

# MARYLAND

VOLUME 7 NUMBER 4

*FRONT COVER.* A member of the 1st Maryland Regiment, the Free State's official Bicentennial troops, makes an entry after a day in the field.

*TOP LEFT.* Students at the Melwood Horticultural Training Center in Upper Marlboro learn gardening and other skills to equip them for paying jobs.

*TOP RIGHT.* Municipally owned bus shuttle service in Garrett County is expanding public transit service available.

*CENTER.* The paths of Benedict Arnold and Maryland's signer of the Declaration of Independence, William Paca, crossed just before the American general betrayed his country.

*BOTTOM.* The log sailing canoe, the oldest type of vessel still extant on the Chesapeake Bay, offers dramatic and exciting sport for boat buffs.

## Staff

Editor—Margaret E. Dougherty  
Associate Editor/Promotion Manager—Bonnie Joe Ayers  
Production—Howard L. Crise  
Circulation Manager—Barbara Chambers  
Design—Robert Thomas, Jr. & Associates/Graphics  
Printing—Art Litho Co.  
Typography—Head Composition Co.  
Color—Progressive Color Corp.  
Editorial and business offices,  
Room 407, 2525 Riva Road,  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401.  
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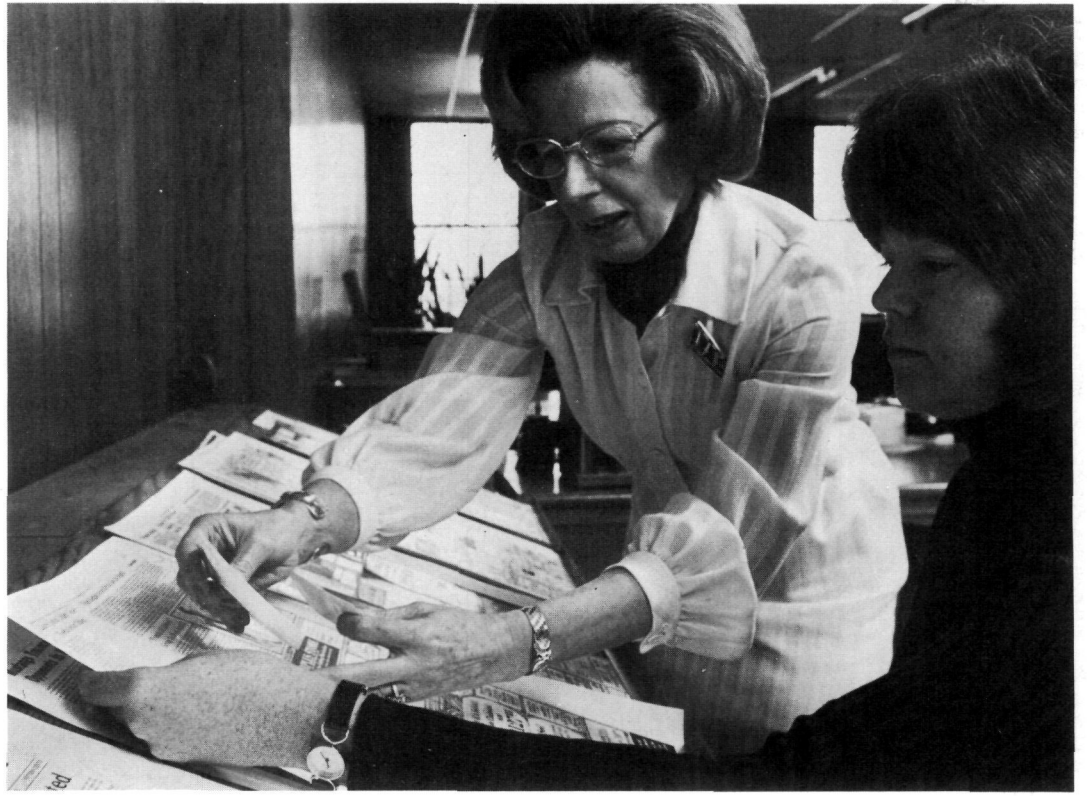
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Get-Away Weekend,  
Bel Air



# Gertrude Poe, Lady Editor

Leader was just an eight-page weekly consisting chiefly of canned news with little local news or ads. Later, there were also The Bowie Register, The College Park News and The Beltsville Banner which she edited before the four were merged as The News Leader in 1945. Today, the paper is a thriving, news-oriented enterprise which runs about thirty pages an issue.

