

A Bleak Life for an Elderly Woman With \$1 Million

By RALPH BLUMENTHAL

Victoria J. Greenidge, who is 78 or 79 years old, lives in a small room on the third floor of a nursing home overlooking the boardwalk in Rockaway Beach, Queens. She has a dozen or so thrift-shop dresses, several pairs of canvas shoes, a straw hat and a television set.

She also has about a million dollars.

When her husband died in 1972, Mrs. Greenidge, who has since been diagnosed as senile, inherited their seven-acre property in Far Rockaway, recently valued at \$150,000, and securities and savings worth about \$850,000.

Since her husband's death, according to recent litigation, some of her wealth has been plundered in an "allegedly criminal pattern of undue influence by a succession of lawyers, workmen, housekeepers, advisers and helpers."

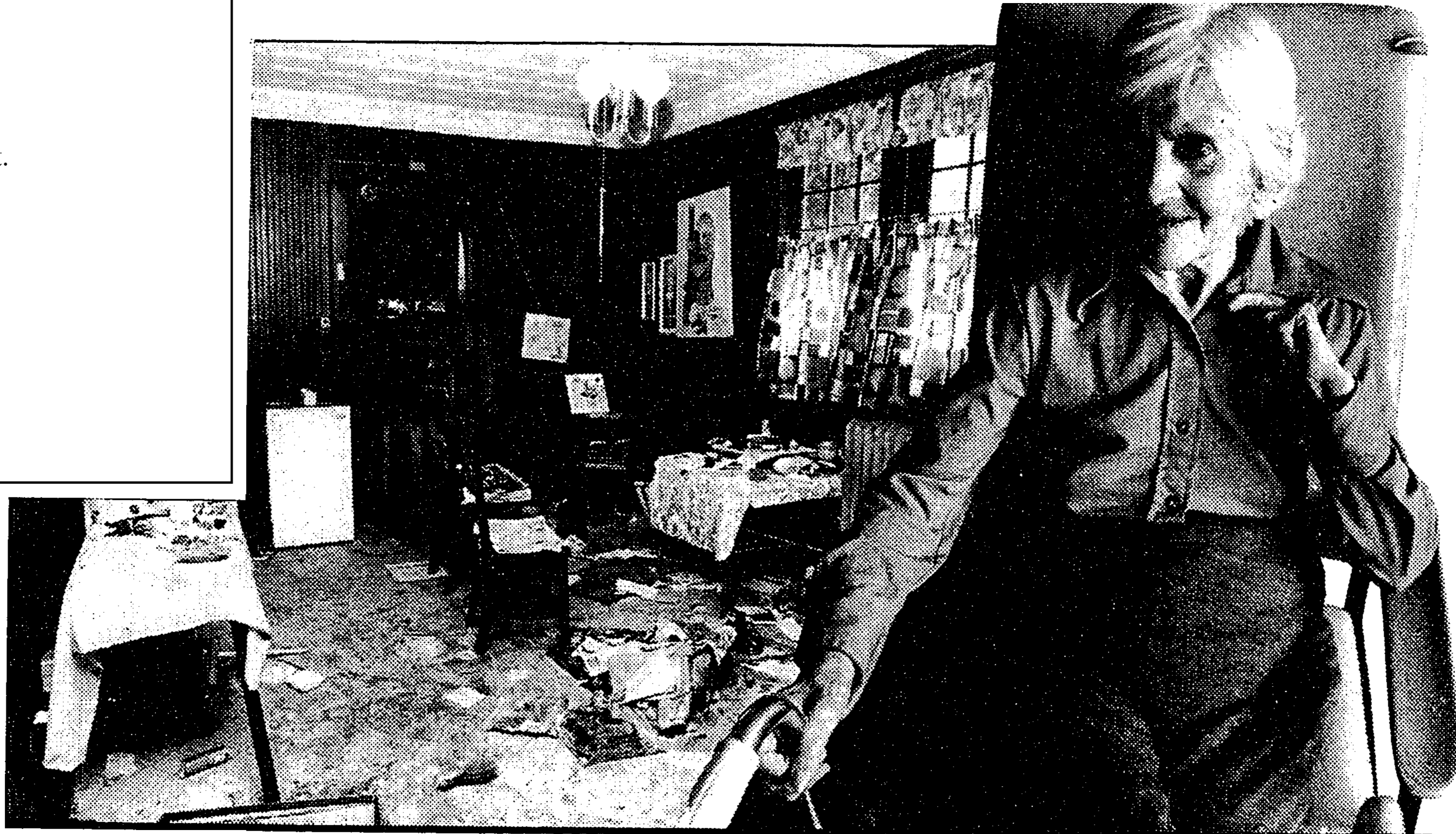
A Puzzling Disparity

Enough of her legacy is left to raise questions about how her court-appointed conservator has been allocating her money and about how the conservator was selected. Those who say they are puzzled by the disparity between Mrs. Greenidge's riches and her pauperlike existence include her former guardian, a former city official and Mrs. Greenidge's oldest friend.

The friend, Edith Bull, and her lawyer, Sidney Baumgarten, a former Queens assistant district attorney and adviser to former Mayor Abraham D. Beame, sued unsuccessfully last year

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The main house at Sunset Lodge, above, and the interior of the guest cottage where Victoria J. Greenidge spent her last reclusive years on the property. At right, Mrs. Greenidge in her room at the Promenade Nursing Home in Rockaway Beach, Queens.

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to remove the conservator, but lost in State Supreme Court and in the Appellate Division.

They charged that the judge had created "a circumstantial appearance of impropriety" by bypassing Mrs. Bull, who had offered to serve as conservator without fee and who had previously exercised power of attorney for Mrs. Greenidge at the behest of the Queens District Attorney.

Instead, the judge appointed a stranger whose wife was a judicial colleague of the judge and who was also a member of a state judicial screening committee that later approved the judge for the Appellate Division.

