic aspirations would call on the civilizing and domesticating abilities of American bourgeois women:

The rise to power of culture was at once the rise of a powerful idea of the feminine, of woman’s role: the dispensing of values nonmaterial, nonaggressive, nonexploitative. As culture came to seem the repository of elevating thoughts and cleansing emotions, it seemed all the more as if the rough world of masculine enterprise had called into being its redemptive opposite.<sup>20</sup>

This was the moment in her city’s history where Bertha Palmer came alive. The Chicago exposition – known as the “White City” for its gleaming neoclassical architecture – was an

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<sup>18</sup> Ross, *Silhouette in Diamonds*, 55.

<sup>19</sup> Wigley, Mark, “Untitled: The Housing of Gender.” *Sexuality and Space*, edited by Beatriz Colomina, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992, 335.

<sup>20</sup> Trachtenberg, Alan, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2007 (1982), 145.

overwhelming response to the simmering debate over the claims of capital and labor, using wealth and power to constitute crowd-mollifying experiences of beauty and wonder.

All her friends in the business community felt their precarious hold on the reins of capitalism, after the Haymarket Square crisis in 1886 and with some fifty thousand new immigrant workers entering the city each year. They saw the exposition as a chance to consolidate and institutionalize what they believed to be America's surest path to progress. And, by this measure, it succeeded beyond their dreams, also cementing Bertha Palmer's status as a leader among women.

While other members of the national Board of Lady Managers saw the exposition as an opportunity to press for American women's suffrage, as president she believed their economic status had to be elevated first. She saw the Woman's Building's potential to raise awareness of both the plight and the productivity of working women. The building was not originally considered part of the province of the board – which had official authority only to award medals for feminine contributions to the spectacle – but Bertha Palmer swiftly took charge of its construction and modified its design to reflect her vision. Then she embarked on two years of traveling and letter-writing to solicit exhibits from all over the world, to show the marvels that women were capable of producing.

In the meantime, she was a frequently embattled mediator for the power struggles within a board of 117 American women (mostly white women; only three African-American women had official roles, and Bertha Palmer expressed sympathy but exerted no pressure to increase their number). Much of her time was taken up with the question of whether the board should become a platform for voting rights, and she made enemies by resisting these pressures with her characteristic pragmatic ambivalence:

She had no patience with Bloomerism, short hair or freak theories. ... Her instinct was to use the weapon at hand and the vote still seemed far off. “One hears so much about the ‘new woman’ that one is in danger of being bored by her unless she arrives quickly,” she commented on one occasion.<sup>21</sup>

Bertha Palmer was correct in observing that the status of American women was already in flux. By this time their prerogative to define the good and beautiful within the confines of the home – backed by private fortunes multiplying at a stunning pace – was already beginning to prove hard to contain inside the domestic sphere. As Dianne Sachko MacLeod points out in her study of pioneering American women art collectors, “the muted dialectic between women and their prized possessions furthered their development as autonomous individuals and ... propelled them out of their cloistered interiors into an engagement with public life.”<sup>22</sup>

It is likely that Bertha Palmer quickly grasped that the art collection her husband had begun could prove a tactical advantage for her in bridging the chasm between domestic consumption and civic influence. Relying on the guidance of the American art advisor Sara Hallowell, she used visits to Paris in the early 1890s not just to muster support for the Chicago fair, but to collect Impressionist paintings.

Her first Impressionist purchase was in 1889, a pastel by Edgar Degas, *On the Stage*. Shortly afterward she purchased Mary Cassatt’s *Mother and Child*, and in 1891 – in the thick of her shopping spree – she snapped up nine canvases in Claude Monet’s *Stacks of Wheat* series. She displayed the Impressionists in her home, along with the collection of Romantic and Barbizon paintings; and enjoyed explaining to more conservative visitors Monet’s dictum that “Impressionism is only direct sensation.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ross, *Silhouette in Diamonds*, 45.

<sup>22</sup> MacLeod, Dianne Sachko, *Enchanted Lives, Enchanted Objects, American Women Collectors and the Making of Culture, 1800-1940*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009, 3.

<sup>23</sup> Ross, *Silhouette in Diamonds*, 149.

Palmer and Hallowell quickly came to depend on Cassatt's expertise regarding Impressionism, and Cassatt and Palmer appear to have genuinely admired each other. Of Palmer, Cassatt wrote to Hallowell: "I suppose it is Mrs. Potter Palmer's French blood which gives her organizing powers and determination that women should be someone and not something."<sup>24</sup>

But there is evidence that beneath her imperious and decisive manner, Bertha Palmer felt the pressure of testing cultural norms. She had feared that taking on the women's board presidency might expose her to social error, according to Mrs. Carter H. Harrison Jr.: "Mr. Palmer told me himself, that when she was considering its acceptance she was almost made ill, in trying to decide what she ought to do. Her husband and her brother induced her to accept the responsibility."<sup>25</sup>

Their urging may have reflected a sense in the family that Bertha Palmer was naturally inclined toward queering the definition of True Womanhood. As her biographer put it, "There were times when her family wished that there were greater worlds for her to conquer. Her sister Ida believed that with all her femininity she had the makings of a statesman, a diplomat or a captain of industry."<sup>26</sup> It is clear that all the travel, correspondence and diplomacy that the presidential post necessitated gave her a taste for public engagement on a scale that was traditionally the province of men.

In her active period during and after the world's fair, Bertha Palmer used the magnificent rooms housing her art collection as a home turf, where she could safely and equitably interact with powerful men. MacLeod's survey of women who traveled abroad for the sake of art consumption singles out Bertha Palmer for the ambiguous and even conflicted gendering of her

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<sup>24</sup> Weimann, Jeanne Madeleine, *The Fair Women*. Chicago: Chicago Academy, 1981, 195.

<sup>25</sup> Sarasota History Center, Rollins Coakley Collection, Manuscript 39, Box 2, Folder 10.

<sup>26</sup> Ross, *Silhouette in Diamonds*, 122-3.

home gallery space, with systematic and didactic arrangement of her paintings – in the established manner of male collectors – surrounded by soft brocade and intimate, yet awkward seating:

Palmer ambitiously added an imperial luster to the American housewife’s domestic role as “queen of the hearth” that resulted in a gendering of traditional female space. She formally staged her rooms in a heterogeneous manner that deviated from the organic unity of feminine interiors. ... As a result, this room is inflected with a dissonance between the womanly notes of the pliable portieres and garlands and the manly chords struck by the rigid rows of pictures and chairs. The effect is gendered inasmuch as it contains male and female elements, but the two do not harmonize. As a performative space for Palmer’s presentation of herself, the room captures the bold rhetoric of her public persona at the same time as it alludes to her femininity.<sup>27</sup>

With Potter Palmer’s death in 1902, his widow could be seen as less ambiguously occupying a masculine space. Her husband’s entire fortune of eight million dollars came to her (reportedly causing fellow Chicago merchant Marshall Field to sniff, “A million dollars is enough for any woman.”<sup>28</sup>) and speculation began immediately about whether – and whom – the fifty-three-year-old beauty would remarry.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that after a proper mourning interval, the new widow kicked up her heels. King Edward VII was crowned in England a month after Potter Palmer’s death, officially ending the character-driven Victorian era and introducing Britain (and upper classes in the United States) to a more relaxed, fluid – and somewhat European – value system.

Bertha Palmer had attended the 1900 Paris Exposition and been present at the unsettling and exciting birth of modern art, and she seemed at first receptive to the cultural transformations that infiltrated the British court and its wealthy American hangers-on. She redecorated homes in England in France in a lighter, post-Victorian style. In 1907, while living in London, she

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<sup>27</sup> MacLeod, *Enchanted Lives, Enchanted Objects*, 109-10.

<sup>28</sup> Ross, *Silhouette in Diamonds*, 183, among other sources.

imported the cast of Richard Strauss' and Oscar Wilde's scandalous opera *Salomé* from Paris to perform the work at one of her parties – with a private showing the next morning for the king.<sup>29</sup>

Instead of embracing a performance of pleasure and pomp among the Edwardians of England and the aristocrats of France, Bertha Palmer could have easily chosen a path to New Womanhood, like her wealthy American Progressive contemporary, Isabella Stewart Gardner (1840-1924.) As art collectors and European travelers, the two women almost certainly met. They both had their portraits painted by the Swedish Impressionist artist Anders Zorn – Palmer in 1893 and Gardner a year later, after seeing Zorn's work at the Chicago fair.

But unlike Bertha Palmer, Gardner was the epitome of the emerging modern woman, a free-spirited intellectual who associated with artists and writers. She had married John Lowell “Jack” Gardner, of an old Boston family, and Boston did not take kindly to his new wife. In 1888, John Singer Sargent painted her portrait, standing in a severely cut black dress, and the criticism was so harsh that the painting was never shown again until after her husband's death in 1898.

A compelling difference between the two widows was essentially one of place – underscoring how the dichotomy of private and public space influenced regional expressions of True and New Womanhood. Gardner was rebelling against the strictures of Puritanical Boston, while Bertha Palmer's youth and adulthood were shaped by a city in the process of invention and reinvention. First, the Civil War accelerated Chicago's importance as a railway nexus and made the fortunes of men like Potter Palmer; second, the great fire of 1871, just after the Palmers' marriage, forced the city into a dynamic rebirth. Chicago's near-spontaneous, frontier-forged hegemony dispensed with the more formalized etiquette that defined True Womanhood in urban

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<sup>29</sup> Ross, *Silhouette in Diamonds*, 209.

areas to the east and south – and allowed its women a certain amount of individuation as long as they kept up superficial appearances.

