

Alice Wilder: a Legend in Her Own Time

Stephen Dean

At the latest meeting of the Board of Supervisors you could have seen an elderly lady paying close attention to the proceedings. Even though recovering from a broken hip, Alice Wilder was in attendance, as she has been at every Board meeting for as long as anyone can remember.

Santa Cruz' "sixth supervisor," as Mrs. Wilder has been dubbed, has never run for elected office, but at 91 years of age she still retains a fervant interest in the political events of the county.

Mrs. Wilder's interest in politics dates back to 1935 when she petitioned the county to turn Hillside Road—where she still lives just above downtown Ben Lomond—into a public road. "My father always told me," she explains, "that you can't expect government to do anything for you unless you understand how they operate: their problems, the pressure they work with from lack of time, the issues they're dealing with."

So Alice Wilder became a participant in politics, representing at first only her neighbors, but later an increasing number of Valley residents. She is still active in the Valley Chamber of Commerce and the Ben Lomond Town Association. She also maintains a downtown office which she opened 30 years ago to conduct her business as a community planner.

"I started it up," she says, "because people were always calling me to find out how to get something done: which agency handled what, who to call to get information. They have an ombudsman now that gets paid by the county to do that, but there never was any such word back then."

As to the makeup of the new Board of Supes, Mrs. Wilder simply comments, "I think it's going to be hell." She feels that the new Board majority is considerably more liberal than her own political philosophies. She tempers this statement, though, concerning Valley representative Joe Cucchiara: "Most all I know about him, I've learned from his statements in the newspapers. He may turn out to be a free-thinker after all."

To insure a proper future for the San Lorenzo Valley, Mrs. Wilder feels that some significant changes must be made in the county General Plan. She believes that limitations on development have become too restrictive for Valley landowners. She views the present no-growth sentiment as a reaction against past abuses, "but you can't just stop all development; somebody's got to pay the taxes on the land."

While witnessing her tenth decade, Alice Wilder today seems more concerned with her family—the foundations of her own past and the heritage of future generations. Her hillside home is a virtual archives of family history. Originally the house was constructed by joining together two shacks. The entire area was once a shantytown for workers in the mill that long ago stood at Old County Road and Highway 9.



PHOTO: R.L. BOOKER

WILDER WISDOM. Alice Wilder, the matriarch of local politics, shares her memories.

Mrs. Wilder's father, Guy Earl, was an Oakland attorney who bought the property as a summer house in 1902. Throughout her childhood, the family would spend their summers at the Ben Lomond house.

"We would take the Southern Pacific 'commuter' train to San Jose, transfer to Felton, then take another train into town," she recalls. Ben Lomond was once a busy resort area, with many summer homes as well as two fine lodges: the Hotel Ben Lomond and the Hotel Rowardennan.

It was here that she met her future husband, Beverly Wilder, whose family summered in the house just above the Earl home. "The Wilders had three boys and one girl, and we had three girls and one boy," she remarks, "so we fit each other real well."

Mrs. Wilder finally moved to the Ben Lomond house permanently in 1934. And here she remains, surrounded by memories of the past. A patchwork tapestry drapes across a chair, her grandmother's hand-sewn gift to her father. Her father's books form the basis of a vast library of old books. A cherrywood-encased stereoscope presents

views of Mendocino County from her mother's youth. Books gleaned from yard sales and second-hand stores contain bits and pieces of family genealogies. Dolls from her childhood are dressed in delicate clothing purchased on European vacations of another day.

A more modern treasure is a two-volume set of books privately published by her brother, Guy Earl Jr. "Every Sunday morning when we were children, the four of us would crawl into bed with our parents, and the servants would serve us breakfast. And Father and Mother would tell us stories of when they were children." These stories so fascinated the children that later her father was persuaded to type his memories of the "old days" so they wouldn't be lost. These were printed up for the family in 1976 as *The Enchanted Valley*.

The second book, *Indian Legends and Songs*, is another of Guy Earl's transcriptions. When he was a boy near Independence, California, he was taught the Paiute language by an Indian friend named Pongo. Pongo also told him the Paiute legends and took him to the places where each of the stories occurred. Mr. Earl would often recite the Paiutes' mythic history to the children, taking them back to the beginning of time when "the coyote, taking the form of a duck and two big red frogs, went to Coso Springs and fashioned out of the red moist earth red images like those seen in the fiery pit, one a man and the other a woman and the Great Spirit made them to live."

The Ben Lomond house has always been a center for the family. It still draws children from as far away as Hawaii and the east coast for summer visits. And on Christmas and Thanksgiving the house nearly bursts with family, who converge for an old-fashioned holiday.

Mrs. Wilder recalls her father standing on the front porch, only weeks before his death. Gazing out upon the land, he said to her, "Alice, I can see my children and their children's children out there. I always want them to have a place to come back to. Don't ever sell this house—it will be the roots of this family."

Alice Earl Wilder sits on her hillside and remembers the past with clarity. But her vision is to the future. She holds in trust the heritage of her people's past and the memories of the land itself. In an age when young people are severed from their own history, she assures a continuity for the generations to come. □



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