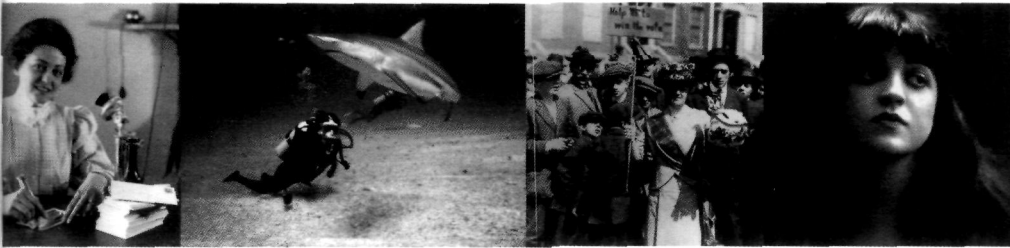


# W O M E N

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OF

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# A C H I E V E M E N T

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IN MARYLAND

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# H I S T O R Y

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*Carolyn B. Stegman*

*Conceived and produced by  
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# Gertrude L. Poe

1915–, PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY

*I tried to give them the straight facts ...*

A newspaper is the pulse of a community, an institution, the meticulous recorder of a town's life. It is also "the first rough draft of a town's history" (Spellman E4491). Newspapers record the histories of a town's families—births, marriages, achievements, honors, and deaths. They record critical decisions, plot growth, photograph the ribbon cuttings at new schools, celebrate new programs, and cover elections by informing the constituents. They are the advertising medium for community businesses. Updating readers on state, national, and international stories, newspapers are often the first thing looked for in the morning and the last thing looked at at night.

In June 1939, the *Leader*, serving Laurel, Maryland, was an eight-page tabloid with four news pages covering local events, from meetings to luncheons, a page of comics, and four canned pages, which included the latest Hollywood chit-chat. Gertrude Poe firmly refused when lawyer G. Bowie McCeney, who had acquired the newspaper as payment for a debt, offered her the editorship. Poe had just graduated from the Washington College of Law of American University with every intention of joining McCeney at his law firm, but his offer was not the graduation present she had expected. Besides, she had never had even a course in journalism. But she recalled a phrase from Shakespeare; "There is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune...and we must take the current when it serves, or lose our ventures." Poe took the job. In the early years, she single-handedly gathered the news, wrote it, edited it, sold advertising, laid out the pages, followed copy to the printer, and took the newspaper to the post office (Murchison 22).

Forty-one years and 2,232 editions later, Poe, who never did practice law, retired as editor. During those years, she led the newspaper through untold progress, merged it with other newspapers, and changed its name. The *News Leader* became a respected full-size newspaper with Poe's steady hand at the helm. Her standards were high, her integrity unquestioned. Through years when the role of journalism itself underwent revolutionary changes, she never lost sight of her basic objective: to chronicle "Laurel's saga" over time:

*Just think what we've been through together," she said to her readers. "The Korean Conflict, Vietnam... The repercussions that changed a small community into a burgeoning city: desegregation, an awakening to civil rights, the 1972 assassination attempt on George Wallace at a local shopping center, the Atomic Age, the Space Age.... How you reacted to change, how you coped with problems, how you rejoiced over achievement, and how you had fun. She (Laurel) just isn't any place. She has charisma and character and courage and compassion. (Poe)*

Through her personal column, "Pen Points," Gertrude Poe would occasionally editorialize when she thought prodding was necessary. The city took her advice on more than one occasion. She helped her readers understand their heritage and past at times. Occasionally, she was philosophical. Although she never endorsed a political candidate, she gave readers information. "I tried to give them the straight facts, no opinion included, so they could make decisions for themselves," she stated.

When a hometown patriot, Major Lawrence Bailey, a Vietnam prisoner of war, returned to Laurel, Poe personally covered his heartwrenching story of mentally and physically surviving solitary confinement in a dark prison room (Poe). Bailey's story was not the first she had relayed about servicemen and women. During World War II, "the paper carried news of Laurel servicemen and women, published letters from them, and covered a community's diligent efforts in meeting the demands of war," she recalled (Poe). She covered that war and a town's involvement in it. "Many subscriptions were sent overseas about those carrying on at home, particularly the women who were manning fire trucks, pumping gas, working in airplane and munitions factories...determined to do their duty too," she said (Poe).

In 1959, Poe became the first woman elected president of the Maryland Press Association (now the



Maryland-Delaware-D.C. Press Association), steering it through its fiftieth anniversary year and becoming one of the first women in the nation to head a state press club. In 1987, that same association inducted her into its Hall of Fame. Poe was the first living person to be so honored. Prior to her induction, the award had always been a posthumous one.

The *News Leader*, which Poe eventually owned, produced that “first rough draft of history” for Laurel, Maryland (Poe). Through a period of vast changes in attitudes and lifestyles, hers was a thoughtful voice of reason and stability. Gertrude Poe led a newspaper to journalism awards and aptly became Maryland’s first lady of journalism. ✿

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## Mary Dolly Harrison

1917–1987, CALVERT COUNTY

... her life was a gift to us all ...



COURTESY OF JOHN W. HARRISON

**O**n Mary Harrison’s desk stood a Norman Rockwell figurine, a girl with braided hair winning all the marbles from the boys with whom she competed. The admirer who had given Harrison this gift told her that she too had the ability to win those marbles (“Mary D. Harrison”). “Feminist” is not a term Harrison ever would have used to describe herself, but long before it was fashionable, she worked her way to the forefront of the business community, pursuing a truly non-traditional career for a woman. Mary Harrison owned a lumber company.

After attending Eaton and Burnett Business College in the late 1930s, Harrison took a job as a secretary for the Thomas Lumber Company in Owings Mills, Maryland. Her employer thought her skillful, bright, and quite capable, so he promoted her to a position as a buyer. In the early 1960s, when the company was sold, Harrison, a yard foreman, and an architect formed their own lumber company, the Owings Lumber Company. Harrison became president and built a respected business based on personal service and quality products. She would remain in the lumber business for almost fifty years.

During that time, Harrison was an active member of her community. In 1978, she was elected as the first woman member of the Calvert County Commission. In 1982, she was elected again and would serve three years as president. She became well known for her determination to provide quality public education and the highest caliber of healthcare. Also, she was a dedicated conservationist bent on

preserving the natural surroundings for the citizens of Calvert County.

A 1987 editorial from the *Calvert Independent*, written a few days after Harrison died, captured the spirit of her public service:

*The work of a public servant is often thankless and unrecognized, and particularly so for elected officials who serve at the whim of a capricious constituency. During the good times, when all goes well in the eyes of the most vocal, the limelight waxes warm and generous. When controversy arises, such popularity often wanes and criticism and complaint replace favor.*

*In choosing to seek public office, Ms. Harrison knew this. Her contributions were made without expectations of thanks, and criticism was accepted with grace. Ms. Harrison was the embodiment of all that is good in the democratic system. She served with an eye to the future by realizing that her actions could significantly enhance or detract from the quality of life for subsequent generations of county residents. Her efforts to preserve natural areas like Flag Ponds, Kings Landing and Jefferson Patterson Park surely serve as an enhancement.*

*During years in which the county felt its strongest and most consistent growing pains, Harrison provided much needed leadership. In her guidance through what may have been the most critical eight years in Calvert County history, we witness that rarest of all treasures: a truly informed, diligent, compassionate and effective elected leader. Those qualities proved invaluable, and we need look no further than the nearest public facility to see the imprint of Mary Harrison...*

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