

Big W

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Section B

Monterey Bay

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Santa Cruz County's sixth supervisor in a red hat

By Aleta Watson
Staff Writer

SANTA CRUZ — Some people call her the sixth supervisor.

Others simply refer to her as the lady in the red hat.

The top officials in Santa Cruz County government know her as Alice — Alice Earl Wilder, the 88-year-old woman who has spent more than half a century watching out for the interests of the San Lorenzo Valley, and the entire county as well, at meetings of the board of supervisors.

Whenever the supervisors meet, Mrs. Wilder is there. Wearing her traditional red hat and coat, she sits in a front row seat bent over the thick board agenda resting in her lap, writing precise notes in the margins of the staff reports.

She says little these days and often appears to drift off dur-

ing long board discussions on obscure issues. But if anyone knows what the county is doing in the valley, it's Mrs. Wilder.

The veteran political observer continues to maintain a small office in downtown Santa Cruz with a red hat painted on the sign in the window ("So

'You can't make comments about anything unless you know something about it'

people will know who I am"). Supervisors refer to her for information on county legislative history. And countless people ask her advice on marking their ballots before they go to the polls.

The daughter of prominent Bay Area attorney Guy Chaffee

Earl, who later became a state senator and regent of the University of California, Mrs. Wilder began spending her summers in Felton before the turn of the century. She lived with her mother, two sisters and brother in a rented house just out of town. Father joined them on weekends, commuting back and forth to Oakland by train.

Today she lives alone in the rambling Ben Lomond cabin her father bought as a summer place in 1901. It has been her year-round home since 1934, when she moved in with her five children and terminally-ill husband. The rustic summer cabin was more like home to them than their Oakland house.

It was only natural that Alice Wilder soon became immersed in community affairs.

"If you don't know people in the community, you're not giving to the community what you should in return for the privilege of growing up in America — that's what my mother and father said," explains the small woman with the short-cropped gray hair and pale blue eyes.

Settled into a large, overstuffed rocking chair in the quiet of her book-lined living-room, surrounded by reminders of her family's colorful past, Mrs. Wilder talks about her life and work in the valley. As she talks, she punctuates her story with animated gestures.

Alice Earl Wilder first made her mark on county government in 1934, soon after she moved her family into the Ben Lomond house. A lot of road work was needed in the San Lorenzo Valley and she began pressuring supervisor George Ley from the valley district to do something about it.

As the daughter of a politician, she was comfortable and self-assured in political circles, unlike many of her neighbors.



— Staff photos by Aleta Watson

... And without it — a view of Mrs. Wilder many have never seen

has attended more meetings than any elected supervisor.

She's roasted the board for its reorganization of county bureaucracy, finding fault in such areas as the sheriff's office and the failure to follow the county's master plan. She's also feted supervisors with homemade fruitcake and bourbon balls and gifts carefully selected to

need for and that's why I got involved."

Soon Mrs. Wilder and her familiar red hat were well known in government circles. She spoke for the San Lorenzo Valley Chamber of Commerce, the only group working to get gas and electric lines and better roads in the valley, as well as the Ben Lomond chamber and a valley property owners asso-

office calls her a community planner.

"I'm no planner but what else can you call it," she says. "We (the county) didn't have a planning department" when the office was opened.

Mrs. Wilder is wearing a red cardigan sweater over her red and green paisley dress. Practically her entire wardrobe is red now. When she was a child





Alice Earl Wilder with her red hat . . .

Housing rehabilitation loans will be available in Monterey

By Michael McGuire
Staff Writer

MONTEREY — Moderate and low income Monterey homeowners will be eligible for low interest loans when a housing rehabilitation program begins sometime before September.

Owner-occupied homes in the Del Monte Grove, Oak Grove and New Monterey areas are targets for the 5 percent loans.

To qualify applicants must earn less than approximately \$10,500 a year.

Approved by the city council, the program had been on the city drawing boards since 1975. The \$90,500 approved for the housing rehabilitation project

is part of the annual \$300,000 federal Housing and Community Development (HCD) block grant received by the city.

In an attempt to increase the number of loans to eligible homeowners, the city will contract with Monterey's Crocker National Bank branch for a "leveraging" program.

According to City Planner David Valeska, who prepared much of the report, leveraging means that the bank will use the city's deposit of \$70,500 as security and use \$100,000 of its own funds for the actual loans.

In addition, the bank will make credit checks of the applicants as well as loan approvals, loan closings, deed preparations, and will pay contractors, collect homeowner payments, cancel delinquencies and if necessary, institute foreclosures.

In exchange for the bank's services, the city's \$70,500 will not draw interest — saving the bank \$4,200 yearly.

The city will also contract with the Monterey County Housing Authority which will determine eligibility of applicants who must earn less than 80 percent of the median income for city residents, and live in their own homes. The housing authority will also determine the extent and nature of the work to be done.

The purpose of the rehabilitation loan program is to upgrade the housing stock in

"It was just a matter of fact that for community things, you need to know people," she says.

And one has to keep track of what government is doing to work with it. "You can't make comments about anything unless you know something about it."

At that time, supervisors met once a month in a room behind the auditor's office in the Santa Cruz courthouse building now known as the Cooperhouse, where people shop for offbeat gifts and sip wine at an outdoor cafe. Mrs. Wilder soon became a regular member of the small audience at those meetings.

Over the years, Mrs. Wilder

Had she been born in another era, undoubtedly Mrs. Wilder would have turned her energies into other channels. But she was a child of the Victorian era, raised in genteel affluence and inculcated with the value of public service.

