

A FRONT SEAT TO HISTORY

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Local centenarian collects memories

By Lisa Reisman
Special to the Times

GUILFORD - When Elizabeth Fischer was still 99 years old, her two daughters asked what she wanted for her 100th birthday. Nothing, she said. Absolutely nothing.

When they told her of their plan to publish a collection of her stories and poems in a book and to present it to her as a gift, she resisted. She'd written them for no one's eyes but her own, she said. Besides, she protested, they weren't very good.

Most of all, said the slight snow-haired Fischer in a recent conversation in her light, airy Guilford home, she "couldn't imagine anyone would be interested." After all, it was her husband Jack Fischer, the Rhodes Scholar, the member of FDR's New Deal, the longtime editor of Harper's Magazine, who had opened up the seat beside him in the front row of history.

Sure, she'd chatted with Eleanor Roosevelt—"a very kind woman, and so easy to talk with," she recalled in her gentle Scottish lilt. Shortly after her January 1936 arrival

by ship from London, the wide-eyed diminutive 26-year-old approached the formidable First Lady at a luncheon in New York. She had lost track of her husband in the crowd, she said. Mrs. Roosevelt warmly sat her down. By the time her husband resurfaced, she

and Eleanor were conversing like old friends.

And yes, there was that dinner at the White House, the one that John and Jackie Kennedy gave in honor of Nobel Prize laureates, where she enjoyed cocktails with Colonel John Glenn and his wife—"an unusually nice couple, quite unspoiled"—dined with Bobby

Kennedy—"very pleasant and personable"—and danced alongside Nobel scientist Linus Pauling and his wife. The same dinner that was, in President Kennedy's words, not only the most distinguished and significant dinner during his term in office, but "... the most extraordinary collection of talent, of human knowledge that has ever been gathered together at the White House,

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Centenarian Elizabeth Fischer at home in Guilford. Behind her is a portrait of her in her 40s by her brother-in-law Paul Laune and one of her daughter Nicky at age 3. Photo by Mara Lavitt.

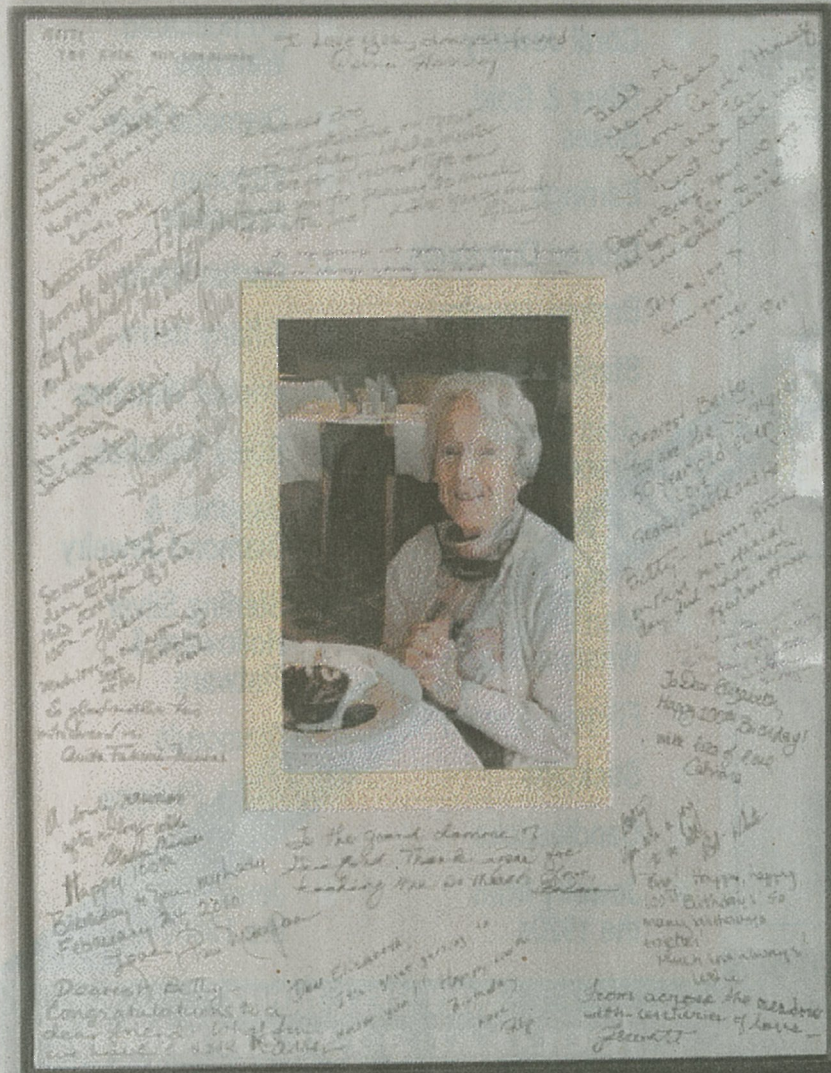
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Front Row: Guilford centenarian collects memories in book

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with the possible exception of when Thomas Jefferson dined alone.”

