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Lewiston Author Bernice Nelke Edited 'Down East' Newspaper

By JONAS CRANE

Monday May 3rd, 1960, was a day of mixed emotions for many of the people who live in that section of eastern Hancock County commonly called "The Peninsula."

These Peninsula residents were sorry to learn that their favorite newspaper, "The Peninsula Gazette" was going out of business although they were happy to learn that the reason the paper was being discontinued was due to the fact that its editor, Miss Bernice Richmond, was getting married.

Miss Richmond lives in Winter Harbor and her paper was probably as unique a news sheet in Maine, if not in all of New England. Before she started it she had written two very successful books about Winter Harbor, and one about her former home in Livermore Falls.

To Lewiston-Auburn people "Miss Richmond" is better known as the former Bernice Nelke for the Nelke family lived on College St. a number of years after moving from Livermore Falls. To her intimates here she was always known as "Bunny" Nelke. Bernice, Mr. and Mrs. Nelke, and two brothers, were all well known—and Nelke Place in Lewiston, a residential area opened up by her father, still bears the family name.

She got the idea for a Peninsula newspaper in April of 1954 when she heard one of her neighbors complaining that the Town never got more than one small column of news in a big Maine area newspaper. Listening to the neighbor, Miss Richmond suddenly visualized a publication that would be devoted exclusively to news of happenings on the Peninsula. She went home, put a folded sheet of paper in her typewriter, and typed a tenative format for a small publication.

Next morning Miss Richmond drove to Bangor to price duplicating machines.

On Duplicating Machine

When she arrived there she found that the man who sold the duplicating machines did not share her faith in the project. He told her bluntly that he had seen dozens of such papers start and fail, after a few months.

When he was unable to discourage Miss Richmond, he advised her to rent a used machine and give the paper a trial before spending money for a new duplicator. She accepted this advice and went home with a used machine and a small supply of paper in the back end of her Jeep.

Time proved that the salesman was wrong in his estimate. "The Gazette" was a paying business from the start and it soon grew to 500 regular subscribers and several columns of advertising.

Although the official title of the paper was "The Peninsula Gazette," most of the local subscribers called it "Bunny's Paper." Peninsula boys and girls who got the paper while they were in the armed forces called it "The Letter From Home Paper."

News in the "Gazette" was limited to happenings on the Peninsula; an area, which loosely, is bounded by the Sullivan Bridge on the west and Gouldsboro Bay on the East. Anything that happened outside of this area was of no importance to Miss Richmond's paper, unless it concerned some of her out-of-State subscribers.

Stuck To Local News

During the time most newspapers carried big headlines about Khrushchev's visit the "Gazette" featured a story about a lost parakeet that had been found safe and sound after two days of exposure to rain and thunder storms.

The first page of the "Gazette" was devoted to editorials which covered a wide range of subjects depending on the season and other factors. Generally they described the things that Miss Richmond saw and heard while she was walking with her two big Chinook dogs, Norvik and Kuna. In the spring, a word picture of the first violets on the golf course where she exercised the Chinooks.

Other editorials described the harbor near her home as it appeared bathed in moonlight or when it was lashed by the fury of a storm. Some of the columns were written about the days when she studied music abroad under the direction of Adolf Vetter in Austria.

Page four of the "Gazette" featured a column called "Peninsula Portrait." This described Peninsula people, their hobbies and interests, and their way of making a living. This page also carried another column written by a retired engineer, Carroll F. Merriman, who wrote about the stars, the tides, the weather, and many other subjects that he followed as retirement hobbies.

Page five contained a column titled "Our Navy Neighbors" which contained news about people and events at the Schoodic Point Naval Station, in Winter Harbor.

About the Fishermen

Page six contained two columns. One called "The Cooks Corner" was edited by Ralph Tracey, a Winter Harbor resident who collects recipes as a hobby. The second was written by Miss Richmond under the title "Fishing News." This was devoted exclusively to fishermen, their boats, and their problems.

Page seven carried a column titled "Our Schools," which featured news about all of the schools in the Peninsula area. Page eight carried a column titled "The Gazette Letter Box" that was devoted to letters written by "Gazette" subscribers. Many of these are now living in "Foreign" states and kept in contact with their beloved Maine through the "Gazette." These letters reminisced about the "good old days" when the writers were living on the Peninsula.

