

# RECORD REVIEW

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PIC #2

Katharine Barrett Kelly in her home office in 2002. "If there was something she didn't know about Katonah, it probably wasn't worth knowing," said friend Deirdre Courtney-Batson.

PIC #1

Katharine Kelly, grand marshal at the Centennial Celebration of Katonah, in 1997.

ITALS IN THIS

Katharine Barrett Kelly, chronicler of Katonah's past, dies at 96

By ABBY LUBY

Memory creates the moving picture that is our lives. Sounds, sights, faces, voices all move together, referencing our place in the continuum.

For more than 96 years, Katharine Barrett Kelly held the collective memory of Bedford and that of her home hamlet, Katonah. She was unique because she possessed her own personal, unwritten history of Bedford, and coupled with her fascination with local genealogy, she had a very complete, inner picture of her hometown.

Mrs. Kelly died last Friday, and now lost to us is her special compendium of knowledge the town has come to depend on. That knowledge started with her ancestry. Her family was one of six that settled in Bedford more than three centuries ago.

Mrs. Kelly was the matriarch of Katonah's oral history tradition, holding vast facts and figures in her head, ready to dispense at a moment's notice, in her own personal style of delivery. In today's society, with growing memory chips the size of a dot on the page, all the facts are there, but the personal vocal inflections a person like Katharine Barrett Kelly attached to the retelling of those memories are gone.

For Katharine Kelly, her world was Katonah. She was born to Edward Percy and Estelle Travis Barrett on May 20, 1908, only 11 years after the founding of New Katonah. The house she was born in still stands at 51 Bedford Road. She was one of four children, but two of her siblings died very young. Her brother Douglas was seven years older than she was, and went away to school. In a 1997 interview with The Record-Review, she said, "So I really was brought up alone, with lots of dogs, lots of cats and neighbors."

In recounting her life in 2002 for the Bedford Oral History program, she remembered being a youngster living on her father's 45-acre farm on Cherry Street and Whitlockville Road.

*I went down to the village to go to school and then came home through Todd's Cow Yard, which was a little scary. I always thought the cows were going to get you, I guess!*

Mrs. Kelly's son, Ed Kelly, 70, said his mother grew up in a neighborhood where everyone was a cousin.

“Her family was one of the six families of the settlers that came here in 1680,” he said. “They have married back and forth for years. When Katonah was moved at the turn of the century, her extended family occupied about half the houses. She herself lived in three or four different houses on Bedford Road, and all around her were about 30 or 40 cousins who all grew up together. It was a huge neighborhood of family and close friends.”

Mr. Kelly said that with that kind of background, it was easy to see why she had a protective feeling about the neighborhood. “She had a proprietary feeling about the community, which is hard for some to understand.”

Mary Vockins, 89, the Bedford tax receiver, was one of Mrs. Kelly’s closest friends. She grew up calling her good friend “Boo.”

“The way she got nicknamed ‘Boo’ was when she was a little girl about a year and a half old, she would crawl into the bathroom where her father was shaving and she would peek around the corner and he would say ‘boo,’ and that has stuck with her,” said Ms. Vockins. “My family moved to Katonah in 1925, and when I was in the fourth grade Boo was ahead of me in high school, and I remember I looked up to her because she was on the basketball team.”

In the town’s Oral History, Mrs. Kelly talked about how athletic she was as a teen.

*I was on the basketball team and on the softball team. We used to get on bicycles and go to the Cross River dam. That was one of our specialties.*

After high school Mrs. Kelly went to finishing school at Scudder in New York City, where she studied social welfare. She worked at various jobs in the years that followed. She worked at the Cornell Clinic in New York City, she was an assistant occupational therapist at the New York Orthopedic Hospital, and worked for a while at the Westchester County Recreation Department in White Plains. She discovered an untapped artistic talent and applied it to crafts, weaving, macramé, and pottery and oil paints.

Marveling at her artistic creations, Martha Skolnik, a Katonah resident who helped establish the Katonah Historical Museum and also produced a 1978 documentary about the moving of Katonah for the KVIS Centennial, said,

“She had created a diorama that was a replica of the Old Katonah. It was a spectacular piece of work. It was a three-dimensional structure made up of about 15 individual rectangles that fit together perfectly, and it has wowed kids for generations.”

Mrs. Kelly met her husband, William A. Kelly, in Mount Kisco, and together they had three children. Ed Kelly lives in Katonah, David Kelly lives in Greenwich, Conn., and her daughter, Karen Janowicz, lives in Illinois.

Katonah resident Carol Kiley grew up with Mrs. Kelly’s children and later became her very close friend. “She was like my mother,” said Ms. Kiley. “Our families were very close. Her grandfather was supervisor, her uncle before him was, and her father was supervisor for 45 years. She inherited all their records. She has more knowledge that has gone with her to the grave than anyone in this town could ever read in a book or ever imagine that they think they could know.”

*My grandmother had 19 grandchildren, and we all, at one time or another, lived in Katonah. So you had all these cousins, and I decided to get very interested in genealogy.*

Katonah resident Deirdre Courtney-Batson worked with Mrs. Kelly on the Katonah Historic District Advisory Commission and said she was an incredible resource because she knew just about every historic house in town.

“She was the former historian of the town and joined the commission when it first started,” she said. “We both joined at the same time, in the beginning, in 1986. Every time we had a meeting, she was there with her index cards on the particular house we were talking about.”

Ms. Courtney-Batson, who owns one of Katonah’s historic houses, said that when she first moved into her first historic home in Katonah, Mrs. Kelly introduced her as “the girl who bought Jimmie Williams’s house.”

“Jimmie Williams owned the house in Old Katonah before the owners we had purchased the house from,” she said. “I figured that if you defined the houses by who owned them in Old Katonah, that made Mrs. Kelly a real old-timer.”

