

Getting to know Eleanor "Sandy" Torrey West Ossabaw Island Matriarch and Muse

No one in the last 125 years has had as much influence on Ossabaw Island as Eleanor "Sandy" Torrey West, the matriarch and muse of Ossabaw Island. Mrs. West lived on Ossabaw Island full-time from 1987 until May of 2016, when, at age 103, she moved to Savannah. She first visited Ossabaw in 1924 at age 11 when her parents, Dr. Harry Norton Torrey and Nell Ford Torrey of Grosse Pointe, Michigan, purchased Ossabaw Island as their winter residence.

In 1978, Mrs. West led her family's negotiations with the State of Georgia during their sale of Ossabaw Island to the state. The Torrey-West family agreed to sell the island to the state for \$8 million, half its appraised value, and gift-deeded the remaining half-value to the state.

As a condition of the sale agreement, Ossabaw Island was designated Georgia's first Heritage Preserve by executive order of Governor George Busbee. Mrs. West was given a life estate of 23 acres on the island, including the Torrey-West House. Mrs. West's life estate "ownership" of the Torrey West Estate continues, despite her no longer living on Ossabaw Island. In January 2019, Mrs. West celebrated her 106th birthday. She lives in Savannah with her dog, Toby.

Many people are familiar with Mrs. West's Ossabaw Island history and legacy but are curious about lesser-known chapters of her life story. This special section provides a wider look at her long and active life.



Eleanor Torrey's early life in Savannah

The Greenwich Years



In 1917, Dr. Harry Norton Torrey and Nell Ford Torrey of Grosse Pointe, Michigan purchased 100-acre Greenwich Plantation in Thunderbolt, Georgia, adjacent to Bonaventure Cemetery. They purchased Greenwich as their winter retreat. Many wealthy northern families including the Torreys bought large homes and land tracts in coastal Georgia in the early 20th century, seeking escape from the brutal northern winters. Harry Torrey was a brain surgeon; his wife Nell was an heiress whose grandfather, John Baptiste Ford, created the first plate glass in the United States, and founded Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company, Libby Owens Ford Glass Company, and Wyandotte Chemical Company (now part of BASF).

At the time of the Greenwich purchase, Harry and Nell's daughter Eleanor and son Bill were four and six years old, respectively.

According to a Savannah newspaper article about the sale, the property included the elaborately furnished main house, a six-car garage, a laundry building, a superintendent's office and cottage, a gate lodge, a chauffeur's cottage, other servants' quarters, an artificial pond, and formal gardens.

In January 1923, a fire destroyed the main house, a three-story, 40-room structure built in approximately 1899 - 1900. In the fire, Eleanor (age 10), and her nurse, jumped from the second floor window to escape.

Instead of rebuilding at Greenwich, the Torreys purchased Ossabaw Island in 1924 and built what is now referred to as the Main House, or the Torrey-West House, on Ossabaw's North End. The Main House was designed by renowned Savannah architect Henrik Wallin; the builder was Farquhar McRae. Wallin and McRae were the architect and builder for other Savannah-area noted buildings, including the Armstrong House. Construction of the Main House was completed in 1926.

Sources:

Historic Bonaventure Cemetery, by Amie Marie Wilson and Mandi Dale Johnson

Ossabaw Island, by Ann Foskey

worldcat.org Ford, J. B. (John Baptiste) 1811-1903 section.



Sandy West – Writer

Did you know that Eleanor “Sandy” West is an award-winning book author?

Pictured: *The God of the Hinge* Book Cover Illustration

Maria Bosomworth and William Rodgers (Beehive Press, 1976) is a picture book for children of all ages, telling the story of an Ossabaw piglet “born in the deep, wild woods” of Ossabaw Island, “where she listened to the soft patter of oak leaves, the crackle of palmetto and the sweep sound of the wind.”

Separated from her mother at only four weeks old, Maria finds love with some unlikely creatures: first, with a group of “people who stop” who rescued her from Ossabaw’s beach; and soon after with William Rodgers, a long-eared, long-tailed, giant-footed puppy. The “true story of their love and friendship [was] written and photographed by Eleanor Torrey West.” The book won an award of excellence in the 1976 Southern Books Competition sponsored by the Southeastern Library Association.

