

CHAPTER ONE

Deus, Amici, et Nos

GOD, OUR FRIENDS, AND OURSELVES

[W]e are of the very small group of people who are by birth and not by possessions at the social head of the greatest and most important city in the greatest and most important country in the world. We are raised above our fellows as is an English nobleman. . . . People look to us, we represent more—much more—than we are. We cannot avoid responsibility; we can only carry it well or badly.

—Great-uncle Bertie Pell

I come from a family in love with itself. My cousin Claiborne Pell, son of my great-uncle Bertie and now retired after thirty-six years as a U.S. Senator, inherited his father's passion for our family history and our name. When I was just out of college in 1959 and still single, Claiborne reminded me that Pells have a tradition of distant cousins marrying each other. In those prefeminist days, a wife always took the husband's surname. "If you married one of your cousins," he suggested brightly, "you wouldn't ever have to lose the name."

I grew up knowing some of the beliefs, facts, and historical oddities that make up the family creed. When I was in third grade, I could tell the class that our scholarly mathematician forefather in England, Dr. John Pell, invented the division sign in 1659. His younger brother, Thomas, an enterprising soldier and doctor who arrived in the New World about 1635, became a prominent citizen of Fairfield, Connecticut. He amassed a small fortune by trading furs, often with an Indian chieftain named Wampage, and marrying a rich widow. Later, he bought an immense tract of land along

Long Island Sound from a council of local Indians. (The price, I learned later: “2 gunns, 2 kettles, 2 coats, two adzes, 2 shirts, 1 barrel of cider and 6 bitts of money.”) Because he staunchly fended off Dutch claims to his property and subsequently was helpful to New York’s colonial governors, the Duke of York conferred upon Thomas Pell the “Lordship and Manner” of Pelham. The grant confirmed his title to the property “forever, firmly, freely and clearly . . . as if he held the same from his Majesty the King of England.” In return for near-absolute power over the inhabitants of his manor, Pell had to provide the duke with one lamb each year on the first of May.

We even have a family fortress. In 1820, our ancestor William Ferris Pell bought Fort Ticonderoga, then a historic ruin that had played a strategic role in the French and Indian Wars and in the Revolution: It was there that Ethan Allen surprised the British soldiers, giving America its first victory in the fight for independence. Pells restored the fort, which is now a historic landmark.

We Pells consider ourselves the only American colonial family whose landholdings stem from grants by both Indians and the British Crown.

The New York colonial families reproduced the English feudal system in the New World, complete with a rigid social hierarchy that ensconced the elite at the top. They intermarried, took the choice government positions, and blithely assumed the prerogatives of a ruling class: “They were the gentry of the country, to whom the country, without a rebellious thought, took off its hat.”

Even now, in the twenty-first century, some of my family still behave like gentry to whom the country should take off its hat. Newspaper writers call us “the ancestral Pells,” who have always been “in society.” My cousin Toby, son of the senator, is a tall, handsome, gray-haired man with a wide smile and dashing white forelock who ran the Newport Preservation Society, a multimillion-dollar complex of museums and colonial homes. Its main office is in a mansion on Bellevue Avenue once owned by his grandfather, a residence that, because of its orange tile roof, is referred to in Newport as “Taco Pell.”

Toby defined the family’s sense of its own aristocracy. “As children, we were taught that, had America been more feudal, we would be a noble family,” he said. “We were told over the dinner table that we were the *creme de la creme*.”

Like Toby, I went through gates into private clubs and private schools that excluded those who weren’t rich enough, or white enough, or maybe

their money wasn't old enough. One grandmother lived in Tuxedo Park, New York, a guarded enclave with a small fortress at its gate; a grandfather lived on an estate hidden behind a thick, green wall on Long Island's North Shore. No stranger could enter the private clubs where my relatives relaxed and played games or the Upper East Side buildings where they lived while they were in Manhattan. Uniformed doormen protected them from unwanted intrusions; servants and tradesmen entered by the back door; everyone executed their orders. It never occurred to me to question the rightness of my own inclusion or the exclusion of others; everyone around me simply took their status for granted.

