

The Southern author Flannery O'Connor (1925–1964) lived in Milledgeville, Georgia, during the last years of her life when I knew her. Flannery lived with her mother, Regina Cline O'Connor, at their farm just outside of town Andalusia, which is an historic tourist site today.

Flannery stayed with her mother because in her last years, “Mary Flannery,” as her Southern belle mother called her in the Southern fashion, had a very serious disease, “lupus”, which eventually claimed her life in 1964. Her father had died of the same disease, and it was genetic.

What you really need to know about Milledgeville is, in the 1950s and early 1960s, Milledgeville had been the state capital of Georgia before the “War Between the States”. After the “War,” many still called it then, the capital of the state was moved to Atlanta, but much pleasant ante-bellum architecture was left behind. The small town was full of high-columned, two-story white houses, while the people living in them prided themselves on a lifestyle of Southern manner and gentility.

Because of the withering “lupus,” which placed Flannery on straight steel crutches before the end, Flannery had to return from the North, where she had been living and writing, to her home in Milledgeville, where her widowed mother, Regina Cline O'Connor, could look after her.

Flannery had to have constant supervision and care. That care was furnished by Regina O'Connor, her mother. After Flannery's funeral in 1964, at which I was a pall bearer, Regina told me the one consolation about her thirty-nine-year-old daughter's early death was that if she, Regina, had died first, who would have looked after Flannery? Regina said that worried her a great deal as it certainly would have worried any mother in a similar situation.

Outside of Milledgeville was the Cline-O'Connor farm. To reach the frame farmhouse, you drove up a hill and over a long red-clay-and-gravel driveway that had green pastures on either side. I can always remember a seated Flannery waving in welcome from her rocking chair on the house veranda as I drove up on many visits to her.

While seated in a rocking chair on the veranda overlooking the sloping hills, nearly every visitor enjoyed a sense of rural peace and serenity. I often found myself there on summer afternoons and evenings. I would be seated in a

rocking chair on the veranda, gently rocking and talking with Flannery. Sometimes Regina, her mother, was present.

When Regina was present on the veranda, the conversation took a more gossipy and provincial level than the better times I enjoyed most was when Flannery and I talked about writing, literature, religion, history, the ironies of life, or anything else we wanted to talk about. We often rocked and talked as we watched the beautiful sunset change the colors of the night around us.

The way I came to know Flannery began with the fact my father and Regina sat on the town's Red Cross together. The Red Cross appealed to them both as a worthy cause that their community should back. Now Regina was a devout Roman Catholic, as was Flannery, and my father was minister of the First Presbyterian Church in town. But that made no difference to either. They had a meeting of the minds on the good of the Red Cross and charity.

Regina, a small and delicate lady, in the fashion of old-time Southern belles, of which she was one if ever there was one, always carried in her hand a dainty lace handkerchief. This handkerchief sailed around her because she gestured with it as she talked. My father wore a gray Fedora hat, which bobbed up and down as he nodded in agreement with someone. The two talked often.

In my memory, I can see the two of them talking after meetings on the Red Cross steps. How amused I was to see her white handkerchief sail and dot the air as if performing semaphore along with her words. My father's hat bobbed up and down in the air as he nodded and agreed with her implicitly. Later my father often said to me that Regina had a good business sense as any man and much better than most men. That she did. She was a born manager. Regina often later said to me that my father was a handsome man. That he was. The two got along famously.

I was a student in 1956 at Washington and Lee University in Virginia, when I first heard about Flannery O'Connor, the writer. A short story of hers, 'A Stroke of Good Fortune', had appeared in the '*Shenandoah*', the literary magazine of Washington and Lee in 1953.

My freshman English classes at Washington and Lee were quite good. A teacher there, Ashley Brown, had done literary evangelism for Flannery in the English Department. All the English teachers knew of Flannery, which

was very good and clever of them at the time, as Flannery was not well known at all in 1953. Many friends from my “prep” school who had gone to other well-known colleges had not heard of her at all at the time when I mentioned her. I have always felt how lucky I was to have gone to Washington and Lee.