In fewer than 1000 words, with 30 photo illustrations, the 70-page *Maria Bosomworth and William Rodgers* offers a glimpse into the heart of Sandy, and a sidelong glance at the island itself in the years just before the sale of Ossabaw Island. More than a children’s book, *Maria Bosomworth...* is a timeless fable of finding love in unexpected places.



In 2006, Sandy joined forces with Elizabeth “Rusty” Pool, her longtime friend, former sister-in-law, and travel companion, to write their joint memoir, *The God of the Hinge: Sojourns in Cloud Cuckoo Land* (Harbor House, 2006). The first-person account begins with their meeting in 1935—two debutantes in their early 20s in New York’s Grand Central Station. They take their first trip together in 1941—a day trip to Windsor, Ontario, a short drive from their homes in Detroit. Over the decades, they travel together almost yearly. On that first trip they hear the song “You and I” many times, which became their name for their travel persona.

As the duo of “You-and-I” makes trips to Jamaica, New Orleans, Santa Fe, Boston, Charleston, and inevitably Savannah, among many destinations, they become aware of a third companion on their journeys, both physical and metaphysical. Revealed in sections written separately, responding to each other as if in correspondence, *The God of the Hinge* is officially written as a missive to Sandy’s oldest granddaughter Melanie. Episodes of adventures lead them to old bookstores and libraries, on beaches in South Carolina and Key West, and back again and again to Georgia. Packed into fewer than 250 pages are tales of Greek mythology, the Big Bang, women’s marches in Washington DC, quotes of classic poetry, and the story of the sale of Ossabaw Island.

Through these expansive narratives the reader is offered a rare image of the young woman who is Eleanor Torrey, and her metamorphosis into Sandy West, the muse of Ossabaw Island.

Books available for purchase at ossabawisland.org



Eleanor "Sandy" Torrey West Timeline

Pictured: Clairview Estate



January 17, 1913 Eleanor Ford Torrey is born in Detroit to Dr. Harry Norton Torrey and Nell Ford Torrey of Grosse Pointe, Michigan. Eleanor is the second of two children; her brother William Ford Torrey was born in 1911.

1916 The Torrey family moves to their new estate, Clairview, located on Grosse Pointe Shores.

1917 The Torreys purchase Greenwich Plantation, Thunderbolt, Georgia, for a winter residence.

1923 The main house of Greenwich Plantation burns. Ten-year-old Eleanor and her nurse escape from the second floor of the burning house. No one is injured but the house is destroyed.

1924 Nell and Harry Torrey purchase Ossabaw Island for a reported \$150,000 for use as their new winter getaway. A house is designed by architect Henrik Wallin and construction begins by Farquhar McRae, contractor. Eleanor Torrey's first visit to Ossabaw occurs this year.

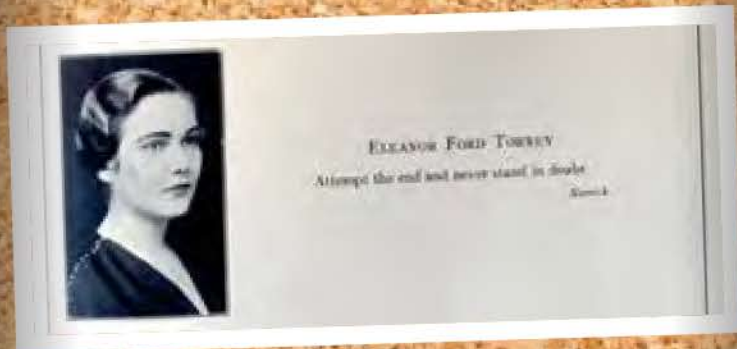
1926 Ossabaw Island Main House is completed. Henry Ford (no relation) is the first guest of the Torreys at their new "retreat in the woods" on Ossabaw.

1928 Eleanor graduates from Grosse Pointe Country Day School (now University Liggett School), a private, independent day school serving students from kindergarten through 9th grade.



1929 – 1931 Eleanor attends The Masters School in Dobbs Ferry, New York, graduating in 1931. She was a member of Phoenix, the honorary drama society.

1935 Eleanor Torrey meets Elizabeth Pool, the sister of John Shallcross, Eleanor's fiancé. Over the next 70 years the two women make annual travel pilgrimages together. During one of their earliest trips, a stranger gives redheaded Elizabeth and blonde-haired Eleanor their lifelong nicknames—Rusty and Sandy.



