

Adelaide Cummings, Poet Laureate of Falmouth

by Leonard Miele

On Saturday, June 2, 2012, just four days before her 98th birthday, Adelaide Cummings was named Poet Laureate of Falmouth, in recognition of her writing skills, especially her humorous, yet poignant poetry. The Falmouth community gave this honor to a remarkable woman, the kind of woman that most people meet only once in a lifetime.

The venerable Adelaide, an experienced Cape Cod sailor and a New England grande dame at heart, began life as a southern girl in Memphis, Tennessee, on June 6, 1914. Although she left Memphis 81 years ago, she still has a distinct southern drawl when she reads her poetry aloud and shares stories about her fascinating life. As she explains it, "I still have a little south in my mouth."

Adelaide grew up in a privileged household in a south that does not exist anymore.

Her father was Harry B. Anderson, a federal judge for the Western District of Tennessee, who was able to provide his family with domestic help, including a cook, a houseboy, and a French governess. Adelaide recalls that the houseboy always called her father Mr. Justice Your Honor Colonel Sir. She also recalls that southern ladies like her mother, Martha

Crook Anderson, never went into the kitchen, noting that her mother couldn't even boil an egg. What was important to the Andersons, however, was education and the love of adventure that comes with traveling around the world.

When Adelaide was twelve years old, she and her three brothers went to Paris, France, with their governess, Mademoiselle Berthet. It is amazing that after 87 years, Adelaide remembers that they stayed in the top floor suite of the hotel L'Abbe au Boire. Since Mademoiselle Berthet never learned to speak English while she worked for the Andersons, Adelaide and her family learned to speak French during the eight years she worked for them. According to Adelaide, even the help at home in Memphis used fractured French to communicate with Mademoiselle Berthet. While on



Adelaide at 18. Courtesy Adelaide Cummings

this trip to Paris, Adelaide experienced one of the most memorable events of her life. On May 21, 1927, Adelaide went along with her twin brother, Joe, and his Boy Scout troop to watch the landing of Charles Lindbergh at Le Bourget Field after his solo flight across the Atlantic. Standing within ten feet of this American hero, she remembers how

handsome, yet bewildered, after 55 hours without sleep, he appeared as hundreds of photographers rushed across the field to take his picture.

When Adelaide was only sixteen, she entered Radcliffe College where she developed her love of words and writing. Before she graduated in 1934 with an A. B. in English, she and her mother took a trip to the desert kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This adventure was the inspiration for Adelaide's first published article in *Town and Country Magazine*. Adelaide then realized she wanted to pursue a writing career and moved to New York City to work for *Life Magazine* as a writer and photographer. At the age of twenty, she was working with such famous people as Alfred Eisenstadt, one of the 20th century's greatest iconic photographers.

During the week of her 21st birthday, Adelaide went to West Point to attend her brother Joe's graduation from the military academy. General William Durward Connor, Superintendent of the academy, had married a Memphis girl who had gone to kindergarten and dancing school with Adelaide's father. The General invited Adelaide and Joe to have lunch at his home after the graduation ceremonies. This was another memorable event for Adelaide, Secretary of State and Mrs. Cordell Hull and President Franklin Roosevelt and his wife Eleanor. Adelaide admits she was speechless. She recalls, "We were overawed by the President. We just sat there."

Working for *Life Magazine* gave Adelaide a front row seat to history during the 1930s. She was assigned to write such diverse stories as John L. Lewis and the coal strikes, the birth of the Dionne quintuplets, and the opening of "The Women," a play by Clair Boothe Luce. Perhaps the most unforgettable story she ever covered was on May 6, 1937, when Adelaide, on the field at Lakehurst, New Jersey, witnessed the tragic destruction of the German airship Hindenburg. Another memorable

trip that Adelaide took with her mother was a visit to see her brother Joe who was stationed in the Philippines. As destiny would have it, Adelaide would encounter another famous person. On the three-week voyage crossing the Pacific, she played ping pong almost daily with John Foster Dulles, who was on a diplomatic mission for President Roosevelt. On the same trip, while Adelaide and her mother were staying at the prestigious Cathay Hotel in Shanghai, Chinese Nationalist planes accidentally blew up a wing of the hotel. Adelaide immediately wrote a first-hand account of the death and destruction and sent the story and photographs to *Life Magazine* in New York, by one of the early transpacific/transcontinental flights.

