

# Gertrude Poe, 101, edited Laurel Leader for 41 years



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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Laurel Leader

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**G**ertrude L. Poe, who guided the Laurel Leader for 41 years as editor before retiring in 1980, died Thursday, July 13, 2017 at her home in Ashton.

A family member, Vicci Rodgers, confirmed her death. Ms. Poe was 101.

Her career at the Leader began in 1939 when, after graduating from **Washington College** of Law, Ms. Poe returned to her job in the law offices of Bowie McCeney on Main Street. McCeney, however, handed her the community newspaper he had earlier acquired in a business deal, and Ms. Poe's career in journalism was launched. She managed the paper's coverage of a world war, civil rights, space race and Laurel's emergence as a suburban, commuter community. Ms. 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, a "one-woman show," she said.

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

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

“I was the first woman to do most everything a man did” as an editor, Ms. Poe said in 2015. In her 2004 autobiography, “Lady Editor,” she wrote: “It was during World War II that I began to take seriously my unwanted role as a weekly newspaper editor, unwittingly spawning a career lasting more than four decades and bringing me undreamed of rewards, awards, experiences and recognition.”

During World War II she not only handled the work for the Leader, but also The Bowie Register, The College Park News, The Beltsville Banner and an insurance business, all owned by McCeney. She became a broadcaster of the local scene when radio station WLMD opened in Laurel.

For many years, she wrote a “Pen Points” column in the Leader, which ran two columns wide down the length of the broadsheet’s front page. Through this forum, she spoke directly to readers, sharing her own thoughts and reactions to national and local events, from the assassination of a president to the murder of a Laurel family. This weekly journal allowed her a forum for her own musings as she covered Laurel’s news, and offered a platform for readers to respond and react to her opinions.

After her retirement in 1980, following the death in 1978 of McCeney, her co-publisher and business partner, assistant editor Karen Yengich became editor until 1990, followed by Joe Murchison from 1990 to 2007.

“Gertrude Poe was one of the most memorable and unforgettable people in my life,” said Yengich, who left the newspaper business in 1992 and worked as an editor and writer for several corporations in Utah. “She hired me to be her assistant editor and to work with her hip-to-hip which I did for eight years. We had desks right by each other, and I learned and watched Gertrude’s leadership in how a community newspaper tied closely to the heart and soul of the people should be managed and operated.”

“When I became editor in 1990, community leaders quickly made clear to me that I was working in Gertrude Poe’s shadow,” Murchison said. “She had retired from journalism 10 years before, but in people’s minds she was still the exemplar of what local journalism should be. I knew I couldn’t measure up to the standard she set of elegant prose and fierce advocacy for her hometown. But I so appreciated that she had put the Laurel Leader on the map, not only in Maryland but nationally, and that she was always graciously encouraging to me when we ran into each other.”

In 1987, Ms. 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 2008 at the Press Association’s 100th year gala at the Newseum in Washington, D.C., she was a guest speaker and honorary chairperson.

In 2002, Ms. Poe was featured in the book "Women of Achievement in Maryland History." She was inducted into the Maryland Women's Hall of Fame in 2011. She was selected as the honorary chairwoman of the 2015 annual luncheon the state of Maryland holds to honor state residents 100 years or older. More than 800 attended that event in May 2015.

Born Sept. 21, 1915 on a farm in Granite, in Baltimore County, Ms. Poe was the youngest of five daughters born to Worthy and Bertha Poe. Her family moved to Laurel during her childhood. She attended a one-room school, Edgewood, on Gunpowder Road, where there were 20 students in grades one through seven. Ms. Poe graduated from Laurel High in June 1931 at the age of 15. She landed a job as legal secretary for Bowie McCeney's father, George McCeney, and left in 1936 to attend law school.

During her entire 41-year newspaper career that involved putting out 2,132 editions of The News Leader, she worked at 357 Main St., the same address where she first started working for the McCeneys.

For many years, she lived at her family's home at 708 Montgomery St., before moving to a home on Briarcroft Lane. When she retired in 1980, she moved to her current home in Ashton.

Laurel resident C. Philip Nichols Jr., a retired Prince George's Circuit Court judge, remembers an encounter with Ms. Poe during his childhood. "As a child and next-door neighbor, I pulled up her prize-winning tulips, put them in a bouquet and knocked on her door," Nichols said. "She was nice enough to only turn me over to my father for punishment instead of handling it herself, which under the rules at the time would have been fine. She also did not carry a grudge since she was nice enough to sign my application to practice law 20 years later."

Nichols said Ms. Poe was, "in every sense of the word, a modern-day woman. She went to law school before it was widely accepted and became a female newspaper editor long before that was routine. She knew her people and she understood the rules of good journalism. We all benefited from her devotion to her profession."

Ms. Poe's retirement years were filled with traveling to Europe, the Southwest, Alaska and other places. She was frequently asked to deliver speeches, and joined the Captain John Chapter of the Maryland Questers, a group devoted to the preservation and restoration of existing landmarks and the acquisition of antiques.

She was a charter member of the Laurel Historical Society and Laurel Museum, and at the Historical Society's 2004 gala she was honored for her contributions to the Laurel community. In 1970 she was editor of the community history booklet celebrating Laurel's centennial. The electric typewriter that she used in her 357 Main St. office and in her home for decades is on display in the Laurel Museum. She never joined the technology age nor used a computer or smartphone.

Ms. Poe was a devoted member of First United Methodist Church of Laurel since 1925. On her 99th birthday, the Poe Chapel and a commissioned stained glass window depicting the 23 Psalm were dedicated at the church.

Since 1980, she has endowed a scholarship fund at the University of Maryland's College of Journalism to "assure the future strength and vigor of the free press at all levels."

She received many honors, award and mementos, which she displayed proudly in her home.

In a 2015 article in the Laurel Leader on the occasion of her 100th birthday, Poe said hers has been “a good life and a good livelihood.” She wrote in her 2004 autobiography: “What a wonderful life, I have had,” and in the autobiography credits others, not herself, for her many achievements and successes.

Although she never married or had children, Ms. Poe was very close with her three nieces and their children and grandchildren. Last week, children from the neighborhood visited Ms. Poe and sang for her.

She is survived by her nieces Jacqueline King Ryder (John) and Joanne King Rodgers; 10 great nieces and nephews, Vicci Rodgers, David Rodgers, Lisa Kuehl, Dan Rodgers and Amy Salmon; Michael Ryder, Craig Ryder and Tom Ryder; Jennifer Burk and Rebecca Stewart; and more than 25 great-grandnieces, great-grandnephews and great-great-grandnieces and grandnephews.

She was preceded in death by her parents, Worthy and Bertha Poe; her sisters, Verna Poe, Myrtle Donaldson, Margaret Vogts and Ruby King; and her niece, Joyce Ann Donaldson Burk.

A celebration of life service will be held Aug. 12 at 11 a.m. at First United Methodist Church of Laurel, followed by a reception at the church hall. Interment is private.

Memorial donations can be made to the [Poe Endowment Fund](#): First United Methodist Church of Laurel.

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