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Aristide Louis Desbouillons

by

Janet Waters Owens

History 300

Dr. Roger Warlick

March 2, 1982

From: Savannah Biographies: a collection of
unedited biographies written by history students
at Armstrong State College Savannah, Georgia.
31419. Volume 10. Minis Collection. Lane
Library, AASU.

On one of his early report cards, a teacher's description of him stated he was "like a windmill."

The energies harnessed to come to the United States from France and found a dynamic business was indeed like a windmill. He lived in Savannah from 1868 until his death in 1915 and established a very successful jewelry business which is still in operation today. He was a devoted family man and took an active part in the civic and social activities of his new Savannah home.

Aristide Louis Desbouillons

The year was 1868. The American Civil War had ended but the Radical Republicans and carpetbaggers were making life miserable for the former Confederate States. The question of President Johnson's conviction for high crimes and misdemeanors had loomed over the nation until March when he was acquitted by just one vote. It was not until August that military authority was suspended in Georgia. And in November, General U.S. Grant was elected president of the United States. There was rioting at the polls in Savannah on that election . . . an expression of alarm as it became obvious that blacks would outnumber whites at the voting booths.¹

It is against this backdrop that a young French watchmaker, Aristide Louis Desbouillons got his first glimpse of Savannah. He and a friend, Henry Ginnel, were on a steamer making its way back from New Orleans to New York when the engines developed trouble off the Savannah coast.² It is pure speculation to say whether it was the excitement of Savannah which captivated the young Desbouillons or if the charms of a certain French lady, the pretty, widowed milliner, Madam Massart had something to do with it. But Desbouillons was soon to make Savannah his home and found one of Savannah's finest jewelry firms. He and Madam Massart were married June 19, 1871 in the Lutheran Church of Ascension.³

Madam Massart was the former Louise Merckling, born October

28, 1839 in the Alsace-Lorraine region of France. Her family moved to Paris when she was about seven or eight years old and she loved the city so much that she claimed it as her home.⁴ Louise was later to describe the Massart family journey to the United States to her daughter Lucile. It was a month's long journey by sailing vessel arriving first in Charleston, S.C. From Charleston they journeyed to Augusta, Georgia.⁵ Louise was the oldest child in the family and thus felt somewhat responsible for the well-being of her brother and sisters. Such responsibility could have influenced her development into a vivacious and enthusiastic young lady of determination. While staying with her wealthy but practical aunt in Augusta, Louise and her two sisters, Emma and Sophie were each taught a skill of their own choosing . . . something at which they could earn a living if it ever became necessary. Louise chose the art of hat making to learn and she became quite good at it.⁶

According to her daughter Lucile, Louise's marriage to Julian Massart probably took place when she was about sixteen years of age.⁷ He too was a native of France.⁸ Julian operated a bootmaking shop on Broughton Street in Savannah.⁹ The Massarts had four children; Ernest, Alice, Fannie and Julian, Jr.¹⁰ The latter died as an infant.¹¹ When the Civil War broke out, Julian's strong loyalist sentiments were to place him in the war on the side of the Union.¹² He died of consumption in 1867 leaving his wife and three children to make their own way in a city which held some reservations toward a man with such sentiments.¹³ It is at this time that Louise's hatmaking flair literally paid off. By the time she was to meet young Aristide Desbouillons, her stylish

French bonnets were quite in demand in the city of Savannah.

Aristide Louis Desbouillons was born May 23, 1840 in Chateau Gontier in western France.¹⁴ This rural bocage is on one of the Loire tributaries, the Mayenne River, and is blessed with mild winters and cool summers.¹⁵ Aristide's daughter Lucile was later to describe her father's native land as a most ideal place to live. Aristide's father, Andre Desbouillons was born in 1795 in the same province as his son. His mother, Victoire Meignan, was his father's second wife and she died when Aristide was eighteen years old. Aristide was the youngest in the family. He had a half-sister, half-brother and natural brother. When he was about eleven years old, Aristide went to live with his brother Andre in Angers which is about thirty miles south of Chateau Gontier.¹⁶ Andre's house was later described by his niece Lucile as quite comfortable. It had a wine cellar and beautiful gardens with fruits, vegetables and berries. Lucile said that one could spend his entire life there in contentment.¹⁷