Another exciting adventure in Adelaide's life was the trip she took to interview the Maharajah of Jaipur, who was anxious to have a story about his polo ponies in an American magazine. Adelaide, again accompanied by her mother, was taken to the Maharajah's palace in a chauffeured Rolls Royce and treated like American royalty. During their stay, they went on a tiger hunt, were entertained on a houseboat in Kashmir, and went on a twelve-day journey into the Himalayas. They traveled on mules and slept in tents adorned with oriental rugs and lotus napkins.

Adelaide's career as a journalist reached a peak in the early 1950s when she was able to break through the glass ceiling and become Editor-in-Chief of *Child Life Magazine* for 13 years. Even though she had three children under 10 years old, she successfully managed her editorial duties as well as her responsibilities as a wife and mother. She also worked for *The National Observer* for three years, writing an award-winning column called "Zoo's Who" in which she used animals to satirize the human foibles of men and women. When Representative Wilbur Mills had an infamous dalliance with Fanne Foxe, the stripper who jumped into the tidal basin in

Washington, D.C. in 1974, Adelaide wrote a column titled "The Wolf" in which a character called Wilbur the Wolf "brightened the news, with his broads and his booze."

Beyond her journalism career, Adelaide has a lifelong passion for tennis. In her 80s she ranked high in her age group. Adelaide and her partner, Dorothy Mooney, were the USTA number three national womens doubles team. Adelaide was the number five national singles player. She has also won three gold medals and one silver medal playing



Adelaide as we know her today. Photo by Leonard Miele

in the senior Olympics. And when she was ninety, she won a mixed-doubles match with her friend Charlie Huestis.

This unbridled energy and enthusiasm for life that is reflected in the poetry that Adelaide began writing when she was eighty-nine years old. In the succeeding five years she wrote five more poetry books with such titles as *Reprise*, *Curtain Call*, and *Finale*. Her latest volume of poetry, *Encore*, was published and distributed on the day she was named Poet Laureate of Falmouth.

Katharine Lee Bates, author of "America the Beautiful," and the most famous native of Falmouth once said, "My poems are my biography." Like Katharine Lee Bates, Adelaide has written:

What essence I possess is caught
In verses, where I hone my thought.
Please, (should you care to take time,)
Piece me together via my rhyme!

Through Adelaide's poetry, the real woman behind her prolific pen is revealed. She explains:

I'm an old fashioned poet
Who commits a dreadful crime
I continue writing verses
That I'm bold enough to rhyme.
My poems are very simple
Free of exalted phrase
What they express is love of life
Revealed in countless ways.

This love of life is a theme that appears in all her poetry books. She is an optimist about life and embraces every moment of it. As she says in her poem "Assessment":

When you look at me you'll never see
A stultified old age.
I've tackled everything full force,
Charged each hill and dale.
The weather's not always been fair,
I've had my share of gale,
But I've tasted far more joy than tears,
I've loved with all my heart,
And opulent have been Life's gifts,
Mine have topped the chart.

Perhaps the poem that best captures Adelaide Cummings' optimism and *joie de vivre* is her poem "Resolve." Even though she turned 100 years old on June 6, she still sees the world through rose-colored glasses with an energy and youthfulness that many people can only envy. She says:

With so many long years granted
Do I dare to ask for more?
My hopes and dreams are slanted
Toward wishes by the score,
For I have flowers unplanted,
Journeys yet in store,
Lovely poems still unwrit,
And lilting songs to sing.
My bones may know it's winter,
But in my heart it's spring!

About the Author

Leonard Miele was an English major at college, obtaining a Masters degree from Northeastern University. Before retiring to Cape Cod, he taught English in the Brockton MA school system for thirty years. Along with writing articles about Cape Cod history in local newspapers and journals, he is the author of *Voice of the Tide: The Cape Cod Years of Katharine Lee Bates*. He is a past president of the Friends of the Falmouth Public Library and the current president of the Davisville Civic Association. Leonard resides in Falmouth with his wife Stephanie, a vocalist and piano technician.