

Gulf Branch Nature Center

The Pola Negri Connection

Born in Poland, Pola Negri was a popular stage and film actress in Warsaw and Berlin before moving to the United States. She had her first American hit with her role in "Passion" (1922), and made over twenty films for Paramount Pictures including "Forbidden Paradise" (1924), "A Woman of the World" (1925), and "Hotel Imperial" (1927). Her exotic "vamp" style made her one of the most popular Hollywood actresses of the silent era.



Silent film star Pola Negri
Courtesy Allison Marchant

Negri's romances with Charlie Chaplin and Rudolph Valentino were widely reported, but her melodramatic behavior at Valentino's 1926 funeral eroded her fanbase. She was unable to make a successful transition to American "talkies," and spent the 1930s making films in Berlin under Nazi Party rule. Negri returned to the U.S. in 1941 and retired to San Antonio, Texas, where she died in 1987.

Many Arlington residents have heard the local lore about silent film star Pola Negri once living in the stone bungalow which now houses the Gulf Branch Nature Center. Local accounts have varied from the house being rented by Negri as her "Virginia hideaway," to being built as Negri and Rudolph Valentino's love nest, or playing host to Hollywood-style pool parties. The Nature Center staff have even incorporated the Pola Negri connection into their programs, screening her films during an annual "Pola Negri Night."

The building's connection to the early Hollywood star was first investigated by Cornelia B. Rose, Jr., a founding member of the Arlington Historical Society. Although the evidence is somewhat inconclusive, the story of Pola Negri and the Gulf Branch Nature Center has become an important part of the oral tradition of Arlington County.

A 1963 House Tour included a stop at the Pola Negri "hideaway." The April 21, 1963 *Washington Post* article includes a mention of the home's claim to fame:

“Star’s Old Hideaway on Arlington Tour. The Virginia hideaway of one time film star Pola Negri will be one of five houses on Tour Thursday April 25 to benefit the Florence Crittenton home...The field house....is now owned by Mr. And Mrs. Jeff Davis.”

Pola Negri anecdotes are also mentioned in several oral history interviews archived at the Virginia Room in Arlington County Public Library’s Central Branch. In her interview, Mildred Walz, who lived near Military Road in the 1950s in the Colonial Village and River Crest neighborhoods, recalled:

“Well that [Gulf Branch Nature Center] used to be out in the woods because there was nothing built up. At the time that was built there were no houses along there. And the story goes, which you probably know, that there was some wealthy guy who built a retreat for Pola Negri, the early film star, and that little stone house was their retreat in the woods.”

Thomas Richards, a longtime Arlington County Board Member who pushed for the Gulf Branch acquisition, recounted the Pola Negri story:

“Immediately upstream was an old house that was alleged to have been owned by silent movie star Pola Negri, a friend of Rudolph Valentino. She is supposed to have planted the rhododendron ... Yes, I say, it is alleged. ”

William Hughes, director of the Department of Recreation & Parks in the '60s, recalled in his oral history interview:

“We bought a house off of Military Road, an old, probably ten or fifteen acre site, which is now the Gulf Branch Nature Center, and here again, it’s using a single family house as a recreation center, in this case the nature center. There was somebody who was quite noted... Pola Negri, who lived in the house ... The house itself had apparently some fancy parties thrown over the years and goes way back in history.”

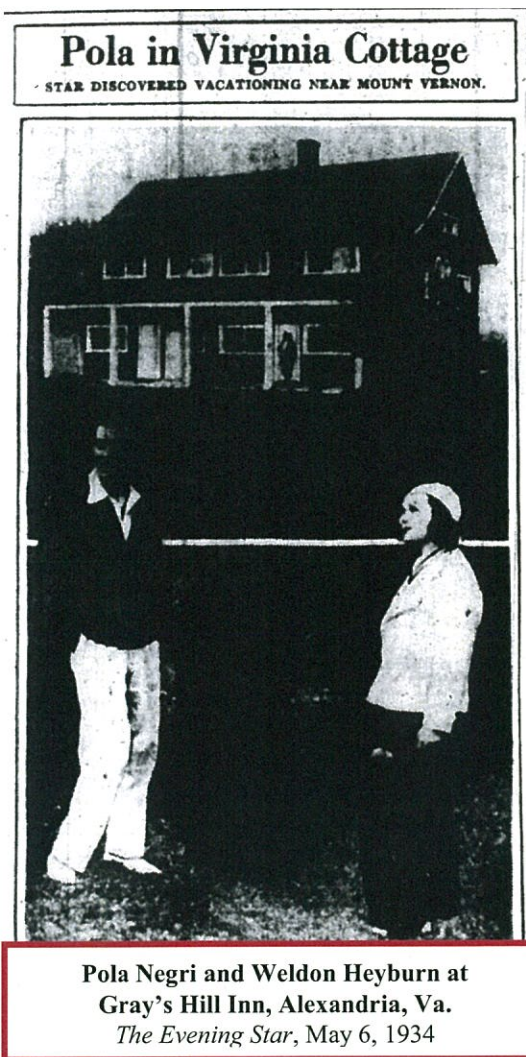
Why Would Pola Negri Visit Arlington?