Then, too, Gardner’s loss of her only son at a young age could have inspired her contempt for such appearances:

When Gardner abandoned hope of motherhood at around 25, she also abandoned conventions imposed on women of her class, and from then on lived as she pleased, very publicly. Newspapers carried sketches of her strolling with lions borrowed from the zoo. She drove horses and cars at breakneck speed. She smoked cigarettes. She had a pair of large diamonds mounted on springs and wore them, like antennae, in her hair.<sup>30</sup>

Another contrast is that while Bertha Palmer appears to have made her fine art collection a steppingstone to the even more male-dominated realm of politics, Isabella Gardner saw the acquisition and display of art as an end in itself: “Years ago I decided that the greatest need in our Country was Art. ... We were a very young country and had very few opportunities of seeing beautiful things, works of art, etc. So I determined to make it my life work if I could.”<sup>31</sup>

Gardner’s self-presentation as a connoisseur and New Woman extended to her dress. She was an enthusiastic practitioner of the Aesthetic movement in fashion by at least the 1890s, giving up corsets and other constraints in favor of flowing silhouettes. Judging from photographs and items in the costume and textile collection of the Chicago History Museum, it was not until 1910 – after her flight to Florida – that Bertha Palmer (described after her death as possessing “the smallest waist in Chicago”) appeared in public without a cinched-in silhouette.

Perhaps her early cultural formation in a Victorian household that prized character and duty was simply stronger in Bertha Palmer – and made the backwoods of Florida more attractive than the arcades of Europe. Even before the death of King Edward in May 1910 brought the

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<sup>30</sup> Middlebrook, Diane Wood, “Portrait of a Lady: A Model for Henry James and for Sargent, Isabella Stewart Gardner brought Europe to Boston’s Back Bay.” *The New York Times*, December 28, 1991. Accessed online on August 31, 2013: [www.nytimes.com/books/97/12/28/reviews/971228.28middlet.html](http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/12/28/reviews/971228.28middlet.html)

<sup>31</sup> MacLeod, *Enchanted Lives, Enchanted Objects*, 91, quoting a 1917 letter from Gardner in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum Archive.

lavish Edwardian Era to a close, she had begun turning away from its culture of excess and pleasure-worship.

Back in Chicago for the winter, she saw an advertisement in the Sunday Tribune placed by A.B. Edwards and Joseph H. Lord, promoting land in sunny Florida. In February 1910 she made her first trip to Sarasota, reportedly pronounced its bay “more beautiful than the Bay of Naples,”<sup>32</sup> and began purchasing what would eventually come to 140,000 acres of Florida coastal plains and prairies.

There can be no argument that Bertha Palmer’s existence changed the American landscape, but not in the ways she intended. The homes she inhabited and decorated no longer stand. The current Palmer House hotel in Chicago, completely rebuilt, contains only some of her purchases for the hotel on display. The house she planned to build in Florida exists only on paper. The one remaining architectural monument to her taste is the Palmer tomb in Chicago’s Graceland Cemetery, built to her specifications and likely inspired by a Pierre Puvis de Chavannes painting she owned.

But Chicago’s Gold Coast neighborhood, where she was among the first residents, reflects and memorializes her time there. And more importantly, aside from her cattle ranch that became a state park, there are acres of land in Florida that oddly echo her vision of pleasure grounds for the middle class: Palmer Ranch and The Oaks subdivisions in Sarasota, and Temple Terrace in Tampa. She is credited with transforming Sarasota from backwater to international resort.

Bertha Palmer’s outsized ambitions were both fostered and thwarted by the cultural space in which she had to maneuver – and the sprawling middle-class gated community that bears her

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<sup>32</sup> Stockbridge, Dorothy, “Newsman Traces History of Mrs. Palmer, Sarasota.” *Sarasota Journal*, December 5, 1973, page D1. Repeated in many other sources; no firsthand verification found.

name in Sarasota, Palmer Ranch, can be seen as a logical culmination and democratization of America's Gilded Age.

## Chapter 2: Engagement and withdrawal

What prompted Bertha Palmer's sudden interest in Florida and rustication? And was it sudden at all, or the deliberate reawakening of a pattern forged many years earlier, before that indulgent detour through European playgrounds?

From what we know of the facts of her life, the imposition of True Womanhood's strictures prompted her, again and again, to shift locales as a flight response to some failure of ambition. If at first she did not succeed, she quit the field of battle. It was this continual compulsion to engage with public life, and then withdraw to a private interior, that charted the course that would lead her eventually to Florida.

T.J. Jackson Lears identifies this pattern of advance and retreat, so common to Victorian-era Americans, as arising from "the conflict between engagement and withdrawal," and he speaks to the invisible costs of such a conflict.

It embodied profound cultural tensions – between the conflicting ego-ideals of autonomy and dependence, between commitment to the superego and resentment against its contradictory demands. ... [T]o be engaged in practical affairs was to be in the world of men, where conscious control and autonomous achievement were most highly prized. To withdraw from that realm was to enter the feminine sphere, which had its own restrictive ideals but which tended to sanction passive leisure and emotional dependence.<sup>33</sup>

The outward conformity of the Victorian bourgeoisie, Lears believes, masked an ongoing ambivalence between masculine autonomy and feminine domesticity. Bertha Palmer's discovery of Florida may have felt like a balm for such inner turmoil. It came at a time when the spotlight of speculation over her wealthy widowhood had dimmed, when she was seen as having "failed to

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<sup>33</sup> Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 218.

marry” in Europe, but had not yet – at just past sixty – elevated to the irreproachably asexual status of an elder matriarch. A close friend in whom she may have indulged a romantic interest had just moved with his wife from Chicago to Washington, D.C., into the higher circle of national politics that she had tried unsuccessfully to join. Her long, unchallenged role as Chicago’s leading socialite – the unofficial queen who opened the Charity Ball each year – had been claimed by aspirants while she was off hobnobbing with King Edward’s friends.

Throughout her life, it had been rare for Bertha Palmer to place herself in a position where social or political failure might be possible. Even her great elevation to the presidency of the Board of Lady Managers for the World’s Colombian Exposition was not a post she had sought for herself.

While she had become prominent as a society hostess, art collector and conspicuous consumer, and was beginning to involve herself in such social causes as Jane Addams’ Hull House, she does not appear to have entertained political aspirations before taking on that leadership role. In fact, it was her neutrality in the area of women’s rights, as well as her husband’s membership in the Democratic Party, that recommended her in the eyes of the fair’s National Commission.<sup>34</sup>

But there is little doubt that Bertha Palmer agonized over the implications of what felt to her like momentous choices. Her continual negotiations with the cultural constraints of True Womanhood were marked by a lifelong striving to perform her all public roles to perfection. Her niece Julia Grant Cantacuzene tells of her sitting awake in the nights before she would meet with important men, studying pamphlets so that she could rise to their level in dinner conversations.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Weimann, *The Fair Women*, 47.

<sup>35</sup> Ross, *Silhouette in Diamonds*, 200.

Once she accepted the invitation to lead the Board of Lady Managers, it became evident that Bertha Palmer could and would fight among men for her convictions. To examine just one instance, in January 1893 she went to the fair's commissioner and complained that its chief of installations was refusing to honor her efforts to secure exhibit space for women's work.

In establishing the Board of Lady Managers, she told him, the U.S. Congress had either "meant something, or else it meant nothing. ... If the action means anything it must mean that working women, being weak, financially and commercially, need to have some particular care given to their interest." A letter afterward to board colleague Mary Trautman reveals how much this display of gender-testing feistiness – and departure from her carefully crafted persona as a serene wife and hostess – had cost her:

I think it is safe to say that my letter made a great sensation. ... You who can have had so much experience in going before legislators, can appreciate my embarrassment in being obliged to appear personally before the Board of Control to present our case. It certainly took a great deal of courage, and I felt weak after making my speech.<sup>36</sup>

But while Bertha Palmer possessed assurance enough to stake her status as a social arbiter to further a cause she believed in, it was not her strategy to persist if met with failure. If she did not succeed, she would not stand her ground "like a man." Instead she invoked the privilege of a wealthy American woman to shift her location as she liked – withdrawing, as Lears describes it, to the feminine sphere. When an effort to build a memorial to the fair's Women's Building faltered in 1894, she wrote to its chief advocate that she would not engage in a losing battle: "I am positively unwilling to mortgage my whole life to any cause and to take away from myself absolute freedom to travel or to make such use of my hours as seems good to me at any time."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Weimann, *The Fair Women*, 233.

<sup>37</sup> Weimann, *The Fair Women*, 590.

Two examples of this flight response are sufficient to illustrate Bertha Palmer's pattern of outsized ambition followed by retreat. The first concerned her voluntary involvement in the Pullman Strike of 1894. The second was her all-out effort to have her husband named as an ambassador to Germany in 1896.

Trachtenberg describes the Pullman railway strike, the summer after the World's Exposition, as spreading "like a prairie fire."<sup>38</sup> And he sees the deeply divisive turning point between capital and labor as flowing directly from the 1893 fair and its symbolism. Industrial workers, he says, had been marginalized and mollified by the pageantry. In the case of labor, repudiation of the Progressive narrative imposed by the fair unfolded swiftly and violently.

The Pullman strike, its burning railroad cars, and the path of ugly violence it traced through Chicago, seems the most dramatic external instance of history playing tricks on the White City. What starker contradiction than the strike and the themes of the Fair? But the relation of events lay even deeper. The model industrial town of Pullman and White City articulated quite similar intentions. ... The town and the Fair replicate each other in illuminating ways, and the events of the year after the dismantling of the Fair also dismantled the notion that in culture alone resides a power to enforce obedience, to teach acquiescence and consent.<sup>39</sup>

It would have been difficult for Bertha Palmer, wedded as she was to the convictions that informed the White City, to resist seeing a role for herself as a mediator in the labor conflict.

George Pullman was a family friend, and yet she sympathized with the workers' anger over successive wage cuts – while rents in the town of Pullman remained fixed – and brutal government intervention on the side of capital. Along with social reformer Jane Addams, she volunteered on behalf of the Civic Federation – a nonpartisan group formed to help implement an urban renewal plan for Chicago by the fair's architect, Daniel Burnham – to reason with Pullman. But he appeared to resent the women's attempts to intervene, and insisted on meeting

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<sup>38</sup> Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America*, 208.