The trappings of the Pell name have continued on into the modern era, and some of the family take these things extremely seriously. In 1988, there were two particularly interesting family celebrations that symbolized conflicting aspects of our heritage. I was lucky enough to attend them both.

THE EAST COAST GATHERING

The first was a family reunion in June on the occasion of the three hundredth anniversary of New Rochelle, New York, a town built on land that had once belonged to the family's manor.

In 1688, Sir John Pell, Thomas's nephew and heir, sold the acreage that is now New Rochelle to the Huguenots, French Protestants who had fled to the New World to escape religious persecution. They paid 1,675 pounds and, in addition to the money, they were obligated to provide one "Fatt calfe every fouer and twentyeth day of June yearly & Every Year forever, if demanded" for Sir John's heirs.

In the colonial era, the presentation of the "fatt" calf was a holiday marked with feasting and fun. Then, for nearly two hundred years after the American Revolution, the Pells, who had been dispossessed of their manor, did not request a calf. But sixty years ago a distant cousin reminded city leaders of the old deed and demanded the tribute. The city paid up. Irregularly since then, the demand has been made and fulfilled with a range of ceremonies that have featured colonial costumes, flags, speeches, and, occasionally, a local beauty queen.

In 1955, a New Rochelle mayor refused to honor the old contract. Tongue in cheek, the family responded. There were skilled Wall Street

lawyers in the family, a Pell spokesman said, who would take legal action to get our city back if a calf was not forthcoming. Instead of seizing farmers' cottages and plows, the family would confiscate tennis courts and three-car garages. The city backed down. And for its tricentennial observation, the city was paying up in style, inviting all Sir John's descendants to attend and receive their tribute.

New Rochelle treated us as though we were prized historical relics, like spinning wheels, horse-drawn carriages, or oil lamps. City officials had planned a series of events for our entertainment over the weekend. So, on a summer morning, about fifty Pells gathered in a sterile hotel lobby, including my son Peter and me. We stood around in small groups of cousins ranging from very young to old, looking uncomfortable. Those who had never met shook hands formally upon being introduced, while those who were more closely related gave each other little air kisses (women) or handshakes with smiles (men). Not a shriek, not a tear, not a bear hug occurred as the family reunion convened.

The first event was a bus tour of our manor. As we drove, a local historian told us of the Treaty Oak that marked the place where our ancestor Thomas Pell had signed the deed with the Indians. One in-law, apparently irked by Pellishness, explained loudly to no one in particular that *her* family descended directly from Napoleon Bonaparte. Evidently considering herself ahead on points, she kept quiet from then on.

Our first stop was the Bartow-Pell mansion, built on a section of the old land grant. The local garden club had carefully restored the grounds; we walked past a tidy herb garden and through a gate in the wrought iron fence to a wide expanse of lawn. There we sat on the grass, admiring the formal garden, its symmetrically arranged ewe bushes and beds of flowers laid out around a square pool with a winged bronze cherub at the center.

The historian continued: The first people to live here were Siwanoy Indians, who claimed all the land along the shore from New York City north to the Connecticut River. She told the story of Thomas in 1654 buying the vaguely defined two hundred thousand acres—then a wilderness where wolves and bears roamed—including the Bronx and the land along the shore of Long Island Sound north to Mamaroneck. As years went by, however, it became clear that the Indians had sold various sections of this land several times over, and, as other settlers moved in, Thomas's acreage shrank.

Thomas, who died rich and childless in 1669, left the manor to his nephew John, a courtier to Charles II "in ould England."

When word arrived in London that the young man had inherited vast lands in the New World, the historian went on, King Charles knighted him on the spot. Sir John promptly left for America, married into a rich family, and began selling off pieces of his manor until all that remained were about seven square miles, including what is now Pelham. As Commissioner of Indian Affairs, he continued his uncle's policy of befriending and protecting local Indians, including old Wampage and his family who lived on an island across the water from the manor house. A Justice of the Peace, Sir John was elected to New York's first colonial General Assembly. His son, Thomas II, married Anna, a local Indian princess who, according to family lore, was Wampage's granddaughter. (According to our family journal *Pelliana*, Sir John, a canny old fellow, considered the union a way to consolidate the Pells' position as landowners.)