The conservator, Herbert Rubin, a partner in the Wall Street firm of Herzfeld & Rubin, a State Banking Board member and chairman of the state law committee of the Liberal Party, denied any lack of care and said his office had devoted at least \$35,000 worth of legal time to the case while receiving compensation of \$9,500 last year.

'Not at Liberty' to Comment

He also denied any connection between his appointment and the position of his wife, Rose L. Rubin, a Court of Claims judge sitting as an acting State Supreme Court justice in Queens. When asked if his appointment and screening committee role could have represented any conflict of interest, he replied: "I am not at liberty to speak to the subject of the committee deliberations."

The judge, Moses M. Weinstein, then a State Supreme Court justice and assistant administrative judge in Queens, is now in the state's Appellate Division. He was on vacation and could not be reached for comment.

Recent visitors to Mrs. Greenidge at

Mr. Greenidge had many influential friends, some of whom passed on stock tips that enabled the couple to purchase Sunset Lodge in the 1940's. While her husband traveled, Mrs. Greenidge stayed home, becoming more reclusive and piling up old newspapers until only pathways were left in the cottage.

When Joseph Greenidge died, he left his wife an estate that Mrs. Greenidge once estimated at \$3 million but which a court accounting last year put at about \$1 million, generating about \$60,000 a year in interest and dividends. The legacy remains substantially intact, Mr. Rubin said last week.

Her problems began soon after his death, according to Mrs. Bull, who lived nearby with her husband, John, and had become friendly with the Greenidges in the 1950's. Mrs. Greenidge grew increasingly eccentric and fearful, Mrs. Bull said, and came to rely on others to undo problems she had encountered for fear of saying no.

"One day Victoria called me up all upset," she said. "She said she had just signed some papers and one was a will prepared by her husband's lawyer and executor leaving everything to him. We couldn't get over it." He was later dismissed and the will superseded.

According to the Code of Professional Responsibility for lawyers, "other than in exceptional circumstances, a lawyer should insist that an instrument in which his client desires to name him beneficially be prepared by another lawyer selected by the client." The lawyer, Nicholas Ferri, of Hempstead, L.I., acknowledged in an interview that he had drawn up a will but said that he could not recall the details.