<sup>39</sup> Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America*, 223-5.

only with the conciliation committee's male members. This, too, came to nothing, and the strike continued for another punishing two months until Pullman prevailed.

This was a highly public failure. As for the friendship between the Palmers and the Pullmans, "a chill developed between them after the strike," her biographer writes. "But before the strike was over the Palmers were on their way to Europe. Potter had been ailing ever since the Fair. They spent Christmas, 1894, at the Grand Hotel in Paris and from there went to Egypt to pass a month on the Nile."<sup>40</sup>

From there they went on to Constantinople, in the only instance that Bertha Palmer would venture beyond the usual Gilded Age stops in Europe – further evidence that she wished to put her political humiliation as far behind her as possible.

A similar grand decampment followed Bertha Palmer's all-out effort to have her husband named ambassador to Germany – even though Potter Palmer spoke no German, was frail at the age of 70, and seemed resolutely indifferent to the honor of the post. Bertha Palmer's sister Ida was married to the son of Ulysses S. Grant, who was sent as an envoy to Austria in 1889,<sup>41</sup> and this may have excited a touch of sibling rivalry. Whatever the reason, Bertha Palmer threw herself into the campaign, firing off telegrams and calling in favors. She drew up a hand-written list of politicians who could endorse her husband, labeling it "Friends to be counted upon." A telegram from one supporter gushed, "My greatest pleasure to do all I can to keep the wires hot on his behalf."<sup>42</sup>

A confidential letter by Washington journalist Walter Wellman to his Chicago publisher Hermann Henry Kohlsaat – whose daughter Pauline would marry Potter Palmer II in 1908 –

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<sup>40</sup> Ross, *Silhouette in Diamonds*, 108-9.

<sup>41</sup> Cantacuzene, *My Life Here and There*, 80.

<sup>42</sup> Chicago History Center, Palmer, Bertha Honoré, correspondence, 1884-1902, 1 of 8, Box 286.

warned at the beginning that Bertha Palmer's efforts would fail: "Am sorry to say Mr. Palmer has no chance whatsoever. Assistant Secretary Uhl will be appointed. The secretary spoke very highly of Mr. Palmer and would like to please you, but the President had already decided on Uhl."<sup>43</sup>

But the efforts of loyal Midwesterners persisted on Potter Palmer's behalf. Then a telegram five days later to Bertha Palmer from a Chicago Superior Court judge, W.G. Ewing, seemed to convince her that the cause was lost. Ewing's message also hints that Bertha Palmer was not particular about where in Europe an ambassadorship might be found. Ewing writes that he had seen both President Grover Cleveland and Secretary of State Richard Olney the night before: "They said endorsements were voluminous and strong but the peculiar situation at Berlin requires some one familiar with the work in hand. We are urging transfers if possible to open vacancy where Berlin complications do not exist."<sup>44</sup>

Once again, Bertha Palmer's response to this high-profile disappointment was to put an ocean between her and any possible embarrassment. Her biographer writes:

There was no time for regrets. She had no sooner learned of the Uhl appointment than she and Potter sailed for Russia to attend the coronation of Czar Nicholas II. ... They were back in Chicago in time to attend the Democratic presidential convention and Bertha ... listened with genuine excitement to William Jennings Bryan deliver his Cross of Gold speech. She and her old friend Mrs. Henrotin attended every session and it was noted in the papers that never before had Chicago women of prominence shown such public interest in a political convention.<sup>45</sup>

This frenetic engagement on the sidelines of public life, more consumption than production, must have disappointed Bertha Palmer on some level. Leadership at the world's fair had given her a taste for making great things happen, but once again she had been relegated to

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<sup>43</sup> Chicago History Center, Palmer, Bertha Honoré, correspondence, 1884-1902, 1 of 8, Box 286.

<sup>44</sup> Chicago History Center, Palmer, Bertha Honoré, correspondence, 1884-1902, 1 of 8, Box 286.

<sup>45</sup> Ross, *Silhouette in Diamonds*, 123.

the society hostess's lot of watching great things happen. The successful, if slightly uneasy, gendering of her domestic space that MacLeod describes had failed repeatedly to translate into the public sphere in a lasting way.

Her gentle regret over this inability of even the most powerful American 19<sup>th</sup> century women to gender a permanent, lasting space can be heard in her closing speech at the World's Exposition: "When our palace in the White City shall have vanished like a dream, when grass and flowers cover the spot where it now stands, may its memory and influence still remain as a benediction to those who have wrought within its walls."<sup>46</sup>

The flight to Florida in 1910, then, makes sense both as a retreat and a re-engagement – one final and grand attempt to find her place in the world, and remake it in ways that might transcend gender. In examining the impulses behind this attempt, it is worth asking whether a pioneering consumer who prided herself on embracing the new before its time, from Impressionist art to *Salomé*, might have found the signifiers of modernity coalescing after the turn of the century altogether too daunting. We know that she was aware of the architectural departures of Frank Lloyd Wright; the 1891 Charnley House, which expressed the first traces of his signature Prairie style, was just around the corner from her lakefront mansion. Her Worth gown commissioned for the opening of the Paris Exposition Universelle in 1900 featured dramatic art nouveau flourishes<sup>47</sup>, and she must have seen the challenging works of Roualt, Klimt, Rodin and Picasso at the fair, along with the beginnings of the German Bauhaus.

Whatever she thought of these arresting new cultural movements – along with the Arts & Crafts aesthetics sweeping Chicago as well as Europe – she did not invest financially in them or reject her own decorating tastes in response. Her ornate personal style had become fixed, if

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<sup>46</sup> Weimann, *The Fair Women*, 599.

<sup>47</sup> Long, *Bertha Honoré Palmer*, an exhibition catalogue, 31.

muted, as she drew close to her sixtieth year. Pierre Bourdieu would have described this trajectory, from pacesetter to onlooker, as social aging – the process by which an individual becomes dispossessed of cultural capital over time:

Social ageing is nothing other than the slow renunciation or disinvestment (socially assisted and encouraged) which leads agents to adjust their aspirations to their objective chances, to espouse their condition, become what they are and make do with what they have, even if this entails deceiving themselves as to what they are and what they have, with collective complicity, and accepting bereavement of all the ‘lateral possibilities’ they have abandoned along the way.<sup>48</sup>

The experience of cultural bereavement, somewhat like a necessary financial retrenchment, can feel less painful in a different social sphere. If Bertha Palmer had become conscious that her interests and position were perceived as passé, she would have realized that her status as celebrity would have a much higher currency on the undeveloped Gulf coast of Florida, where her money could buy all the cultural capital she might desire.

A failure to understand and welcome modern art and culture would have been deeply felt by Bertha Palmer, for whom aesthetics had always been a calling card. But cultural irrelevance was probably less painful for her than a sense that Chicago’s civic life was passing her by. She might have remained in the city, had she seen for herself a more prominent and lasting part to play in politics and social reform.

According to MacLeod, the transition from aesthetics and domesticity to political activism was a logical one for American women art collectors of the Gilded Age, as an extension of the reforming impulse that swept the nation. And this required a negotiation of space that necessarily differed with the individual, as there were no rules for the journey they were attempting:

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<sup>48</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1984, 110-11.

Although these collectors differed in age, location and degree of political involvement, they were united in their struggle for women's spatial representation in a world defined by gendered power relations. ... In their commitment to art and activism, they traversed spatial realms that sometimes interpenetrated, blurred, and collided. When they moved from the security of the domestic interior into what was construed as masculine public space, they maintained an emotional attachment to objects and frequently reverted to their homes in search of reassuring and more familiar forms of comfort.<sup>49</sup>

In Bertha Palmer's case, the reversion was not so much to her home – which, in her civic functions as official hostess and political mediator she had turned into a place of business. Instead she retreated to Bar Harbor or Newport, to Europe or Russia, and eventually to Florida. These forays, especially after she became a widow, can also be seen as a bold new form of home-making, the search for a place where she could feel both comfortable and important.

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<sup>49</sup> MacLeod, *Enchanted Lives, Enchanted Objects*, 97.

### Chapter 3: A blow to the body politic

For Bertha Palmer, the Florida adventure marked a permanent end to her love affair with politics – which had bloomed and faded in tandem with a personal friendship that may have been the most intimate of her life. In an adulthood marked by cordial but stately relations with a wide personal acquaintance, this ostensibly political alliance with her Chicago neighbor is remarkable for the unprecedented warmth she expressed to him in letters. And the height of their closeness appears to have coincided with the pivotal time just before the death of her much older husband, after which she would redefine her social role as that of a single woman with independent wealth and no constraints on her mobility.

Bertha Palmer's keen interest in social improvement had led her to dabble in Chicago's politics before her attendance at the Cross of Gold speech in 1896. After the fair, she became one of the very few women asked to be part of the Civic Federation. And Susman speaks convincingly of the 1893 Chicago exposition's role in forming American Progressive thought – ideals Bertha Palmer embraced at the time and expressed until the end of her life:

Thus the city, a special vision of the city, suddenly becomes realized in model form at the White City at just that moment when the national synthesis comes into being. Its millennial hope emerges in a distinctive way in American thought. ... Many historians have argued that Progressivism was an urban phenomenon, but too few have seen that Progressivism in its very nature begins with an urban image. Its vision of a new America is a vision of a land transformed into a series of ideal cities.<sup>50</sup>

But the occasion of Jennings' rousing speech, when Bertha Palmer was forty-seven, appears to be the beginning of a more thorough immersion. Her husband had only interested

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<sup>50</sup> Susman, *Culture as History*, 247-8.

himself in politics as they affected his business interests, and by this point in life he had withdrawn from many involvements, including his merely dutiful attendance at his wife's social functions.