Ms. Courtney-Batson said she had spoken to Mrs. Kelly about a month ago. “I asked her if she wanted to serve on the historic district commission and she said she certainly did,” she said. “Her term had just been renewed. If there was something she didn’t know about Katonah, it probably wasn’t worth knowing. She was an incredible person and an incredible resource. I’m really going to miss her.”

The town’s current historian, John Stockbridge, remembers the wealth of knowledge Mrs. Kelly shared for the oral history project.

“Nobody knew Katonah genealogy better than Katharine Kelly,” he said. “She was always feisty. When we did the oral history, I gave it to her to look at, and when she returned it she said, ‘The whole thing is no good. My name is spelled with two ‘a’s’ — Kath–a–rine, not Katherine.’ So I changed it, and she said, ‘Now it’s OK.’”

Town of Bedford supervisor Lee Roberts said Mrs. Kelly was a wealth of information on any subject having to do with the history of Bedford.

“Boo loved Bedford, and Bedford loved her back. As the town historian, Boo made our heritage accessible and interesting.”

In 1991 Mrs. Kelly became the Bedford town historian, and held that post for about six years. She worked on the 1900 census, cataloging and alphabetizing local families, which gave Mrs. Kelly an expertise on Bedford cemeteries. She contributed to the nine-volume publication of Bedford Historical Records, and co-wrote “Katonah” with Frances Duncombe.

*I can tell you who lived in every house, and which was why, and all about it, because I made a business of it.*

Mrs. Kelly was connected to just about everyone, including Nina Kellogg, deputy town clerk. Ms. Kellogg said Mrs. Kelly’s cousin, Robertson T. Barrett, was married to her husband’s aunt. “Mrs. Kelly and I shared the same birthday,” Ms. Kellogg said. “We always got a kick out of that because we were 50 years apart. You couldn’t live in Katonah without knowing Boo Kelly. She did amazing work on the genealogies, she knew all the different families and occurrences, and she kept it all in her memory. She was a one-of-a-kind individual. It was such a blessing to know her for my entire life.”

Ms. Kellogg remembered Mrs. Kelly being a major figure in the Katonah Centennial, as well as a very integral part of the 1680 Bedford Tricentennial celebration in 1980.

Living in or visiting relatives in most of the Katonah homes for almost a century gave Mrs. Kelly a special sense of place, a sense that revered the old neighborhood and defied change.

*And I was so ticked off at anybody that destroys our old houses, and then Martha Stewart comes along and takes my great aunt’s house — Ruth Sharp, she was a Robertson — and leaves two walls and goes out there and blows and blows and blows it until she says it fell down. I never saw it fall down. And now she’s got what she wants.*

Everyone always knew that Boo Kelly would tell you just what was on her mind.

Longtime friend, Katonah resident Patty Ruger, said she met Mrs. Kelly because they were both members in the Republican Party. "I moved to Katonah in 1949 and bought a Victorian house," she said. "Boo was a fabulous bridge player, and we played for years. She was pretty critical if you did something wrong, and she let you know it in no uncertain terms. She was very sharp up until three days before she died."

Mrs. Ruger said she had spoken to Mrs. Kelly just a few days before her death.

"She had been in the hospital two times because she was having difficulty breathing," said Mrs. Ruger. "All she wanted to do was to get out and go home."

Mrs. Ruger's daughter, Jennifer Haviland, said the thing she will never forget about Boo Kelly is how she managed to take steps after knee surgery.

"She would always go down the stairs backwards because it was easier for her," she said. "Even in her 90's she was going downstairs backwards faster than most people go upstairs forwards. That's just the way she was. Everything was to the fullest. When she protested the wrapped trees on Bedford Road, it showed how impassioned she was right to the end."

Ms. Vockins and Mrs. Kelly took many trips together over the last decade. On some of those trips Mrs. Kelly's political convictions influenced her as a tourist.

"She was a dyed-in-the-wool Republican," said Ms. Vockins. "On a tour in Atlanta, we went to Roosevelt's home, called Warm Springs, which is where he went because of his polio. When we went to his house, Boo wouldn't go inside. She just stood outside because Roosevelt was a Democrat."

Ms. Vockins also remembers Mrs. Kelly having a similar reaction on a trip to Cape Cod. "We stopped at a memorial to John Kennedy, and she wouldn't get out of the bus — Kennedy was a Democrat, too."

According to Ms. Vockins, Mrs. Kelly was always doing things her own way. "When we went to Martha's Vineyard, Boo was having trouble sleeping," Ms. Vockins said. "So the first thing she did when we went into the hotel room was to touch the mattress, and she would say, 'Too soft!' When I would wake up in the morning, there was nobody in her bed. She had gotten out of the bed, and she's lying on the floor!"

When Katonah's Methodist Church offered square dancing, Mrs. Kelly and Ms. Vockins decided to try a few classes.

"You had to be partners — she was the woman and I was the man," said Ms. Vockins, chuckling. "We had to do-si-do, and she did good."

"I cannot believe there's not a Boo Kelly," Ms. Vockins added. "It never occurred to you that she would ever leave, because she was such a strong character."

Ed Kelly said he is starting to think about all of his mother's records and memorabilia housed in a small library in her house on Hillside Avenue in Katonah.

"My brother and I are facing the monumental task of dealing with all the files and records," he said. "None of us will be able to replace what she knew because it was all oral. She was so strong, one always perceived her to last forever, so we never wrote things down."

*Don't forget, all the hilltoppers came up from New York. And they have all the big places. It's entirely different. When you went downtown you knew everybody. Now you go downtown and you can wave a flag if you find somebody you know. For a while we had the IBM people then everybody came in and everybody went out Then all of a sudden Katonah got extremely fancy. And it's the place to live now.*