The historian ended her lecture with the fifth Lord of the Manor, Joseph II, a British sympathizer at the time of the Revolution. He was imprisoned by the patriots and beaten so badly that he died shortly afterward. In fact, most of the Pells, knowing on which side their bread was buttered, had sided with King George, and thus did not fare well after the Revolution; they were attainted and their property was confiscated. The manor house was burned. Most of the family fled to Canada for refuge.

But they did not stay long. Political passions in the new United States cooled, and the Pells returned to live in New York City; one of them, William Ferris Pell, made a large fortune on Wall Street importing marble and fine wood for the growing city. No one seemed to care any more that the family had supported the king, and they took a prominent place in New York society.

My relatives beamed as the historian acknowledged the special place of their ancestors in colonial history. Her words bathed the family in an aura of aristocracy—they were indeed extraordinary, and she was giving them their due.

After her talk, we walked over to inspect the ancient graves that remain on the property—of Joseph, the fourth lord, his wife, Phoebe, and two others, all enclosed in a small square plot marked off by concrete posts linked with a metal railing. The weather-beaten graves were weedy and overgrown. "I paid to have pachysandra planted in there," grumbled my elderly, heavysset cousin Rodman Pell, a fishmonger who arrived years before bearing a family Bible that, much to the distress of the assembled family, confirmed his descent from the lords of the manor. His clothing, voice, and demeanor betrayed his

working-class status, and he stood out from the others, any of whom could have stepped from the pages of *Town and Country Magazine*. Some of his elegantly clad cousins joked about his jacket, whose fabric, they said, looked like the test pattern on an old TV.

Later, we returned to the hotel to change for the formal dinner, which was to be held at the Bartow-Pell mansion. I sat next to one of my favorite cousins, one with the formidable name of Anthony Douglas Stephen Mordaunt Pell, known to all as Tony. A handsome, stout, jovial fellow, he began telling me stories about one of our most eccentric relatives: Claiborne's father, my great-uncle Bertie, a friend of FDR's from Harvard, a New Dealer and diplomat, and Bertie's wife Olive, an artist who edited her own version of the Bible. It was a rather unwieldy volume, Olive felt, so she cut out the boring parts of the Old Testament, excluded references to eating meat since she was a vegetarian, and condensed the four Gospels into one. She sold some family diamonds to finance the 1952 publication of her handy, compact result, which she named *The Olive Pell Bible*. It had quite a success.

When Uncle Bertie was FDR's Minister to Portugal at the start of World War II, Tony told me, Lisbon was a center of intrigue. Olive was planning a dinner for the diplomatic corps to liven up the wartime social scene; she decided to serve ice cream for dessert. But delicacies were scarce, and no ice cream was to be had. Olive heard that the U.S. Navy, stationed on watch offshore, had a supply on board for the sailors. She asked Uncle Bertie to get some for her party. Oblivious to the wartime emergency and concerned for the success of Olive's social event, he had an urgent message dispatched through the military communications system to the fleet commander at sea, ordering him ashore immediately. The admiral, undoubtedly expecting that a crisis was brewing, encountered Bertie, who had had himself ferried out to the anchored ship in a naval launch, flags flying. Bertie explained he'd heard that the admiral had ice cream aboard; could he have some for his wife's party? "ICE CREAM? ICE CREAM!!" bellowed the apoplectic admiral, muttering furiously as he steamed back to his ship.

As the family dinner went on, there were several speeches. Claiborne gave one about the family spirit and invoked our motto, *Deus, Amici et Nos*, or "God, our friends, and ourselves." He told of one young Pell student who was too poor to buy a tail coat. A rich relative gave him one, and in later years the charity was returned: the recipient gave a tail coat to the son of his benefactor.

The senator told of his father's dedication to the family. As World War II drew closer, Claiborne said, Uncle Bertie began to worry about the fifteenth-century gravestones of our ancestors in Dersingham, England, and the possibility that the Germans might destroy them in the Blitz. He arranged for workmen to protect the monuments with sandbags so that they would not be damaged if bombs should fall into the ancient cemetery. "I wonder how the people who lived there then felt about that," my son Peter mused afterward. "Their houses weren't protected, but those old graves were."