As invested as she was in the True Womanhood embodiment of wife and mother, Bertha Palmer needed a reliable escort into the masculine public space of politics. For this she turned to a family friend whose importance in her life may be underestimated. The intensity and then the waning of that friendship conceivably provided an important catalyst for her experiences as a widow and her eventual migration to Florida.

The Palmers had next-door neighbors to the north of their mansion on Lakeshore Drive, Emily and Franklin MacVeagh. The MacVeagh house, destroyed in 1922, was built in 1893 by the architect Henry Hobson Richardson (of Glessner House fame), and photographs show it to have been in better taste than the Palmers' 1882 "English Gothic" castle, whose resemblance to the homes of Milwaukee beer barons was said to have embarrassed Bertha Palmer.<sup>51</sup>

Franklin MacVeagh, born in 1837, was exactly halfway between the ages of Bertha Palmer and the husband who was twenty-three years her senior. He attended Yale and graduated from Columbia University Law School in 1864, but soon gave up his practice "because of ill health"<sup>52</sup> and launched a wholesale grocery business. In 1874 he became president of the Citizens' Association, a forerunner to the Civic Federation, and in 1894 he was the unsuccessful Democratic nominee for a U.S. Senate seat. His older brother Wayne MacVeagh, a Civil War hero, was the 36<sup>th</sup> attorney general of the United States, and served as ambassador to Italy under

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<sup>51</sup> Kalmbach, Sally Sexton, *The Jewel of the Gold Coast: Mrs. Potter Palmer's Chicago*. Chicago: Ampersand Inc., 2009, 29-30.

<sup>52</sup> Leonard, John W., editor, *The Book of Chicagoans: A Biographical Dictionary of Leading Living Men of the City of Chicago*. Chicago, A.N. Marquis and Company, 1905, 387.

Grover Cleveland from 1893 to 1897 – at the very time Bertha Palmer was angling for a similar posting on behalf of her husband.

Emily MacVeagh and Bertha Palmer had a friendship based on shared acquaintances and charitable interests, but Emily MacVeagh's involvements tended to be more literary. Their relationship appears to have been just as formal and slightly impersonal as most of Bertha Palmer's female friendships – outside of more intimate ties to her sister Ida Grant and Grant's daughter Julia. A note from Mrs. MacVeagh when the two women had been neighbors for two years – and probably dining companions since the 1870s – has a tone of deference, but makes it clear they met and conversed often:

December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1895

103 Lake Shore Drive

Dear Mrs. Palmer,

I enclose \$10 for a Charity Ball ticket – your ball last night cannot be eclipsed by the one tonight. Yours was simply perfect. I want to talk both balls and some other details over with you, if ever your work is over.

Affectionately yours,

Emily MacVeagh<sup>53</sup>

It was her husband Franklin who appeared to have the more substantive attachment to Bertha Palmer. Correspondence between them refers to civic improvement committees, political speeches and meetings that Bertha Palmer hosted at his request. Their letters that have been preserved at the Chicago History Center appear to have survived in her family (MacVeagh to Palmer) and in the private collection of Mary Ann Dicke, who stamped them with the year 1949 (Palmer to MacVeagh). Dicke's collection was auctioned off in March 1975, and the Palmer-MacVeagh letters were possibly part of a lot including "Chicago ephemera." Several have notations on them in MacVeagh's handwriting, suggesting that he had saved Bertha Palmer's letters for historical purposes.

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<sup>53</sup> Chicago History Center, Palmer, Bertha Honoré, correspondence, 1884-1902, M1984.750 (1 of 2), Box 286.

A brief note to him just preceding the time of Bertha Palmer's more intense engagement with politics displays a tone that borders on informality – or at least a warmer relationship between them than seems to have existed between her and his wife. The notepaper bears the year “1896” in pencil, in MacVeagh's hand, which would place it a few days before her campaign to have her husband named ambassador to Germany.<sup>54</sup>

Dear Mr. MacVeagh,  
Won't you come in to see me this afternoon after your return from your office. I will be glad to give you some cups of tea if not too late for it but would like to see you for a few moments in any case.  
Very sincerely yours,  
Bertha Honoré Palmer  
Tuesday  
January Twenty eighth

Reading the letters from the years that followed this point leaves little room for doubt that their mutual admiration and respect ran deep. A dinner invitation to him – dated in MacVeagh's hand, November 9, 1900 – suggests an ongoing and avid discourse that she was impatient to see interrupted: “I tried to talk with you about your article (which I was much pleased to read) at the horse show but found it impossible. Wont you come in for dinner some evening soon and let us have a comfortable chat over the whole matter especially reorganization of our dislocated and dismembered ‘body politic.’”<sup>55</sup>

Bertha Palmer appears not to have saved as many of his letters to her. But an undated, multipage letter written from the Chicago Club – marked “file” in her hand – gives an impression of how often they tried to be together, with and without their spouses:

I fancy that I could not have been very well when I came on Wednesday since on Saturday I had a sharp turn of illness which has kept me since indoors under a doctors care. Today I am almost well again – and think I shall possibly get out for a short time,

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<sup>54</sup> Chicago History Center, Palmer, Bertha Honoré, correspondence, 1884-1902, M1984.750 (1 of 2), Box 286.

<sup>55</sup> Chicago History Center, Palmer, Bertha Honoré, correspondence, 1884-1902, M1984.750 (1 of 2), Box 286.

though of this I am not yet quite certain. I am only certain that I am a new man since Saturday or yesterday. Just as soon as possible I shall be trying to see you.<sup>56</sup>

Whether their feelings were in any way romantic or sexual cannot be determined, and it is certainly possible – given the character-driven adherence to duty and public service that informed both their lives – that such feelings would never have been acted on or even acknowledged. But as the novels of Henry James and Edith Wharton make clear, Gilded Age society could function as a hothouse in which unexpressed emotions had the power to effect momentous changes – so it is also possible that an attachment between Bertha Palmer and Franklin MacVeagh was a secret shared unconsciously among their circle.

A beguiling parallel can be found in “With the Procession,” an 1895 novel by Henry Fuller, the son of a socially connected Chicago family. Fuller tells of a long-standing, unconsummated romance between the social leader and art collector Mrs. Granger Bates, “the richest and best known and most fashionable woman” in town, and her neighbor David Marshall, a family man who made his fortune in the grocery business and was often – like Franklin MacVeagh – in ill health. Early in the book, Mrs. Bates gives Marshall’s daughter a tour of her mansion and art collection:

“I don’t know,” she went on after a short pause, “whether you understand that your father was one of my old beaux – at least, I always counted him with the rest. I was a gay girl in my day, and I wanted to make the list as long as I could; so I counted in the quiet ones as well as the noisy ones. Your father was one of the quiet ones.”<sup>57</sup>

Mrs. Potter Palmer was so closely identified with the character of Mrs. Granger Bates that in later years this speech written by Fuller came to be attributed to her: “Keep up with the procession is my motto, and head it if you can. I do head it, and I feel that I’m where I belong.

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<sup>56</sup> Chicago History Center, Palmer, Bertha Honoré, correspondence, 1884-1902, M1984.750 (1 of 2), Box 286.

<sup>57</sup> Fuller, Henry B., *With the Procession*. New York, Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1895, 58.

When I can't foot it with rest, let me drop by the wayside and the crows have me. But they'll never get me – never!"<sup>58</sup>

In 1900 Bertha Palmer wrote to Franklin MacVeagh a long letter from New York, having returned from the Paris Exhibition and a visit to Queen Henriette of Belgium. MacVeagh's letter to her had reached her during that visit, in the city of Spa, and he had apparently asked her to accept some public post.

"You know how little service I can be on the committee," she wrote, "and I hate to be more dead wood – I presume however that by this time the matter is decided for good or ill and nothing I would say can change it. You must let me hear what you did."

After some gossip about their mutual acquaintances in Europe, she closes on a warm note of fondness that is rare in the whole of her preserved correspondence:

Mr Palmer is infinitely better and looks forward to a happy summer.  
I hope to hear good news from you + the best will be that your parents are well enough for you to slip off to some invigorating climate + have a thorough building up.  
With regards to Mrs MacVeagh and much love to yourself  
As ever yours  
Bertha Honoré Palmer

The following year, Bertha Palmer convinced her elder son Honoré to be a candidate for alderman in Chicago. As in previous political ventures, she used a man as a stand-in for her own ambitions but played an active role in rallying support personally. MacVeagh was certainly among the "friends to be counted upon" – apparently he signed petitions on Honoré Palmer's behalf but because they did not support the same candidate for mayor, MacVeagh made no campaign speeches for him. And MacVeagh's handwritten notation on one of Bertha Palmer's letters suggests that MacVeagh acted out of friendship, not political conviction, in backing her

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<sup>58</sup> Fuller, 70. The first two sentences of this speech are attributed to Bertha Palmer on page 4 of Saarinen, Aline B., *The Proud Possessors: The Lives, Times and Tastes of Some Adventurous American Art Collectors*. New York, Random House, 1958.

son's candidacy. On letterhead bearing the words "Honoré Palmer Candidate for Alderman 21<sup>st</sup> Ward 100 Lake Shore Drive," she wrote to thank him:

Dear Mr MacVeagh  
Wasn't it jolly – I am so glad we gave them a good beating while we were about it. ...  
Your help was greatly prized and was of great value in determining the results.  
With a thousand unexpressed as well as expressed thanks  
I am  
Most gratefully yours  
Bertha Honoré Palmer

MacVeagh had scrawled across the top of this triumphant note in pencil: "I was sorry about [Fletcher Dobyns, Honoré Palmer's defeated opponent] who was a fairly good man."

