

Civic volunteer Sara Bunnett dies at 87

Bio-B
By JONDI GUMZ
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

For four decades, Sara Anne Bunnett devoted herself to civic improvement in Santa Cruz, starting with better schools, then better library services, and finally preserving historical records for the next generation.

A petite woman, she was a formidable advocate because of her firm manner and gracious style. Her many contributions were recognized Jan. 21, 2006, which then-Mayor Mike Rotkin proclaimed as "Sara Bunnett Day."

Bunnett died Sunday at the age of 87.

"Libraries were enormously important to her," said her son David Bunnett, noting she had majored in literature and in her 20s worked in a university library.

"She would speak of libraries as a foundation for democracy," added her daughter-in-law Nancy Bunnett.

Born Sara Anne Telfer in Portland, Ore., she was the daughter of Annie Jordan Harrison, a member of the first graduating class at Reed College, class of 1915, and a descendant of American president William Henry Harrison.

A family photo shows infant Sara cradled in her mother's arms, her grandmother and great-grandmother looking on. Behind them, clearly visible, are shelves full of books, hinting at their influence on her life.

She met her husband to be, Joseph "Joe" Bunnett, in 1938, at a dance at the end of her first day at Reed College. Ballroom dancing

Sara Anne Bunnett

BORN: July 25, 1919 in Portland, Ore.

DIED: Oct. 29, 2006 in Santa Cruz.

HOME: Santa Cruz.

EDUCATION: Bachelor's degree in literature, Reed College, 1942, with a thesis on Jane Austen's high comedy.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT: President of Rhode Island Citizens Association for Public Schools, 1964; Member to Commission to Study the Entire Field of Education in Rhode Island, 1964-66; president, UC Santa Cruz Women's Club, 1968-69; member of the Santa Cruz City Schools board, 1969-1977, including serving as president; member of Santa Cruz Organization for Progress and Euthenics, county Bicentennial Committee, and League of Women Voters; founding member, Friends of Santa Cruz Public Libraries; Santa Cruz library board, 1978-1986; chair of citizens advisory committee to the library, 1989-1992; member of library joint powers board, 1996-2004; member, Genealogical Society of Santa Cruz County, including two terms as president.

SURVIVORS: Husband Joseph Bunnett of Santa Cruz; two sons, Alfred Bunnett of Minneapolis and David Bunnett of Point Reyes; brother William Telfer of Falmouth, Mass.; sister Lelia Pearson of Tigard, Ore.; three nieces and one nephew.

CONTRIBUTIONS: Genealogical Society of Santa Cruz County, Box 72, Santa Cruz, CA 95063-0072.

SERVICES: To be announced.



was the rage, and she was a "very good" dancer, her husband said. Their engagement was announced at a Christmas formal dance when they were seniors, and they married in 1942 soon after they had graduated from Reed.

The couple lived in Rochester, N.Y., where Joe was a graduate student in chemistry. As Joe advanced in his faculty career, they lived in Portland, Ore., where their three sons were born, then Chapel Hill, N.C., and Providence, R.I.

While Joe taught at Brown University, Sara served as president

of the Rhode Island Citizens Association for the Public Schools. She was appointed by the governor to a special commission to study education. Her son Alfred related that she was accused of being a "machine politician" as she sought reforms from those entrenched in the system.

When Joe was recruited as a chemistry professor to the new University of California campus in Santa Cruz in 1966, it didn't take Sara long to get involved in local education. She was appointed to an opening on the Santa Cruz

City Schools school board in 1969, then won election and served as board president.

Tragedy struck in 1972. The couple's youngest son Peter drowned at age 21 at the Municipal Wharf. In his memory, Joe and Sara established a library fund at the Santa Cruz High School, where he had graduated, for a collection of books on practical arts.

"You have to adjust, but the wound never heals," Joe said.

In 1974, when women were being encouraged to break out of stereotypes and get involved in politics, Bunnett ran for county supervisor. She finished third in a five-way race eventually won by Gary Patton, then completed her second term on the school board.

Then she tackled a project researching family history. She discovered her grandfather, George Telfer, had written letters to family members during his service as a lieutenant in the Spanish-American War. She tracked down all of the letters from the recipients, meticulously researched all of the people mentioned therein, adding explanatory footnotes and old photos to create a book, "Manila Envelopes," published by the Oregon Historical Society.

The book, which covers the period from May 20, 1898 to Dec. 8, 1898, is dedicated to "all the letter writers and all the letter savers."

Next, she turned her attention to the public library system. A founding member of the Friends of the Santa Cruz Public Libraries, she served on three library boards between 1978 and 2004, the only local resident to do so.

She showed up at the library almost daily to volunteer.

Library chief Anne Turner said Bunnett was instrumental in passage of a quarter-cent sales tax to expand library hours and facilities. Because a previous measure had been defeated, Bunnett argued that grassroots efforts would not be enough and professionals were needed to run a successful campaign. To raise the funds to pay professional staff, she got on the phone and persuaded people to contribute.

By 1986, Bunnett had taken up a new cause, preserving historical records. She started a project to index people and places in old newspapers to make the information more accessible to researchers. Local historian Margaret Koch nicknamed her "Mrs. Genealogy."

Volunteers started with the Pacific Sentinel of 1856, reviewing each edition, page by page, column by column, jotting down entries on index cards that were later entered into computer files. The index is complete up to the daily Santa Cruz Sentinel of 1961.

No other newspaper in the nation has been so extensively indexed, said Maxine McNamara, president of the Genealogical Society, who was recruited to the organization by Bunnett.

The indexing project included the Santa Cruz Surf and the Mountain Echo. Several volumes of indexes have been published, and are available in the Santa Cruz Library's Central Branch and the McHenry Library at UC Santa Cruz.

"We're going to meet Thursday

like we always do," said Dean Reynolds, 79, a volunteer with the project, which is ongoing.

People who worked with Bunnett recalled her as someone who made a difference.

"She was thoughtful and insightful," said Arnie Levine, who was president of the city teachers association when she was on the school board, "She spoke her piece. She didn't hide behind anything."

Patton, the former county supervisor, said she frequently contacted him during his tenure in office to comment on issues such as historic preservation and transportation policy. He described her as someone from the university community "who wanted to be sure that UCSC was not just a 'City on a Hill' " — someone who made a personal commitment to the political and community life of Santa Cruz.

"I'll think of her, always, as she pictured herself in her campaign brochure, breezing ahead on her bicycle," he said in an e-mail from Sacramento.

"She felt it was her calling to improve the libraries and she did a wonderful job," said Scotts Valley City Councilman Randy Johnson, who served with her on the library board.

"I'm so sad," said Pat Sandidge, director of the Friends of the Santa Cruz Public Libraries, her voice breaking. "She did so much for schools, libraries, the whole community. I dearly loved the woman."

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