

# RECORD REVIEW

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Anne French, former Executive Director, Mianus Gorge Preserve.

Grand Dame of Bedford, Steward of Guard Hill, Wilhelmine Stewart Kirby Waller is dead at age 90

By ABBY LUBY

Memorial on Thursday, April 15, 11 a.m. at St. Matthew’s Church

The Bedford community and the country at large lost a true steward of the earth when Mrs. Wilhelmine Kirby Waller died on Wednesday, April 7, 2004. Like her father and grandfather before her, Wilhelmine Waller was imbued with a sense of the land starting with her own backyard on Guard Hill road and extending to the preservation of open space country-wide. Her life spanned almost an entire century that saw two world wars, space exploration, the changing role of women and the information age.

Mrs. Waller knew half a dozen American presidents from Lyndon Johnson to George Bush Sr. through her work on environmental legislation since the 1960’s. Her friends crossed class lines from horse breeders to neighboring farmers and planning board members.

Wilhelmine Waller moved from New York City with her parents into the Dutch colonial house on Guard Hill Road when she was 16. She married Thomas Waller in 1942 and together they bred race horses and hunter ponies on their 250-acre Tanrackin Farm, one the most successful breeding farms in Westchester.

“Aunt Willie had a marriage that was really based on solid friendship and trust,” said Marilyn Tilt, Mrs. Waller’s god-daughter. “The old days at Tanrackin farm were pretty special.”

Katonah resident Dottie Harder knew Mrs. Waller for almost 80 years. “Her parents and my parents went way back,” said Mrs. Harder. “We had an interest in horses and we were both very fond of riding together Mrs. Waller was part of my world here.”

Mrs. Waller’s passion for the equestrian life kept her connected with the outdoors. Her love for all flora and fauna moved her to leave food for raccoons and skunks on her porch to growing colossal pumpkins by watering them with milk.

According to Ms. Tilt, Mrs. Waller won many prizes for the giant gourds at the Yorktown Grange Fair and remembers how “Aunt Willie used to deliver giant pumpkins to her friends and family in the fall. We would arrive home and there would be this giant pumpkin right by the stone wall near our front door and I would know Aunt Willie had been there.”

Pat Keese, who worked with Mrs. Waller on the Nature Conservancy said Mrs. Waller had an extraordinary love for creatures of any kind. “She would never put a horse down,” said Mrs.

Keesee. "She used to call her old horses "pensioners" and kept them at the farm just eating grass. Eventually the number of horses dwindled."

Mrs. Waller's god-son, Rigdon Boykin and his sister Meta, came as young children to live at the Guard Hill home after their father died.

"We lived there on and off for a number of years," said Mr. Boykin. "I remember two things that ran our life when we were little, the garden club and horses. She was extremely active as the president of the Garden Club of America at that time."

"She changed the face of the garden club," said Ms. Tilt. "It was no longer a group of women whose gardeners made gardens, it was a group of women who were going to help the community become more beautiful and change things in a meaningful way. I think the way the garden club is run today is largely because of the standards and goals she set, that important business had to be conducted that would change the face of the community, the land, and the country."

Her presidency of the Bedford Garden Club preceded Mrs. Waller's presidency of the Garden Club of America. As head of the national organization Mrs. Waller was strategically placed in the relatively new political arena of environmental law. Among the many national and state commissions, Mrs. Waller served on the National Advisory Committee on Highway Beautification during Lyndon B. Johnson's administration and in the early 1970's she became a member of the Advisory Committee to the Secretary of State for the United Nations Conference on Human Environment. For three presidential administrations she held her seat on the President's Citizen Advisory Council on Environmental Quality from Presidents Nixon, Ford and Bush. Whole rooms in her home are adorned with hundreds of pictures and plaques marking her environmental contributions.

By the time Nancy Vincent became president of the Bedford Garden Club, Mrs. Waller was well known for her work in Washington.

"She was quite famous, having served on committees for a span of presidents that was quite phenomenal," said Mrs. Vincent. "I was in awe of her and found her very formidable, but we got to know each other when we were both interviewed by the Hudson Valley Magazine. I remember her quote then was that she really had a love of the earth, which meant both preserving the global environment as well putting her hands in the dirt and growing things," she said.

Anne French, the former executive director of the Mianus Gorge Preserve (1985 to 1999) came to know Mrs. Waller because she was a trustee of the Preserve since 1955. "I've known Willie Waller all my life," said Ms. French. "In the 60's she was a powerful figure in the big battle to put Interstate 684 down along the Saw Mill River Valley, which is where it belonged. I knew her very well then since we were both living in the path of the road of the time."

Ms. French, who now works in the Environmental Studies department at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, remembers Mrs. Waller as a pioneer in the environmental movement in the county.

