



MONDAY
JANUARY 10
2000

WORLDNETDAILY EXCLUSIVE COMMENTARY

Divorce could reveal Rockefeller trust secrets

Trial set for next month
in messy, 3-year squabble

Editor's note: This article is reprinted with permission from the Sunday, January 9, edition of the Palm Beach Post.

By Mary McLachlin
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DELRAY BEACH -- In court files, she is described as naive, angry and manic depressive; he as controlling, punishing and obsessive/compulsive.

He says she was a shopaholic who squandered money on "junk" from discount stores, had three different personalities, zoned out on prescription drugs and alcohol and drugged the children to make them go to sleep.

She says he made her wear a notebook around her neck to keep her on a schedule, stomped around the house waving a gun, called her crazy, fat and ugly, and tried to get her into a menage a trois with a 19-year-old baby sitter, one of a covey of bosomy

young women in the house known as the "Lost Classics Girls."

Could this decayed coupling get any nastier?

Oh, yes. Count on it.

Because, aside from allegations of drugs, sex and mental instability, the breakup of George Dorr O'Neill Jr. and Amy Whittlesey O'Neill has those special ingredients that make up the monumental divorce cases, the ones that cause lawyers to salivate, the kind that measure up to the best, or worst, of Palm Beach's marital bloodlettings.

Fame. Politics. Money. Old money, in vast quantities.

Amy O'Neill, 32, of Delray Beach, is the daughter of Faith Ryan Whittlesey, who was ambassador to Switzerland, White House public liaison director, the most senior woman on Ronald Reagan's staff, a Pennsylvania state legislator and the Sunbeam Corp. board member who seconded the motion to fire "Chainsaw Al" Dunlap as president.

George O'Neill, 49, of Lake Wales, is the oldest of the "fifth generation" of the Rockefeller family, son of socialite Abby "Mitzi" Milton O'Neill -- eldest of "The Cousins" generation and director of the family empire headquarters -- a great-great-grandson of John D. Rockefeller and a devotee of far-right icons Pat Buchanan, Phyllis Schlafly and Florida's own U.S. Rep. Charles Canady.

Their divorce is into its third year, fourth judge, 12th volume of court files and thousands of pages of documents in Orange County Circuit Court at Orlando. Trial is set to start March 6 and last three weeks.

At issue: The future of five children, ages 1 to 8, and the secrecy of the legendary Rockefeller family trusts, believed to be worth billions.

Amy O'Neill's lawyers have accomplished what few thought possible: getting a New York court to order release of copies of the 1934 trust established by John D. Rockefeller Jr. and other trusts created

within the family. To protect the privacy of dozens of other beneficiaries, the names of those unrelated to the divorce action are blacked out, and either side can ask for "protected" status if the court deems a document sensitive enough to exempt it from Florida's open records laws.

George O'Neill has maintained throughout the divorce proceedings that he has only small and sporadic income from the trusts, though he did admit receiving \$795,000 in allowance from his parents in 1997. He claimed he had no marital assets to divide with his wife, and that he and his five siblings have only an "expectancy" of money from the trusts.

\$200 million inheritance?

One published report, quoting an unnamed source close to the family, said he could inherit as much as \$200 million upon the death of his 71-year-old mother.

George O'Neill still lives in the walled, gated and guarded blueblood enclave called Mountain Lake, near Lake Wales in Central Florida, where his parents own two homes. Amy O'Neill fled to Palm Beach County in 1998 when she was pregnant with the couple's last child, settling into a \$395,000 house owned by her mother in Delray Beach and installing the older children in the private Gulf Stream School.

Since then, the children have been shuttled up and down Florida's Turnpike weekly, three hours each way, while their father and mother wage a bitter and costly tug-of-war over them. Neither the parents nor their lawyers would comment on the record for this story.

Faith Whittlesey, now a lawyer in Cambridge, Mass., would say only: "It's an inexpressible tragedy for the children and for the families, and it's a mystery for me how the Rockefeller and O'Neill family can allow this to continue."