By 1977, Mrs. Bull testified in her suit, she had become concerned about Mrs. Greenidge's deteriorating condition and hired a woman for \$25 a day to shop and do housework. Within a few months, Mrs. Bull testified, the housekeeper, Evelyn Winters, had promoted herself to social secretary at \$350 a week and had brought in two sons, a daughter and other relatives at \$50 a day each to work on the property.

Unusual Practice for Wills

A new will was drawn up naming Mrs. Winters as a prime beneficiary and was filed in Surrogate's Court — an unusual practice, since wills are usually filed only upon the legator's death. That will is now being challenged by Mr. Rubin as conservator.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Greenidge's condition continued to worsen. "She had these scald marks or whatever," Mrs. Bull testified. "She had all red eruptions on her skin. She had rashes. Her lips were blue. She looked absolutely thin like she was suffering from malnutrition."

According to testimony in her suit, Mrs. Bull called the police to report Mrs. Greenidge "was being ripped off by a gang of people." After inspecting the house, David Fisch, an aide at the city's Protective Services for Adults, concluded: "It seemed to be a lot of money outflowing from that household and I thought it should be brought to the attention of the District Attorney."

John J. Santucci, the Queens District Attorney, began an investigation in the spring of 1978. Detective Constance Mahoney, who was assigned to the case, and Tom McCarthy, an office spokesman, both said the investigation was nearing a conclusion when Mrs. Greenidge became incompetent, depriving the state of a crucial witness and stymying the case.

Mrs. Winters moved away, eventually to Florida, and Mrs. Greenidge moved into the Bulls' house for several weeks at the suggestion of the District Attorney's office until she could be placed in St. John's Hospital in Far Rockaway. Also at the urging of the District Attorney, Mrs. Bull exercised power of attorney for her friend, paying the nursing home and other bills.

Bank Vault 'Cleaned Out'

In the meantime, someone had "cleaned out" Mrs. Greenidge's bank vault, according to Mrs. Bull's lawyer, Mr. Baumgarten, who characterized the widow as the victim of an "allegedly criminal pattern of undue influence" of lawyers and others before Mr. Rubin was named conservator. In the conservancy proceeding, Justice Weinstein agreed that "this little lady became the prey of people" bent on enriching themselves at her expense.

In 1978, physicians determined that Mrs. Greenidge was no longer able to manage her affairs, and a guardian ad litem was named to represent her interests in an action to appoint a conservator to act for her. The guardian, Jesse Rothman of 475 Fifth Avenue, Manhattan, recommended the appointment of Mrs. Bull and Mr. Baumgarten as co-conservators. A hearing was held before Justice Weinstein on Feb. 22, 1979, and on March 6 the judge named Mr. Rubin conservator.

Contesting the selection later before the Appellate Division, Alan M. Swiedler, representing Mrs. Bull, cited judicial rulings against nepotism and "disguised nepotism" and noted that Mr. Rubin "is the spouse of a judge" assigned to Supreme Court with Justice

Weinstein. "This fact cannot be disputed nor overlooked" in light of the antinepotism dictum, he declared.

The reference was to Mrs. Rubin, who in 1973, despite ratings of less than "qualified" by screening panels, was named by Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller as a Court of Claims judge to sit as a State Supreme Court justice hearing narcotics cases.

At the time of his appointment as conservator, Mr. Rubin was on the 11-member judicial nominating committee for the Second Department. Some months later, the panel approved Justice Weinstein's nomination and Governor Carey named him to the appeals court last Dec. 20.

In October 1979, the appeal against Mr. Rubin's appointment as conservator was rejected by the Appellate Division, as was an application by Ralph Greenidge of Chatham, N.J., a recently discovered cousin of Mr. Greenidge, to be named conservator. "He hadn't seen Mrs. Greenidge in 25 years," Mr. Rubin said. "He came from left field."

