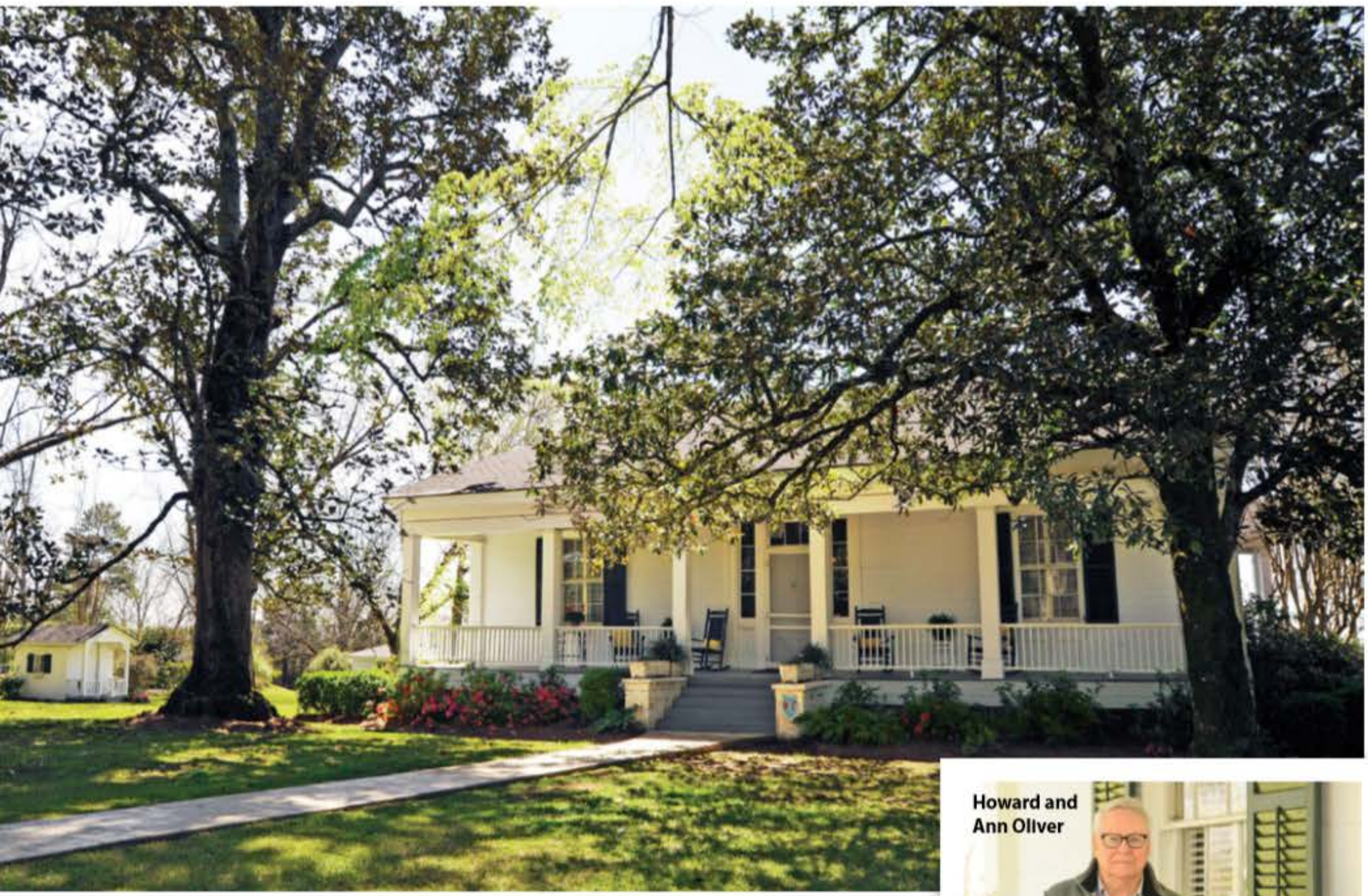

Present Tense and Past Perfect

Two Centuries—And Counting— At The Magnolias

By JIM NOLES *Photos by* MICHELE MIREE SMITH


Howard and Ann Oliver

It was the middle of February in south Dallas County. Deer season was over and, as if on cue, red buds and dogwoods were beginning to burst into pink and white life in the otherwise brown understory of the pine and oak forestlands.

Some twenty minutes ago, my truck crossed the Alabama River at Selma, slipped south down Alabama Highway 41, and then, just south of Sardis, rattled onto the faded blacktop marked Dallas County Road 85. I was in the Black Belt, but it was not the Black Belt of vast cotton fields and Spanish moss-draped river bottoms that so often comes to mind.

No, this particular part of the Black Belt was as gnarled and rugged as an old farmer's knuckles—knuckles that might have crowned a weathered hand resting atop a hand-hewn cypress fencepost. Here, the county roads were twisting and occasionally treacherous, with narrow shoulders and the constant threat of a sudden curve to bring you face-to-face with a log truck pulling its load of pine out of a fresh clear-cut. If you are driving slowly, and with the window down, you

will smell the piney odor even before you see the trucks.

The payoff for such roads comes with the vistas available atop the wooded hilltops. There, the modest summits catch warm breezes and the traveler is rewarded with a clear view to the next ridgeline—maybe as far distant as the hamlets of Pine Apple or Oak Hill.

