

BERNICE MARTIN, 104

Cherishing the Gift of Long Life

*"I always say, if you don't try something,
how do you know if you don't like it?"*

By DIANE MELTON

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL FIEDLER

“And when you get the chance to sit it out or dance, I hope you dance,” croons country singer Lee Ann Womak, in her blockbuster hit song, urging

listeners to cultivate that “sense of wonder.” That outlook has been Bernice Martin’s lifelong credo, and, she says, it’s how she brought up her own children. As she walks through the cheerful corridors of the McLean Foundation in Simsbury, where she resides, greeting friends and staff members, the centenarian is still a powerhouse of adventure: “I always say, if you don’t try something, how do you know if you don’t like it?”

It’s not often one gets to chat with someone who has lived over an entire century, and one hopes to learn from them, to glean their wisdom, tickle their memories. This piece of advice from Martin resonates: embrace life. She never wanted to miss an opportunity, because, she insists, she never wanted to ask herself, “Why didn’t I do that when I had the chance? I took every opportunity there was because I didn’t want to hear someone else say something was interesting!” And that is just what this gentle, yet spry woman has done to propel her into a new millennium. Yet, while Martin has always been eager to try new things, has traveled the world, and is forward thinking, she has her roots firmly planted in Connecticut and is filled with a treasure chest of memories from days long gone by in the Nutmeg State.

Chatting in her charmingly decorated room with a pink flowered handmade quilt and antique desk, she recollects with fondness growing up in West Simsbury on her aunt and uncle’s farm. “Everybody lived

Continued on Page 20



CHERISHING LONG LIFE

Continued from Page 18

on a farm then," she recalls. "Everyone had a lot of land – as far as one could see. Down across the road – of course it was a dirt road – there was a meadow where they used to let the cows out to graze the green grass. That's how we got our milk."

Martin was born on December 6, 1905, the younger of two daughters. When she was 6, her mother died of pneumonia, and her Aunt Anna and Uncle Thomas Clark, unable to have their own children, graciously took Martin and her sister into their home.

Martin's childhood was a happy one. Christmastime was particularly joyful, and her vivid descriptions conjure a Norman Rockwell setting – the quintessential country Christmas of fire-lit hearths and horse-drawn sleighs. Martin remembers the annual holiday traditions, imprinted in her mind like the pages of a cherished picture book. She remembers sneaking halfway down the stairs on Christmas morning, the aroma of molasses and ginger cookies permeating the home. But her aunt deterred her: she and her sister could not come down until breakfast time.

Breakfast on Christmas morning was plentiful. The oil-lit kitchen would have already been warmed by the wood-burning stove – the fire having been built by the hired man at 5:00 a.m. Fresh eggs were collected from the farm, and bacon would be a special treat. There was always a teakettle steaming, Martin recalls, because "there were no hot water faucets in those days." Hard to imagine now – a water pump, the kettle boiling continuously on the stove, the pail with a dipper, a fresh pitcher of water always standing on the shelf above the sink.

Martin is animated as she re-envision her Christmases past. Her vibrant, azure eyes are penetrating as she culls from her reservoir of memories. Her presents would be handmade and always included a new party dress (although most of her clothes were hand-me-downs from her sister), and perhaps a hand-sewn dress for one of her dolls.

Christmas morning was a solemn time as well. No one was allowed to make a peep during prayers: "We would have prayers first thing in the morning. We would sit in a circle. We had to sit very still. You had to pay attention."

As we talk, Martin sits comfortably on the seat of her "Swedish walker" – a high-tech device that functions triply as a seat, four-wheel walker and carryall basket. She is wearing a pale aqua pants suit that complements her eyes and soft silvery gray hair.

Lunchtime is approaching and Martin has welcomed me to join her in the tasteful dining room of the Robinson, McLean's assisted living facility. As we walk down the hall, she struts just ahead, leading the way. At her full height, Martin is petite, yet compact and energy-packed. She is remarkably sturdy and self-sufficient. I ask her how she has managed to stay so fit. She admits to casual smoking as a young woman, because "it was fashionable then." But she has exercised regularly throughout life, gardened abundantly – she is a master gardener – and as she comments: "I haven't abused my life, let's say that. My aunt would say, 'You only have one life to live. Take care of it.'"