Another quick note, about season tickets for an opera or theater box that Franklin MacVeagh had purchased and given to Bertha Palmer – she was offering to have her son reimburse him – refers in closing to their shared passion for politics. The letter is undated, on her regular blue letterhead, and it might have been sent after her son's campaign or in another election year:

I hope all goes well since you helped to save the country – and that you will now think to trying to save the pieces of democracy – for I am convinced the country never needed the grand old principles so much as now. I have been entirely bottled up during the campaign and that was why you had such an overdose of my rampant sentiments the other evening.  
I must do it again  
Sincerely yours  
Bertha Honoré Palmer  
Saturday

Bertha Palmer had succeeded with her son's entry into politics, but he – like his father – had little interest in the sport of campaigning and power-brokering and had gone through the motions to please her. Potter Palmer died shortly after his son's election, at the age of 76, and after serving for four years Honoré never stood for public office again. There is no definite record of correspondence between Bertha Palmer and Franklin MacVeagh after this point, although the families certainly met in Europe and Chicago in her early years of widowhood.

This time also marked the lapse of her passion for local politics. It is unclear how much of that passion had been nourished by McVeagh's zeal, or whether her withdrawal caused or resulted from the cooling of their friendship. It would certainly have been more difficult for him to continue those eager and frequent political discussions with her as an unmarried woman. However embroiled their civic interests and private longings may have been, some rupture in that delicate connection took place after her husband's death. Characteristically, Bertha Palmer sailed to Europe.

Speculation was high about her social doings and marriage prospects. "King Tries to Make Match for Mrs. Potter Palmer," read a headline in the *New York American* on March 17, 1907.<sup>59</sup> Her hometown paper, *The Chicago Sunday Tribune*, ran a full-page article on September 22 of that year, showing photos of her European residences and asking, "Is Mrs. POTTER PALMER the ONLY American Woman Who Knows HOW to SPEND A FORTUNE?"<sup>60</sup>

Shortly after this last report of her frivolity, Bertha Palmer returned to Chicago for the winter season. One can only imagine what old friends like the MacVeaghs thought of this type of coverage, but she herself wanted it to stop. According to her biographer, when members of the press gathered to interview Bertha Palmer at her Lake Shore Drive home, "she looked at them coldly."

Their papers had been linking her name with a succession of romances in Europe and she did not approve. ... "It is very annoying to a woman who is traveling alone and unprotected to have such things printed," Mrs. Palmer told the reporters severely. "Coming from one's own town, too!"<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ross, *Silhouette in Diamonds*, 213.

<sup>60</sup> Dwight, Eleanor, *The Letters of Pauline Palmer: A Great Lady of Chicago's First Family*. Easthampton, Massachusetts, M.T. Train/Scala Books, 2005, reproduction of the newspaper page on page 50.

<sup>61</sup> Ross, *Silhouette in Diamonds*, 212-13.

As if to prove her gravitas, she once again entered into a local collaboration with Franklin MacVeagh in the winter of 1907, seeking to resolve friction between the Civic Federation and Chicago trade unions by hosting a meeting at her home. She may have seen this as a chance to succeed where she had failed during the Pullman strike. If this meeting was an attempt by capital to mollify labor, in the manner of the long-gone White City, it did not appear to succeed – despite Bertha Palmer’s “beauty, her social prestige, her gracious manners, her large hospitality, and her administrative talent,” according to a friend of Emily MacVeagh:

It was thought that a better understanding could be reached if the conflicting elements could be brought together on a semi-social ground. Mrs. Palmer combined a love of the gay world with a keen interest in the vital problems of the day. ... In spite of an effort to be courteous and conciliatory on the part of the union speakers, the undercurrent of veiled menace and defiance was plainly visible, though these were not directly expressed.<sup>62</sup>

Perhaps some compelling element that had been present before in the political understanding between Bertha Palmer and Franklin MacVeagh did not survive their separations after Potter Palmer’s death. Shortly after this meeting Bertha Palmer went West to visit her now-married son Honoré on his ranch in Oregon, and she was captivated by the vitality and promise of frontier life. She was already back in Europe when she heard that the MacVeaghs would be leaving Chicago: He had been asked by the incoming president, William Howard Taft, to serve as Secretary of the Treasury – the only Progressive in the conservative Cabinet of a Republican president. He headed the Treasury Department from 1909 to 1913.

It must have occurred to Bertha Palmer how well she would have suited the life of a Washington hostess, as the wife of a Cabinet member. The contrast between the MacVeaghs’ new adventure and her own well-traveled circuit from Chicago to Europe and back could have been a factor that drove her to consider a reinvention of her own in Florida. At any rate, from this

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<sup>62</sup> Mason, *Memories of a Friend*, 112-14.

time she left her political career and her close friendship with Franklin MacVeagh behind her. She and his wife met in Paris in 1912, according to a letter from Emily MacVeagh: “I dined quietly with Mrs. Potter Palmer the other night. She is looking younger and more beautiful than ever.”<sup>63</sup>

Emily MacVeagh, never very strong, died in 1916. It appears that just months before the end of her own life, Bertha Palmer had lost direct contact with Franklin MacVeagh, who would survive unmarried until 1934. An unsigned file copy of a typewritten letter that she dictated on March 13, 1918, as she was succumbing to breast cancer, thanks a friend for sending on a letter he had received from her old political ally: “How kind of you to send me the letter from Mr. MacVeagh, which I was very glad to have and through it to learn indirectly his news and that he was well. I am very glad to know that you think of us in the cold climate of Chicago and envy us our bright sun and balmy breezes.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Mason, *Memories of a Friend*, 153.

<sup>64</sup> Sarasota History Center, Manuscript 32, Box 1, Folder 10.

#### Chapter 4: A “wild and dirty” place of grace

For a lifelong city dweller like Bertha Palmer, the pull of the sun and the breezes was intensified by a pervasive American cultural disenchantment and anxiety in response to post-Victorian industrialism and the stressful, chaotic urban environments it created. Florida offered her the potential to resolve the inside/outside, domestic/public, feminine/masculine dialectics that lay at the heart of this stress.

Having grown up imbibing the rhetoric of competition and expansionism employed by Chicago’s boosters, who shaped the historian Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis to their own profitable ends,<sup>65</sup> she would have been responsive to the back-to-nature mood taking hold among the wealthy classes after the turn of the century – and seen it as an opportunity for engagement as well as retreat. She might have been drawn to the “free land” of Florida as a place to re-enact the heady early days of her youth in a less complicated, less codified and more dynamic setting.

A predominant theme among the many active expressions of antimodernism, Lears tells us, was vitalism, a sometimes metaphysical or sentimental celebration of the connections between natural surroundings and the human soul. Bertha Palmer would not have overtly adopted such a romantic stance, but the lure of a “simple life” that others were experiencing would have appealed to her as a chance to pursue the lingering American Progressive “vision of a land transformed into a series of ideal cities” – in Susman’s words.

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<sup>65</sup> Cronon, William, *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991, 31.

Bertha Palmer came of age in a raw frontier city, where the river flowed with red blood from the slaughterhouses, live fish plopped from the water faucets in the finest homes, and rickety boardwalks – which would later spread the fire of 1871 – allowed ladies to walk without dragging their skirts in the mud and manure of the streets. Her 1907 trip to her son’s ranch in Oregon may have awakened a desire to return to this kind of liminal space – a place in the process of being deliberately constructed from surrounding natural resources.

The White City of 1893 can also be seen as a liminal space, a cultural frontier constructed from an urban-rural interdependence. Chicago was a force fueled as much by the labor of Midwestern farm families as it was by the timber of Michigan and Wisconsin forests. Later came the waves of immigrants from Europe, adding to the “women adrift” surrounding the world’s fair, “single young women who had never seen a city but now hoped to make one of the biggest and toughest their home.”<sup>66</sup>

This saturation of the masculine urban space by young working-class women literally pulled privileged matrons like Bertha Palmer out of their luxurious interiors, as they felt a duty to advance the women’s safety and welfare. But the Chicago she returned to in 1907 after her time in Europe had re-established a hegemony of gender and class distinctions, with more smoothly running institutions to both aid the poor and keep them in their place. Once again, the less fashionable streets were seen as no place for a lady.

It may have appeared to her that the work of Jane Addams and other reformers whose efforts she had supported was coming undone – and that the ability of women to matter in the city’s public space was circumscribed as a result. Chicago social activist Louise de Koven

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<sup>66</sup> Larson, Erik, *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair that Changed America*. New York: Vintage Books, 2003, 11-12.

Bowen, ten years younger than Bertha Palmer, wrote about the city's daunting cultural segregations at the turn of the century:

Every charities district is supposed to have men and women in it who keep in touch with the cases in their district. But life in the modern city is so complicated and diversified, and there are so many demands upon the times of its citizens that the tendency is to get into a groove, to meet only the people who have the same interests and who do the same things as oneself. The average citizen never meets his foreign neighbors or knows anything of their lives. He looks upon them as an alien class with whom he has nothing in common.<sup>67</sup>

The complexity and the patriarchal structure of life in the maturing city – an orderly outward suppression of the conflicts and tensions that had characterized Chicago's growth spurt, and an attempt to erase the cultural diversities so vivid during that period – can be seen as what Lears refers to as “the banality of modern life.”<sup>68</sup> He identifies the antimodernism that developed among affluent, educated Americans in response to this evasive banality as springing from a crisis of cultural authority – the very same displacement that Bertha Palmer experienced in her post-fair years as she tried to “keep up with the procession” in politics and then in European high society.

The failures that she felt as personal and painful are framed by Lears as a wholesale repudiation of the idea of autonomous selfhood, along with the Protestant ethic itself, by a newly empowered professional class.

A wealthy, connected, self-made American like Potter Palmer was suddenly no match – when it came to representing his country as an ambassador to Germany – for a career diplomat who knew the language and possessed proven negotiating skills. This “triumph of modern culture,” says Lears, led to

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<sup>67</sup> Bowen, Louise de Koven, *Growing Up with a City*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002 (1926), 71.

<sup>68</sup> Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 251.

