
CONCH LIFE

by

Wilhelmina Harvey

Wilhelmina Harvey, former First Lady of the Island, current (1976) Chairman of the School Board, Monroe County, an original Conch, and President of the Key West Women's Club, relates some interesting anecdotes of her life as a young Conch in tales she remembers.

Her recollections were made at a luncheon which carried out a theme of long ago...with a beautiful center piece and a glow of candles. She was surrounded by Mary Malone, Chairman of the Committee, by Marjorie Hauch, noted author, and by her husband, C. B. Harvey who was City Mayor for about 10 years.

Written up in the "NOW HEAR THIS" Column, it stated that at this luncheon there would be Salt Water Conchs, and Fresh Water Conchs. So, I guess I am the Salt Water Conch as I was born on this Island.

The word Conch and Creole almost precluded my becoming a Mrs. Harvey, about which I shall tell you later. ^{A lady} ~~Baro~~ asked me this: "What kind of a Conch am I? I wasn't born here and I wasn't born around fresh water..." so we decided that she was a brackish Conch.

It is not difficult to you to figure this person's age because the East Florica/Coast's Railway train came to Key West in January, 1912 and this Conch (I) came the next month, in February.

I would love for everyone to know and remember that Key West in the Olden Days ~~had~~ the richest per capita among its population in the United States. Conchs even ate from 14 carat gold plates--the first gold plates that were ever made by Tiffany, and they came right here to Key West. Even those eating grits and grunts no doubt had some fine China in the house. These people, although they may have eaten some rice during the depression, worshipped their ancestors and were very proud of their heritage.

Speaking further of Mr. Flagler and his railroad, there is a very colorful man in Key West who is called Ludie who is quick to remind you that he is the very first person that Mr. Flagler greeted. When Ludie is asked: "What did Mr. Flagler say to you?" Ludie answers: "Mr. Flagler said, 'Get out of my way, kid'".

In 1513, when passing the coast and viewing the islands of what we now call The Florida Keys, the Keys were named Los Martyres, because the silhouette of the Keys reminded the beholder of people who were suffering; in other words, the martyrs. However, my husband is a history buff and his theory is that Ponce de Leon had a historian on his ship by

the name of Peter Martyr, and he feels the Keys were named for him.

As a child, when walking with my mother, we would invariably meet old bent over Uncle Tom and Aunt Toody. My mother would shout to the heard of hearing, elderly Uncle Tom, bent and black: "Uncle Tom, tell Miss Wilhelmina about her dapper grandfather." Then he would smile and tell me about his being valet to my young grandfather on trips to New York. and my grandfather was such a spendthrift that his father would never trust him with any money. The valet was entrusted with all the money.

Wilhelmina's grandfather was Captain Carey who owned a house now owned by Jessie Porter Newton. Her story is that his being such a spendthrift necessitated his selling the house to Miss Jessie.

There was always a shortage of males on the Island--that is until the Navy, Air Force, and Army came in. So the girls were always raised in clusters of five or six. The high school girls vied with the convent girls.

In 1925 the Junior Women's Club was formed and these girls became the social hub of the island. Just last month, we honored eleven women now living in Key West who were members of those chartered juniors.

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~~Alpha Sinclair~~, now Mrs. Walter Eckberg, Capt. Eckberg's wife, was one of those charter girls.

As teenagers..for R & R...we would go to town, Duval Street, ask store owners (there were no department store owners--just dry good's merchants) Mr. Joe Pearlman, Mr. Appelruth, Mr. Aronovitz, and others, if we may use their restrooms. These were two-seaters out in the back of their stores. There we'd take our cigarettes which were rolled in banana leaves. We frequently heard ~~fire~~ engines clinging and clanging down Duval Street, after we had failed to put out the fire.

We'd ride the elevator to the top of the LaConcha Hotel. What a view!

Girls, remember--not many boys. Then we'd go home, fully satiated for a day's outing.

Dr. C. Maloney, first mayor of Key West, wrote the first history of Key West. This was the speech which he, as mayor, gave when he dedicated City Hall--the old one, in front of the Key West Citizen, which is now being restored. This book was out of print for years, and copies were very expensive. With reprinting now, they are reasonable and available at the local book stores.