Sewing Circle by Mail

Some of the letters came from out-of-State people who have "adopted" the Peninsula. In addition to letters some of them sent contributions to the local church and civic organizations. One lady in California, who has never visited Winter Harbor except through the pages of the "Gazette," "joined" the Winter Harbor Sewing Circle by sending a quilt.

Acting as editor, reporter, publisher, and what have you, Miss Richmond had a busy and full life. She printed the paper on a mimeograph machine that she called "Alfred." Alfred was a temperamental creature, and Miss Richmond's descriptions of "his" tantrums gave her readers many a chuckle. In her spare time she also did job printing on another machine called "The Petuna Press."

Born in Livermore Falls

Miss Richmond was born and grew up in Livermore Falls. Her family operated a dry goods store there and the memories of her childhood and of her grandmother inspired the book, "Right as Rain" which was published by Random House in 1946.

One chapter in the book describes the Stanley Steamer

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DRIFTWOOD FOR THE FIRE—While occupying the lighthouse at Mark Island, Miss Richmond toiled many an hour collecting driftwood cast up on the rocky shore by the restless and turbulent sea. This photo was taken at the time of her successful first book authorship. Though the possessor of a sensitive and artistic nature she long ago also learned to master the many physical tasks required of daily living close to the sea.



WITH HER TWO CHINOOKS—The kitchen of her Winter Harbor home is especially attractive, and Miss Richmond is particularly proud of the old-fashioned iron cook stove, part of which shows at the right. The picture of the author walking the two Chinooks is a familiar one to everyone on "The Peninsula."



SCENE OF HER WRITING TRIUMPHS — Lovely Mark Island lighthouse was purchased by the author and her husband as an island home. From her experiences there she wrote her first book, followed by two others which all became excellent sellers throughout the country. People still inquire, first thing on at arrival in the area, where the lighthouse they "read about" is located.



BERNICE RICHMOND "AT HOME"—The former Lewiston and Livermore Falls author lives close beside the sea that she loves. This house was originally built as a waterfront store at Winter Harbor but "Bunny Nelke" (as she was known here before her musical and writing career began) has altered it to serve as a snug and attractive residence where she did all the writing for her enterprising little newspaper.



WHITEWASHING, NEVER ENDING WHITEWASHING—If you live in a lighthouse this is one of the chores that must be repeated time and again as the elements connive to undo your handiwork. What would a Maine lighthouse look like unless it was spotlessly clean, and gleaming with whitewash or white paint? The life is rewarding, but requires much hard work, too.

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that Miss Richmond's father 'imported" from Boston.

When Miss Richmond was 16 years old the family moved to Lewiston. For her that was just the start of several moves that eventually carried her to Austria for a formal education in music. Stepping stones along the way were graduation from The Beacon School, Brookline, Mass.; four years of study of the piano under Arthur Foote; a job as Secretary of School and College Music at the Oliver Ditson Co.; and a part time job as Secretary in the Physical Education Dept. of Smith College.

While she was working there Miss Richmond acted as accompanist for the vocal teacher and he was so impressed by her talent that he eventually arranged for her to go to Austria to continue studies in that field. At that time the American dollar was equal to 73.500 Austrian Kroners so Miss Richmond was able to carry on her studies on a small budget.

Life In Story Book Austria

In June, 1922, Miss Richmond started her high adventure when she sailed for Austria. Arriving there she became a paying guest in the home of Herr Adolf Vetter, and immediately a new and exciting life began for her. She still remembers the thrill of a first visit to the opera where she sat in a box next to the President of the country.

Herr Vetter was president of the opera and he had a suite of offices in the palace of the former Emperor, Franz Josef, so with his position he inherited the horses and coachman that once belonged to a Prince.

He was a member of the Social Democratic Party and once when Miss Richmond was riding with him the carriage was stoned by members of the opposing party. There were also other unpleasant things in the new life.

The Winters were cold and World War One had reduced the coal supply to a point where it was almost as valuable as the Crown Jewels. Miss Richmond remembers that sometimes the studio was so cold it required an hour of scale practice to warm her hands enough for the six hours of playing that was her daily stint.

Clever Dogs

Miss Richmond also found other strange and sometimes startling conditions in the new land. All dogs in Austria were trained to attack strangers. Herr Vetter's dog was no exception and it required a two weeks' training period, during which Miss Richmond fed him lumps of sugar that were more precious than coal, before the animal would allow her to enter the house unless accompanied by a member of the family.

However, after the training period he became her staunch and loyal companion and guardian; and Miss Richmond recalls many pleasant hikes in the Wiener Wald Forest when she felt completely safe while she was guarded by the big dog.