After an English teacher heard that I was from Milledgeville, Georgia, he asked me if I knew O’Connor. I did not. But he said I should and that I should read her in a past issue of the college literary magazine. I did so. I read her short story ‘Stroke of Good Fortune’. I didn’t know exactly what I was supposed to feel, but whatever, I laughed and laughed and laughed, and I said to myself that I had to meet her. Here was a real-life lady.

I asked my father when I came home for a weekend if he knew one Flannery O’Connor.

He thought a little. ‘Of course,’ he said, “that’s Mary Flannery, Regina’s daughter. She sits on the Red Cross with me.” Then he paused and said, “Mary Flannery writes,” I think.”

I said she did and I wanted to meet her. He said he would be happy to arrange it. *No problem.*

In Milledgeville, there was one good restaurant, the Sanford House, in an elegant antebellum mansion. It was run and owned by Miss Fannie Appleby White and a younger friend, Mary Jo Thompson. The O’Connors often ate there, as did my family. Miss White was a good friend of Regina O’Connor. In fact, Mary Jo and Miss White often spent their weekends with Flannery and her mother at their Andalusia farm.

To make matters better, Mary Jo was a friend of my mother, and Miss White was a member of the Presbyterian Church, taught Sunday School there for years, admired my father’s sermons, and was clever enough to tell him so regularly. When my mother, who had heard I wanted to meet Flannery, said that was easy and explained the social situations to me, I knew I was in like Flynn. I would meet Miss O’Connor. So I began reading everything of Flannery’s I could find.

A few days later, when my family entered the Sanford House, my father asked Miss White who was the hostess at the restaurant to signal him if Mary

Flannery and Regina O'Connor came in. He told Miss White why. They did and she did. And so I met Flannery.

Miss White combined four walnut dining tables together so Regina and Flannery and my family could all sit at the same table. All this was quickly arranged by Miss White. Regina was delighted to have someone to gossip with.

'And this way,' Miss White said, 'Flannery can meet Jim (me)'. She should have said, 'So Jim can meet Flannery.'

Miss White placed our table in the dining room, where there was a big engraving of Robert E. Lee over the fireplace. There I had my first meeting with Flannery. When the Sanford House closed some years later, I bought the 1870 Lee engraving as a memento, and I have it in my foyer today as a memory of my meeting with Flannery.

At the table, my father and Regina immediately started talking Red Cross. My mother threw in some provincial gossip which Regina hadn't heard and was impressed delightedly to hear. But Flannery and I were both children of older parents seated at the same table. In an earlier period, South children, no matter what age, were to be seen and not heard.

Flannery and I didn't get to talk too much about literature, but I was able to tell her how smashing I thought her writing was. I could tell Flannery liked this. I asked if I might come alone one day to talk writing and maybe other things.

Flannery, ever polite, said she would be delighted to have me visit. She said we could sit on the veranda, see the sunset, and discuss literature and writing. She said her mother would telephone me a good appointment day and time for me to visit.

I said, 'Thank you very much.'

She was very sorry I had to come to see her, but she was very limited in moving around. (She came in on her steel crutches for the lupus and leaned them against the wall near her chair as she ate.)

I said, 'No matter.' I told her how I had been reading her and how I found her stories great fun.

I visited off and on with Flannery for eight years. She was very kind and very gracious. She always shared her opinions with me quite honestly. I told her about how I felt about writing, religion, and life in general. She was always informative, ever interesting, dry, ironic, and amusing in her comments.

She liked to ask me questions to answer the questions I asked, so it often went on and on. She was using the Socratic method, of course, which, looking back, I think was the right method to use in teaching someone my age. (I was twelve years younger than she was.) I talked to her generally like a wiser and more experienced big sister. I could do this because she was never pompous or pretentious about being an author.

Knowing her was a wonderful experience, spiritually life-affirming, and in time, I came to want to share my O'Connor experiences as well as I could with those who did not have them. My hope is, just maybe, through writing them up, I may be able to share some of the flavor I found in knowing her with those not so fortunate as to have known her.