

Gertrude Poe, Laurel's pioneering journalist, celebrates 100th birthday



Gertrude Poe, who was editor of the Laurel Leader from 1939-1980, turns 100 on Monday, Sept. 21. (Jen Rynda/The Baltimore Sun Media Group)



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Leader editor for 41 years, Gertrude Poe turns 100 on Sept. 21, 2015

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In a 1980 front-page column in the Laurel Leader, Gertrude Poe described Laurel as having "charisma and character and courage and compassion."

The former Leader editor easily could have been describing herself.

The last 100 years have taken Poe, who celebrates her 100th birthday Sept. 21, from humble beginnings to law school graduate and a 41-year newspaper editor career that spanned a world war, civil rights, space race and Laurel's emergence as a suburban, commuter community. Along the way, the "Lady Editor," as Poe calls

herself, developed a deep love for the community her newspaper journaled, a compassion only outdone by her love for her family.

In her own words, Poe said hers has been "a good life and a good livelihood."

The youngest of five daughters born to Worthy and Bertha Poe on a farm in Granite, in Baltimore County, one of Poe's earliest memories is being in her father's arms as she reacted to fireworks set off to celebrate the end of World War I.

Her family moved to Laurel during her childhood and lived in several houses before moving to 708 Montgomery St. in the late 1920s. While a smart and capable student who skipped a few grades, Poe recalls in an autobiography published for her family in 2004 that she felt a lack of confidence that she overcame by pushing herself to achieve success.

The year she turned 12, Poe enrolled in the old Laurel High across from her family's home, and in her junior and senior years was secretary to Principal L. B. Howland. Her status as insider to the head of school brought Poe some popularity, which she said helped build her self-confidence.

"Laurel High was a good high school with a good principal," Poe said of her alma mater.

In her sophomore year, Poe won first place and \$5 in a Washington Star essay contest on "My Ambition." Her ambition: to be a lawyer.

After graduating from Laurel High in June 1931 at the age of 15, she landed a job as legal secretary for local attorney George McCeney at 357 Main St., the same address where she would lead the Leader as editor from 1939-1980. But first, law school beckoned and in 1936 Poe enrolled in [Washington College](#) of Law (now part of American University), graduating with a juris doctor degree.

Returning to Main Street, she expected to pick up where she left off and become legal secretary for G. Bowie McCeney, who had taken over his father's firm after George McCeney died in 1934.

Instead of the career in law she expected, her tenure as community newspaper editor was launched.

Bowie McCeney had earlier acquired the Leader in a business deal, and had no intention of becoming a full-time editor.

In June 1939, he handed the editor's job to the new law school graduate, saying, "See what you can make of it."

An attorney who also had insurance and real estate businesses to run, McCeney stepped back and gave full control of the Leader to Poe.

I did all the work" on the paper, Poe said. "He would just shake his head [at my questions], saying, 'no, that's your decision.'"

Poe said taking over as editor "led me to some very interesting experiences that took me almost around the world. I shared my experiences with my readers."

It also led to what Poe calls an "unmatchable friendship and business relationship" with McCeney that continued for the rest of his life.

In the next decade, Poe shifted the Leader's coverage from national to local news, and wrote the stories, sold the ads, drove the paper to the printers and put the paper in the mail.

"I was a one-woman show," Poe said,

Through her Pen Points, which ran two columns wide down the length of the broadsheet's front page, Poe spoke to her readers directly, sharing her own thoughts and reactions to national and local events, from the assassination of a president to the murder of a Laurel family. Her weekly journaling allowed her an outlet for her own musings as she covered Laurel's news, and offered a platform for readers to respond and react to her opinions.

She said readers were "hungry" for what she wrote in her Pen Points, and that she was "inspired" by their reaction and feedback.

Poe made sure the Leader championed achievements of Laurel residents, reporting the births, deaths, graduations and other news that allows a community newspaper to help write the history of its readers.

During World War II, she published letters from local men and women serving in the armed forces, and chronicled how Laurel as a community was carrying-on during the war years. She said it was during the war years that her job as editor became meaningful, and she finally felt "reporting news was exciting."

In 1950, Poe became Leader co-publisher with McCeney and in 1958, she was the first woman elected president of the Maryland Press Association, now known as the Maryland-Delaware-District of Columbia Press Association.

As head of a local press association, Poe usually found herself the sole woman at meetings or conferences of regional press group, but with her continuing effort of pushing herself for success, she soon found she was among friends.

"I was the first woman to do most everything a man did" as an editor, Poe said. "I really did try to get more women into journalism."

That effort earned her the Emma C. McKinney Award of Merit from the National Newspaper Association in 1967 for her work as a woman in community journalism.

In 1980, two years after McCeney's death, Poe retired from her career as Lady Editor, handing the paper over to her assistant editor, Karen Yengich.

Retirement brought travel — to Europe, the Southwest, Alaska — requests for speeches and a chance to spend more time with her family, including sisters Myrtle Donaldson, Margaret Vogts and Ruby King, their children and grandchildren. Poe moved to a 16-room, brick Georgian-style home in Ashton well-suited to entertaining friends and family members, and in the early 1990s undertook a redecorating project that ended up being featured in Home and Design magazine.

"What surprised me most were the invitations to speak," Poe said of her retirement. "They just really wanted a woman speaker."

In 1987, Poe was the first woman, and first living honoree, inducted into the MDDC Press Association Hall of Fame, "an honor that superseded all others," Poe wrote in her autobiography.

In 1988, she established the Gertrude Poe Fund for Journalism Excellence at the Philip Merrill College of Journalism at University of Maryland.

For nearly a century, the Poe family have been active members, and generous benefactors, of First United Methodist Church on Main Street, where last year on Poe's 99th birthday, a chapel and stained-glass window were dedicated to her family.

Poe is gracefully approaching her milestone centennial birthday much as she has approached most things in her 99 years: with determination, and excitement to be sharing her achievement with her family and the Laurel community, she said in a recent interview.

Her 100th birthday will be spent with those closest to her, including several grand nieces, while elected officials, community leaders and new and old friends are sending a flood of well wishes to her home in Ashton, and the Laurel Historical Society has an over-sized birthday card at the Laurel Museum available for visitors to sign.

In 2004, when Poe was the honoree at the Laurel Historical Society's gala, she said, "I fell in love with Laurel and was very proud to chronicle its history for four decades."

It would appear that the community fell in love with its Lady Editor, too.

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