Aristide went to Paris as a young man, then to attend school in London where he learned to speak English. At first he was very interested in health and medicine and considered becoming a doctor. Unfortunately, his doctor told him he was in very poor health himself and could not expect to live more than a year. It was suggested that a warmer climate might be of benefit to him. He was turned down by the French army for the same reason. Aristide studied instead to become a jeweler and watchmaker.¹⁸

In search of that warmer climate and perhaps a bit of adventure, Aristide and a friend journeyed to the United States. It

is likely that he was under the sponsorship of an American jewelry firm. He worked for a few years in the Washington, D.C. area at a jewelry store named Gault's.¹⁹ He liked Virginia but was still searching for a place to make his home when he and Henry Ginnel took the trip to New Orleans.²⁰ It was on that return trip from America's French city that fate landed Aristide in the city of Savannah.

The first year of Louise and Aristide's marriage, they lived at 121 Broughton Street which had served as both home and millinery shop for Louise and her children. Aristide started the jewelry business at 21 Bull Street which was adjacent to Madame Desbouillons' millinery shop.²¹ The millinery shop faced Broughton Street and the family's living quarters were in the rear.²² And it was a big family already. Louise's first three children were living at home and on June 11, 1872 the Desbouillons gave birth to their first child, Lucile.²³ Two years later on July 7, 1874 their son Victor was born.²⁴

Aristide had become a member of the local French Benevolent Society in 1873.²⁵ This group's purpose beyond French camaraderie was to aid needy Frenchmen both in the United States and abroad. These new Americans still felt a strong kinship with their homeland where the recent Franco-Prussian war had left its ugly scar. The society had been established in 1871. Meetings took place about once a month. They elected officers and often sponsored social events to raise money for their cause.²⁶ The picture one might see on a July day in 1874 in Savannah was far removed from the chaos experienced in Paris at the same time. The French Benevolent Society held a festival at Beach Hammock and it was described by

the Savannah Morning News as the social event of the season. The steamer Carrie, left the Bull Street wharf early in the morning with about one hundred excursionists and chugged down the river towards the beach. The Hibernian Brass Band had been engaged for entertainment and when their destination was reached, there was dancing, eating and socializing all day long. They returned up the river with the sunset lighting their way back home having netted \$200.00 for their worthy cause.²⁷

The Desbouillons' son Andre was born September 20, 1877.²⁸ Soon afterwards the burgeoning family moved to 109 York Street and in 1879 moved again to 142 Broughton Street.²⁹ Their last child, Leon was born on June 26, 1880.³⁰ In the meantime, Louise's oldest daughter, Alice had grown up. She married Mason Bridges of Augusta on April 19, 1880, the same year that Leon was born.³¹

The family's lifestyle could probably be called very comfortable. They made numerous trips to New York and France where they purchased goods for both businesses. Always following these trips, Madame Desbouillons' advertisements in the Savannah Morning News would beckon the Savannah ladies to come see her latest supply of French ribbons, patterns and hats just arrived from the fashion capitals.³² Towards the end of 1882, the family moved its residence once more to 113 Congress Street which adjoined the Screven House.³³

Aristide had been serving as secretary of the French Benevolent Society since 1874 and had been made president in July of 1882.³⁴ Upon his return home from out of town one fall evening that year, he was greeted by his fellow Frenchmen. They told him that there was some business to discuss, whereupon they proceeded to his home.