In later years, Judge Jefferson B. Brown wrote another history--"Key West, the Old and the New." This book has been out of print for many years. Copies still sell for \$50 if you can find one. It has been told what a venerable judge and how esteemed Judge Brown was, not only by the people of Key West but the State and the Nation. In fact, when I was a young girl and went to college, there hanging in the Capitol in Tallahassee was a beautiful portrait of Judge Brown who had been a State Senator and had also been a Supreme Court Justice in the State of Florida. This was my girl-hood experience with Judge Brown. He had an apartment up over my family and in the summer we would swim out there as it was right on the water and the Florida East Coast Railroad executives had built these apartments at Old Trumbo so the executives could come down and spend a little vacation. So, as the executives became less in number, FEC decided they would rent the apartments. The Judge had rented one, as well as our family along with many other families from Trumbo Point.

Judge Brown had told my mother, Mrs. Annie ^{Carrie} Page, that he would like to have a coming-out party for her young daughter who was being graduated from the Convent (that was I). Of course, my mother was thrilled because she thought Judge Brown was tops as did everyone else. I thought so too, and still do. For the coming-out party, I had just the most beautiful dress and he had invited young folks to the party; it was served in the most

beautiful style. He visited Europe almost every year of his life and he would bring back the most beautiful china and linens; all the foods on the table were molded in a manner of theme featuring the party. So, after the party was over and I was bidding adieu to my host, Judge Brown said to me: "Miss Wilhelmina, (and he always bowed from the waist down and looked much like a Kentucky Colonel) I'll take you down to your mothers." I told him that would be fine but it wasn't necessary, but he insisted. So, he escorted me home. Of course, my mother wanted full details of such a lovely party. So, before I told her about all the beauties of the party, I said to my mother: "I'm not going to any more parties Judge Brown has." Surprised, my mother asked why, of course. I told her, "Why, mother, he wanted to kiss my hand. Not only that, but he wanted to kiss my arm right up to my elbow, I'll bet." My mother looked and said: "Well, Wilhelmina, you can tell Judge Brown has lived in Paris a good part of his life." Not wanting my mother to take this lightly, I added: "Not only that, mother, but he was breathing so rapidly, like he couldn't catch his breath." My mother wasn't too happy when I said that but she added: "Oh, Wilhelmina, you know Judge Brown has asthma." He was, without doubt, a sweet gentlemen and everybody loved him and ^I guess that was one of the reasons why--because he always tried to do something to make someone feel so wonderful. So, until that date and maybe since that, I may be the only debutante from Key West.

After graduating from the Convent, I went to an all girls' school, and became (as many other Key West girls did) a schoolteacher. Then some ^{Coast and Geodetic} engineers came to town and two marriages occurred; one was ^{cleare} Dorothy ^{McCarthy}, who married Admiral McCarthy; Dorothy is still among us but ~~believe~~ Admiral McCarthy has passed on; the other was C. B. Harvey and I, Wilhelmina. C. B. used to take the ribbing of his life from the other engineering families living in Key West; they would tell him that when he

married that little Conch schoolteacher, he would be going barefooted down Duval Street with a string of grunts bobbing up and down; that his income would be nil because nobody uses engineers on this Island. Yet, I guess he really loved that little Conch girl because he surely seemed content. So, anyway, we became engaged. Then, my mother decided she wanted to go to New Orleans to meet the Harveys before her daughter became a Harvey. I had made a "hit" with the Harveys because I had been at summer school at Tulane all summer and I had learned to love the Harveys. Now my mother arrives and Mrs. Harvey has us for dinner. The next day at the hotel, or the same night perhaps, my mother said to me: "I'm not so sure you should marry into that Harvey family".....and after my inquiry of "Why not,".....she added, "But, did you hear Mrs. -Harvey when she kept referring to her Creole ancestry?" I explained that just meant they were of European descent but mother was still not sure she wanted HER daughter marrying into a CREOLE family. Well, I told C. B. what mother had said and naturally he carries this home to his own mother. His mother was enraptured with me, she just loved me to pieces, but she was taken ~~back~~^{aback} by my mother's comment on the Creole ancestry. So, Mrs. Harvey says to her dear son, C. B., "Well, Mrs. Page referred constantly to her being a Conch. I looked the word up in the dictionary and it says....a group of illiterate.....people on the Florida Keys....so I don't know what Mrs. Page has to talk about." So, eventually all feelings were waylaid and C. B. and I were married39 years ago.