From the *Washington Post* and *Evening Star* archives, we can document two visits by Pola Negri to the Washington, D.C. area. The first visit was in late August 1932 to perform a skit titled “Is This Love?” as part of a vaudeville act at Loew’s Fox theater. In the skit, Negri sang “Paradise,” her hit song from the 1932 RKO film, “A Woman Commands.” An August 25, 1932 *Evening Star* story hailed her arrival that day as “Pola Negri’s first visit to the Capital in the flesh.”

Negri's second documented visit to the Washington, D.C. area occurred in early May 1934. Rumors swirled that she might be in town, but the *Washington Post* was skeptical, reporting on May 8:

“Following hot on the heels of Katharine Hepburn's phantom presence in the Capital for a few nebulous moments last week, was the grapevine report afoot yesterday afternoon that Pola Negri was in town... Maybe she was... But as this is being written at 7p.m., preliminary to Daniel Frohman's Actors Fund Benefit, nobody is sure of it... One suspects that it was Mr. Frohman who started it all, trying to get Mme. Negri to appear at his show... Mme. Negri, it will be recalled by those who remember ‘A Trip to Pressburg,’ has a way of arriving in the Capital without ever getting here.”

Negri had been slated to appear at the National Theater in a November 1933 performance of the play, “A Trip to Pressburg,” but never arrived because of alleged health issues.



But Pola Negri was indeed in the Washington area in May 1934 – *Evening Star* reporters scooped the story and tracked her down at Gray’s Hill Inn near Mount Vernon on the shore of the Potomac River. Although Negri’s May 1934 stay was in Alexandria, not Arlington, it reveals a possible reason for her visit to northern Virginia. During her stay at Gray’s Hill Inn, she was observed spending the day with Weldon Heyburn, a native Washingtonian also known as “Spanny” Franks. The *Evening Star* noted the two had “played a skit together on motion picture theater stages” the previous season, probably referring to the 1932 vaudeville show at Loew’s Fox Theater.

As reported by the *Evening Star*, Negri was first spotted at Gray’s Hill Inn climbing an apple tree, then played “some kind of an afternoon game” with Heyburn on the picturesque grounds of the Inn. After graciously answering a few of the reporter’s questions, Negri and her companion departed for a walk in the woods.

Besides Weldon Heyburn, there may have been an even more compelling draw for Negri’s visit – the picturesque northern Virginia scenery. When asked by the reporter why she was visiting the area, Negri replied, “I love this country. I want to buy some land here. I want to live like your George Washington. Oh yes, I love it here very much.”

The May 6, 1934 *Evening Star* article paints a picture of a film star on retreat, staying far away from the Capital city. According to the reporter, Negri’s secretary initially claimed she was not staying at Gray’s Hill Inn. Could the press intrusion have led her to seek a more private

"I love this country. I want to buy some land here. I want to live like your George Washington. Oh yes, I love it here very much."

- Pola Negri's impressions of northern Virginia, *Evening Star*, May 6, 1934

hideaway in Arlington's Gulf Branch stream valley? A few weeks after her stay at Gray's Hill Inn, the May 25th *Fairfax Herald* had a brief front page feature on Negri's visit:

"According to report, Pola Negri, the film actress who has been spending some time in Mt. Vernon district, contemplates buying land and **erecting a house overlooking the Potomac**. When she completes making a picture at Hollywood, and other contracts, she will return to Virginia."

According to *Washington Post*, *New York Times* and Washington's *Evening Star* news reports of the era, Negri suffered from periodic appendicitis or gall bladder attacks throughout the early 1930s – in December 1931, March 1932, and November 1933. While illness could be a possible reason for her to retreat to a "Virginia hideaway" like the Gulf Branch Nature Center house, the reports typically mention her as resting or recuperating at her primary residences in Santa Monica or New York.

