

Siuslaw News
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Opinion

EXTRAORDINARY PEOPLE

CATHERINE J. ROURKE
 For the Siuslaw News

Maude Brunette



Life's exhilarating waltz began nearly a century ago for Maude Brunette. The spry adventurer recalls twirling around her parents' ballroom dancing studio at age 3 in Liverpool, England, during the Roaring Twenties. That same year she learned to knit, followed by reading at age 4.

"TV didn't exist, so we focused on books, sports and crafts," she said. "Boys also learned to knit because it enhances manual dexterity. Crafts engage your mind and require skill."

Maude fondly reminisces on those earlier years "focused on family instead of gadgetry."

"Children didn't have adult headaches and complex toys like they do today," she said. "Technology is a good thing but so is making things with your own hands. There's nothing like the satisfaction of knitting a sweater."

By age 5, Maude had already devoured "Gulliver's Travels." Now, 88 years later, the native Brit remains a voracious reader with travel tales of her own.

"Reading was and still is the joy of my life," she said. "But my real idea of fun is

going to Paris for New Year's, roaming through book shops on the Left Bank or

riding Arabian stallions across the Moroccan desert. I also enjoy hopping on local buses in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico; staying in youth hostels in Wiesbaden, Germany; and touring Portugal on foot for a month.

"My mother gave me the self-confidence that I could do anything, go anywhere and be whatever I wanted."

—MAUDE BRUNETTE

Or the joy of taking a pot of tea in the English countryside."

Maude's list of intriguing experiences includes studying Nigerian art at Dartmouth, attending six community colleges, riding show horses around the world and immersing in art history for six months in Florence, Italy. The enterprising powerhouse has also run airports, tended bar, designed her own clothing line and launched her own book-keeping service.

"My mother gave me the self-confidence that I could do anything, go anywhere and be whatever I wanted," she said. "I always believed in keeping active and learning new things. My education never stops."

Her education was disrupted, however, at age 16 when World War II broke, dramatically changing the lives of her family. That's when another kind of education began.

"As a young girl, I saw how war brings people together and tears them apart," she said. "It exposes human kindness in the face of calamity."

Maude remembers the first air raids in the spring of 1940 as Britain evacuated children to rural areas. Her younger sister was sent to live with a relative in Canada but her ship was torpedoed. Devastated by the loss, Maude remained the only sibling at home as her brothers went off to war.

"We spent the nights in an air raid shelter sitting in a big armchair under the stairs listening to the sirens," she said. Maude tuned out the bombers flying in every 20 minutes by reading "Gone with the Wind."

Then she went to live with an aunt near Wales so she "could sleep in a bed instead of a chair." At age 18, she joined the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF).

"The Royal Air Force needed young women with good math and science skills to serve as radar operators and map the bombers. I said, 'That's me! This is what I can do.'"

Maude describes how it took "thousands of people" to operate the radar stations positioned every 25 miles along the British coast. Stationed as a radar operator in Devon and Cornwall in southwest England, she served in the WAAF from 1941 to 1944.

"My job consisted of tracking radar lines, discerning the number of planes and their direction, calculating their height and distance," she said. "We had hundreds of people tracking planes within a 200-mile radius. We shared a great sense of pride and a wonderful camaraderie."

According to Maude, England survived the Battle of Britain due to this strategic communications system.

"We knew where every plane was in the sky at any given time," she said. "But it meant working all kinds of shifts. We were always in a daze."

It was during one of those shifts that Maude met an American electronic technician sent to her station. She and Bill Brunette were married shortly after and went to his home in California when the war ended.

"Moving to Hollywood felt like going to Mars," she said. "It was a reverse culture shock."

Bill's career in the Department of Defense took the Brunettes all over the globe, from Paris and Germany



Maude Brunette now (above) and in her Women's Auxiliary Air Force uniform in 1941 at age 18 (left)

PHOTO BY CATHERINE ROURKE



COURTESY PHOTO

to Morocco, where Maude learned to ride Arabian stallions while raising her two children.

"Riding became the family pastime," she said.

The Brunettes lived in Dallas in the '60s and Maude joined the spectators watching the Kennedy motorcade in 1963.

"I saw JFK just two minutes before he was shot," she said. "I'll never forget it."

Bill passed away suddenly while they were stationed in Arizona in the '70s. As a woman who never looked back, Maude focused on her strength instead of her grief. She ran a private airport in Tucson with 110 hangars and then worked as a live model at the Dartmouth art school.

