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Behind the Facade of the RI Embassy in Washington

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By Abdullah Balbed

WASHINGTON D.C. (JP): One hundred years ago this month, construction began to erect an enormous mansion located at 2020 Massachusetts Avenue Northwest. It was built by Thomas Walsh, an Irish immigrant, who moved to the United States at the age of 18 with his father and younger sister in 1869 and settled in Worcester, Massachusetts. He worked as a carpenter.

At the age of 21 he decided to go west to Colorado, where his older brother, who immigrated earlier, was stationed with the U.S. Army. He retained his vocation as carpenter, specializing in building houses and bridges. As what usually happened to many young men of that era in the West, he caught gold fever and went to work in a gold mine.

After years of hard labor and other challenges, working and prospecting, he struck it rich and purchased Camp Bird Mine. He had earlier married a woman who bore him a daughter in 1886 named Evalyn and a son in 1888 named Vinson.

He developed an interest in politics, mainly on the Republican side. At the turn of the 20th century, he decided to move to Washington, D.C., to be at the center of power and politics. He became close friends of past presidents William McKinley, William Howard Taft and Teddy Roosevelt. Roosevelt's daughter, Alice, was one of Evalyn's closest friends.

Alice later moved to a house across the street from Evalyn.

He purchased the land for a mansion, hired Henry Andersen, a famous New York architect. He wanted to emulate the *beaux arts* style of Paris of that era. He brought in artisans from Italy to do the murals and intricate woodwork. He spent almost US\$1 million, including for furnishing. In her book titled "*Father Struck It Rich*", published in 1936, daughter Evalyn called it "a million dollar 60-room mansion". It was ready for occupancy in the summer of 1903 and they moved into the four-storey building with full basement.

They lavishly entertained kings, queens, presidents, prime ministers and other rich and famous people of the era.

Also in the mansion, the transaction for the purchase of a fabulous 441/4 carat blue diamond, called the Hope diamond, took place. This diamond supposedly brought bad luck. It was from India and first owned by a maharajah, but it was stolen by a Frenchman named Jean Tavernier and brought to France.

Not long afterward, Tavernier was attacked and killed by a pack of wild dogs. The diamond next fell into the hands of Mary Antoinette, and we all know what happened to her. Years after the French Revolution, a London banker named Henry Thomas Hope acquired it and gave its new name: the Hope diamond.

Diamond as charm

Evalyn first saw it in Paris. Jeweler Pierre Cartier brought it to her hotel. She was enchanted with it, and the next year, Cartier came to Washington D.C. and consummated the sale of it to Evalyn. She received many letters telling her the story of the diamond, and she grew nervous. She consulted with a priest and had the stone blessed.

She wrote in her book that "Monsignor Russell's Latin words gave me strange comfort. Ever since that day, I have worn my diamond as a charm. I kid myself, of course -- but I like to pretend the thing brings good luck. As a matter of fact, the luckiest thing about it is that, if I ever had to, I could hock it". The last private owner of the diamond, a New York jeweler named Harry Winston, donated the diamond to the Smithsonian Institute in 1950. Until today it is still on display in the institute's Museum of Natural History.

When Thomas Walsh died, his widow, Carrie Bell Walsh, inherited the mansion, and upon her death in 1932, she willed it to Evalyn and her husband Edward (Ned) B. Maclean, son of the owner and founder of *The Washington Post*.

During World War II, the mansion was used rent-free by the American Red Cross for its many activities. Women workers of the Red Cross manufactured surgical dressings and set up classes for nurse's aides in the building. It also served as the headquarters for emergency first aid workers. Evelyn died of pneumonia in 1947 at "Friendship", a mansion located about five kilometers from 2020 Massachusetts Avenue. She and her husband had inherited it from her father-in-law.

The Indonesian government, through first Ambassador to the United States Ali Sastroamidjojo, purchased the building on Dec. 19, 1951, for \$335,000 to be used as its chancery. Partial financing was arranged through the American Security Bank, the predecessor of the present day Bank of America. Another \$75,000 was needed for repairs and restoration.

