

**IN PERSON*****IN PERSON; A Born Storyteller, She Took Her Time*****By Jill. P. Capuzzo**

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IT is just past noon when the women, some aided by walkers, begin making their way up the flagstone path, carrying Tupperware tubs or plates wrapped in tin foil. Soon, the oval wooden table in Anne Knight Ruff's kitchen is groaning from the platters of muffins, salads, quiche, and blueberry buckle spread upon it.

This is the gathering of the Friday Ladies, a weekly ritual that has gone on for nearly 30 years here, and is only one aspect of a way of life -- rapidly disappearing -- that this group's hostess has captured in words.

A born storyteller, Ms. Ruff has for years entertained family and friends with her tales of growing up -- and growing old -- in this Victorian community by the Delaware. A few years back she was invited to join a writing group, whose members encouraged her to start jotting her stories down, if for no other reason than to preserve the family history for her great grandchildren. Once others read the stories, a grassroots effort took hold to get them into print.

With the help of friends and relatives, who pitched in to type the stories, edit copy, take pictures, and raise enough money to cover production costs, Ms. Ruff now finds herself, at age 81, a first-time author with a surprise hit, "Ruff Copy!". Of the initial 1,000-book run, only about 100 copies remain to be sold. While many have been purchased locally at \$10 apiece, books have also been shipped to Florida, California and Maine.

"The word of mouth has been good," said Michael Robinson, the librarian here who helped edit the book. "People are enjoying it, even if they don't know the characters."

A mixture of humorous anecdotes, short stories and longer musings, "Ruff Copy" traces the rich life of Ms. Ruff, and the town in which she she grew up. Her grandfather was Charles A. Wright, a founding father of Riverton and the owner of the Tacony Palmyra Ferry Company and later the Tacony-Palmyra Bridge.

In one story, Ms. Ruff recalls private family cruises on the ferry; in another, her sister's speech at the bridge opening ceremony. Most of her stories, however, reflect scrappier kinds of activities, like swimming in the Delaware River, climbing inside the girders of the Tacony-Palmyra Bridge, or jumping across ice floes on the frozen river.

"The river was such a big part of our lives," said Ms. Ruff. "That's where we learned to swim. And we knew we had to swim across it before we were 12 or we'd be considered a failure for life."

The story of her own swim across the mile-wide channel at age 11 includes a description of a huge tanker heading right toward her. Her reaction? "Hot dog! There will be even bigger waves."

The youngest of seven children, Ms. Ruff said it was understood that she and the other women in her family would get married, not go to college. "We were expected to go from the care of our fathers to the care of our husbands," she said. To compensate, the women created their own mutual support society -- still evident among those who gather each Friday.

"These were very bright, very able women who didn't have the educational opportunity, so they developed a support network that was culturally enriching," said Bill Probsting, the headmaster of Westfield Friends School, who said his elderly cousin still reads five or six books a week and can identify every species of fern or moss in her garden. "There was always an art project going on, they were always talking about good books, they'd invite speakers in to lecture them."

A devout Quaker, Ms. Ruff -- whom everyone calls Bay -- embodies the philosophy of living simply and giving back to the community. Her bungalow-style house is filled with hand-sewn quilts and oak chairs that she has bought for \$2 and painted with bright patterns. The kitchen floor is covered with Edward Hicks' "A Peaceable Kingdom," which she painted about 25 years ago because she could not afford linoleum. When the Friends School upgraded to fiberglass furniture, the old maple desks and chairs provided her with three years of fuel for her Franklin stove.

At the age of 56, she began working for the American Friends Service Committee, tracking shipments of clothing to third world countries. Each spring she teaches children with cerebral palsy how to swim, and in the summer she opens her own ancient pool and gives swimming lessons to the children in the neighborhood.

As she wrote in her book: "I love to teach swimming, and I always feel I need to justify having my pool. It must be more than a place to lie about in the sun."

Each of these chapters in Ms. Ruff's life are now stories in her book, but getting those stories out of her head and into print was a challenge, said Priscilla Adams, also a member of Westfield Friends, who first recognized the potential of the tales.

"I read them and I told her, 'These are wonderful, we should print them,' " said Ms. Adams. "The happy parts make you laugh, the sad parts make you cry. She writes about these experiences that weren't mine but somehow I feel I can touch them."

Another friend, Suzanne Day, worked with a local printer to get the book produced, and despite her predictions that the book would "sell like hotcakes," could not convince Ms. Ruff to go for a 2,000-book run.

"Bay was so modest about it," Ms. Day said. "She said she didn't want to have boxes of unsold books sitting around."

The book's success comes as a surprise to no one, except perhaps its author. For local readers of "Ruff Copy," half the fun is trying to figure out which dog the author is describing, or pinpointing the swimming hole Ms. Ruff refers to as "Tomato Pond," where all the rotten tomatoes floated up river from Campbell's Soup in Camden. For those less closely tied to the community, "Ruff Copy" provides a touching portrait of living a full and sometimes challenging life. In addition to her humorous adventures, Ms. Ruff writes about losing friends, her struggles with deafness and aging.

"My life hasn't been like a novel," she wrote. "It just sort of rambles on and I learn very little. One thing I have learned is that growth is painful, and also that you are in danger of leaving some people behind."

Ms. Ruff is a little baffled -- though delighted -- by the celebrity that has surrounded her these last couple of months. She keeps a folder of fan mail from readers, is happy to sign books thrust into her lap, and was thrilled to be recognized by a stranger when she was out for tea recently. She wasn't too thrilled, however, by the man who stopped at her house recently to recount his memories of Riverton -- and stayed for the afternoon.

"He was so boring," said the tall, slightly stooped writer who did not have time to mince words. She had more pressing concerns, like scraping the concrete floor of her 10-foot-deep pool so she could start filling it before the state restricted water use.

She is nursing a wound on her hand where she had a small amount of skin cancer removed -- less a result of the cigarettes Ms. Ruff still smokes than the hours she spends outside, tending her koi pond or hacking out a patch of day lilies. She wears state-of-the-art hearing aids, but still has trouble deciphering a group's conversation. She says she no longer climbs up on her roof to patch her chimney and watch the river flow -- as she did at age 70 -- and has no plans to write a sequel.

"I told my writing group I'm not writing anymore," she said. "I've said everything I have to say."

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