

FREE ACRES REVIEW



90th Anniversary Edition

Mark Your Calendars

JULY 1ST & 2ND ARE DAYS
OF FREE ACRES
FESTIVITIES &
HOMECOMING!

STATISTICS

MAY 1998 — FEBRUARY 2000

by Betty Miles, Town Clerk

BIRTHS

06/25/98

Katelyn Marie Comerford, daughter of
Jim & Dawn Comerford

09/24/98

Greta Marie Fergus, daughter of Rich
& Terri Fergus

01/13/99

Daniel Kramer, son of Bob & Heidi
Kramer

04/11/99

Taityana, foster child of Melissa Faitout
& Henry Kita

05/15/99

Madeline Pennington, daughter of Sarah
& Russell Pennington

10/30/99

Rose Mary Lyon Malanga, daughter of
Bob & Kathy Malanga

11/22/99

Rachel Anne Tarmy, daughter of Mark &
Maura Tarmy, granddaughter of Barry &
Marianne Tarmy

11/29/99

Riley Maj Kaufman, daughter of Bill &
Kelly Kaufman

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Photo by Consuelo Kanaga, 1941

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EMEMBERING OLD FRIENDS

FROM SYLVIA HEERENS

During the past year, Free Acres lost a remarkable leaseholder, Zelda Benjamin, who had lived here over 50 years. She was 100 years old when she died; but that was by far not the only factor that made her remarkable. Until her death her positive attitude and interesting personality was an inspiration for everyone who knew her.

Her close friend, Joan Facey, at her memorial on 10/15/99, spoke the following words:
"This is not a funeral. This is a celebration of one special life, and one special lady!"

And this is a brief celebration, the formal one. Later when it is easier, we are going to have a real celebration, a big one, and a real send off. We have videos and thoughts of so many and we will do it all in celebration.

Everyone has one Mother. I have been blessed with two: My birth mother and my Mother's dear friend, Zel.

This is also a celebration because of what Zel thought about death. She said that she had a good life and a full life. That she was not afraid of death, that she was at peace and happy. Several times in the last weeks, I entered her room where she was lying with her eyes closed and with a smile. I said, "Zel, you seem happy." She answered firmly, "I am." She was.

She thought she had a good life — how amazing when you consider her life. She was born in Rumania on December 24, 1898. Before she was eight years old, the family had to flee for their lives to escape a pogrom. She remembered it vividly, because she was given one of the infant twins to carry. As they made their way by foot, the child died. They were forced to leave the child beside the road with a candle burning at its head. They did not dare to take the time to bury the child. Zel only shared

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Laurel Hessing
Sylvia Heerens
Betty Miles
Anne Damianos

Editor
Contributing Editor
Contributing Editor
Design & Production

this memory with me in recent years. I cannot imagine the emotional trauma this must have been for a child of less than eight years. The family planned to immigrate to America but by the time they got to Montreal Quebec, the Mother was sick and could go no further.

Things were hard. Zel told me of taking a few pennies, buying newspapers for a penny and selling them for two pennies, and that the few pennies made a difference to the family budget. Before she was through she had her two sisters selling newspapers on the street and her Mother stationed at a busy intersection. She was forced to leave school at age 12 to help her father in his tailoring shop. (She sewed until her eyesight failed.) Tailoring work was often taken home to be completed overnight by her Mother and sisters. Life was a struggle.

Zel's escape became participation in the Jewish theater in Montreal. When we cleaned the attic room to prepare a place for future live-in, I came across the notices and reviews for her performances. They were very good. So where would an aspiring actress go but to New York City? After a visit to an uncle in NYC in 1917, she moved there in the early 1920's.

In NYC she won a scholarship to one of the two Russian acting schools. She was doing very well in her chosen art. Then she met Gershon. After they got together and she was struggling to play summer stock and keep a household, she decided that there could not be two artists in a family. At about that time she was offered a position teaching at the Tamara Dakahonova School. She accepted and taught there for almost forty years.

During the 1920's and through the depression, she said that for many years breakfast and lunch were a cigarette and a cup of black coffee. They lived in a tenement on the site now occupied by Lincoln Center. She said that whenever there was the smell of food cooking, all the tenants

would gravitate to the apartment with the food and it would be shared.

In 1936, they bought the two-room "shack" (that is what she called it) in Free Acres. My earliest memories of Zel go back to when I was five years old (this is the thread that ties back to the emotional trauma of the pogrom). My earliest memories are of a woman who, whenever persecution of the Jews, the holocaust, the Nazis or persecution of any kind were mentioned, would have tears streaming down her face. It made a strong impression on me for children do not usually see adults distraught.