... a spreading sense of moral impotence and spiritual sterility – a feeling that life had become not only overcivilized but also curiously unreal. For the educated bourgeoisie, authentic experience of any sort seemed ever more elusive; life seemed increasingly confined to the airless parlor of material comfort and moral complacency. Many yearned to smash the glass and breathe freely – to experience “real life” in all its intensity.<sup>69</sup>

Sarasota in 1910 existed as a town, with some buildings and streets and a small hotel – not considered good enough for a visiting dignitary like Bertha Palmer, so a just-completed sanitarium was made over to her party for their first stay. And there were plenty of agricultural enterprises, not only citrus groves, but farms growing celery, lettuce and sweet potatoes. But the terrain itself – including the 350 acres Bertha Palmer purchased for her home at Osprey – was as rustic as any vitalist could wish for, and a drastic contrast to the first six decades of her life. Her daughter-in-law, Pauline Kohlsaatt Palmer, writes to her own mother in November 1910, alternating between praise and complaint:

Sarasota itself is most wonderfully situated on the bay, with a chain of keys protecting it from the gulf. Such fish I have never seen – great big ones jumping several feet out of the water everywhere you look! ... It is a fascinating country with wonderful vegetation. We got off at one place and walked a little way. Everything was very wild and dirty – so dirty that I nearly died. I don't see how people can bear to live surrounded by such filth, but they don't even seem to notice it. We saw a lovely blue heron flying near the shore and finally eight in the water. It is the first I remember seeing, and I was fascinated by its colour. The mosquitoes were very thick and vicious.<sup>70</sup>

It is easy to imagine Bertha Palmer finding rich potential in such an imperfect paradise, with no professional class to discourage her from amateur forays into ranching, farming, gardening and real estate development. She seems to have approached her enterprises not only with her characteristic earnestness, but also with a certain joy and spontaneity. Among the Northern visitors she tried to interest in Florida investments was T. Coleman du Pont. A dinner

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<sup>69</sup> Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 4-5.

<sup>70</sup> Dwight, *The Letters of Pauline Palmer*, 74.

conversation about a canal she wanted dug from her Myakka Valley ranches to Sarasota Bay led to some impromptu and unsuccessful experiments with du Pont's "blasting powder."<sup>71</sup>

Bertha Palmer's urges to make something of the untamed paradise in Florida, rather than sit back and enjoy its readymade beauty, were as much a response to her time as the original impulse to rusticate had been. The urban dweller's deep yearning for a correspondence with nature and agriculture, coupled with a relentless compulsion to perform and produce, resonated throughout the art and literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's first decades.

It did not take long for Bertha Palmer's inculcated industriousness to blossom in Florida's warmth. Along with the 90,000 acres of land she acquired in the Sarasota area, she bought another 50,000 acres of cleared timberland around Tampa, including 19,000 in what is now the Temple Terrace area – ostensibly a hunting preserve<sup>72</sup> but almost certainly part of her grand plan to open Florida's Gulf coast to middle-class tourists and retirees, just as Henry Flagler had claimed the east coast as pleasure grounds for the wealthy. Her interest in the Tampa area may have sprung from an idea of forestalling any competitor with ideas of picking up there where the late hotelier and railroad magnate Henry B. Plant had left off.

One inadvertent but important mark that Bertha Palmer made on her adopted state was the importation of architect Thomas Reed Martin, who went on to design many Sarasota landmarks in his recognizable Mediterranean Revival style with overtones of Art Deco, and also the Columbia Restaurant in Tampa. Martin was an apprentice at the Chicago firm of Holabird and Roche when she invited him to Sarasota in 1910. The following year he moved here with his family, but his 1912 designs for "an opulent Italian villa" at the Osprey estate did not meet her

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<sup>71</sup> Ross, *Silhouette in Diamonds*, 235.

<sup>72</sup> Burroughs, Lana, Tim Lancaster, Grant Rimbey with The Temple Terrace Preservation Society, *Images of America: Temple Terrace*. Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2010, 15-16.

approval. The two are believed to have quarreled, and at some point in the design process she turned to New York architect Ogden Codman, who had built society “cottages” in Newport. His drawings for a “Palladian-style palazzo” of more than 20,000 square feet were never completed.<sup>73</sup>

This period, from around 1912 to 1916, appears to have been literally among the most fruitful of Bertha Palmer’s life. A local newspaper reprinted a breathless report from the Chicago Tribune in the spring of 1915, declaring that “Mrs. Potter Palmer leads in so many ways and has so easily achieved distinctions in the past that her latest success will surprise nobody.” With a hint of condescension, the article called her “the world’s most renowned market gardener.”

Last week sixty-eight carloads of freshly gathered asparagus left Sarasota, Mrs. Palmer’s estate in the heel of Florida’s riding boot, for the New York hotels. ... Mrs. Palmer is supposed to own about 200,000 acres at the jumping off place of Florida, parts of which she is getting under cultivation as rapidly as possible. ... Ogden Cadman of New York has been her architect, and from time to time she has expert advice abroad from famous landscape people. ... Mrs. Palmer uses fast power boats for supervising her estate, and automobiles where the roads permit.<sup>74</sup>

It is likely that at her Osprey estate, which she named The Oaks, and at her more rustic ranch, Bertha Palmer was able to resolve her Victorian ambivalence between duty and pleasure for perhaps the first time in her life. In 1911 a Chicago reporter arrived to write about her extensive gardens – and found the celebrity in a mood of serenity, even humility: “The most wonderful thing in the world is a garden,” she is quoted as saying. “I have found my one talent, if I have any, at Sarasota Bay. It is to watch beautiful things grow and see flowers blossom as I plant them.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Stockbridge, Dorothy, “Sarasota Leader Planned Bayfront Mansion.” *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, April 12, 1992, 11 and 13I.

<sup>74</sup> “What Chicago Paper Says,” *Sarasota Times*, April 12, 1915, quoting the Chicago Tribune.

<sup>75</sup> Ross, *Silhouette in Diamonds*, 229.

Because Bertha Palmer had lived all of her adult life among wealthy peers, where beauty was her primary currency, it must have been bracing to make her way instead with straightforward American dollars. No longer was she dependent on the cultural “image of female beauty as artifact or mask, as an exterior, alluring and seductive surface that conceals an interior space containing deception and danger,” as Laura Mulvey describes the patriarchal mythology.<sup>76</sup>

And on the Florida frontier, setbacks in her architectural or agricultural experiments seemed less dire – especially since she occasionally gave herself respites from these endeavors in Palm Beach, Chicago, New York and Europe. Her progress in several areas – including a railroad spur to her lands in Venice, a successful program to treat cattle for ticks, and the importation of African-American farm workers from New Orleans in the face of local opposition – seem to have helped free her from the lifelong advance-and-retreat pattern so common to Victorian-era Americans.

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<sup>76</sup> Mulvey, Laura, “Pandora: Topographies of the Mask and Curiosity.” *Sexuality and Space*, edited by Beatriz Colomina, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992, 58-9.

## Chapter 5: Cancer and “American Nervousness”

Bertha Palmer’s bustling, blooming, productive widowhood in the liminal greenspace of Florida’s west coast might have solidified a more prominent place for her in the state’s history – but at this point her lifelong good health deserted her.

As a woman in her sixties, culturally considered to have aged beyond her desirability, Bertha Palmer had succeeded in becoming a “woman on the outside” in a way that would have been impossible in an early-20<sup>th</sup> century city. But in 1916, breast cancer transformed her body once more into an object and a prison, a gender-determined signifier for prevailing societal anxieties concerning the “fluid sexuality” of women.

These anxieties were an integral part of a contagious psychosomatic response to the cultural shifts that complicated and stratified modern life, which often found physical expression in a sort of nervous collapse that mostly afflicted the professional and wealthy classes – and especially women. The popular diagnostic term for this vague but pervasive disorder was neurasthenia.

At this point in Western medical history, there was little doubt that cancer was a true somatic disease. But breast cancer patients like Bertha Palmer, after undergoing crude surgical procedures, found themselves plunged into the same netherworld of rest cures and fad diets that were prescribed for “nervous exhaustion.” And they were treated by specialists who believed breast cancer to be a female complaint engendered by the stresses of modern life – very much like neurasthenia.

Lears traces the roots of antimodernism to this “disease of the age.” He writes about George Miller Beard, a New York neurologist, who coined the term “neurasthenia” to describe a response to cultural complexity that manifested itself in any number of physical ailments and disabilities, and constructed a suitably hysterical discourse on its plethora of root causes – including railway travel, electrification and “extremes of dryness of the air” – in his 1881 work, *American Nervousness*.

Beard’s lumping together of disparate phenomena suggested that neurasthenia was a catchall term, encompassing what present-day psychiatrists would classify as various neurotic symptoms. They were unified, however, by a common effect: a paralysis of the will. Tortured by indecision and doubt, the neurasthenic seemed a pathetic descendant of the iron-willed Americans who had cleared forests, drained swamps and subdued a continent.<sup>77</sup>

There are signs that Bertha Palmer’s younger son, Potter Palmer II – called “Min” in the family, for minor – fit the definition of a classic neurasthenic. While Honoré Palmer displayed a robust love of sports and the outdoors in the heroic mode of Theodore Roosevelt, his brother Min possessed a quieter, indoor nature. He worked intermittently on behalf of his mother’s real estate and financial interests, with frequent travels to indulge a mild interest in history and antiquities. His wife’s regular and relentlessly cheerful letters to her mother from these travels suggest that Min was only infrequently both happy and healthy. Her most direct reference to the problem came on their first trip to Sarasota, in November 1910, half a year after his mother arrived:

We came down here yesterday, through lovely country, so rich and cultivated, in spots. They grow celery, lettuce, sweet potatoes, mainly, besides the oranges and grapefruit. Min likes it quite a good deal, which rather surprises me. I think he is somewhat surprised himself, to tell the truth! He hasn’t any of his usual hopeless feeling about it.<sup>78</sup>

For a society matron, Bertha Palmer had always been physically active, taking part in the urban fad for bicycles in Chicago and later organizing shooting parties at her Myakka Valley

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<sup>77</sup> Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 49-50.

