

At 75, reporter finds herself in the spotlight

By J. CAROLE BUCKNER
Staff Reporter

CHICAGO — At 75, Mount Greenwood resident Rita Fitzpatrick is a reporter's reporter, a living lesson in news gathering — Chicago-style.

A former Tribune and Sun-Times staffer who got her start at the Southtown Economist in 1937, Fitzpatrick learned that doggedness, quick thinking and an enterprising mind pay off in front-page stories.

Fitzpatrick, who grew up in the Englewood neighborhood, knows too that oftentimes getting the story can be as exciting as the story itself.

This week, the reporter was honored with a surprise birthday party at the Beverly Country Club by her brother and two sisters.

Sixty-four relatives, friends and colleagues turned out to celebrate and recollect her adventure-filled years as a newspaperwoman.

"I've covered everything from pregnant elephants to murder trials," she said, noting that when she started at the Tribune in the late '30s, she was the only woman among 100 men to work the city desk.

Her assignments took her to courtrooms all over the United States to cover famous trials, she said.

In a recent interview, "Fitz," as she was dubbed because it was the only part of her name that would fit on the daily assignment sheet, recounted one of her more memorable assignments during the 1950s.

"It was cutthroat journalism in my time. There were several newspapers in town and everybody wanted to be first with the story," she said.

That drive to be first and best has earned Fitzpatrick a highly regarded reputation and has been the stuff of some great personal stories, especially during her years covering murders and murder trials.

"We got the flash and I went out

on a murder case. It was a strange case," said Fitzpatrick.

"Two guys were sitting at a kitchen table; evidently they were arguing over something. One of them pulled a gun and shot the other. The one that was shot lived long enough to pick up a knife and lunge it into the other guy's heart and killed him.

"We were practically the first on the scene. We got there as the cops were arriving. I ran around to the back — you can always get in quicker through the back," she said.

"Anyway, I remember I was wearing a light gray outfit with four-inch heels at the time.

While in Washington during World War II, Fitzpatrick interviewed actor and former bomber pilot Clark Gable in a Pentagon broom closet.

"Well I opened the kitchen door and stepped inside. The floor was covered with blood — and blood like oil. Well, my feet went out from under me and I went flying.

"I slipped and landed on my backside, sliding across the floor and skidded up to both the corpses on the floor," she said.

"It was awful. I was slipping from the top to the bottom. I was soaking," she said.

But it didn't stop her from getting the story.

Startled, but not shaken, she picked herself up, took out her notebook and immediately began interviewing two policemen standing nearby — getting the story to the desk in time for the next deadline.

Back in the '50s, deadlines weren't once or twice a day, she said. At one time, deadlines came five times a day for reporters, and usu-

ally meant 10- to 11-hour days, not unlike today.

"You were always busy," she said.

Being busy and thinking on her feet was second nature for Fitz, even before her days covering the crime beat.

After graduating magna cum laude in 1935 from St. Mary's of Notre Dame with a bachelor's degree in English, she couldn't get a job on a big newspaper, she said.

So, as she tells it, "I went to work as a model and 'assistant gofer' for a downtown furrier.

After two years, she worked her way up to a buyer and was earning \$85 per week, which "was a lot of money for 1937," she said.

One day her sister called and told her that while shopping in the neighborhood she had overheard the Southtown's society page editor telling a friend she was going to quit that day.

Within minutes Fitz was on the phone talking to a stunned managing editor who had just received the society page editor's resignation.

He told her to come in for an interview. "He offered me \$15 a week, so I took it; I wanted to work on a newspaper," the Irish, red-haired reporter said.

"In those days, society editors did everything. In the morning, I covered the police and did rewrite. I covered general news, wrote the short story of the week, did a humor column, filled the society pages and covered neighborhood news, too."

Within a short time, she went to the Tribune, where she earned \$25 a week, she said.

During her years as a reporter, Fitzpatrick "brazened" her way into Cook County Jail to interview a heroin addict unbeknown to authorities; came within inches and seconds of falling out of an airplane flying 7,000 feet up while on her way to a murder trial in Indiana; and entered an apartment to re-



Staff photo by Larry Ruehl

Longtime newswoman Rita Fitzpatrick (right) was the center of attention at a surprise birthday party this past weekend.

trieve incriminating photos and letters in a love-triangle murder, while fellow reporter Roman Pucinski, now a Chicago alderman, waited downstairs.

One of her favorite stories revolves around outwitting a competitive colleague on a rival paper who always scooped her on trial verdicts.

It seems this zealous reporter would virtually prevent other reporters from getting to the telephones to call their desks after a verdict was handed down. In his zeal, the reporter hired people to tie up nearby phone lines, Fitzpatrick said, which annoyed her greatly.

During a murder trial that also tested the constitutionality of allowing a spouse's testimony to be used against another spouse, Fitzpatrick was determined to be first on the street with the verdict.

So she called the telephone company claiming to be the presiding

judge's secretary and requested that a phone be placed in the courtroom.

When phone company workers showed up in court during the next day's lunch recess, she immediately put the phone into her purse and told the telephone man to install a jack in the courtroom next to the press box.

When the verdict came in later that day, Fitzpatrick found herself sitting in the catbird seat, calling her story in as all the other reporters scurried out of the room and beating her rival a full 45 minutes on the street.

Fitzpatrick doesn't really think of herself as a "liberated woman," even though she was one of the first women assigned to write local color stories on the World Series, and kept her maiden name after her marriage in 1939 to James Carmody.

Carmody, a banker who supported
See REPORTER, page 4

Reporter

(Continued from page 1)

ed her career by even bringing her changes of clothes when she was stranded in Iowa or Wisconsin covering a trial, died in 1956.

Fitzpatrick said that throughout her career as a reporter she had to be ready to take off on assignment at a moment's notice to other states, often having to leave without a suitcase or other clothes.

When she wanted to change to her married name in 1939, her editor wouldn't allow it, saying she had earned a reputation as Rita Fitzpatrick, not Rita Carmody.

Not limited to the crime beat, Fitzpatrick's career has included covering city and national politics, including Presidents Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman and John Kennedy before he became president while she worked a three-year stint in Washington.

While in Washington during World War II, Fitzpatrick interviewed actor and former bomber pilot Clark Gable in a Pentagon broom closet.

"I've interviewed 12 kings and queens, 13 Civil War veterans" and several first ladies, Fitzpatrick says matter-of-factly.

Her 40-year career included working on the Sun-Times for several years; writing speeches for Mayor Richard Daley; organizing political campaigns; writing a television show; and working in public relations, eventually heading up the Michael Reese Hospital public relations department.

She retired in 1981 because of a back injury.

But her love is for "hard news," she said.

Although she hasn't written "a word" other than her annual Christmas sonnet for the family's Christmas card, she says "Yes, I do miss it.

"I'm a newspaperwoman. I guess

it's the uncertain element of what's going to happen" which keeps those reporter's instincts still smoldering, she said.

That and wanting to be first in telling the story.

"I still love the messy stuff — murders, messy divorce trial, the hard news," she said, adding as a second thought the fun she had doing feature writing.

"I love doing features too. I always tried to give hard news a feature twist," she said, adding, "The facts are the flesh of the story, but you've got to put a little clothes on them. The facts, by themselves, are pretty naked."

These days she spends most of her time traveling and, of course, reading the newspaper, news magazines and lots of books.

"Someday, I would like to try writing fiction," she said.

But for now Fitzpatrick's real-life story as reporter has provided many family members with hours and hours of enjoyment.