Since 1973 the building has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places and, as such, no major renovations are to be made that would change the character of the building, much less tear it down. It has to be preserved. Arrangements also have to be made for visitors to view it, without disrupting the daily activities of the embassy.

Not for sale

The building has been featured in the *New York Times Magazine* with pictures of its magnificent "Y" shape staircase and the Tiffany-style stained-glass ceiling. In 1963, a decade before it was designated as a historical building, Indonesia's third Ambassador to the United States Zairin Zain received an offer of \$4 million from the Hilton Corporation. Of course, it was turned down.

Today, it is estimated that it could fetch a price of between \$25 million to \$30 million. But if it is to be sold, the prospective purchaser is required to sign a pledge to preserve the building. So far, the Indonesian Embassy has no plans to sell it.

When the need for additional offices became acute, Ambassador D. Ashari, the ninth ambassador to the United States, was able to obtain funding from the Indonesian government to build a new structure, adjacent to the old one, on what was once the embassy's parking lot. He inaugurated it in June 1982.

The present Indonesian ambassador, Dorodjatun Kuntjoro-Jakti, a man with a keen interest in history and preservation but with a very limited budget, directed his administrative staff to make some improvements to several aspects of the building. The parquet floors of the ornate reception rooms on the first floor were refurbished and the drapes in those rooms were replaced with better material.

In October 1999, Ambassador Kuntjoro-Jakti officially renamed one of the rooms "The President Room" in which the large photographs of the first four Indonesian presidents are displayed with short inscriptions in English underneath.

However, a built-in organ with massive baroque-style wood, located in the other reception room, remains out of order because the cost of repairing it is expensive. Some American organ buffs who have visited the embassy, voiced an interest in finding ways to have the organ repaired but so far nothing has materialized yet.

During these years, the Indonesian Embassy had entertained in this building many Indonesian as well as American dignitaries, including former presidents Sukarno and Soeharto, former vice presidents Hubert Humphry and Walter Mondale, former attorney general Robert Kennedy, former secretary of states William Rogers and Henry Kissinger and former World Bank president Robert S. McNamanara.

Evalyn's Ghost

Another aspect of the building is the existence of Evalyn's ghost. Many embassy night watchmen have sworn they have seen Evalyn's ghost roaming the building at night. Some Indonesian diplomats and embassy staff members who sometimes have to work late, claim to have had queer feelings.

The book *The National Directory of Haunted Places* by Dennis William Hauck, published in 1994, states under subheading *Indonesian Embassy: Old McLean Mansion*: "The apparition of a beautiful, nude woman is sometimes seen descending the palatial stairway here. Her spirit just wants to return to better times. Her name is Evalyn Walsh McLean, the former owner of this mansion, whose life was ruined by the curse of the Hope Diamond".

And in the book *Ghosts: Washington Revisited, The Ghostlore of the Nation's Capital* by John Alexander, published in 1998, under subheading *The Curse of the Hope Diamond* says : "The specter of a nude woman, 'of unparalleled beauty and form', is said to

occasionally grace the imposing stairway inside the palatial Indonesian Embassy at 2020 Massachusetts Avenue, Northwest. Those who keep alive the lore of Embassy Row like to think 'the nocturnal nude', as one reporter labeled her, is a youthful Evalyn Walsh McLean visiting the home she first occupied upon coming East -- a home where she had known only happiness. All of that, of course, was before she and her husband, Ned, acquired the infamous, and some say diabolical, diamond so strangely misnamed Hope."

Recently an Indonesian student videotaping a student event held at the embassy, captured on camera what appears to be a woman's figure in a white dress descending the staircase. Believers insist that the blurry picture is proof-positive that Evalyn's ghost exists, while skeptics remain disbelieving.

Before returning to Indonesia next month upon completion of his tour of duty as Indonesia's ambassador to the United States, Dorodjatun plans to hold a modest commemoration of the building's centennial by inviting the descendants of Evalyn: a great grandson presently living in Memphis, Tennessee, and two other relatives living in Fairplay, Colorado.

The writer is a staff member of the Indonesian Embassy in Washington, D.C.