Examining the Evidence

Could the Gulf Branch Nature Center bungalow really have been the Virginia hideaway of the infamous silent film vamp, and if so, what is the evidence?

The only documentation to support this long-held story is a February 5, 1972 letter from Cornelia B. Rose, Jr., a prolific Arlington historian during the 1950s-1970s, and founding member of the Arlington Historical Society. In her letter to "Alice" in the Parks & Recreation Division, she says she has some recent correspondence from Pola Negri's secretary regarding the "persistent rumor that the house now used for the Nature Center in Taylor Run Park was once a 'hideaway' for Pola Negri." Rose then quotes the letter she received from Negri's secretary:

"Miss Negri did indeed rent the house you mentioned, in the Spring of the early '30's. She cannot remember the exact year."

Rose ends the letter to Alice with, "So now we know for sure."

In her letter, C.B. Rose unfortunately refers to the wrong park, mentioning Taylor Run Park instead of Gulf Branch Park. This was likely a simple misstatement by Rose — she may have been thinking of [Zachary] Taylor Park, south of Gulf Branch on Military Road, or possibly

February 5, 1972

CORNELIA B. ROSE, JR.
1318 TWENTY-FOURTH STREET, SOUTH
ARLINGTON, VIRGINIA 22202

Dear Alice,

In your capacity at the Recreation Division you might be interested in some correspondence I have just had.

There has been a persistent rumor that the house now used for the Nature Center in Taylor Run Park was once a "hideaway" for Pola Negri. When I was at the Court House I spent some time (on request) running down deeds but no clue.

I learned through a newspaper story (long ago) that she now lives in San Antonio - no address. I have a friend there and sent her a letter addressed to Miss Negri. Her detective work must have been good since I now have a reply from a Marion Marsh who styles herself P.N.'s secretary. It reads:

"Miss Negri did indeed rent the house you mentioned, in the Spring of the early '30's. She cannot remember the exact year."

So now we know for sure.

Best,

Cornelia

Letter from Cornelia B. Rose, Jr.
Courtesy of the Gulf Branch Nature Center



Cover of Gray's Hill Inn promotional booklet, undated.
Courtesy of the Virginia Room, Fairfax County Public Library

Taylor Run in Alexandria. Since we don't have Rose's original inquiry to Negri, we don't know how specific she was in describing the house on Gulf Branch. If she described it as a Virginia cottage or bungalow outside Washington, on or near the Potomac River, this could also describe Gray's Hill Inn, where Negri stayed in May 1934.

C.B. Rose's original inquiry to Negri may have included more clues in her description of the Gulf Branch house. Unfortunately, the original letter Rose received from Pola Negri's secretary has not been found in C.B. Rose's papers, held in the Arlington County Public Library's Virginia Room. Nor has it turned up in the Arlington Historical Society collections. Negri's memorabilia collection is held by St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas, but it does not include any personal correspondence. According to St. Mary's special collections archivist, Brother Robert Wood, Negri instructed her secretary to destroy her letters and other personal papers upon her death.

The C.B. Rose letter holds one more important clue: Negri's secretary said she "did indeed rent the house you mentioned." Since one doesn't usually "rent" a room at an Inn, this may rule out the possibility that Negri was thinking of her stay at Gray's Hill Inn when she responded to Rose's inquiry.

The Importance of Local Lore

So is Pola Negri's connection to Arlington's Gulf Branch Nature Center more than just local legend? Additional research may lead to a more definitive answer, particularly if descendants of the property's former owners, the Cricher, Bley, and Davis families, can be tracked down. Descendants of the Bley family, who owned the property at the time of Negri's alleged visit, may possess correspondence or other documentation of her stay.

We know from the May 1934 *Evening Star* and *Fairfax Herald* articles that she was smitten with northern Virginia, particularly the area along the Potomac River. Perhaps Pola Negri rented the secluded Gulf Branch bungalow before or soon after her stay at Gray's Hill Inn. In early 1935, she traveled to Berlin to star in films made by the German film outfit, UFA. She spent most of the late 1930s in Germany and France, returning to the United States in 1941.

From the 1963 local house tour and several oral histories, we know the local tradition of Pola Negri's stay at Gulf Branch has been circulating for decades. And C.B. Rose, Jr., Arlington's premier historian, seems to have been convinced of the story's validity by the response from Negri's secretary.

Ultimately, confirming or disproving the story of Pola Negri's "Virginia hideaway" becomes secondary to the value that it holds in our personal and collective memories.

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