

The Remarkable Women of the Florida Keys Chapter - Our Founder

By Phyllis Wilkinson

The founding Regent of our Florida Keys Chapter, Katharine "K" Wilkinson is the subject of this column. When her name was suggested it seemed a daunting task to write about someone whom I had never had the opportunity to meet. With her autobiography, "It Had To Be You" borrowed from the Key Largo Library, I learned exactly who she is, a woman who lived life on her own terms. Born on October 24, 1915 in Philadelphia, her mother was part of the Philadelphia Mainline and her father, Luis A. Mata, was a consul in the diplomatic service of the government of Ecuador. Her parents divorced in 1934, her father returned to Quito, Ecuador never again to see his children from this marriage.

"K" and her mother first came to visit Miami and the Keys shortly after the divorce. Her mother was so taken with the area that she returned to Philadelphia, packed up and along with her parents moved to Coral Gables.

"K" soon made friends, some of whom decided that she was just the right person for Jack Wilkinson, an out of work graduate of MIT. The relationship clicked and in September of 1937 Katharine and Jack Wilkinson were married in Fort Lauderdale.

Settling down to married life in a lean-to shed on a spit of land in an area called "Planter" not too far from the old post office in Tavernier, Jack earned money by catching ocean specimens for Marine Land Studios in St. Augustine. A beachcomber who let nothing go to waste, Jack salvaged every piece of wood washed up on shore, removing and

straightening every nail. Eventually he built a dock which extended 350 feet and expanded the lean-to into an 8x12 room. A Sears Roebuck tent, held up by a mast from a washed ashore schooner added to their living space. Their bed was a 3/4 cot, their living quarters included a two burner kerosene stove and a small ice box which held a chunk of ice. Their first piece of furniture was a wicker loveseat washed ashore. They fished for their food. "K" described this part of her life as "beautiful....unusual and something I am very grateful for today. I think it has made a better person of me and really gave me a chance to raise Johnnie, Katharine and later Robert, in Tavernier, in an uncluttered life, down to earth, and it was clean and clear and just beautiful." She and Jack lived in the tent and enjoyed this idyllic lifestyle until Jack went into the service of his country at the beginning of WW2.

"K" Wilkinson was active in the general welfare of the Tavernier community and worked to help bring the Coral Shores School into operation. She was the organizer of the Coral Shores School PTA. She was very instrumental in getting the bond passed which built Coral Shores High School. Her first job was as the first secretary and then Office manager of the Coral Shores School, a job she held for 26 years.

Interested in the American Legion Auxiliary, she served a few terms as President of that organization.

She was a volunteer for the American Cancer Society for 44 years. The state of Florida awarded her the Distinguished Service Award for 42 years of service and she was

named "Outstanding Volunteer" in 1993 by the Upper Keys Unit. When the Monroe County Kiwanians honored the first ten outstanding citizens of Monroe County, she was the only woman in that first group. The Rotarians made her an Honorary Member. She was the first woman to be Grand Marshall of the Reporter's 4th of July Parade and Grand Marshall in 1977 for the high school's Thanksgiving Day Parade. The Jaycee's named her the Outstanding Senior Citizen of the Upper Keys.

As a member of the DAR in Miami, she saw a need for a Chapter in the Keys. From February of 1982 she worked relentlessly for the establishment of the Florida Keys Chapter. As organizing Regent, her work was realized in October of 1983 along with the 13 organizing members and 18 charter members. Of the charter members, Martha Gammon, Geraldine Greene, Mogi O'Neil and Janice Webb remain active.

"K" lives today in Miami in an assisted living home near her daughter, Katharine Pickard.

Jeremiah Lott, Katharine's Revolutionary war ancestor was a private in the Army who served as a trumpeter. His brother was a first lieutenant, their father a captain in the Buck's County, Pennsylvania Company. What an honor to these brave men that their descendant was so proud of her ancestry that she founded a Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution. How fortunate we are that she did.

Constitutional Minute.

Jacob Shallus

Q. Who was the penman who, after the text of the Constitution had been agreed on, engrossed it prior to the signing?

A. Jacob Shallus who, at the time, was assistant clerk of the Pennsylvania State Assembly, and whose office was in the same building in which the Convention was held.

Q. Does his name appear on the document or in any of the papers pertaining to its preparation?

A. No. In the financial memoranda there is an entry of \$30 for "clerks employed to transcribe & engross."

Q. When and how was the identity of the engrosser determined?

A. In 1937, on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the Constitution. His identity was determined after a long and careful search of collateral public documents, and is here disclosed for the first time.

Q. Where did Shallus do the engrossing?

A. There is no record of this, but probably in Independence Hall.

Q. Did he realize the importance of the work he had done?

A. Probably not; when he died, in 1796, the Constitution had not yet come to be the firmly established set of governmental principles it since has become.

"Unfortunately, people look at the Gilbert Stuart portrait (of George Washington) or the dollar bill, and he looks old, or disgruntled, or sedentary, if you will. They don't see he was the action hero of the 18th century."

James C. Rees
Exec. Dir. Mount Vernon's Ladies Assoc.