It continues because the mixture of emotion, vengeance, family pride and fortune fueling it is volatile and apparently boundless. As in most contentious divorces, painfully intimate details about

the O'Neills, their children and their relatives are now grist for public gossip, through testimony, court files, news stories and a tell-all article in December's Vanity Fair that has provoked wrathful backlash.

After the article appeared, George O'Neill's lawyers asked the court to impose a gag order on everyone connected with the case. They filed a sworn statement by a former Secret Service agent saying the photographs and information about the family's residences and routines had exposed the children to kidnapping.

The lawyers, John Frost of Bartow and Michael Walsh of Orlando, also alleged that Amy O'Neill used the magazine story to spread "scurrilous innuendo" to try to pressure her husband and his family into a bigger divorce settlement.

Amy O'Neill's lawyers fired back last week with a detailed list of the testimony and documents that have been placed in the court record by George O'Neill's lawyers. Those filings were the first to expose the "sordid and indecent details" and other family information that he now complains about being publicized in the magazine and news stories, they said.

Attorneys Mark Rabinowitz and Michael Sampson said raising the kidnapping threat was calculated to outrage and prejudice the court against Amy O'Neill and force her to continue spending money to defend herself against the "vast financial resources" of her husband and his family. They countered the ex-Secret Service man's statement with one from a former FBI agent, who said the chance of the O'Neill children's being kidnapped as a result of the Vanity Fair article was less than their risk of being struck by lightning.

In the magazine piece, Amy O'Neill describes the last year of her marriage as a shame-filled nightmare of trying to appease what she felt were deviant demands by her husband -- sodomy, group sex, watching hard-core pornography, wearing a remote-control sex device -- and being disparaged by the group of young women he employed as baby sitters and as typesetters for his publishing venture, Lost Classics Book Co.

The women numbered from four to seven at various times, most between the ages of 18 and 24. They joined their employer daily for "Wafflerama," a prolonged breakfast session in which they made fun of Amy O'Neill and referred to her as "bitch" and "dragon lady" when she wasn't present, according to their own testimony and that of other staff.

Guardian appointed

The "Lost Classics Girls," as they were known in the household, wore short shorts and revealing tops, and one of them -- a 19-year-old with long red hair -- even walked around the house in George O'Neill's boxer shorts, according to testimony.

Cosmo Cremaldi, 63, a Cambridge businessman and friend of the Whittlesey and O'Neill families, is godfather to one of the O'Neill children and was a guest at the christening of another on New Year's Day in 1995. He testified that, during the after-christening party, he walked into the kitchen for a glass of orange juice and beheld the baby's father groping the red-haired baby sitter against the refrigerator.

"His right arm was over her shoulder and his left hand was down around the back section of the buttocks area," Cremaldi said.

A month later, Amy O'Neill testified, she also walked into the kitchen late one night and found her husband and the baby sitter in a "sexual embrace." She said that led to a tearful confrontation in which she locked herself in the bedroom, he beat in the door and screamed obscenities at her.

"He told me that I was seeing things, that I was crazy like my brother," she told Vanity Fair.

Henry Whittlesey's illness -- schizophrenia, diagnosed when he was in college -- was one of the private family problems disclosed in court, as was the fact that he is the birth father of the oldest O'Neill child. Amy and George O'Neill adopted the child when he was 2, and both have testified that he is especially close to his adoptive father.

The court appointed Orlando lawyer Nancy Palmer as guardian ad litem for the children, to watch out for their interests during the divorce. In a report to the judge, Palmer said the Lost Classics Girls, in general, were unsophisticated and seemed to enjoy having (George O'Neill) as a 'buddy.' They drove his cars, they went swimming with him, he fed them and some even admitted to having crushes on him."

"I suspect these young women boosted his self-esteem (which is sad), but also lowered his wife's self-esteem (which is equally sad)," Palmer wrote.

Besides the Lost Classics group, the household help also included nannies, housekeepers, George O'Neill's personal laundress and, for a time, the wife of a local funeral home director, who went on trips with the family and who Amy O'Neill testified she saw having sex with her husband. The woman testified that she had smoked marijuana with both O'Neills, Amy had passed out and the alleged sexual incident never happened.