"She would be sitting at the hairdressers with a stack of papers on her lap, writing letters furiously to every known politician in Washington and all the presidents of all the garden clubs of America to get them to take a greater stand on environmental issues," said Ms. French. "What a dynamo, what energy she had. She was somewhat of a voice in the wilderness at that time because Bedford was green and bucolic and people believed that it would stay that way forever, but she knew it wouldn't. She knew the country was headed in a different direction and needed to get some environmental laws."

In Mrs. Waller's last decade of her life, long time friend Betty Walmsley has kept Mrs. Waller updated on national legislation. "I always had to bring back information for her from my trips to

Washington where they still talk about Willie Waller as if she's still active around the Capital," said Mrs. Walmsley. "She was always eager to know what was happening at the Garden Club of American as well as at the Bedford Garden Club."

In the early 1960's Mrs. Waller worked with writer and scientist Rachel Carson on her infamous tome "Silent Spring." Mrs. Waller highly respected Ms. Carson for her innovative and award winning books that awakened the world to the threats of pollution. In her last interview with the Record Review Mrs. Waller said "Out of all the conservationists I ever knew, I would say that Rachel Carson was probably the most genuine. She loved the earth, she loved the animals and the open spaces."

In "Silent Spring" Ms. Carson wrote about Mrs. Waller's struggle with agriculture officials to stop spraying her property with DDT because it was contaminating the milk in the Wallers' purebred Guernsey cows.

The Waller's were known as gracious hospitable people and Mrs. Walmsley favored the Wallers' Christmas parties for years.

"Willie Waller would be standing at the door greeting everybody and she always wore the same navy blue dress holding a tiny purse in her hand," said Mrs. Walmsley. "She would direct people upstairs where the men took their coats to the left and the women to the right."

Dottie Harder also remembers the Guard Hill house as a meeting place for several community groups. "The Kirby home was always the center of many gatherings for family and Willie Waller kept up that tradition through her various organizations like the Farmer's Club and the Bedford Garden Club," said Mrs. Harder.

Mrs. Walmsley said that when various groups met at the Waller house Mrs. Waller would sit in a chair facing the group and talk about the days when her parents were alive and say "Well, I may not be here next year and if I'm not, you can go ahead and have your annual meeting here anyway."

"She's been saying that for the last 15 years," said Mrs. Walmsley.

Ms. French said if Mrs. Waller cared about somebody she would go beyond just neighborliness and really help them. "For her to care about them, the people had to be real. She did not suffer hypocrites and fools."

Dottie Harder said Mrs. Waller loved children. "She would entertain my two young children by doing cartwheels when she came by – can you believe that?"

Mrs. Waller's involvement with the community didn't end at her front door or testifying in Congress for environmental legislation. Her presence at local planning or zoning board meetings and at nominating committees were her day to day civic exercise.

Anne French likened Mrs. Waller engaged in battle when she attended a local town meeting.

"She would go into the trenches with you at planning board meetings," said Ms. French. "She was a woman of great presence and she would sit up there in the front row and developers would say "oh no she's here!" It was so much fun to watch their faces."

Ms. French said Mrs. Waller attended meetings well into her 70's.

"She didn't have to do that. For someone who grew up in what we called "the golden ghetto" of Bedford, the remote, idyllic pastoral scene, she had a very clear sense of what was going on in the world. She didn't get bitter when Bedford got paved over and taken over by aggressive, noisy traffic, she just said "there's work to be done." I admired that spirit."

Nancy Vincent saw Mrs. Waller just two weeks before her death.

“She was in wonderful spirits and we laughed and laughed about how she had to replace the curtains in the living room so that the farmer’s club could have their slide shows,” said Ms. Vincent. “She worried that they would pull the draperies closed and they might all fall apart.” In the last few decades Mrs. Waller made efforts to preserve the property on Guard Hill Road. About 23 years ago, Mrs. Waller gave the town of Bedford Guard Hill a 20-acre parcel that is the highest point in Bedford and said to be the second highest point in the county. Under an agreement with the Westchester Land Trust three years ago Mrs. Waller was able to preserve about 56 acres near Guard Hill Road and to the east of West Patent Road to be preserved for farming and equestrian use.

Ms. Tilt said “The area that had been in her family for so many years has been kept as open space as much as possible. I do feel with her passing, an important part of Bedford has been laid to rest. We just have to remember her.”

“For Mrs. Waller to give the top of Guard Hill to the town was so enlightened,” said Ms. French. “There was no reason for her to do that except for her sense of moral issue. She was just there for a while, as her grandfather and her father had been before her. She wasn’t the owner of Tanrackin, she was a steward of the land.”

Ms. Tilt said she will always remember her Aunt Willie’s exemplary strengths.

“She had these very high standards and if you disappointed her with your standards, you heard about it. She had no problem telling you what to do or how to do it. Just after she passed, Rigdon and I were saying to each other that we are sure she is re-organizing heaven.”