Once they were comfortably seated, Dr. R.P. Meyers gave a speech making the real purpose of their visit known. They wanted to surprise and honor him for his many years of devoted service to the society. His friends had previously arranged the event with Madam Desbouillons. They all partook of a sumptuous banquet, toasts and then presented a one hundred thirty-five piece porcelain service to the honoree.³⁵

This pleasant lifestyle received a jolt on the morning of January 17, 1883 when Aristide opened the jewelry store and found the area of his safe strewn with empty jewelry boxes and the tools that were used to rob it. Cash, diamonds and precious stones valued at \$12,000 had been stolen. There was some consolation in the fact that the showcases housing thousands of dollars worth of valuables had not been touched, but still it was a devastating blow. The safe contents had represented the earnings of his lifetime. It was later discovered that the thief(s) had entered the shop by forcing a window open and then using a sledge hammer on the safe. Even though the store was on a busy street corner, the closed shutters in the front windows probably allowed the robbery to be carried out without the notice of the many passers-by. A well known New York "cracksman" was suspected in the case.³⁶

The family in the year of 1883, consisted of Mr. and Mrs. Desbouillons, Ernest Massart who was working as a clerk in his stepfather's business, Fannie Massart, Lucile, Victor, Andre and Leon. By 1886 they moved their residence once again to 126 Broughton Street.³⁷

The years continued to be prosperous for Aristide despite

the robbery setback. He and his family were a part of the cultured society of the city. Aristide served on the executive committee of the Savannah Floral and Art Association for their spring exhibit in 1887.³⁸ Perhaps it is at this time that his daughter's artistic abilities were beginning to surface. Lucile had taken art lessons from Mr. Brandt at the Telfair Academy.³⁹ Some of her drawing specimens received creditable mention at a Chatham Artillery exhibition that May.⁴⁰ The family continued to travel both for business and pleasure. All of the children visited France at various times during their youth. Young Leon went to school there for awhile. At home the family became accustomed to hearing and using both English and French in speaking to one another. On one of their trips to Europe, Aristide took the children to one of his favorite places in London, Dickens' Curiosity Shop. And while in France, Madame Desbouillons was to exclaim to the children as they were riding down the Champs Elysees, "Don't you love my Paris?" They visited Aristide's brother Andre and his wife at Angers, the place where Aristide had spent part of his life.⁴¹ Lucile was to remember that the French people of that area had never seen Americans before and were quite excited about the opportunity to meet some. They had heard detailed stories about the wild, red-skinned Indians in America and were disappointed to see that the Americans they met did not look any different from the French people. Lucile remarked that perhaps they had expected to see Pocahontas.⁴²

Aristide was elected to the executive committee of the Savannah Floral and Art Association again in 1888.⁴³ He also served as an official that year for the annual regatta of the Isle of Hope

Yacht Club.⁴⁴ Luckily for him and his family, the fire of 1889 passed up his home and business though it destroyed so much of Whitaker Street. Many of his acquaintances were not as fortunate. The fire did over a million and a quarter dollars worth of property damage.⁴⁵

The jewelry business continued to prosper. By 1894 Victor was working as a clerk in his father's firm.⁴⁶ He and Andre both became more involved in the jewelry business as the years passed.⁴⁷ It was to be the first and the only career that Andre ever had.⁴⁸ Both boys started their "apprentiship" doing chores around the shop. This included sweeping up, running errands and the like.⁴⁹ Unlike his brothers, Leon did not take as active a part in the firm. Perhaps as the youngest child in such a large family he was inclined to strike out in other directions. While he did spend some time in the jewelry business, he also worked for a number of years at C.W. Howard and Company, Central of Georgia and as a manufacturer's agent.⁵⁰ Lucile continued in her art studies and Louise's abundant supply of nervous energy would keep her busy in the millinery business until her health became a problem. Lucile was married to Savannah artist and painter, Christopher Murphy on February 22, 1902.⁵¹ The year also saw the marriage of Louise's first son, Ernest Massart to Miss Minnie Goldsmith.⁵² By 1904 the family moved to 435 Habersham Street. The jewelry firm was moved in 1905 from its long time location at 21 Bull Street to 12 East Broughton, formerly occupied by tobacconist Oppenheimer Sloat and Company. The distance was not that great from the old

location, but Savannah was a growing city and the new skyscraper, the Liberty National Bank was built in the old Desbouillons' location.⁵³

On October 11, 1905, Andre Desbouillons married Miss Tessie Renkl.⁵⁴ The couple moved into their own home on East 31st Street.⁵⁵