George O'Neill fired the Lost Classics Girls after his father, George Sr. -- a board member of the New York/New Jersey Port Authority -- suggested he get rid of them and try to reconcile with his wife. The women testified he gave them each "severance pay" of roughly \$3,500 and told them not to say anything.

Palmer became an issue herself in the divorce after George O'Neill accused the guardian of being biased against him, demanded she resign or be disqualified and repeatedly challenged her claims for payment. The court refused to make her step down.

Palmer's report said she doubted that George O'Neill had sexual affairs with the employees, who "seem mesmerized by the Rockefeller name and the lifestyle" of the O'Neills. Her report said he loved his children and had become a more attentive parent since the separation, but he was primarily interested in controlling his wife's behavior and whereabouts or punishing her for wanting a divorce. Excerpts:

- "(A therapist) describes Dad as controlling, obsessive/compulsive and only able to see things through his eyes. In other words, he

cannot be reasoned with and it has to be his way or no way."

- "Mom states Dad berates her, tells her she is crazy, fat and ugly, and compares her to other women ... (he) intimidates her and embarrasses her in front of friends and employees, isolates her from others, withholds money from her, and tries to convince others she is crazy."

Pregnancy controversy

Aside from the Rockefeller trusts, the most publicized chapter of the O'Neill saga is about breast milk -- another excruciatingly personal matter exposed for public bemusement.

In early 1998, the couple made a two-week attempt at reconciliation, during which Amy O'Neill became pregnant. She told the court that, when she called her husband two months later to tell him, he said she was lying and hung up the phone.

He continued to deny he was the father of the child, or said he didn't know whether he was, throughout the pregnancy, but sought permission to be in the hospital room when the baby was born. The judge denied it.

After a DNA test proved he was the father, he filed for visitation rights. And he asked the court to make his wife pump enough breast milk so that he could take the baby girl on weekends with the older children.

"Deciding Custody Over Spilt Milk," said a headline in a New York tabloid.

The judge granted George O'Neill's request, shortly after which Amy O'Neill switched the baby to formula.

After Amy O'Neill left, her husband filed for custody of the children, claiming she wasn't capable of parenting them because her mental state was unpredictable and she abused prescription drugs. He submitted a long list of drug purchase records that included numerous tranquilizers and mood-altering

drugs.

A month after the tearful confrontation over the baby sitter, Amy O'Neill testified, she slashed her hands and feet in despair after trying to check into a psychiatric clinic and being turned down. The clinic refused her, she said, because her husband kept the insurance and credit cards, and he was in Palm Beach for a business meeting with his father.

George O'Neill testified that his wife suffered from depression and had times when she couldn't function.

"And there are really three Amys," he testified in August 1998. "There is the lovely, charming, articulate Amy. And there's the one that doesn't function very well. And then there's the one who's very mean and vicious. ... And in the last few years, it's been more and more the mean and vicious Amy."

Last June, Amy O'Neill's van was struck as she pulled out of a shopping center in Royal Palm Beach with two of her children and four others as passengers. She had "post-concussion syndrome," according to her doctor, and had difficulty speaking and concentrating.

George O'Neill wrote her a note saying he would be happy to keep the children while she recovered and that he hoped she felt better soon. But when she postponed a deposition because of the concussion, he filed for custody, saying if she was physically, neurologically or mentally incompetent to testify, she couldn't take care of the children.

The guardian's report quotes Amy O'Neill's therapist as saying she grew "significantly stronger emotionally" after leaving the marriage. Her network of support in Palm Beach County includes old family friends from her parents' mainline Philadelphia and conservative political roots, as well as parents of her children's schoolmates.

"She's stable, she's grounded, she's been through a lot," says Allison Bachrodt, one of those parents. "She was never crazy -- the definition of insanity is not knowing what is real and what is not, and she is constantly in an aware state.

"She was very aware of her situation at all times.
She just didn't have the tools to get out of it."

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