In their lawsuit and appeal, Mrs. Bull and Mr. Baumgarten alleged that once Mr. Rubin received the appointment, he was "grossly neglectful" of Mrs. Greenidge's needs. Mr. Rubin contended that they had never made written offers of assistance and that he had repeatedly acted on Mrs. Bull's suggestions on care for Mrs. Greenidge.

In July 1979, a social service counselor at St. John's Episcopal Nursing Home in Far Rockaway — where Mrs. Greenidge was moved after contracting pneumonia and breaking a wrist and leg falling out of a hospital bed — said she had tried repeatedly to contact Mr. Rubin about providing clothing, a television set and a companion for Mrs. Greenidge. "I have never received a response," said the aide, Cheryl Hauk.

Mr. Rubin has maintained that he had responded appropriately to all requests made on Mrs. Greenidge's behalf and had assigned an employee of

his office to purchase clothes for her.

Mrs. Bull testified that she had appealed in vain to Mr. Rubin to engage a full-time companion for Mrs. Greenidge. "There are sufficient and adequate funds in this estate to provide the conservatee with the finest and most complete care," she said. Some months later, she said, Mr. Rubin hired a part-time companion, but recent checks at the Promenade Nursing Home showed that the woman, Doreen Melville, was not on duty all the hours she was supposed to be. Mr. Rubin said his office would look into the matter.

According to the staff of the Promenade home, where Mrs. Greenidge was moved last winter, she is rarely taken outside in good weather or to special entertainment programs downstairs.

Mr. Rubin contended that Mrs. Greenidge's physician initially "indicated a personal companion was unnecessary." But the doctor, Mordecai Zucker, denied ever being contacted by Mr. Rubin and said that, in fact, Mrs. Greenidge "would benefit significantly" from full-time care "if the estate assets are sufficient to provide same."

Mr. Baumgarten testified that he and the Bulls had found evidence of theft and vandalism when they checked the Greenidge house and cottage four months after Mr. Rubin's appointment. Squatters, he said, appeared to be living in the cottage apartment.

The house has since been boarded up and a security service was hired for a while to police the property.

Mr. Rubin said real-estate brokers have advised him that the property is not salable in its present form. "It is our present intention," he said, "to order the houses demolished" to prepare the property for sale.

When told of Mrs. Greenidge's life in the nursing home, Mr. Rothman, the guardian whose responsibilities ceased with Mr. Rubin's appointment, was incredulous.

"What?" he said. "With all her money?"

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The New York Times

Edith Bull

the Promenade Nursing Home on the Rockaway boardwalk at 114th Street found a frail woman with clear, milky skin, silky white hair and bright brown eyes sitting by her bed, staring vacantly at a television set. Mrs. Greenidge, whose responses to questions seemed incoherent, was alone — her paid companion, who Mr. Rubin said is with her on weekdays from 10 A.M. to 6 P.M., had not shown up that day.

Several miles away stands Sunset Lodge, the rustic seven-acre Greenidge property at 1479 Point Breeze Place on Jamaica Bay opposite Kennedy International Airport. Behind the unlocked gates, the plywood-shuttered main house bore the effects of vandalism: broken glass and a discarded antique book lie on the porch.

A Testimony to Vandalism

Behind the house, shadowed by giant maples, a rusting red truck with a smashed windshield nestles in the underbrush. Vines have swallowed up the pathways to a garage and guest cottage where Mrs. Greenidge spent her last reclusive years on the property. Under a ceiling shredded by a water leak stand a refrigerator, stove and microwave oven. The rooms above are in disarray, with strewn dishes, papers and clothes testifying to vandalism.

Maxwell Cohen, a neighbor and assistant principal of Beach Channel High School, remembers when it was otherwise. "Victoria was in love with the property," he said.

Although the Greenidges never moved into the main house, preferring to live in the cottage apartment, he added, they spent years equipping the house with fine furnishings and antiques — many of which, he said, have since been looted.

According to court papers and interviews, Victoria Josephson was born outside Boston about 1901. In the 1930's, while she was a dancer with a ballet company, she met and married Joseph Greenidge, a reporter for Reuters and other wire-service agencies.