

MONTHLY MUSINGS

SHARON VIRT

Spring Cleaning

Not only have my gardens received an abundance of my attention these past few weeks, so has the house. And the closets. And my desk drawers. And even that old trunk in the basement that I've ignored for years! What else is there to do under a stay-at-home order on a rainy afternoon other than all of those tasks that I have put off for forever? Boxes stuffed in the back of a closet. Files that contained copies of paid invoices from 2009. Clothes that I have worn since I can't remember when. No better time than now to go through it all!



Every now and then during this spring cleaning, I stumble upon a lost treasure. Like my grandmother's old cookbook. And faded photos of me and my brother as children. And an envelope filled with crumbling notes and letters between my great, great grandmother and her daughters such as the post card (above) sent on April 5, 1912 to my great, great grandmother Lydia Everhart Arnold by her daughter Leah Arnold Mentzer. *"Dear Mother, I will be up on Sunday to take Ina to church. I will eat dinner with Annie and stay the night with you. Leah."* Sweet little notes advising each other of their plans. With no telephone lines, cell service or internet, post cards and letters were *the* way to communicate. Can you imagine? How did one arrange a meeting? Or a birthday party? Or Sunday dinner? And heaven help you if there was a last minute change in plans. Logistically, it must have been a nightmare! I think being "socially isolated" has made me more appreciative of how much simpler communication is today, and ironically, how that simplicity has complicated our lives. Our great grandparents were forced to keep things simple. Send a postcard early in the week to set the next weekend's plans. *"I'll take you to church."* Or *"I'm coming over for dinner."* They didn't have the ability to over complicate things. Yet today, the technology designed to ease our burdens has somehow found a way to add to them. Multiple schedules to manage. More correspondence to read and answer. Meetings to coordinate, change and reschedule. Multitasking. Maybe the silver lining of this pandemic (if there is one) is that we have all been forced to simplify our lives a bit. No in-person meetings unless absolutely necessary. Shopping less frequently and just for the essentials. Using only what we need. Hanging out with family at home. Playing board games with our kids. Reminiscing. Isn't that kinda what life was like a century ago? And if you find yourself with a little extra time on your hands, maybe do a little "spring cleaning". You never know what you might find.

Leah



MASQUE OF HONOR

Update: COVID-19 Disruptions

Considering the havoc that COVID-19 has caused, it should not come as a surprise that the publishing industry is also feeling the effects. Amazon, for example, has shifted resources to essential orders which has slowed book fulfillment. Further, Amazon has advised large publishers like Simon & Schuster (the folks who will be distributing *Masque of Honor*) that orders or reorders might be substantially delayed or even canceled. More than two thirds of Barnes & Noble stores are shuttered and independent bookstores are widely closed. For the moment, printers that the publishing companies use are printing and shipping, but some of those printers are in Canada and that supply chain has been interrupted.

With all that is happening in the industry and the time that it takes to successfully launch a new release, my publisher and I have decided to move the release date for *Masque of Honor* to **February 9, 2021**, which also coincides with the anniversary of the infamous duel. This change allows time for placement of the novel in the Simon and Schuster fall catalog as well as ample time for my publicist to launch the release campaign without the distractions of the coronavirus outbreak and a presidential election. From a production perspective, my publisher (Rosetta Books) is getting my manuscript in final form. We are adding more features to the book, like original artwork and illustrations, and are producing an audio-version of the novel that will be available at the same time the hardcover and e-book versions are released.

I know many of you who were expecting the release of *Masque of Honor* in late May will be disappointed (trust me, so was I at first!). But all things considered, I'm hoping that the delay will allow more planning to improve the chances for *Masque of Honor* to become a best-seller!



Cherry Blossoms on the Tidal Basin

This past month, I have been sorting through old photographs of Selma and stumbled across this one taken sometime between 1912 and 1915 of the "new" cherry trees in Washington, DC. For more about the history of this gift from Japan, click [here](#).