Only one cousin expressed a divergent view: a Congregational minister who reminded the gathering that some aspects of the Pell spirit were obnoxious and selfish—and he urged the family to expand its spirit to include the whole family of mankind.

The next morning threatened rain. We drove to the neighboring town of Pelham, named for the old family manor, to attend the ceremonial raising of a flag newly designed for the occasion. The senator chatted in his courtly manner with town officials and acted as our patriarch. Bagpipes played, VFW officers in uniform surrounded the flagpole. I stood next to him under lowering skies as he pulled the ropes raising the white and blue Pelham flag.

The day turned sunny for the main event.

In New Rochelle, a small crowd waited in front of a makeshift stage in a grassy park near Long Island Sound. A Black Angus calf balked at a ramp leading onto the stage but a burly man roughly twisted up its tail while two others linked arms around its rear end, pushing and tugging the panicked beast up and into position. Once there, its legs splayed out and it collapsed in a miserable heap. Dignitaries on the platform looked down with sympathy on the poor creature, which later struggled to its feet and stood, head hung low, as the ceremony went forward.

The audience quieted. The deputy mayor spoke: "Pells, Huguenots, and humble citizens of New Rochelle who are neither Pells nor Huguenots," he began with a wry smile. "I welcome you. We thank you, Pells and Huguenots. Because of you we can live here and raise our families here." He took the free end of the calf's rope and presented it to Cousin Rodman. "See what we are giving away instead of the city!" crowed the mayor.

Rodman responded: "I accept this fat calf on behalf of all Pells around the world, near and far. And I thank the city for paying the rent on time."

Most Pells were turned out as if for the Harvard-Yale crew races or a boarding school graduation—the men were in blazers and ties, the women in prints and linen dresses. Debonair, white-haired cousin Eddie, a lawyer from

Philadelphia, sported a wide-brimmed straw hat, impeccable white trousers and jacket, along with a cigar and a pretty wife with a charming European accent. Many of the men wore Pell Family Association ties, black, with a discreet pattern of tiny pelicans like the one on the family crest.

That night, I had a melancholy dream. I saw a railway car filled with drunken, older men, one of them riding a horse, making it go faster and faster into a dead end.

THE WEST COAST GATHERING

Five months later, however, I experienced a very different aspect of our history at a Jewish gathering in my home city of San Francisco.

Some family background here: To my immediate family, Uncle Bertie was ridiculous. My father, Clarence Cecil Pell Jr., and his father, Clarence Cecil Pell, the grandfather whom I called Big Cook, mainly organized their lives around exclusive private clubs and arcane racquet sports. But Big Cook's brother Bertie and Bertie's son Claiborne plunged into the real world of politics. My side of the family made fun of them: they could not hit a ball very well, they did not care much about sports, they read history and went to museums and were considered to be stuffy and boring. "I was always told that Uncle Bertie was a horse's ass," one cousin told me.

Having read Bertie's 1972 biography, *Brahmin in Revolt*, I knew a little about him. Born in 1884 at the height of the Gilded Age, he was a gentleman who lived off family money. An unusually independent thinker, he was educated at Pomfret, a boys' boarding school in Connecticut, where he was the only person in the entire school to subscribe to a daily newspaper. He went on to Harvard, but after a year or two he left because he felt there was nothing more for him to learn there. He traveled and read history in Europe as a young man and, unlike most of his social class, developed a philosophy based on the European sense of noblesse oblige. A devotee of art, music, and literature, he disdained the profit motive as unworthy of a cultivated person. "Even those of us who shared in the good things must realize that the boom times benefited too few people, that the distribution of profits was unfair," he wrote. To the horror of his friends, he recoiled at the spectacle of unbridled capitalism and later became a lifelong Democrat.

In 1912, he moved back to Tuxedo Park after years of living in Europe. Immediately, he pitched in to support the Progressive campaign for Theodore

Roosevelt, who advocated breaking up the powerful industrial trusts and prosecuting corruption in government. Bertie, whose social status protected him from retaliation by the unforgiving Republicans who ran Tuxedo, was the front man. He organized small businessmen and working people, among them the servants who would have been summarily fired had such activity been known to their employers. "No county committeeman has ever done as much work as was credited to me in that campaign," he reflected years later.