There was also the crash course in Americana for the Irish native who



100th birthday wishes for Elizabeth Fischer, hanging at her home in Guilford. Photo by Mara Lavitt

grew up in Scotland—specifically, a honeymoon tour of the devastated prairie lands in the Dust Bowl region immortalized in John Steinbeck’s classic “Grapes of Wrath” as part of her husband’s duties as a member of FDR’s Farm Securities Administration. Her traveling companions: the iconic American photographers Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange, as well as future Pulitzer Prize winner Eudora Welty.

Of course, she’d been a first-hand witness to those events, she supposed, but merely as a spectator, and solely in fulfillment of her obligation as dutiful wife. Maybe she’d jotted down some notes while raising her family and running a household in Washington, D.C. and later in White Plains, but it was all, literally, ancient history.

To their credit, the daughters willfully disobeyed their mother. They put together the slim volume titled “Elizabeth Wilson Fischer: Centennial Memoirs,” now available at Breakwater Books in Guilford that chronicles not only her recollections of the last century’s most celebrated personages but also uncovers pieces of local history in sketches of storied figures like Elisabeth Adams and Willoughby Wallace.

It was the “small, modest” Dr. Adams, the same Elisabeth Adams for whom Guilford’s middle school is named, who, on the February 1968 day Elizabeth and her husband moved to the yellow farmhouse above Leete’s Island in Guilford, diagnosed her with an allergy attack. Soon enough, the two became friends, and it was then Fischer noted Elisabeth Adam’s uncommon qualities. According to Fischer, Dr. Adams made it a practice of going well

beyond her duties as medical doctor, regularly bringing a growing plant to an ailing patient as a “way of helping him live each day in touch with on-going life.”

Then there was Willoughby Wallace, whose name graces the library in Stony Creek. Wallace was a homeless vagrant of unknown origins who for many years subsisted on handouts of food and warm clothes from generous villagers. Upon his death, Fischer learned from longtime Creeker Yami Reff, it was discovered that Wallace had bequeathed his savings account – “at least one hundred thousand dollars” – to the village either to construct a free library or to be divided between two churches. A small majority at a town meeting, defying the far more vocal churchgoers, voted in favor of the library.

No doubt such anecdotes enliven names that might otherwise only be found in an Encyclopedia Britannica or wikipedia.com entry or inscribed on buildings. And no doubt Fischer’s unique perspective, one that is refreshingly devoid of ambition or agenda, offers a new angle on events dryly documented in textbooks. Still, contrary to her humble estimation of her literary talents — not surprising, perhaps, for a wife whose husband’s journalistic prowess even the poet Robert Frost held in high regard — it’s the elegant simplicity of her poetry, and the poetry in her prose, that are most to be admired in “Centennial Memoirs.”

Consider, for example, the description of her Scottish grandmother, with whom Fischer as a girl summered in the Village of Dailly: into her ninth decade, she recalls, “her cheeks were like pale rose petals.” (Her grandmother’s secret: rain water.)

Referring to a cable that her mother had died while Elizabeth was living in Washington, D.C., she expresses her longing to “hold back this dawning day/until our spirits touch again.” And, of her wish to put into words her childhood in Scotland for her daughters, she writes of her struggle to convey “how the mystery of the long summer twilight felt, or the gentle sadness I remember as the islands sank into the night sea, or the ecstasy of finding a carpet of blue-bells in the springtime woods.”

Asked to account for her astonishing longevity, the centenarian shrugged, as if it wasn’t particularly impressive.

“I like to learn new things,” she said, and added, blue eyes sparkling, that she had recently taken up meditation. “And I love the people in my life.”

The feeling, it’s clear, is reciprocal. Elizabeth Fischer exudes a warmth and sprightly charm that is positively magnetic. Which is why, according to aide Patti Hartman, “her schedule is always packed, the phone is always ringing off the hook, and friends are always stopping by.” She’s also thrilled to be living in the Age of Obama: “He has all of Jack Kennedy’s charisma,” she remarked. “The difference is Obama refuses to let it get personal.”

As for the flurry of interest surrounding her book—there will be a reception in honor of its publication at 3 p.m., Sunday, April 11 at the Guilford Library – Fischer is, quite simply, awestruck. “I suppose I had to be convinced I had something to offer,” she allowed.

It was, it seems safe to say, the best birthday present she’s ever received. And that’s no small feat.