Over lunch in the stately dining room, we continue to reminisce about her childhood Christmases. All decorations

Continued on next page

Love Horses?

So do we. At Connecticut Trailers, we know that choosing the right trailer is about safety, reliability and comfort. Let us help you find a trailer that suits your horse and your lifestyle.

We build trailers for a custom fit and ship nationwide. Browse our lot where we stock the largest selection of horse trailers in the area or visit us online.

Financing available and registrations done on site.



7 Bolton Center Road
Rt 85 & Rt 6, Bolton, CT
Toll-Free: 877-690-0163
www.cttrailers.com

Need Service or Parts? Visit our full-service parts and repair facility. We perform DOT inspections and offer free pick-up and delivery within 25 miles.

EXISS
THE MARK OF EXCELLENCE

MILEY
A Legend Returns

SOONER
PREMIUM CUSTOM TRAILERS

Commercial customers take advantage of year-end savings and full tax deduction. Visit us before December 31, 2009!

CHERISHING LONG LIFE

Continued from previous page

were homemade from colorful scraps of paper that were saved throughout the year and fashioned into paper chains. There was no electricity in her West Simsbury homestead in the early 1900's ("only Mr. Raleigh in Simsbury had electricity; he had the latest of everything"), so they popped corn on a pan on the wood-burning stove to decorate the tree. The tree itself, Martin recalls, was a "live" one meticulously chosen from land owned by her Uncle George in Simsbury.

In the afternoon, a sleigh ride across the snow-driven meadows was *de rigueur*. Bundled up against the wintry chill, the girls would climb into the wooden sleigh. A woolen blanket was thrown over the horse, and bells would ring as they approached neighbors' houses with good tidings. Following, there was always a festive holiday dinner, prepared from the bounty of the farm. Martin remembers the raucous cries of a live chicken destined for the dinner table – her uncle would chop off its head in the morning and her aunt would roast and serve it with side dishes made from the cornucopia of crops preserved in the family root cellar – potatoes, turnips, parsnips, onions and squash.

Such self-sufficiency on a farm was unremarkable in those days, but luxuries such as chocolate had to come from "downtown" Simsbury. Her uncle George, the dentist George Butler, would bring peppermint-chocolate treats that were carefully rationed, as well as ice cream for the homemade pies. "We called it 'city' ice cream," Martin remembers. Uncle George would bring these delectables in his automobile — the only one in Simsbury, according to Martin, and she recalls with a

Martin remembers the annual holiday traditions, imprinted in her mind like the pages of a cherished picture book. She remembers sneaking halfway down the stairs on Christmas morning, the aroma of molasses and ginger cookies permeating the home.

chuckle that as kids, she and her sister would scoot up into the "rumble seat," despite her aunt's protestations that they might fall out.

Eventually, Martin moved from the farm in West Simsbury to live with her "city" uncle in order to attend high school in Simsbury. Upon graduation, she attended Bay Path College and worked as a receptionist. She met her husband, Garland

Continued on next page

Cold Weather Wreaks Havoc On Your Doors

We'll repair them quickly, correctly, and affordably.

\$15.00 Off
Genie opener & install or FREE
Second Remote* (\$35.00 Value)

DOUGLAS GARAGE DOOR CENTER
We Open Doors For You
SALES, SERVICE, INSTALLATION

860-528-5228 • 860-525-2737
46 Brewer Street, East Hartford

www.douglasgaragedoor.com

Member ICA, NAHB

LogiPay, STANLEY, Home Depot, LiftMaster

*Offers not valid on prior purchases. One per person. Expires 3/15/10.

If your CHILD is STRUGGLING in school, SUCCESS starts HERE.

When your child isn't getting the grades you think he or she should, call Huntington Learning Center.

Our certified teachers can find out what's holding your child back and create an individualized program of instruction designed to fix the problem.

Just a few hours a week at Huntington can improve your child's learning skills, so your child can overcome frustration with school, as well as develop confidence and motivation.

Call Huntington today. We're nearby and affordable. We know your child can succeed in school, because we know your child *can* learn.

