



Porch Talk

by Marjory Potts

Conversations With...

Eleanor Pearlson

*Principal and Owner of Tea Lane Associates,
Eleanor Pearlson, like most Islanders,
has worn many hats.*

Eleanor Pearlson, at 80 something, is a larger than life personality. Many contradictory things have been said about her, most of them true. She's known equally for her generosity and her strong will, her enthusiasm and her temper, her warmth and her keen business sense. She might greet you or grill you, but chances are, if you need help with something, she's got the answer. Whether it's finding a job, the perfect property or starting a business, Eleanor is in the know. And, she doesn't hesitate to offer her advice with or without a request.

But the matriarch of Tea Lane Associates wasn't always so self-assured. "I was born at 1195 Cambridge St., Cambridge," Eleanor recalls, "to first generation parents who slaved away. They had a 24 hour grocery store, open seven days. It was downstairs, we lived upstairs." It was grim. She helped out growing up, but it wasn't where she wanted to be. From early on, she was interested in progressive causes and despite her family's poverty and the depression of the 1930's, she managed to go to Boston University, graduating in 1942 with a degree in economics.

She didn't have to go far to look for a job; it was World War II.

"I wanted to escape the poverty of the slum area, so I went down to Causeway St. where the Navy was recruiting. I was one of the first WAVES they took."

The Navy sent her to Smith College for training, which she calls the "best time of my life. The other women there had come from business, they were high powered,

many in their late thirties, "and here I was in my early twenties. I was a babe, wet behind the ears." (She believes that despite her college degree, impressive for a woman at that time.)

Smith had a gorgeous campus. It was, dare we say, a luxurious place for a young woman to be, and Eleanor thrived. She graduated from the course a midshipman.

Her first assignment was the Naval Air Base at Newport, another top spot.

"It was beautiful, great, the country club of the East. I had a wonderful time there."

Her next tour was in Hawaii, at the Naval Air Station in Kaneohe. "One of the nicest spots you could ever be in." She decoded messages from war ships in the Pacific. She also remembers becoming head of base entertainment, running the bachelor's officers' quarters. "I was in charge of everything for a thousand naval officers who came back from air duty. Food, music, dancing - parties every night." Even more exciting, the Navy taught her to drive a car. "Where would a poor girl get a car," she says, clearly keen on the opportunities the military gave her. "If there is no war, it's a great training."

Promoted, by the war's end, she was Lieutenant Eleanor Pearlson, Junior Grade.

At the end, she applied to get out.

"Everyone thought I was crazy. I could have gone up in rank, and in pay, but it was time for a new experience."

She has some regrets. "I should have gone into public service, should have been in Washington, in politics."

The military's loss was Manhattan's gain. For the next twenty plus years,



Eleanor Pearlson, at her home in Chilmark. She is always willing to offer her advice and her opinions. . .

Eleanor proceeded to live a thoroughly meaningful life in New York City. Her roles included:

- Member of management of the Mutual Broadcasting System, a radio network with over 500 affiliates including New York's WOR.
- Executive Secretary of The Women's Trade Union League (WTUL), which played a key role in helping to improve conditions for working women in the first half of the twentieth century. Members included Eleanor Roosevelt, and the Dreier sisters Mary and Margaret, aunts to the Dreier family of Seven Gates.
- Director of Women's Operations for the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, a major charitable organization to help European immigrants with 116 affiliates.
- Executive Secretary for Henry Street Settlement which offered community services on the lower East side.

While fundraising and recruiting board members for the Henry Street Settlement, Eleanor met Julie. Julia Sturges came from a cultured, educated family; she was a woman involved in helping children. “Arts for Living” was a program she created at the settlement house. Julie was the perfect board member for a nonprofit.

Perfect until there was a long strike and Eleanor couldn’t cross the line because she was management.

“We were trying to get information for friends on the picket line and Julia, as a board member, was able to smuggle it out to me. We were terrified they’d find us, running around exchanging this information in secret. That was a very scary period of our lives.”

Ultimately the strikers lost. Eleanor recounts that Julia was fired from the board when they found out on whose side she was. Eleanor left as well at the end of 1966.

In June 1967, she and Julia moved to Martha’s Vineyard, bought their first house in Chilmark on Tea Lane and figured establishing a small real estate agency would be a simple and civilized pursuit. Yet, purchasing a large piece of Chilmark property with the goal of sub-dividing turned out to be more daunting than fighting for the rights of women, laborers and the impoverished.

“It was a 30 year struggle”, she says, actually laughing. She wasn’t laughing then.

“I thought this was America, and if you wanted to open up a grocery store you did. But it was not America” in her view. She and Julia felt that people didn’t know how to take them, that they were doing something “that was not average. We were two women in real estate. We didn’t feel welcome.”

The Island was also reeling from a proposal that had been made in the early 70’s by Senator Edward Kennedy to make

Eleanor in St. Maarten, N.A. where she and Julie spent many winter vacations in the late 60’s.



Martha’s Vineyard “Forever Wild”, limiting further development, making the Island a kind of national park. Many believe that the Kennedy proposal led town boards to introduce zoning and to start planning, keeping these decisions from being determined federally.

Into this came Eleanor and Julia with their own plan, possibly the first subdivision, presented in Chilmark, drawn up by experts that they felt were the very best, architects and planners such as James S. Polshek and Peter Hornblower. “These were men of the future, visionaries who believed in cluster housing and the social responsibility of architecture and planning.” It was, she says, very beautiful, allowing for open space, for trails, and a variety of houses on different sized lots. But the town had its concerns about population density. The issues were complicated. It became a legal and financial

nightmare for the Tea Lane women, but they did not retreat.

One positive, and unexpected outcome was the creation of the Land Bank’s Waskosim’s Rock, a large nature and walking preserve, off of North Road. Tea Lane Associates slowly became a successful part of the Island business community. The business grew by word of mouth. Their customers were, Eleanor says, “not always famous people, but nice people.” Many have become friends.

Based first at Beetlebung Corner in Chilmark and then additionally in West Tisbury, Tea Lane presently has 11 associates, some of whom have been there for more than 10 years. They are a talented and diverse group of individuals who meet the challenge of working for a woman who is constantly dreaming up another idea or project, and who always believes that her company can accomplish more. Nine years ago Abby Rabinovitz, Eleanor’s niece, joined the business to assist Eleanor. Another niece, Leslie Pearlson, came to join the business four years ago.

Eleanor Pearlson, turning 85 on June 9th, is indomitable and truly one of a kind. An old leftie, a fighter for social justice, she’s also a free market businesswoman. She thinks the Island has enough open space, but it’s what we do with it that is important. She’s all for affordable housing. She starts talking about creating cluster housing with open space around them, “like in Europe”. She gets excited. Wouldn’t that be the right thing to do?

She loves the game. She won’t stop. She still cares.

Julia Sturges in Manhattan when she was on the board of the Henry Street Settlement, in 1965, before she embarked on their Vineyard adventure.