1935 Eleanor Torrey marries John Shallcross. They move briefly to Savannah where John works for Charles Herty at the Savannah Pulp and Paper Laboratory. The couple lives on Washington Avenue in Ardsley Park and occasionally visit Ossabaw Island.

1937 – 1944 Eleanor and John Shallcross, now living in Detroit, have three children: Michael (1937), Gillian (1940), and John (1944). They visit Ossabaw annually during this period. The marriage ends in divorce.

1945 Dr. Torrey, Eleanor's father, dies.

1952 Eleanor "Sandy" Shallcross marries Clifford Bateman West, an artist and film maker affiliated with Cranbrook Institute of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. The Wests reside in Bloomfield Hills, making at least one trip to Ossabaw each year.

1953 Justin West, son of Sandy and Clifford, is born.

1957 William Torrey, Sandy's brother, dies in Savannah.



1959 Nell Torrey, Sandy's mother, dies. Sandy and the children of her late brother William inherit Ossabaw Island. Sandy receives a life estate to the Main House (now known as the Torrey-West Estate).

1961 Sandy and Clifford West launch the Ossabaw Foundation, and its seminal program, the Ossabaw Island Project, an interdisciplinary retreat at the Main House on Ossabaw Island, for established creatives in many artistic, scientific, and cultural disciplines.

1964 – 1968 Sandy, Clifford and Justin West make frequent trips to Europe to produce 16 films on sculpture and the Italian Renaissance. Clifford is cameraman and producer, and Sandy is the scriptwriter.

1965 Sandy and Clifford West acquire a herd of eleven donkeys for their son Justin as a Christmas present. The herd eventually grows to over 150 animals.

1968 Sandy West participates as a panelist at the Conference on the Future of the Marshlands and Islands of Georgia, held at Sea Island. This conference led to the state legislation known as the Coastal Marshlands Protection Act, passed in 1970.

1970 Sandy and Clifford West launch Genesis as another program of their Ossabaw Foundation. This interdisciplinary program for emerging creatives (mostly undergraduate and graduate students) is conducted in a near-wilderness environment at Middle Place on Ossabaw Island.





1970s Sandy West pursues her passion for painting scenes of the island.

Mid 1970s Sandy West meets with major landholders of Georgia barrier islands, environmental activists, and officials from the State of Georgia (including Governor Jimmy Carter) seeking ways to protect Ossabaw Island from private development. She rejects many offers from developers seeking to purchase Ossabaw Island.

1976 Beehive Press publishes *Maria Bosomworth and William Rodgers*, a 70-page picture book written by Eleanor Torrey West, with 30 photographs also by West.

1978 The Torrey-West family, led by Sandy, sells Ossabaw Island to the State of Georgia for \$8 million, which is half the appraised value. Ossabaw is designated as a state heritage preserve, protected from development and limited to use for natural, cultural or scientific education, research or study. These protections are stipulated by Sandy and her family as a condition of the sale. Sandy, now divorced, retains life estate to the Main House and the surrounding 23 acres.

1978 – 1994 Sandy's private Ossabaw Foundation enters a use agreement with the State of Georgia and continues to operate public use and education programs on Ossabaw Island, and for a time, continues to operate OIP and Genesis. The public use and education programs include yearly visits by Shorter College, trips by the Smithsonian Institution, and educational camping and day trips.

1983 Sandy suspends operations of the Ossabaw Island Project and Genesis, due to funding deficits.



1987 Sandy becomes a year-round resident of Ossabaw Island, moving into the Main House.

1994 Sandy's private foundation, The Ossabaw Foundation, is dissolved. A new public nonprofit, the Ossabaw Island Foundation, is established, to manage programming and facilities on Ossabaw Island and to serve as steward of the heritage preserve. Sandy becomes Chair Emerita.

2002 The State of Georgia declares March 2 of this year as "Eleanor Torrey West Day" on the occasion of the dedication of the restored Club House on Ossabaw Island. Other honoraria over the years include awards from Georgia Humanities Council (Governor's Award), the Georgia Council for the Arts, and The Garden Club of America.

2006 Eleanor "Sandy" West and Elizabeth "Rusty" Pool write and publish *The God of the Hinge: Sojourns Into Cloud Cuckoo Land*, a memoir of their travels and their friendship.