By LOUIS PEDDICORD

*One bright summer day forty-four years ago, Gertrude Louise Poe walked the length of Laurel's Main Street in search of a job. She was fifteen years old, barely a month out of high school, and probably would have accepted almost any work she could find in that Depression year of 1931.*

*As it was, she stopped in front of 357 Main Street, an old two-story frame building which then housed the offices of a local attorney. He had a secretarial opening that paid five dollars a week. She applied, was offered the job and started work the next day.*

*Today, Gertrude Poe still begins the day at 357 Main Street in Laurel and is still associated with the same local family, the McCeney's. "I haven't gotten very far in life," she is fond of quipping when recounting her career. The fact is, though, Miss Poe has traveled quite some distance in the past four decades, despite being anchored at the same address all these years.*

*For thirty-six years Gertrude Poe has been editor of Laurel's community newspaper, The News Leader; for the past twenty-five years, she has been co-publisher of the paper and business partner with G. Bowie McCeney, a*

*local attorney and son of the man who first hired her back in 1931. She earned a degree from Washington College of Law at American University in 1939, and has been the only woman to serve as president of the Maryland-Delaware-DC Press Association. For several years she had her own news program on the Laurel radio station. She and her newspaper both have received more than a score of top journalism prizes and awards, and she, herself, has garnered literally hundreds of mementoes, letters of appreciation, honorary memberships and prizes over her long newspaper career.*

*An attractive, fashionable woman who admits to having had "a very satisfying and rewarding life," Miss Poe lives in a tastefully furnished red-brick house in Laurel. Her life has been the newspaper and the people of that city. When she was a freshman in high school, Gertrude Poe entered a "My Ambition" essay contest sponsored by a Washington newspaper. She won a five dollar prize for her entry, which persuasively argued that above all, she wanted to be a lawyer. Never having practiced law does not seem to have disturbed her. She admits she missed her goal, and explains how she was "handed the paper in 1939 when Mr. McCeney unexpectedly acquired it." In those days, The*

*Over the years, as Laurel has grown from a town of about 2,500 in 1931 to one of 11,000 today, Miss Poe has been busy. In addition to frequent public speaking engagements, she has conducted a successful insurance agency and real estate for twenty-three years from the 357 Main Street address, while editing what she now instinctively calls "my newspaper."*

*Almost without exception among Laurel's former and current public officials, Gertrude Poe is a well-liked, respected woman and editor. Says one former mayor: "Gertrude is one of the finest things that could have happened to the town. She's done a tremendous job for many years and I, along with everybody I know, have a great deal of admiration for her." P. W. Filby, director of the Maryland Historical Society who has had many contacts with Miss Poe in recent years, seconds that opinion. "She puts out one of the better journals in the whole of the State; my only quibble is that I wish she wrote more herself. She's an excellent writer."*

*What does a community newspaper in Maryland look like today? What is it trying to do? Where is it heading? Gertrude Poe's name was most frequently mentioned by newspaper sources as typifying a small community journalist who might be able to answer those questions. The following interview is the result.*

**After thirty-six years on the job as editor of THE NEWS LEADER, can you pinpoint for us what qualities make an editor?**

Many quite different things. First and foremost, a person must have an innate interest in, and liking for, people. I myself have enjoyed knowing people, working with them and reporting their activities. I am also eager to please, which is perhaps a curious characteristic for an editor to have. But I think in a community newspaper it's important to please because we're writing for the family. Exercising integrity and good judgment in handling news is also a prerequisite, as is the ability to maintain an economically stable business enterprise.

**How would you see the ideal community newspaper?**

I think the community newspaper should reflect life in the community, simply and accurately. Someone coming into town for the first time should be able to pick up the paper and see the community's image mirrored there in black and white. We don't deal just with important issues, the big news; we are dealing with Cub Scouts and youth activities, church and school news, the municipal scene, community groups; everything that makes up life in the community. I want to please the birdwatcher and the bridge player. And I'm just as eager to please the thirteen-year-old boy who has become an Eagle Scout, or the twelve-year-old who is wrestling for the first time.