Despite his progressive politics, however, Bertie was hardly a man of the people. He went about in a knickerbocker suit, plus-fours, and a wide cravat, sometimes of swirling dotted swiss. Old-fashioned pince-nez perched on his nose. In winter, he sometimes wore a long, flowing cape, and in summer he was resplendent in grand white suits, always with a waistcoat.

Private clubs were a great part of his life, and his stuffiness about them was legendary. In a letter to a cousin, Bertie wrote: "The successful election of Plummer, Duncan and Creighton Webb at the Union certainly shows that the standard has gone down. . . . It would not be very well to say that none of these men would have been admitted into the backdoor of the old Union as it is highly probable that at least one of them delivered imported biscuits and other delicacies at the kitchen entrance." He continued, "One goes to a club not because of whom one will see but because of whom one will not see."

Hardly words that one would expect from a liberal Democrat, but Bertie was filled with contradictions. His long friendship with Franklin Roosevelt began when they were students at Harvard. Years later, as governor of New York, FDR gave Bertie a position in the state Democratic Party, and, despite the objections of regular Tammany Hall pols, continued to boost his political career. Bertie served a term in Congress representing New York's Silk Stocking District on the Upper East Side. As World War II was breaking out, FDR appointed him Minister to Portugal, and then, in 1941, to Hungary, a fascist state then under Nazi domination. Bertie insisted on being driven through Europe to his new post in a large Buick station wagon. On the way, he saw starving prisoners of war and heard frightening accounts of Nazi atrocities. When he arrived, Bertie joined the best club in Budapest and rented a suite of rooms at the Ritz. Well-liked by the Hungarian people, he openly disrespected German officials. Using his diplomatic status, he helped smuggle Jews out of Europe.

In December 1941, after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Hungary declared war on the United States and Bertie had to burn the U.S. Embassy

codes before his departure. Despite the Germans' efforts to isolate him, five thousand Hungarians showed up at the train station to see him off when he left the country.

Over the opposition of State Department career officers, Roosevelt appointed Bertie to the War Crimes Commission, the international body set up to decide the fate of the Nazis once the Allies had defeated the Axis powers. To those career officers, Bertie, who had not come up through regular bureaucratic channels, was known to be an independent thinker and the president's friend, even something of a loose cannon.

Horrified by what he knew had happened in the Holocaust and what he had seen of Nazi behavior in Europe, Bertie was determined that perpetrators of war crimes should be punished. He wanted to see the guilty—from privates to generals—swing. He had no tolerance for the international law of the day that provided no way to punish a government for crimes against its own people. The political and military leaders of the Third Reich, for instance, could not be tried in an international court for genocide against the Jews of Germany. But his views were opposed by the higher-ups in the anti-Semitic State Department, which had refused to take in Jewish refugees in the 1930s. However, the career officials could not publicly disagree with Bertie on this issue, since revulsion against Nazi atrocities ran high in the nation. So they proceeded quietly to undermine Bertie's work. Behind his back, they cut off his access to the president. They saddled him with a disloyal assistant. Though Bertie worked desperately to get our government to recognize atrocities committed by the Nazis against their own citizens as war crimes, he did not succeed. In fact, with Roosevelt's connivance, he was fired from his post.

The accepted routine for an official who had been sacked was to maintain silence. But Bertie, who did not care if he ever got another post, did not go quietly and he did not give up. He spoke freely to reporters and Jewish groups, telling them that the State Department was soft on Nazis and that he had been fired because he sought to punish war criminals.

By going public, he and others put pressure on the State Department, which ultimately had to reverse its stance. In defeat, he won. After that, Bertie left public life.