2016 Sandy moves to Savannah, where she resides with her dog Toby.

Sources and photo credits:

Betsy Cain

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Elizabeth DuBose

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The God of the Hinge: Sojourns Into Cloud Cuckoo Land, by Elizabeth Pool and Eleanor West (2016)

"Keeper of the island" by Dan Chapman, *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, March 6, 2016

Maria Bosomworth and William Rodgers, by Eleanor Torrey West (1976)

The Masters School alumni office.

Ossabaw, by Eleanor West. (1973)

Ossabaw Island, by Ann Foskey. (2001)

Sally Speed

University Liggett School website, uls.org

Eleanor Torrey West

Lisa White





Photo by Fran Lapolla

Ossabaw Island's donkeys: Justin West tells their story.

The eight donkeys living on Ossabaw Island are some of the most beloved of all Ossabaw Island creatures. They are the remaining members of several generations of Sicilian donkeys who first came to Ossabaw in 1965. By 1998 the original herd had grown to approximately 150 animals and were impacting the ecosystem of the island. At the request of the State of Georgia, most of the donkeys were rehomed to families on the mainland, selected by Mrs. West and Roger Parker. The eight donkeys that remain are carriers of equine infectious anemia and are quarantined on Ossabaw for life.

In June, TOIF talked to Justin West, youngest child of Eleanor “Sandy” Torrey West, about the donkeys’ decades-long history on Ossabaw.

How the donkeys first came to Ossabaw Island:

“[The donkeys] were a present for me, years and years ago. I was 12. It was Christmas morning. We always had a big Christmas tree from the island that reached all the way to the ceiling in the Main House. Under the tree was an envelope [for me.] I opened the envelope and it was a clue. It led me to different places in the Main House, and then to the Club House. The last clue was to the barn near the Boarding House. We all went down to the barn and there were three donkeys. My mother and father [Clifford West] had gone down to Bull Island [South Carolina] in our blue Volkswagen minibus and loaded them in the bus and drove them back to Savannah.

“There were three original donkeys. Then we thought, ‘that’s not going to be good for the gene pool.’ Within a year or so we got [eight more]. I don’t think they were from Bull Island.”

Controlling the growing donkey population:

[By mid-1975, the original herd of 11 donkeys had grown to 69 animals.]

“The donkeys were populating the island at an alarming rate. Bill McCort from Penn State suggested that they might be interested in vasectomizing the donkeys [to stop the donkey expansion]. We rounded up a bunch of the donkeys. [A vasectomy clinic was set up] in Middle Place field. A bunch of vet students came down from Penn State. McCort was interested in animal behavior; the vasectomies didn’t change how the donkeys behaved. This was when Arthur [Graves] was the superintendent; Eugene [Graves] and Roger [Parker] and the rest were all there too. The vasectomies worked, except they missed a couple of the donkeys.

“I had grown up on the island and reached that age where nothing surprised me. It was just another day on Ossabaw--a bunch of Penn State vets with their masks on, and their instruments, operating a field hospital.”



Photo by Fran Lapolla

Justin’s personal connection with the donkeys:

“I did feel ownership of the donkeys; in the sense they were always referred to as ‘Justin’s donkeys.’ I remember my mother asked my permission to do the vasectomies because they were ‘my’ donkeys. At some point, like everything on Ossabaw, they became the island’s.

“When I’ve told people the story of the donkeys, people who have never been to the island don’t believe it--it sounds made-up. People who have been [to Ossabaw], there’s so much to absorb that it just fits in with the alligators and the snakes. It’s a bit of an Alice in Wonderland situation—you don’t really question the fact there are hedgehogs playing croquet because everything else is so unusual.

“I’ll be talking to someone, and they’ll say ‘Oh, I was [an Ossabaw Island Project] member down there. Are those donkeys still there?’ Or I’ll see a picture that someone did from the island, and there are the donkeys out in the marsh; or someone will send me a poem that their mother wrote about them.”

Justin’s reflections on donkey life:

“They travel widely and fast but they don’t seem to rush. You’ll see them at North End and very soon after that we’ll see them at Middle Place. They are the quintessential Buddhist animal, they are in the moment, they take their time and don’t hurry.

“I don’t want anyone messing with them. They should have a full life and peaceful death on the island. They’ve woven themselves into island life and into what has come out of the creative life, as an integral part of the island.

“I’m sure the donkeys will appreciate being written up; they like their moment in the sun.”