**Do you see yourself as what Americans in their nostalgic moods consider a "shirt-sleeves editor?" Someone who does everything on the newspaper? A one-woman show?**

For many years, I was that. I guess from 1939 until about 1956 or 1957, it was a one-woman show. I sold the ads, made them up, wrote the copy, went to the printing plant, proofread and saw the newspaper locked up and printed. Then I brought the paper home with me and put it in the mail. Now my responsibilities as an editor have grown, as the paper itself has grown, so my duties are not just confined to the editorial side of the newspaper. As a partner with Mr. McCeney, I share in the business responsibilities, too. I am very fortunate in having a very competent staff to help me get the paper out each week.

**Have you ever crusaded for any one issue or cause in THE NEWS LEADER over the years?**

We have never been a crusading newspaper. For twenty years, I authored a column called "Pen Points," which reflected my personal philosophy; I would make subtle suggestions, and many of them were picked up and carried through. But I would say that we have never really been a crusading newspaper; we have been a newspaper, *per se*.

**Do you feel your newspaper has promoted the town's cohesiveness, its identity, over the years?**

Many have told me they feel that without *The News Leader* Laurel would have lost something of its identity in the growing urbanization of the entire area. So, yes, I imagine the newspaper has helped Laurel remain itself even as the Baltimore-Washington sprawl gradually closes in on it.

**To what might you attribute the impressive growth in the number of community newspapers over the past five or ten years? They seem to have taken the place of the metropolitan dailies in many instances, and the smaller, neighborhood-oriented paper seems to be succeeding where others have failed.**

In a metropolitan area, such as the one in which we are located, there is a real need for coverage of the local scene. The metropolitan daily cannot possibly do it, costwise. I think people need community newspapers to keep them abreast of what's going on in local government and their immediate environment.

**Has it been your intention over the years to affect the workings of government? To guide its course in any way?**

No! I don't feel it's my function to guide government. The voters choose the people they want to guide them in government and it's my function to report that government scene to the best of my ability, but not to guide it.

**But, at the same time, do you feel THE NEWS LEADER has served as a catalyst in informing the people and thereby spurring them to action?**

Unquestionably; I think that is true.

**Has that been your intention?**

Yes, it has. And I might say that by reporting fully and accurately on both sides of an issue, we just naturally stir up the interest of our readers. We don't have an editorial page because we feel a newspaper should be exactly what it says it is: a newspaper, not a journal of opinion, interpretation or guidance.

**So you give a large amount of credit to the average man; you believe that he will correctly form his own judgment on an issue?**

I do indeed. I feel that, given the facts, whether it's an election campaign or anything else, the reader can make up his own mind, and should. Give readers the facts, let them decide; that way they'll have nobody to blame or credit but themselves.

**Have you found that a newspaper, particularly a community newspaper, has obligations to citizens that other profitmaking businesses do not?**

We have an obligation for integrity, for fairness in reporting the news. It is *integrity* that shows up in black and white. Most businesses don't see the results of their labors so starkly every week where everybody in the community can review them and say, "That's not right. That's wrong." So we are a bit different from most businesses, I would say. Because our labors do appear in black and white each week, it is a continuing challenge to improve the next issue. Even after thirty-six years, it's still a challenge.

**How do you compete with the hypnotic appeal of television?**

TV is no competition to us. I feel that the people are still going to read the local newspaper because it has a report of the game that their children played in or a play they starred in. It's going to be read and it's kept around for a whole week. Few readers discard the community newspaper until the next issue comes out because it serves as a reference and is used for clipping. It serves a purpose not filled by any other media. It gives stature to the community and its people.

**Do you feel, then, that a local newspaper such as THE NEWS LEADER is part of the family?**

Unquestionably, yes. Last week, for instance, one bundle of our papers that should have gone to Laurel was placed in a bag that went out of the city. It didn't arrive back here until two days later. There were fifty-seven papers in that bundle and I think we had calls from fifty-seven people.

**What were your ideals about editing a newspaper back in 1939? How do they compare with your ideals now?**

You must recall that my ideals in 1939 were to practice law, not edit a newspaper. I hadn't the vaguest idea that I would still be at it thirty-six years hence, or that I would have enjoyed it as much as I have, or had as many rewards, economically as well as journalistically. But, to answer your question, I think the ideal of any worthwhile enterprise is to do the best you can. And that holds true whether you are digging ditches or editing a newspaper. If you do the best you can with that job, that is the ideal situation.

