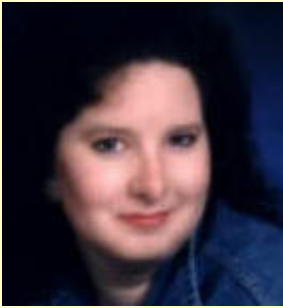


St. Simons—The First Visit

By Graceann Maciolek



I'm told there is a legend that, once you get the sand of St. Simons Island in your shoes, you return again and again. I absolutely believe it now, but I had no idea what I was getting myself into when I first visited in April 1994.

For four years, I had been voraciously reading the novels of Eugenia Price, and becoming more curious about the Coastal Empire she obviously loved so deeply. By 1994, I couldn't stand it any longer. When my then-husband and I started to think about where we'd like to go on our next vacation, there was only one destination that held any interest for me.

We crossed the Torras Causeway in the early evening, and the first thing I wanted to see was Christ Church Frederica. Even though it was getting dark, I nagged my husband into driving out Frederica Road toward the beautiful white church I'd thus far seen only in photos. By the time we got there, it was well and truly dark, and it so happened that a meeting of some kind was going on. Being careful not to disturb the participants, we stopped at the end of the walk, under the canopy of Cherokee Roses, and marveled at how beautiful the stained glass windows looked as lit from within. I could have admired the view for a great deal longer, but the grumbling coming from both my husband and my stomach pulled me away.



The next morning, I woke earlier than I ever do at home and, being extremely quiet so as not to wake my spouse, I threw on a pair of shorts under my sleep shirt, grabbed my jacket and left a short note indicating that I'd be walking on the beach. Little did I know that as soon as I got there, I would run into said spouse coming from the other direction! He had been up and walking for more than an hour already. We strolled along the beach together, gathering shells and investigating sea creatures, and then we curled up together on the wooden swing to watch the sun come up. Given that I am a devout night-owl, I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of sunrises I've gotten up to see (the ones I've seen by staying up the entire previous night comprise a longer list). I still remember it as one of the most beautiful things I'd ever seen God do.

After all that walking and sunrise-watching,

we were ravenously hungry, so (after a stop in the room to replace my sleep shirt with more appropriate attire) we got into the car and drove to the Village for a visit to the Sandcastle, where they have a lovely, inexpensive breakfast buffet that suited us perfectly. We were in their outdoor seating area, where the grackles love to sit and watch for any wayward crumbs, and usually demand some – “Drop the biscuit! Drop the biscuit!”



Having been able to consume a reasonable amount of food, the best way to work it off was to head over to the Lighthouse and make the 129-step climb to the top. In truth, my husband made the climb and I waved proudly from the gazebo below. I didn't start doing my own lighthouse climbing until a few visits later. The tour of the lighthouse as operated by the Coastal Georgia Historical Society was fascinating, and it was amazing to see a portrait of John Couper, the man I'd read so much about in my Price novels. I think that was the first moment it truly hit me (though I had always known) that these people existed and were a part of the land on which I was standing. It was an overwhelming feeling; I was humbled by the history that surrounded me.

My husband thought he'd burned enough calories to merit an ice cream cone, and while we were nibbling away at our butter pecan (mine) and mint chip (his) cones, we noticed a sign for the St. Simons Trolley Tour, departing from about 20 feet away and in about 5 minutes. We hopped on, and proceeded to be driven about the Island in an open-air Trolley, hearing about all the legends and history from an Islander. The



driver and guide covered a lot of ground, literally and figuratively, in the hour-long tour, and I was surprised and delighted to find that one of the stops was at Christ Church Frederica, which by this time was actually open for tourists to step inside. The sanctuary was cool, dark and soothing, and the docent pointed out the various pews dedicated to Island families. Such a serene place to meditate, to contemplate and to pray. Then the guide led us through the cemetery, pointing out the gravesites of the many islanders about whom I'd been reading for the last four years. I couldn't imagine a more beautiful place to be laid to rest.

We were truly sorry to see our Trolley tour end, but we ventured back to the beach in the afternoon for more meandering and general relaxation, and then closed out the day with one of the most sumptuous meals I had ever been

privileged to eat. We rolled back to the hotel stuffed to our earlobes and thoroughly exhausted from our day in the sunshine, and deeply disappointed that we hadn't budgeted time in our schedule for more than one day on St. Simons Island. I thought I had an inkling of what a magical place it would be, but I underestimated my love for it enormously. I never wanted to leave, and the next morning, as we crossed the Causeway back to the mainland and the "real world," I sobbed as if my heart would break.



Many things have changed since the first time I visited St. Simons, both for me and for the Island. I'm now delightedly single, and each year when I return, I take a different friend with me in order to share with a new person the magic of St. Simons. The Island has continued to change and evolve, as well – every year when I arrive I see something different. But the magic, and my joy, remain undimmed, and the sunrises just as beautiful.



Websites to visit

<http://www.saintsimonslighthouse.org/> - Website of the Coastal Georgia Historical Society and the St. Simons Island Lighthouse

<http://www.christchurchfrederica.org/> - Website for Christ Church Frederica

<http://www.stsimonstours.com/> - Website for the St. Simons Trolley