Cousin Howard Lindsay

After she had completed her studies Miss Richmond returned to America and began giving piano lessons in New York City. Eventually, her cousin, Howard Lindsay, (originally from the Livermore area, also) got her a job arranging and playing music in the "Constant Nymph." After that she worked in 12 more Broadway plays including such hits as "The Green Bay Tree," "Our Town", and "The Doll's House."

Lindsay, of course, is the celebrated theatrical figure, producer and actor who is married to actress Dorothy Stickney with whom he starred for so many seasons in "Life with Father." So Lindsay is another Maine luminary, known to countless thousands for his long association with Lakewood.

In 1935 Miss Richmond married Maine-born Reginald Robinson who was working as a research sociologist in New York. Four years later they bought the Mark Island Lighthouse near Winter Harbor, for $1,750.

Wrote Best Sellers

That purchase started another high adventure for Miss Richmond and turned her talents from music to writing.

Her first book, "Winter Harbor," was published by Henry Holt Co., in 1943. It was a vivid and colorful book about their life in the Island Lighthouse and became a best seller.

Even today many tourists who come to Winter Harbor want to see the island and the lighthouse as the highlight of their trip.

In 1944 Random House published "Right as Rain" which was a story about the author's grandmother and life in Livermore Falls where she was born.

In 1947 Random House published "Our Island Lighthouse" which was a sequel to "Winter Harbor."

Two years later Miss Richmond and her husband were divorced and she left the island (which she later sold) and purchased a house in Winter Harbor.

It had originally been built as a waterfront store near the Town Landing and offered Miss Richmond a chance to live close to the sea as a substitute for her island home.

Before starting the "Gazette" she tried teaching piano and playing in a local orchestra as a means of making a living and occupying her time. Neither project was successful; and, the idea for a local newspaper came at a time when she felt that she faced an uncertain future.

Chatty, Homespun Style

The "Gazette" news was written in a chatty, homespun style that made it seem more like a letter from home than an orthodox newspaper. Generally, its contents were pinpointed on the Peninsula, its people, and its problems. But, sometimes Miss Richmond reminisced and gave her readers a glimpse of the exciting years when she had lived abroad.

One editorial described an Easter trip to Venice: "For pure adventure we traveled third class, sat all night on a hard bench and got fleas! As the train was slowing to a stop in Venice we stepped down to the lowest step to catch our first glimpse of the Grand Canal. Above us a conductor warned 'Adagio, adagio' (slow! slow!) To us this was only a tempo in music until we realized that to him it meant, 'Take care!'

"Although we visited all of the galleries and churches we found particularly exciting the many shops devoted to the sale of Venetian beads; and our nightly excursions in a gondola to join other gondolas floating around a big boat in which a dozen artists from the opera company sang familiar arias were enchanting."

The Winter editorial took "Gazette" readers on a skiing trip to Ottoschutzhaus on a two-mile high Rax in Southern Austria.

A More Rewarding Career

"I remember our hobnailed boots—so very heavy—that we even practiced WALKING prior to going with two girl friends and their brothers for several days skiing. In addition to wearing these boots, we also carried a rucksack full of food, and skis and poles crossed on our shoulders. The ponderous boots became as light as a feather by the time we had finished the five hour climb.

"Here at the top we ate breakfast and luncheon from our rucksacks and dined at night on a thick pot roast smothered in red cabbage, clustered about a ceiling-high stove. This was ringed with wide fenders on which our wet mittens and socks steamed the evening long."

Miss Richmond found publishing the "Letter From Home Paper," a rich and satisfying experience.

Although it was not a get-rich-quick project by any means it provided her an interesting way to make a living.

More important, perhaps, it brought her many interesting contacts, a host of new friends, and a mode of self-expression that was more satisfying than her previous work in music and book writing.



AS THE ARTIST CAUGHT HER. Syd Browne, who operates the "Art Gallery" at Winter Harbor, did this portrait of Miss Richmond during her successful lighthouse days. In it she appears more as Lewiston-Auburn friends remember her while living on College St. and, later, at Nelke Place.



AS THE NEWSPAPER PUBLISHER Here she works over the temperamental "Alfred", which is the affectionate name she has given to the balky, second-hand duplicating machine used for publishing "The Gazette." She is reluctantly giving that up now as she is about to be married. "The Gazette" had about 500 subscribers, many from distant states and places. It even carried advertising, as well as the news of everyone living on The Peninsula."