**Are today's reporters better or worse than they were ten or fifteen years ago?**

I think they're more aware. They have a wider grasp of the news and a better sense of what's going on across the country on all levels.

**How do you feel journalism in general is faring?**

It seems to me that integrity in reporting needs to have a fresh glance. The need for just plain, factual reporting should be stressed. More and



more we're going into interpretive writing and by-line articles where the reporter interprets the scene. It's not just that he is reporting the factual thing; he's almost editorializing as he writes the article, and I'm not sure this is a safe trend. I think we need to get back to sheer factual reporting. However, I do applaud investigative reporting.

**You've mentioned that in all your years as a businesswoman and editor, you've never had any hint of discrimination against you because of your sex. How do you explain that?**

It's true. I never have been the subject of any sex discrimination in my business. When the insurance business owned by my co-publisher, Mr. McCeney, was turned over to me and it became the Gertrude L. Poe Agency instead of the G. Bowie McCeney Agency, I didn't lose a single insured. There was never any doubt that I could handle the work. The fact that I have worked with the same man for over forty years, a partner in business with him for twenty-five years, and am the only editor he has ever had for the newspaper, seems proof enough to me that there's been no discrimination at all. However, I have worked hard for it; I believe I have earned what I have because I've accepted the responsibilities as they were offered to me.

**In line with that, were you not the first woman president of the Maryland-Delaware-DC Press Association?**

Yes. I was president in 1958 and 1959, and still enjoy the distinction of being the only woman to have served in that capacity. Even though I was just a small-town newspaper editor presiding over the Associations Board, consisting of editors of *The Sunpapers*, *The Catholic Review*, *The News American* and other daily and weekly newspapers, never was there any hint of discrimination or lack of cooperation with me. It was a marvelous situation and one that I shall always cherish.

**Do you sense any growing disillusionment in the citizenry? Any increased cynicism about government and government officials?**

Oh, indubitably. Doesn't everyone?

**Is this true on the local level as well as nationally?**

Yes. I think it sort of filters down to a natural distrust of any form of government. I see a growing interest in keeping a watchful eye on any agency or any government. I know that in the last couple of years we have seen far more interest shown in the municipal scene, in park and planning issues, in county government. This is a growing trend. People are not quite as lazy about reading and attending, listening and sitting in meetings and hearings, as they used to be.



**So on the whole, you think that this cynicism or this disillusionment is a good thing?**

Right. I think it activates people and puts government on the alert.

**This may be somewhat out of your bailiwick, but do you feel that newspapers can do anything to stop or slow the "1984" society that is being predicted more and more for this country? In other words, can anyone or anything combat "Big Brother?"**

I think there are many things in this country that are askew. Our tax situation particularly needs careful attention; and our social programs. I'm not a commentator on the national scene. I have only my personal observations and opinions; but being in business for so many years I am well aware of the demands that government makes on the businessman. His survival is really at stake if government doesn't do something to correct the tax situation.

**We were talking just a moment ago about the citizenry's growing disillusionment. Do you feel that the kind of situation you just described has anything to do with this attitude?**

I believe people, particularly the concerned taxpayers, are completely frustrated and skeptical. Trust in government is almost totally bankrupt. Watergate, with all its disillusionments, has crowned this growing cynicism. Furthermore, hard work is not rewarded by government. It is penalized. Free enterprise struggles

to cope with a tangled web of government red tape and increasing demands while government itself continues to encourage dependence on it.

**One other question: do you consider yourself conservative or liberal?**

I'd call myself conservative.

**What form does your conservatism take?**

First, I have never spent more than I have. I believe people ought to save more and spend less. Extended credit is too easy, often devastating, both to the seller and the consumer. Second, I still believe the three "R's" should be basic to our public school education. The products of our schools since the three R's were dropped are often pretty bad. Much of the tax dollar for education is wasted. Third, I believe people should work harder and longer. They should remain productive until they are at least sixty-five or have worked at least forty years. People play too much; we've gone hog wild on recreation. Fourth, oft times tradition is considered the enemy of progress; and in government I suppose I'm not a true conservative, for I believe reforms are necessary. The way my conservatism functions in government is to keep what progressiveness has accomplished.

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LOUIS PEDDICORD is a writer for the State's Department of Economic and Community Development.

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