<sup>78</sup> Dwight, *The Letters of Pauline Palmer*, 74.

ranch. But all of her correspondence displays ample evidence of an anxious, perfectionistic personality – at times even an obsessive focus on small details that today would be characterized as micromanagement. The regal serenity she displayed as a public figure appears to have come at the kind of price Beard describes in *American Nervousness*:

There are those who prefer, or fancy they prefer, the sensation of movement and activity to the sensations of repose; but from the standpoint only of economy of nerve-force all our civilization is a mistake; every mile of advance into the domain of ideas, brings a conflict that knows no rest, and all conquests are to be paid for, before delivery often, in blood and nerve and life.<sup>79</sup>

If not for the cancer, Bertha Palmer's Florida retreat might well have been a prophylactic against this kind of conflict. Her money and mobility made her feel at home with the businessmen who were vigorously promoting the growth and development of Sarasota. Her mother had died at eighty-one and her father at ninety-three, and she had every intention of living long enough to put her Florida acreage to prodigious use.

But the diagnosis scuttled her plans – including her dreams of the timeless mansion that would have been “similar to Vizcaya in Miami, of monumental proportions.”<sup>80</sup> Against her will, it forced her into the life of an invalid, marked by a disease that was secret and shameful. Placed in the hands of medical experts whose theories about cancer to some extent blamed the victim, this confident and formidable woman appears – in her correspondence, at least – to have internalized the tendency to view female cancer patients as afflicted by “nerve weakness.”

As tuberculosis was the disease of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, cancer would cast its shadow over the 20<sup>th</sup>. Between 1900 and 1916, U.S. cancer deaths rose by 29.8 percent<sup>81</sup> – likely boosted by more accurate diagnoses. When Bertha Palmer took the train to New York for an explication of her

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<sup>79</sup> Beard, George M., *American Nervousness, Its Causes and Consequences: A Supplement to Nervous Exhaustion (Neurasthenia)*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1881, 104

<sup>80</sup> Stockbridge, *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, 131.

<sup>81</sup> Mukherjee, Siddhartha, *The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer*. New York: Scribner, 2010, 24.

symptoms, she found doctors far more knowledgeable than they would have been a few decades earlier. Yet in the public imagination – and in the minds of many doctors – the early Greek physician Galen’s theory that cancer and depression were manifestations of the same “black bile” disease still held on.

The turn-of-the-century conflation between cancer and mental illness was especially notable in the cases of female patients – who were seen as more prone to the disease – and for the cancers that invaded women’s breasts and reproductive organs. Historian Robert Aronowitz tells of the influential British physician Herbert Lumley Snow, whose 1891 book, *The Proclivity of Women to Cancerous Diseases*, positioned the dramatic rise in cancer diagnoses as inseparable from the complex demands of modern culture.

Snow and others explicitly connected cancer in the breast and elsewhere to neurasthenia, chlorosis and other late-nineteenth century medical ailments that particularly ailed women and whose ultimate causes lay in modernity. The links among civilization, female stress, nerves and cancer and other “nerve weaknesses” led Snow to “the practical conclusion” that we need to “aim at removing the causes which, among us, so conspicuously impede the female sexual organs in the due performance of their allotted functions.”<sup>82</sup>

After centuries of dismissing cancer as a mysterious and incurable disorder, physicians had entered the “optimistic” period of treatment. The development of anesthesia and antiseptics had made surgery an accessible and popular strategy, and the U.S. surgeon William Stewart Halstead pioneered the “radical mastectomy” in 1891 – a “majestic and flawed” method of cutting deeply into the patient’s breasts, neck and shoulders, the success of which depended not on surgical technique but on how far the lesions had spread before they were diagnosed.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Aronowitz, Robert A., *Unnatural History: Breast Cancer and American Society*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 70.

<sup>83</sup> Mukherjee, *The Emperor of All Maladies*, 60-69.

Bertha Palmer's cancer appears to have been well advanced when it was discovered; despite extensive treatment – and no doubt mortifying disfigurement – her physical decline was swift. At the time a shameful, unmentionable affliction, breast cancer relegated her once more, during the last two years of her life, to a painful conflict between private and public space.

Halstead's method, standard at the time, was to follow the mastectomy procedure with a long convalescence at a sanitarium, out of the public eye, in the manner of tuberculosis cures. In 1914, a patient of his, Ruth Green, wrote to him, "My friends all say, 'How well you look since your rest cure at the Hopkins' — so I haven't said a word about my operation."

Green's friends assumed she experienced a more stereotypical female ailment and treatment (the rest cure was a treatment for neurasthenia and kindred conditions), which allowed her to maintain a wanted privacy about her cancer diagnosis and treatment.<sup>84</sup>

This enforced secrecy must have been painful for Bertha Palmer. Just as she had finally freed herself to enact the masculinized role of a forest-clearing, swamp-draining, iron-willed Florida capitalist, her physical body turned against her, and her letters display a decided change in tone. Whether her cancer diagnosis truly brought on the cluster of emotional and physical complaints that qualified as neurasthenia cannot be established. But there is little doubt that her doctors treated her as if this were the expected outcome. A 1913 letter from another cancer specialist to Halstead, Aronowitz wrote

... suggests more general conflicts and parallels between contemporary beliefs about individual, especially female, psychology and cancer. In the same era in which the physical and emotional stress of modern civilization was seen as making women neurasthenic, women were being told to be more vigilant about their bodies — a double bind if we assume that neurasthenia, despite the protests of some physicians, was a stigmatized diagnosis. Second, cancer was viewed as something happening under the surface of the body yet relentlessly looking for expression just as neurotic drives were always finding physical manifestations. Both occurred more in women and were made worse by civilizing forces.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Aronowitz, *Unnatural History*, 130.

<sup>85</sup> Aronowitz, *Unnatural History*, 309.

Toward the end of her life, indications of Bertha Palmer's vigilant resistance to her disease would only have reinforced this prevailing view that cancer and neurasthenia were interconnected, a twinned response of the still-mysterious feminine mind and body to an age of cultural turbulence. The anxiety surrounding her suffering is evident in a February 21, 1918, dictated letter to her doctor in New York. The tone is so redolent of American Nervousness, in its obsessive attention to physical symptoms, and so unlike that of any other existing letter from Bertha Palmer, that it merits quoting in full:

Dear Doctor, –

I was very sorry not to have seen more of you while in New York because I was not doing so well as at first and thought the special cooking at the sanatorium would correct my difficulties, or you would find out from reports made to you what they were and make such changes as you thought best.

Perhaps when I first saw you I should have explained what I thought was my trouble, and I will do so now: when I was young I had little appetite for winter food, fresh winter vegetables being rare. Boiled cabbage, turnips, parsnips, et cetera, I never ate. I permitted myself the great indulgence of winter strawberries, et cetera, as soon as they appeared, and drank with my meals clarets and sauternes. These acids I persevered in till my digestive organs were quite upset and I could take them no more—fruits, cream, vegetable acids, wines, et cetera, could not take at all. My diet was fish, fresh meats, ham and bacon, eggs, rice, potatoes, fresh peas and beans and sweets, of which I am very fond, also canned California fruits. I always took a mild purgative every second day.

Your diet of cereal with cream, followed by prunes, was quite an upsetting of my traditions, but as I did not suffer from it at first I supposed you had found a combination that relieved me from my old disability. But gradually it has come to disagree with me seriously. When I reached New York I had been four days without a movement from my bowels, although I had twice taken my little purgative pills that formerly have been sufficient. Miss Christee gave me an enema at the sanatorium, but it did not seem to relieve me; the congestion seemed to be in my upper bowel.

While in New York I suddenly lost my appetite—the morning meal was oppressive; my urine became scant and dark colored at times, and these symptoms have continued up to now. I have, therefore, decided to break the training for a time (your prescription advises that I believe) and eat ordinary food, leaving out many of the fresh vegetables.

I am writing you fully so you can think over your food elements and give me what you think desirable, leaving out many of the acid producing foods.

I am very sorry not to continue so responsive as at first but feel sure that after considering the matter you can send me a dietary that will suit my peculiar difficulties.

The purgative I will take is one of the Graines de Santé of Dr. Blanc, Paris, or Calabar Grains made by a Chicago chemist.<sup>86</sup>

The physician she wrote to was Ludwig Kast, a prominent Vienna-born professor of clinical medicine. While it appears that Kast had prescribed a regimen of foods and medications for his famous patient, he was by no means a champion of the holistic quackery exemplified by the sanitarium director John Harvey Kellogg, and his patient C.W. Post, who both founded cereal companies based on George Miller Beard's idea that neurasthenia and other afflictions stemmed from dyspepsia – the common term for indigestion.

Kellogg had actually worked with Beard decades earlier, in attempts to cure cancer by means of electrical stimulation. “Dr. Beard claimed,” he said – “I did not see very many cases – but he claimed to have obtained very good results from this method.” As late as 1901, Kellogg was conflating cancer and tuberculosis as a problem of the immune system, to be treated by diet:

It seems to me, sir, that the great difficulty we have to contend with in the treatment of cancer is not altogether the fact that we cannot remove all of the outside structure of the cancer, or the morbid growth, but that we cannot judge the patient. ... People get sick with cancer because they have a weak constitution which is susceptible to cancer. It is only a sick man that gets tuberculosis. He must be reduced to a low level of vitality before he can become infected.<sup>87</sup>

Dr. Snow, too, had described cancer as a disease of the modern age: “It is also found that carcinoma is almost absent in the savage; while rapidly increasing in prevalence among the

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<sup>86</sup> Sarasota History Center, Manuscript 32, Box 1, Folder 10.