"I thought I'd like to be a lawyer," Mrs. Wilder confides. "But my father said that would be all right if I were a boy. 'You'll learn the needs of your community. You'll put in your time being a good wife and mother and work for the good of your community,' he told me.

"So it's just been community work," she says without a trace of bitterness. She was graduated from the University of California at Berkeley with a degree in social economics, the closest thing to sociology offered at the time. Instead of moving on to a career, she married an engineer, who served as construction supervisor for the building of UC Medical Center in San Francisco, and raised five children.

After her husband died in August of 1935, Mrs. Wilder decided to stay in Ben Lomond. There was much work to be done in the community and Mrs. Wilder set to it. Neighbors asked her to run for Ben Lomond school board because she knew something about city schools and she won easily. Later she served on Boulder Creek Union School District's board and the County Board of Education.

"I was primarily interested in working with people," she says. "Through working in the schools I discovered the county didn't have a health department or welfare department. These are things you felt a

Monterey by aiding homeowners who find it difficult or impossible to qualify for loans in the private market. The city report says of the dilemma facing moderate and low income homeowners, "Owner-occupants appear to have a more severe problem than investor-owners of rentals. Often they have limited assets and are not regarded by banks as first-choice risks for loans. They may be fearful of banks or contractors or both. They refrain from rehabilitating their homes, out of necessity more than choice."

Priority for the loans will be on a first-come, first-served basis but when a choice must be made between applicants priority will be given to those over 62 years of age, the handicapped and female heads of households.

Rental units will not be eligible for loans through this program. As the loans are paid back, the principal will be returned to the rehabilitation account for relending. Loans will average \$8,500 to \$10,000 and repayments will average \$49-\$61 a month over a 12-to-15-year period. Conventional loans of 10 percent interest cost \$62-\$77 in monthly repayments. Money received through the rehabilitation loan program will be used primarily to bring older homes up to state and local building codes.

annual Christmas party in the board chambers.

In 1969, county officials placed a plaque on the rail in front of her favorite seat in the board room in celebration of her 80th birthday. A few days later, 450 guests — among them state, local and even a few federal officials — honored her at a testimonial dinner.

The old Ben Lomond recreation hall on the banks of the San Lorenzo River was renamed "Wilder Hall" in her honor in 1974. The local recreation district had been one of her pet projects ever since it was formed in 1948.

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But most of the time she spoke from her personal point of view, addressing the board on philosophical issues rather than specific actions.

Along the way, Mrs. Wilder became an important force in Republican politics, managing campaigns for a number of state officials.

One reporter's favorite story about Alice Wilder, which she flatly denies, involves Richard

'She's a remarkable woman . . . a great source of information. If she tells you something, it's usually right.'

Nixon and his 1962 campaign for governor of California.

Nixon was using Santa Cruz as the staging ground for a whistle stop train tour and Mrs. Wilder had a commitment from him to visit the residents of the Casa Del Rey retirement hotel near the Boardwalk before he took off.

The Nixon entourage was late, though. The candidate gave a quick speech from the back of the train and prepared to take off but Mrs. Wilder was angry. Nixon had made a promise and he was going to keep it, schedule or not.

"Alice grabbed him by the lapel and marched him over to the hotel like a little kid," the reporter recalls with relish.

Half an hour later, Mrs. Wilder came striding back to the train followed by a slightly sheepish Nixon. Then the train tour began.

Countless retired people depend on Mrs. Wilder's political opinions each year to help them get through long ballots. She keeps her sample ballot marked during the weeks before the election and dispenses advice to all who call and ask for help.

This year she recommended that everyone vote against Proposition 13.

"It's just as bad as I thought it would be," she says.

Since 1950, Mrs. Wilder has kept her small office downtown, where she helps people who are lost in the maze of governmental bureaucracy. Her phone book listing for that

her father decided she looked best in blue and all of her clothes were that color. But when she moved to Ben Lomond, she decided to change her image.

Thus, the red hats.

Mrs. Wilder began wearing the red hats merely because she liked the color. They became her trademark, however, when an official at a Public Utilities Commission hearing berrated her for switching to a blue hat and mixing him up.

"I thought, 'Father was right,'" she says with a wry smile.

Guy Earl had always maintained if you wanted to stand out in public life, you had to adopt a distinctive trademark. His was blue stationery for all business and political correspondence.

"So I always wear a red hat now. I do have a black hat, but I seldom wear it."

She also use pink stationery exclusively. It never gets lost in bureaucrats' files, she insists.

Although she's approaching 90, Mrs. Wilder shows little sign of slowing up much. She still walks down the hill from her old house to catch the bus and ride into town everyday. She usually divides her time between her office and rounds at the county government center several blocks away.

During the summer, her home is filled with a round of visiting relatives. She keeps her calendar filled with notations to let her know who is coming next.

"She is a remarkable woman. She has an unbelievable amount of stamina for someone her age," says Cecil Smith, chairman of the board of supervisors and one of Mrs. Wilder's many admirers.

"She's a great source of information," he adds. "If she tells you something, it's usually right."

Mrs. Wilder is convinced that at least part of the secret to her influence in the county and positive reception by each succeeding board of supervisors is tied to the fact that she isn't a politician. She has never, for example, considered running for political office such as the board of supervisors.

"I'm not getting anything out of it personally," she says. "The point is making it a better place for people to grow up in, live in and work in."

Inside:

Japanese TVs hurt

The avalanche of Japanese TV sets has knocked most U.S. television manufacturers out of business, Jack Anderson reports, and battered the dollar until it can no longer stand up against the yen.

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