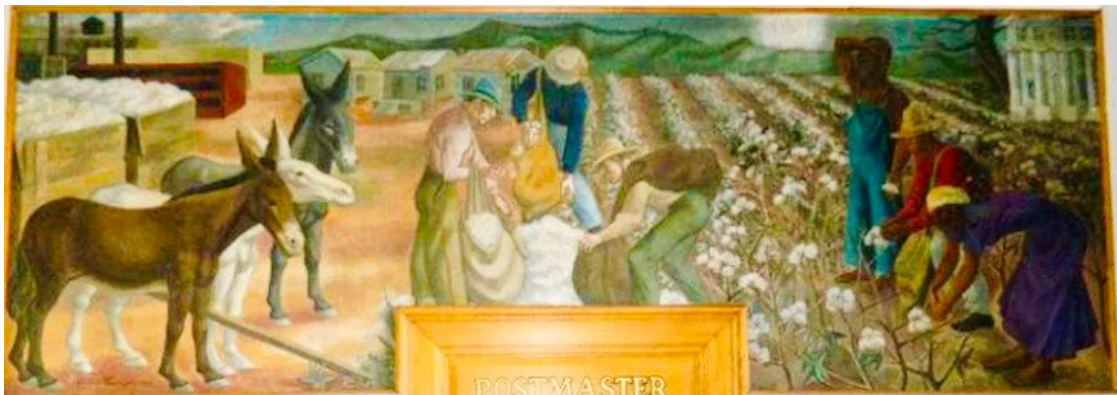
And since we're talking about cherry blossoms, take a look at my April-blooming gardens at Selma. [Follow the link here](#) to my online photo gallery to see more.



From My Kitchen to Yours:

Fontina and Asparagus Strata

Looking for a great Spring brunch casserole? This strata is one of my all-time favorites that I make nearly every Easter. And if you are counting calories, opt for turkey sausage over pork, and ditch the whole milk and use skim instead. Get the recipe [HERE](#).



Federal Project Number One

Who would have thought that an economic recovery program of the Great Depression Era would have been one of the most significant contributors to the discovery of new artists in the 20th century! In 1935, President Franklin Roosevelt established the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to put Americans back to work. While best known for its public works projects, the WPA also sponsored projects in the arts – employing tens of thousands of actors, musicians, writers and other artists under Federal Project Number One. My selection for April's BOOK CLUB features the painting and restoration of a post office mural commissioned by

the WPA. As an amateur artist, I was intrigued by the underlying story and became even more curious about the post office mural project after I finished the book. The Treasury Relief Art Project (part of Project Number One) provided artistic decoration for existing Federal buildings, and produced a number of post office murals. Contracts were awarded to artists based on works entered in both regional and national competitions. Artists submitted sketches anonymously to a committee of their peers for judging. The committees, composed of art critics, fellow artists and architects, selected the finest works. This anonymity was to ensure that all competing artists had an equal opportunity of winning a commission. But when out-of-state artists were selected over local painters, controversy erupted. Many residents of small towns, most notably in the Southern states, resented the portrayal of rural lifestyles by artists who had never visited the areas where their artwork would be displayed. This, of course, sets the scene for Diane Chamberlain's *Big Lies in a Small Town*. For a sense of these real-life controversies, check out this article on the [Morrisville North Carolina Post Office Mural](#). I can't help but see the similarities between Diane Chamberlain's Anna Dale and Alicia Wienczek. Regardless of the controversy, so many wonderful artists were discovered by this program aimed to illuminate the public psyche during this dark period in American history. Jackson Pollock, Moses Sawyer, Dox Thrash and Sargent Claude Johnson were all WPA artists. Click here for a [full list of WPA artists](#) participating in Federal One projects. And while you're at it, grab a paint brush or a box of crayolas and discover your inner-self while social distancing. Who knows... you just might be the next Jackson Pollock!

"Painting is self-discovery. Every good artist paints what he is."

—**Jackson Pollock**



Sharon's Book Club: Big Lies in a Small Town

As long as Virginia's "stay-at-home" order remains in effect, my Book & Wine Club will continue to meet virtually. And you can be a part of it! Send me a 1-2 minute video (*easily record yourself using your phone*) answering one-or-two of the questions about our book, *Big Lies in a Small Town* by Diane Chamberlain. The list of questions can be found at my [Book Club website](#). At the end of your video, don't forget to tell me, out of five, how many stars you rate this month's read. **Upload your video [here](#).**

Don't forget to check my [FaceBook](#) or [Instagram](#) page for details on our May Book Club selection.



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