<sup>87</sup> *Transactions of the American Electro-therapeutic Association, Ninth Annual Meeting*. New York: American Electrotherapeutic Association, 1901, 140-141.

civilized.”<sup>88</sup> But Kast, Bertha Palmer’s consultant, was a respected pioneer in cancer research, whose rigorous laboratory studies advanced early 20<sup>th</sup> century knowledge of how malignancies arose and spread. He wrote in 1908 that “we should not be too ready with the diagnosis of ‘chronic gastritis’ or ‘nervous dyspepsia’ but should bear in mind the possibility of an incipient cancer.” He added:

All the efforts of curing internal cancer with drugs, or serum, trypsin, electricity, radium, and innumerable other devices are failures. Nowadays only ignorance and prejudice can explain the attitude which promises cure through medical means. There is only one hope for permanent cure and that is operation.<sup>89</sup>

The radium treatment Kast mentioned was administered in the form of an injected solution, a method that was widely adopted after the element’s discovery in 1898 – but quickly proved to be harmful and often fatal. The radiation therapy familiar to us today was not then an option, because machines with sufficient voltage to be effective were not available until the late 1920s.

When a grueling surgery failed to alleviate her suffering, Bertha Palmer cannot be blamed for grasping at the kinds of theories that Kellogg and the culture as a whole espoused, and feeling that she had failed to achieve the holy grail of vitalism. Kast – like many oncologists even today – may have hoped that the pills and powders he recommended might have a palliative placebo effect on his patient. She was taking at least five medications during these last months, according to letters sent to pharmacies in Chicago and New York, and ordering bottles of pills by the half-dozen at a time.

Bertha Palmer’s complaints about reluctant bowel movements and scant urine echo a theory of Beard’s – that the American economy’s new reliance on “brain-work” was changing

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<sup>88</sup> Aronowitz, *Unnatural History*, 70.

<sup>89</sup> Kast, Ludwig, “The Early Diagnosis of Cancer of the Stomach.” *American Medicine*, Volume 14. New York: American-Medicine Publishing Company, 1908, 577-81.

the physical constitution of its people. According to a chart on the frontispiece of *American Nervousness*, this epidemic of multi-symptomatic breakdowns began with dyspepsia – which could escalate into exhaustion and from there all the way to insanity. Beard asserted that “delicacy of digestion” was “one of the best known and first observed effects of civilization on the nervous system,” and offered an observation that by 1880, the stomach of the East Coast brain-worker could no longer digest pork:

Among the brain-working classes of our large cities everywhere, pork, in all its varieties and preparations, has taken a subordinate place among the meats upon our tables, for the reason that the stomach of the brain-worker cannot digest it. Three times a day, and every day in the year almost, the flesh of swine in some form was, in the last generation, the dependence of our fathers, who could eat it freely without ever asking themselves whether it was easy or hard to be digested. This dethronement of pork has had, and is still having on one side, a disastrous effect upon the American people.<sup>90</sup>

Perhaps Bertha Palmer took seriously the idea that her adherence to the prevailing cultural imperative to be a “brain-worker” had led to her own physical disaster, and was anxious to try any diet that might reverse the process. Or perhaps she knew her end was near and simply wanted to mount a gallant resistance on all fronts. But it is clear she felt this violation of her body as a shameful event. She avoided any public acknowledgement of the cancer, and instead focused on various less serious complaints that could have been a result of the disease or a distraction from it.

In March 1918, two months before her death, she dictated a letter to an acquaintance concerning the donation of her marooned automobiles to the American Army in France, and appended this postscript: “P.S. I am very glad to say that I am very well, indeed, except for a little neuralgia from which I have suffered lately.”<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Beard, *American Nervousness*, 42-3.

<sup>91</sup> Letter to Dr. Brewer, Sarasota History Center, Manuscript 32, Box 1, Folder 10.

Public taboos concerning breast cancer persisted well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. When a cancer survivor contacted The New York Times in 1950 to place an announcement of a support group, the society editor told her the newspaper could not use the words “breast” or “cancer.” She suggested the phrase, “diseases of the chest wall.”<sup>92</sup>

But at the time of Bertha Palmer’s illness, delicacy and stoicism about bodily topics extended in her family to a host of diseases, not just cancer or neurasthenia. When her daughter-in-law Pauline wrote to Chicago with news of Bertha Palmer’s brother Harry Honoré’s death in 1911, the recipient was sworn to secrecy: “Harry has been terribly ill with gallstones for several years and has suffered agonies. He has had pneumonia lately and died very suddenly. Don’t say anything about his gallstones or suffering from them.”<sup>93</sup>

And seven long, detailed letters from Pauline Palmer to her mother, written between February 2 and April 23 in Sarasota, make no mention at all of Bertha Palmer or her state of health. After she died on May 8, the Chicago newspapers reported the cause as an illness both swift and mundane: “She was ill only two weeks, but time enough for her dear ones to gather round her. She died of pneumonia.”<sup>94</sup>

Through the medium of space – tens of thousands of acres of it – Bertha Palmer had doubled the fortune her husband had left her, and imposed her maiden and married names upon Florida’s urban and rural places in the best tradition of an American pioneer. How sad, then, that she would be forced at the last back into her woman’s body, on a bed, in a house, and onto the “complex terrain of social and sexual significance” that Mulvey defines as the American home:

This “interior” also contains within it “interiority,” the psychic spaces of desire and anxiety, and the private scenarios of feelings, a female sphere of emotion within the

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<sup>92</sup> Mukherjee, *The Emperor of All Maladies*, 26-27.

<sup>93</sup> Dwight, *The Letters of Pauline Palmer*, 80.

<sup>94</sup> Sarasota History Center, Rollins Coakley Collection, Manuscript 39, Box 2, Folder 10.

female sphere of domesticity. ... But its emotional reverberations and its gender specificity are derived from and defined in opposition to a concept of masculine space: an outside, the sphere of adventure, movement, and cathartic action in opposition to emotion, immobility, enclosed space, and confinement.<sup>95</sup>

Bertha Palmer's cancer-ravaged body was packed in ice and taken by rail for entombment in Chicago's bucolic Graceland Cemetery, at the time well north of the urban area, under a marble structure she had designed for her husband sixteen years earlier. Modeled after a Grecian temple, its flat roof and Ionic columns are a match for the dreamlike temple in the Palmers' Puvis de Chavannes painting, *The Sacred Grove: Beloved of the Arts and Muses*, that now hangs in the Art Institute of Chicago.

The family monument stands on a grassy hill and overlooks a small lake. It is open on all sides to the sun, snow and wind, lending Bertha Palmer's final home the inside/outside, feminine/masculine balance that she sought throughout a lifetime of spirited and troubled negotiations with space.

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<sup>95</sup> Mulvey, "Pandora," *Sexuality and Space* 55.

### **Conclusion: Mobility and opacity**

Bertha Palmer's life can make sense to us when seen as a culturally determined performance of the aspirational mobility dream. This one socially prominent woman's spatial navigation from America's Gilded Age and Progressive Era into a period of "American Nervousness" before and during the First World War encompassed a transition from domestic consumption to public production, involving numerous trips to Europe and decisive involvement in three world's fairs. It logically directed her toward the twentieth-century retreat and reassessment that culminated in her 1918 death as a wealthy Florida widow.

Her testing of the boundaries of True Womanhood allowed her to operate in a masculine space, yet she stopped short of embracing the ideology or lifestyle of the New Woman. She yearned instead to cross the gender divide and effect real change as an American Progressive, and repeatedly failed in this ambition, setting up a pattern of engagement and withdrawal that typified a pervasive Victorian ambivalence about the march toward modernity. Her most earnest commitment to political life coincided with an intense familiarity with her neighbor and political ally Franklin MacVeagh, and after her husband's death the dissolution of that invigorating friendship may have precipitated her decision to move to Florida's west coast.

In this rough yet lush and liminal space, she found ways to enact her desire to push the limits of gender and make her mark as a rancher and businesswoman instead of a society hostess and conspicuous consumer. But then, just as the First World War cut her off from her beloved Europe, cancer put her firmly in her place as a woman, forcing her to embody the cultural

construct of a neurasthenic who was powerless to resist the swirl of social anxieties generated by the modern age.

These contradictions and dichotomies that Bertha Palmer embodied on a grand scale do more to make her knowable to us today than the record of her words and actions can accomplish. Both her Victorian reticence and her modernistic construction of a seamless public façade have a way of hindering our best efforts to understand her motivations, despite a wealth of biographical material. In this absence of a discernible inner life, she calls to mind another transitional cultural role model, current presidential candidate Hillary Clinton – whom fellow New York Sen. Chuck Schumer has reportedly described as “the most opaque person you’ll ever meet.”<sup>96</sup>

In the end, cultural history gives us the only reliable lens for penetrating the veneer of Bertha Palmer. Without it, we are thrown back on those adulatory and baffling cardboard characterizations that form her biographical legacy, and inform that murky yet dazzling portrait of *Mrs. Potter Palmer* hanging at the Art Institute.

Many mysteries remain in this painting, but from the perspective of her Florida adventure, one seems especially worth dwelling on: its sharp introduction, in the top right corner, of natural light and color into the domestic gloom of the Palmer mansion. The effect of this yellow-green presence is to illustrate a tension between two competing nineteenth-century images of femininity, the hegemonic ideal of domesticity and the counterhegemonic “vitalism.” Suspended mid-canvas, *Mrs. Potter Palmer* is turned firmly and enthusiastically toward the comforting darkness of domesticity. But she is, literally, light on her feet; and the viewer perceives that at any moment she could, if she so chooses, pivot away and walk outdoors, casting aside her gavel and her crown.

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<sup>96</sup> Zengerle, Jason, “Is Hillary Clinton Any Good at Running for President?” *New York Magazine*, April 5, 2015. Accessed online on July 5, 2015: [www.nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2015/04/hillary-clinton-2016-campaign.html](http://www.nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2015/04/hillary-clinton-2016-campaign.html)

Opacity, while confounding the biographer, can create a useful cultural mirror. The spatial progression of Bertha Palmer's personal life both mirrored and made the time in which she lived. She was typical and yet exceptional, in that she traveled so much and so far – from the immobility of a young bride locked in a hotel suite to the free-range, all-American pursuit of what Bachelard calls “daydreams of immensity.”<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 184.

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