Some two hundred years ago, the first flames of the so-called "Alabama Fever" began burning in the hearts and minds of cotton farmers in Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia. The cause of the fever was a desire to find new lands, in what became known as the Old Southwest, on which to farm cotton; the symptoms of the affliction were the uprooting of planter clans for the migration into the Alabama Territory.

It was, therefore, perhaps the younger son of a Carolina planter who was the first man (other than the native Creeks, of course) to stand atop such a hilltop, embrace the vista unfolding before him, and, in his mind's eye, imagine upland pastures and fields of creek bottom cotton below. His father and older brother could continue to milk the nutrient-denuded soils of the Carolinas for one more crop of white gold; here, in Dallas County, he would stake out his own claim.

As settlers arrived, survived, and thrived, communities such as Carlowville and Pleasant Hill sprang up. Today, they are, for the most part, a handful of antebellum homes used as hunting lodges, complemented with wooden churches hosting maybe twice-a-month worship services. But back in the day, these communities were also home to schools, general stores, law offices, and physicians and, within these proud hamlets, a new generation of Alabamians was born.

In Pleasant Hill, Dr. Ulmer John Crumpton was a member of that new generation. When he married Lucy Rives, of nearby Collirene, in 1848, his new father-in-law, Green Rives, gave his daughter Lucy the gift of the construction of a new home—a house built, according to family histories, under the direction of a man named Smart, an English-trained builder.

For his part, the groom possessed the perfect location for the newlyweds' new home—a hilltop some two miles southwest of Pleasant Hill that his family had acquired in 1818—a year before Alabama became a state. The heights were blessed with vistas that would charm the Crumptons' children for generations to come and, and construction commenced, would soon be crowned by a grove of magnolia trees planted by Dr. Crumpton that still stand today.

Atop the hill, master builder Smart oversaw the construction of a handsome one-story cottage for the young doctor and his bride. It boasted an inviting front porch, a pair of bedrooms, a parlor and dining room, and, in the custom of the day, a detached kitchen building.

For building materials, Smart enjoyed access to the hand-hewn foundation timbers, underpinnings, and sills from the building that have formerly housed the Pleasant Hill Baptist Church. It was a structure built some 28 years earlier—about the same time Alabama became a state. Thus, even after later generations tastefully extended the back of the cottage to make room for an ever-widening circle of descendants and friends, it can be fairly

TOP: Flowers (Larkspur, snapdragons and dusty miller) are planted every spring by Ann Oliver along the picket fence surrounding the pool.
ABOVE RIGHT: Mark Miree's daughters, Grace and Lexi enjoy playing in Ann Oliver's 75-year-old childhood playhouse.
LEFT: Sunset over the field beside The Magnolias

said that the cottage's foundations are as old as Alabama's.

It was four of those descendants—Howard Oliver, his sister Mary Ann Oliver Miree, his wife Ann, and their daughter Mary Ann Oliver Ragan—who greeted me as I arrived at the antebellum cottage built for Howard's great, great-grandfather some 166 years ago. And, in the time-honored tradition of the house now known as The Magnolias, they were soon graciously entertaining me with stories of the past, spiced with the old photographs and family artifacts on the walls.

Many of Howard's and his sister's tales dated back to their childhood days, when the home was still occupied by Dr. Crumpton's grandson, Howard Ulmer Crumpton, and his remarkable wife Ethel, an accomplished school teacher who had trained at Peabody College, Columbia University, and the University of Chicago.

For Howard and sister Mary Ann, those times consisted of weekdays at school in Tuscaloosa and then weekends at the homestead, ranging unfettered in the surrounding woods and creek bottoms with their cousins or sitting at Ethel's feet as she regaled them with stories of Greek mythology that they, in their childhood wonder, thought "Me-Ma" was making up on the spot.

As daughter Mary Ann, now a trader with a brokerage firm in Birmingham, shared her own memories, it was clear that the connection to the land was just as strong in her generation as in her father's. And not only was it strong—it was apparently contagious. Her husband Darrell, who studied forest resources and wildlife biology in college, now stewards the old Crumpton lands through each season.

Before I knew it, the afternoon sun was sinking toward the western horizon— and I still had a two-hour drive back to Birmingham ahead of me. And so, as we began to wrap up the afternoon's conversation, I posed one final question to Howard.

"You spent a good part of your childhood here. Then you and your wife moved back up here from Destin in 2000 and have lived here since. And so, in all that time, what would you say is your most favorite memory of The Magnolias?" I asked him.

He gave his unlit cigar a couple of thoughtful chews, pulled it out of his mouth, and replied, spreading his arms as he did.

"I don't know if I can say that I have a favorite memory from all of the time around here," Howard answered, "because I think it's more like I'm living in a current memory. That's right—a current memory. Can you have such a thing?"

As I drove home to Birmingham, I thought about his question. And I think my answer is "yes, you can"—and you can find it at The Magnolias. ■

LEFT: View from the back porch of the pool
FAMILY MEMBERS FRONT ROW L TO R: Mary Ann Miree, Mary Ann Oliver, Michele Miree Smith, Beth Oliver Ballentine
BACK ROW L TO R: Will Oliver, John Oliver III, Margaret Hubbard, Jimmy Hubbard, Becky Oliver Haines, Mitch Hungerpiller
Not pictured: Mark Miree, Aubrey Miree, Melissa Oliver, Mike Hungerpiller

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