It must have been quite a shock for Madam Desbouillons and her family when she suffered a stroke around 1905. She was left with some paralysis but was able to move around with the aid of a cane.⁵⁶ She had been active in the millinery business up until that time. It was a tremendous loss to her family and friends when she died on August 18, 1907.⁵⁷ She had had the joy of seeing seven grandchildren born prior to her death. Lucile and Chris had had a son, Christopher Aristide, and two daughters, Mary Louise and Lucile.⁵⁸ Alice Massart had three daughters.⁵⁹ And Andre and Tessie had a son.⁶⁰ At the time of Madam Desbouillons' death, Leon, Victor, Lucile and Chris and their children, as well as Aristide were all living in the house on Habersham Street. Following her death, Aristide, Lucile and Christopher and the grandchildren moved to 207 Charlton Street.⁶¹ Victor moved into a hotel for a time and Leon went to Augusta.⁶² Lucile bought a house in 1908 at 11 East Perry Street and Aristide and Victor went to live there with the Murphys.⁶³ Little Andie Desbouillons, Tessie and Andre's infant son, died of influenza that year on April 4.⁶⁴

By 1909, Leon had married Miss Rubie Lombard of Augusta and they came back to Savannah to live at 710 Tattnall.⁶⁵ Victor was the only child remaining unmarried. He has been described as an adventurer with a restless spirit. He tried his hand at

reporting in New Orleans and later helped to build a railroad across the South American Andes. He returned to the jewelry business though and became a master engraver.⁶⁶ He was not to marry until after his father's death.⁶⁷ He had no children.⁶⁸

Lucile had four other children, Margaret, Richard, Elanor and Hinckley.⁶⁹ Margaret has vivid memories of her grandfather, Aristide during the last years of his life. She said that he was very fond of reading and that he loved newspapers. He read several different ones. He also remained keenly interested in medicine and health and paid very close attention to her and any health problem she might have.⁷⁰ Margaret also said that her grandfather toyed with the idea of spending his last days in France. The roots that he had planted in Georgia so many years earlier had taken hold firmly and the branches were in full bloom. Leon and Rubie had a son, Leon Louis in 1912.⁷¹ There was no reason Aristide could not go back to France at this time. The business was very prosperous and in the capable hands of his sons who had grown up in it. His health was not good, but neither was it good back in the 1860's when doctors told him he only had a year to live. He departed for France by way of New York. But just as fate was to play a part in Aristide's move to Savannah when those steamer engines developed trouble, a new form of transportation, the automobile, was to change his plans again. He was struck by a car in front of his hotel in New York and had to return to Savannah.⁷² He died on September 3, 1915.⁷³

His will stipulated that all of his property of every kind be equally divided amongst his four children, Lucile, Victor, Andre and Leon. His sons and his son-in-law, Christopher Murphy, were

named executors of his estate. He asked that the jewelry business be continued by the executors for a period of one year, the children deciding after that time whether to sell it.⁷⁴ Of course, the business was continued and Andre and Victor took over the active management of it. A move to smaller quarters was required during the depression in the 30's. In 1939, Andre's daughter, Louise Desbouillons Morgan, and her husband Charles took over the store. The Morgan's daughter, Ann married Jack Altman, Jr. and Jack took over the management in 1953. Today, Mr. and Mrs. Altman operate Desbouillons in its location at the Medical Arts Shopping Center.⁷⁵

Notes

- 1 Savannah Morning News Digest, 1868, intro.
- 2 Personal interview with Mr. and Mrs. Jack Altman, Jr. on February 18, 1982.
- 3 The Lutheran Church of the Ascension, Church Records, 1871.
- 4 Personal interview with Miss Margaret Murphy on February 23, 1982.
- 5 Margaret Murphy.
- 6 Margaret Murphy.
- 7 Lucile Desbouillons Murphy, "Recollections," unpublished journal in the private papers belonging to Miss Margaret Murphy.
- 8 Laurel Grove Cemetery Records, vol. 2.
- 9 Directory of the City of Savannah, 1867.
- 10 Margaret Murphy.
- 11 Laurel Grove Cemetery Records, vol. 2.
- 12 Margaret Murphy.
- 13 Chatham County Health Department, Bureau of Vital Statistics, Death Records of Chatham County, 1867.
- 14 Bonaventure Cemetery Markers, Section A, Lot 77.
- 15 Encyclopedia Americana, 11, 1981.
- 16 Margaret Murphy.
- 17 Lucile Desbouillons Murphy.
- 18 Margaret Murphy.
- 19 Mr. and Mrs. Jack Altman, Jr.