It was not until 1985 when Gershon died that Zelda, for the first time in her life, had time for herself. Then she blossomed in her own right. She worked on herself. (Today the analysts would say processed her emotions) and finally, began to value herself. Fairly recently, within the last few years, we sat down in the little kitchen to eat on a Friday night. I had just arrived after a busy week of work, lugging my suitcase and tired. Zel said, "We all carry baggage." My thought was, of course, I had just lugged that bag from Newark airport. She said "I mean emotional baggage and I am not going to carry mine anymore." It is not only amazing that a 97 year old would think that, but she did it! From that time on, she could discuss prejudice and persecution without dissolving into tears. She had come to emotional terms with the experience of her early childhood. May we all do so well at 97.



Zelda Benjamin as photographed by the Star-Ledger, 1999

In 1991 when I was forced to move to Atlanta due to a corporate relocation, I invited Zel to move with me. She did drive down with me, which was no small effort for her at 92. She later told me the reason that she drove with me was that she could not bear the thought of my entering an empty new house by myself. What a lady! She stayed for two weeks and then returned home to the comfortable home she had created from the "shack."

Zelda valued her husband's paintings, people and, especially, her friends. If she could speak to you today, she would express her love and gratitude.



AN ESSAY ABOUT FRANK STEPHENS

Our meeting hall in the Free Acres Farmhouse was long ago named Frank Stephens Hall. I thought it important to know just whom our meeting hall was named after. Among the Eberlein letters Sylvia and I read in order to create Treasures of the Little Cabin, we found letters from Arden and Frank Stephens was mentioned often in them. I had included some material about Frank Stephens in the first part of my book entitled Annotated Anthology of Free Acres Writing. I knew that Frank Stephens was a close friend of Bolton Hall, the founder of Free Acres and Will Price, an early pioneer. However, to learn more about Frank Stephens and the Stephens family, I asked Caroline Stephens Holt, Frank Stephen's granddaughter, to write an essay about him. Caroline lives not far from Free Acres, in Westfield. Here is her essay:

Frank Stephens was born in Rahway, New Jersey on December 28th, 1859. His full name was George Francis Stephens, but he was known as Patro by most of us who knew and loved him. A handsome man with a rugged, chiseled face, he radiated enthusiasm, charm, and boundless energy in everything he did. Making life-long friends, and sometimes enemies, wherever he went, he was a man of high ideals with true dedication to the various causes he espoused. He was a well-known sculptor, a prominent creator of wrought iron works, a poet, a musician, an Anglophile, a Shakespearian actor who also performed many roles in Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, a promoter of the use of the universal language Esperanto, a pacifist, and an ardent crusader for human and animal rights.

He was the second of three sons and one daughter born to Henry L. Stephens, well known magazine illustrator and caricaturist for publications of Frank Leslie and the Harper Brothers. On his mother's side, he was descended from Colonel Lewis Nicola, who, in Revolutionary times, served as Washington's personal aide. Entering Rutgers at the age of sixteen, he intended to enter the ministry eventually. However, at the beginning of his sophomore year, as a result of the strenuous demands of his inter-collegiate Greek studies, his eyesight was so far gone as to necessitate surgery, which ended his college career. Depressed over this set back, he was sent by his father to Philadelphia for studies at the Academy of Fine Arts under Schuessle, the painter, and the sculptor, Joseph Baillie. While there, he met and fell in love with a sister of Thomas Eakins. His fiancée died unexpectedly before the couple married. Stephen's father died about the same time. After these two overwhelming sorrows, he fell in love with his former fiancée's young, motherless sister, Caroline Eakins. The two became engaged, married, and later became the parents of three children: a daughter, Margaret, and two sons, Donald and Roger. Margaret subsequently married Harold Ware. They had two children, a son Robin and a daughter, Nancy, now

deceased. The elder son, Donald, and his wife, Ingeborg, produced two daughters, Hope and Peggy. Hope is married to Caleb Foote. Peggy and her husband, Lew Aumack, now live in Arden. Roger and his wife, Alice (nee Thornall), had two children, Caroline, now Caroline S. Holt, and Roger Thornall Stephens who died in 12922 at the age of two and a half. Shortly after Roger Stephen's birth, tragedy struck again when the baby's mother, Caroline Eakins Stephens, passed away.



The Farmhouse today.

Some time before, in 1896, Frank Stephens had learned of Henry George, then a candidate for mayor of New York City. Reading George's "Progress and Poverty", he recognized a kindred soul who shared his own concerns for the illnesses of the society around him. In his own words, he said, "with the first reading of this book, I knew I had found the answer to the problems which had perplexed me and haunted me all my life." With the passing of his wife, he was further discouraged, feeling that his hopes of improving the social ills he deplored were never going to be achieved. In near desperation,

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