While C. B. was mayor, we received a telephone call which I answered. The voice at the other end asked if we were the Harveys with the former Coast and Geodeticsurvey. I told them we were. It developed that while the survey was in progress, this gentleman and C. B. were very close friends. So, we made an appointment to have them over to our home but C. B. and I agreed that we would not tell them that he was the current mayor of Key West; this C. B. felt would tie in too much with all the teasing he had taken from his old

friends about going barefoot down Duval, the grits and grunts, etc. All evening, I was dying to tell them ~~at~~ ^{that} C. B. was mayor but I didn't; the next morning my phone rang about 7:30 and it was the lady whom we had entertained the night before. She said to me.. "A fine friend you and C. B. are!" So I asked what we had done wrong as I did feel our evening was well planned and that we had entertained them royally. Anyway, it developed they had a little conversation with the desk clerk at the motel after they returned home that evening and mentioned they had been with the Harveys. The motel clerk pinpointed the name to the C. B. Harveys and told them C. B. had been mayor of Key West since he (the motel clerk) had been in grade school.

After being questioned by a lady at the luncheon as to what C. B. stood for, Mrs. Harvey explained that his name is Cornelius Bradford Harvey.

It has been said that 17 U. S. Presidents have visited Key West. C. B. as mayor was host to three - Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy....and John Glenn, the astronaut. Each time a VIP would visit Key West, C. B. would get together with the Commissioners and suggest that they change the name of such and such a street to honor the visiting President of the United States. So, first thing you know, the sign painters would be hard at it painting the new signs on the street. C. B. has always seemed to think that President Truman was the most affable. Riding in with President Eisenhower after he had landed at the Naval Air Station at Boca Chica, C. B. turned to him and said: "Mr. President, please notice when we reach the next intersection (driving along Roosevelt Blvd.) it has been named Eisenhower Drive." The President then turned to C. B. and said: "Mr. Mayor, I'm glad to see my road turns to the right."

Regarding the Margaret Truman Launderette, (in answer to inquiries from the group at the luncheon)..... Margaret Street has been there for a long time and was named for the daughter of Key West's first millionaire. Then, Truman Avenue, of course, was named for President Truman because in the olden days, that road had not been paved; it was gutted and the Conchs used to call it

Rocky Road. During my era, this road was changed to Division Street; then, during my husband's administration it was changed to Truman Avenue. It was just coincidental that Margaret Street ran into Truman Avenue; but, you know, something sweet happened too. One time when President Eisenhower was coming into town, there was a local photographer and a newspaper man who had quite an eye. He took his camera and posed so that he could get a picture of President Eisenhower driving into Key West and so he got such a beautiful picture that Life Magazine bought this photograph from him. Anyway, Life Magazine came out and the cover had the car with the Margaret Truman sign in the background - President Truman, Mayor Harvey, the Admiral and the Chaffeur driving the automobile with the caption: "President Eisenhower crosses Margaret Truman Street."

At the time of the Cuban trouble during the Cuban Crisis, President Kennedy came. That sweet C. B. tried all day to bend one of the official keys that he, as mayor, would give in honor of the citizens of Key West to a distinguished guest. He bent the key purposely so that he could impress the President with the fact that with this crisis in Cuba, Key West was in a terrific plight--the economy was really bent. So, when C. B. greeted the President, he gave him the bent key. Of course, the President saw the significance of it because he said to C. B...."But, Mr. Mayor, I thought I had explained about the economy and how we are trying to keep it straight and now bent." C. B. was almost run out of town because the Conchs thought it was the most ironic thing for the Mayor of Key West not to find a new shiny key to the City of Key West and not give him an old bent key. Of course, this was all due to lack of understanding.

This was an amusing incident too. One time C. B. was addressing some teachers from Miami University. He was telling them about the great fire in Key West. He told them that Key West had one fire engine and the reason there was so much devastation caused by the fire was that the one

fire engine was in New York City being repaired. Well, that was too much for these Miamians to take. So they interrupted the Mayor in his speech, and shouted up at him on the podium and said: "Mr. Mayor, why didn't you send that fire engine to Miami for repairs?" So C. B. was quick, and proud to tell them: "Well, the reason it had to go to New York City was that Miami was just an Indian village at the time."