"The hardest job of all in life is to remain perfectly still," she said.

One other thing brought the unstoppable Maude to a halt: discov-

ering Florence on a road trip in 1989.

"The moment I arrived here I knew this was it," she said.

Maude purchased a historic home in Old Town and dropped anchor, creating a clothing line of tweed and Scotch plaid capes, jackets and shawls crafted from Pendleton wool.

Maude's sparkling eyes and serene smile remain unchanged from her WAAF portrait at age 18.

"I've had a fabulous and fascinating life," she said. "But family is what matters most. Stay active, do what you love and appreciate life."

Catherine J. Rourke is an award-winning writer, journalist and book editor who teaches creative writing at the Florence Regional Arts Alliance. She may be contacted at CJReditor@gmail.com.

LETTERS

Civics with a French accent

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof. ..."

This First Amendment guarantee of religious freedom takes organized religion out of government and government out of an individual's religious practice. Nevertheless, the primary campaigns in Iowa and South Carolina suggest that religious conservatives have a disproportionate control over the Republican process of nominating the head of our government.

While they are only 25 percent of GOP-primary voters in New Hampshire, evangelicals are estimated to be over 65 percent of the GOP-primary voters in South Carolina and were over 60 percent in Iowa.

The Pew Research Center has found that there is a growing public uneasiness with this mixing of religion and politics. The number of people saying there has been too much religious talk by political leaders stands at an all-time high since Pew began asking the question more than a decade ago. Nearly 40 percent say there has been too much expression of religious faith and prayer from political leaders (30 percent say there has been too little).

In France, laïcité, the notion of separation of

church and state, goes a step further than the First Amendment. The French look to shut religion and its sway over French politics and policy entirely out of the public arena.

Laïcité arises out of a centuries-long domination of the Catholic Church that left post-revolution French republicanism suspicious of any expression of faith in the political or governmental spheres. No matter how benign, such speech is seen as potentially exclusionary to people of one denomination or another and inherently exclusionary to people of no faith.

As former Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun noted, "A government cannot be premised on the belief that all persons are created equal when it asserts that God prefers some."

Laïcité's solution is to exclude religious language from all such speech in the public sphere. Laïcité says nothing about religious belief in the

private sphere. It does not attempt to define common secular values. Rather, it would have French citizenship defined without reference or regard to ethnic, racial or cultural identities or sectarian affiliations.

In America, rather than abstaining from religious speech as prescribed by laïcité, lacing primary campaigns with sectarian religious invocations has become de rigeur. Doing so serves to narrow the eventual choices of the greater, non-sectarian electorate not targeted by the candidates. Of course, prohibiting religious language in the public sphere would run smack up against the First Amendment's freedom of speech guarantee.

Nevertheless, James Madison, "Father of the Constitution" and author of the First Amendment, taught that "religion and government will both exist in greater purity, the less they are mixed together."

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR POLICY

The Siuslaw News welcomes letters to the editor concerning issues affecting the Florence area and Lane County. Emailed letters are preferred. Handwritten or typed letters must be signed. All letters should be limited to about 300 words and must include the writer's full name, address and phone number for verification. Letters are subject to editing for length, grammar and clarity. Publication of any letter is not guaranteed and depends on space available and the volume of letters received. Libelous and anonymous letters as well as poetry will not be published. All submissions become the property of Siuslaw News and will not be returned.

Write to: Editor@TheSiuslawNews.com

Perhaps Madison believed that mixing religion into campaigning would be equated in the public's mind with the profane divisiveness it could engender. Then, politicians might be discouraged from equating it with votes. A lesson and a hope those aspiring to high office would serve us well to learn.

Arnold Buchman
 Florence

Thanks for history lessons

I attended the free talk that Mike Allan gave titled, "A Union Soldier's Story." Mike explained the history of U.S. flags and Civil War prisons. It was a very nice slideshow and wonderful explanation of the conditions Civil War prisoners had to live in.

Mike gave an interesting look into the Civil War and even had a medal to share. He had lots of tips to share on finding Civil War records. He volunteers at the library to help others and is a member of the Siuslaw Genealogy Society.

This was the second talk on Civil War — January's talk was given by JoAnn Garlington and titled, "Prisoners of War — A Confederate Soldier's Story." JoAnn was enthralling.

My thanks to both of these people.
 Pat Ronney
 Florence

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