As a child, I didn't see much of him. But many years later, when I became engaged to Herbert McLaughlin, who after all was a Yale-educated architect from the swanky Chicago suburb of Lake Forest, he sent me a letter. Herb, like all men his age in 1959, had to perform some sort of military

service and upon graduation was going into the Air Force as a lieutenant. Evidently Uncle Bertie did not consider that the McLaughlins were suitable matches for our family—perhaps because their forebears had been immigrant Irish who parlayed a small grocery business into a highly profitable coffee company. His letter went something like this:

My dear Eve, I have heard that you are to be engaged to a Catholic who is entering the armed forces. It pains me to think of you hanging out your wash in a back yard with other military wives. And I must tell you that, as a Democrat, I have had a great deal more contact with Catholics than most people have. I must assure you that the person who passes the plate in a Catholic church is nothing like an Episcopal vestryman. Give up these plans, my dear Eve, and come travel with me in Europe. . . .

At the time, I howled with laughter at my great-uncle's snobbery, quoted his admonition to all my friends, and married Herb McLaughlin anyway.

In November 1988, a Jewish friend called me. "Why do you joke about your Uncle Bertie?" he asked rather crossly. "His memory is being honored at a dinner by the Northern California Holocaust Center because of his work at the end of World War II. The senator is going to be there."

So, very surprised, I went to the dinner. When a few guests complimented me on my "illustrious" family, I felt false because I had such mixed feelings about being part of it.

The ceremonies began with frightening black and white films of Nazis torching Jewish businesses and places of worship on *Kristallnacht* in 1938. Next, a Holocaust survivor spoke of his experiences at Dachau. Then, in the silent banquet room, Dr. Charles Sydnor, a history professor who had served with the Office of Special Investigations tracking down Nazis after the war, rose to speak. "Herbert C. Pell was as close to an aristocrat as it is possible for an American to be," he began. "But values were more important to him than being rich or well connected." He went on at some length about Bertie's "noble origins," his Yankee matter-of-fact demeanor and, most of all, his relentless crusade to make genocide a crime. "Had Ambassador Pell not shamed his government, there would have been at best only watered-down versions of Nuremberg. His legacy made it possible to track down, denaturalize and deport war criminals." Dr. Sydnor concluded like a rabbi: "In the Name of the Almighty, Blessed be he."

Tears ran down my cheeks. Although I had read about this in Bertie's biography, I had not felt or understood the power of what he did until that moment. Claiborne rose. "My father had trouble sleeping for two years because of his memories of the Holocaust," he said in his soft voice. He deplored the tacit prewar understanding between the United States and Great Britain not to give asylum to the Jews of Europe, to leave them to Hitler. He accepted his father's award.

I left that evening with an altered sense of my family. On the one hand, I felt glad to have moved away from the East Coast and to have made a different life for myself on the other side of the country. On the other, here was something to be truly proud of. Yet as I considered some of the contradictions that make up the peculiar Pellish stance toward the world, I wondered how the snobbish clubman and the stalwart defender of the Jews managed to exist together in the same skin. And I wondered how my side of the family could have written Bertie off as a boring "horse's ass" or cared that Claiborne, a distinguished senator, wasn't a better tennis player.

The two family events, the "fatt" calf presentation and the dinner honoring Uncle Bertie, roiled my conflicted feelings about being a Pell. Apart from a love of sport, our sense of superiority and familial tendencies toward eccentricity and public service, what were we Pells about? It's not money that sets us apart—after all, there are far grander fortunes around. It's our history, dating back so many centuries, our ancestors' role in the colonies and unusual closeness to the Siwanoy Indians, the nineteenth-century prominence of the merchant Pells on Wall Street, our purchase and restoration of Fort Ticonderoga, and what we see as our place in the country's ruling class carried on in the twentieth century by Bertie and Claiborne.

Tony Pell, my dinner partner in New Rochelle and the cousin of whom I am so fond, is a cheerful Boston investment banker who was in his fifties and president of Fort Ticonderoga when I talked to him about the family. Most of the Fort's board of directors are relatives whom Tony worked with. He has thought about the issue of social class in our family and its effect on us. "There are certainly down sides. One of those is this sense of isolation," he told me. "I don't know that we are comfortable with ourselves. There is this sense of being above the *hoi polloi* when in fact by any American standard we are not at all. But there is a holding on to that idea of being above, and when you can't afford it that's a terrible thing to have. We have paid a dear price, many people have, for that sense of privilege."