20 Mr. and Mrs. Jack Altman, Jr.

21 Directory of the City of Savannah, 1871

22 "Obituary of Andre Desbouillons," Savannah Morning News,
3 Aug. 1949.

23 Chatham County Health Department, Bureau of Vital Statistics,
Death Records of Chatham County, 1956, Lucile Desbouillons Murphy.

24 Bonaventure Cemetery Markers, Section A, Lot 77.

25 "Minutes of the French Benevolent Society, 1871-1884,"
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26 "Minutes of the French Benevolent Society."

27 Savannah Morning News, 29 July 1874, p. 3, col. 1.

28 Bonaventure Cemetery Markers, Section A, Lot 77.

29 Directory of the City of Savannah, 1877/78 and 1879.

30 Bonaventure Cemetery Markers, Section N, Lot S 1/2 149.

31 Savannah Morning News, 20 April 1880, p. 5, col. 1.

32 Savannah Morning News, 11 April 1883, p. 4, col. 2.

33 Directory of the City of Savannah, 1882.

34 Savannah Morning News, 18 Sept. 1882, p. 4, col. 2.

35 Savannah Morning News, 18 Sept. 1882, p. 4, col. 2.

36 Savannah Morning News, 18 January 1883, p. 4, col. 2.

37 Directory of the City of Savannah, 1886.

38 Savannah Morning News, 16 March 1887, p. 8, col. 2.

39 Margaret Murphy

40 Savannah Morning News, 5 May 1887, p. 8, col. 4.

41 Lucile Desbouillons Murphy.

42 Lucile Desbouillons Murphy.

43 Savannah Morning News, 18 January 1888, p. 8, col. 1.

44 Savannah Morning News, 20 May 1888, p. 3, col. 2.

45 Savannah Morning News, 7 April 1889, p. 1.

46 Directory of the City of Savannah, 1894.

47 Mr. and Mrs. Jack Altman, Jr.

48 "Obituary of Andre Desbouillons," Savannah Morning News,

3 Aug. 1949.

49 "Obituary of Andre Desbouillons."

50 Directory of the City of Savannah, 1899, 1902, 1903, 1909.

51 Chatham County Probate Court, Marriage Licenses, Book O,

p. 441.

52 Chatham County Probate Court, Marriage Licenses, Book P,

p. 219.

53 Directory of the City of Savannah, 1904, 1905, 1906, 1907.

54 Chatham County Probate Court, Marriage Licenses, Book R,

p. 336.

55 Directory of the City of Savannah, 1906.

56 Margaret Murphy.

57 Chatham County Health Department, Bureau of Vital Statistics,

Death Records of Chatham County, 1907, Louise Desbouillons.

58 Margaret Murphy

59 Chatham County Probate Court, Wills and Estate Documents,

File 517.

60 Bonaventure Cemetery Markers, Section A, Lot 77.

61 Directory of the City of Savannah, 1908.

62 Margaret Murphy.

63 Chatham County Courthouse, Deed Books, 9Q, p. 403.

64 Chatham County Health Department, Bureau of Vital Statistics,

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- 65 Directory of the City of Savannah, 1909.
- 66 Mr. and Mrs. Jack Altman, Jr.
- 67 Margaret Murphy
- 68 Margaret Murphy
- 69 Margaret Murphy
- 70 Margaret Murphy
- 71 Bonaventure Cemetery Markers, Section A, Lot 77.
- 72 Margaret Murphy and Mr. and Mrs. Jack Altman, Jr.
- 73 Chatham County Health Department, Bureau of Vital Statistics,
Death Records of Chatham County, 1915, A.L. Desbouillons.
- 74 Chatham County Probate Court, Wills and Estate Documents,
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