\$50 OFF DIAGNOSTIC TESTING

Huntington LEARNING CENTER 1-800-CAN LEARN

At Simsbury Commons
530 Bushy Hill Road, Simsbury, CT 06070
(860) 408-1686

CHERISHING LONG LIFE

Continued from previous page

Martin, a Brown University graduate and handsome engineer from Maine who came to work for Simsbury's Ensign-Bickford Company. Founded in 1836, the company was then known for manufacturing safety fuses for use in mining. "Everyone worked for Ensign-Bickford back then," Martin says.

The Martins raised two children – son Dale, now deceased, and daughter Diana, who lives in Simsbury, and she has four grandchildren. Martin devoted herself to gardening; she loves roses in particular – "probably because they're the hardest to grow," she says. For years she was an avid member of the Gardening Club in Simsbury, responsible for the flower arrangements at the Eno Memorial Building. And she is known for her green thumb at McLean, where daily she nurtures the plants in the greenhouse. Martin was a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution, having traced her lineage back to a relative, Comfort Clark, who fought in the Revolutionary War. Additionally, she has traveled globally, under the auspices of the Simsbury Arts Council. "There isn't a country I haven't been to," she says.

What does the wise centenarian envision for the future? "I hope the future is more stable," she says. "Maybe things were better back then, but ... You have to change with the times. You can't live in the past." She says she voted for Obama because she "liked what he's accomplished. He doesn't show off. He had to make it on his own." But, she adds with a wink in her tone, "Don't tell any one I voted for a Democrat."

As we finish our dessert, a staff member comes over to tell Martin that her daughter called with the reminder of an

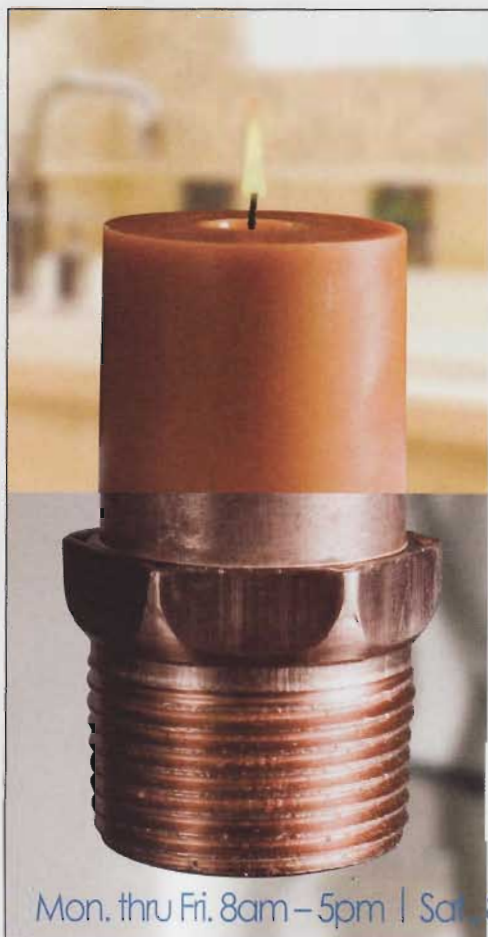
"You have to change with the times. You can't live in the past."

upcoming concert at the First Church of Christ. Martin has been a member of the white clapboard, steeped house of worship on Hopmeadow Road since she was 7 years old, and she has hardly missed a Sunday service. Every year she continues to help decorate the church at Christmastime.

I notice that Martin has salvaged the parsley garnish from her plate. "For the squirrels," she explains. Another resident glides over in her wheelchair and offers Martin more parsley. I contribute mine to the pile.

After a hearty lunch, I thank Martin for her hospitality and for her remembrances of Christmases past and observations present. We stroll through the greenhouse and out into the gardens, the outdoor plantings now withering and bracing for the winter months ahead. Martin drops her parcel of parsley on a small patch of dark earth. "For the squirrels," she smiles, her blue eyes crinkling. ■

Diane Melton is an adjunct professor of English at Central Connecticut State University and freelance writer living in West Hartford.



We'll keep you in your comfort zone.

Nobody knows heating systems like Avon Plumbing & Heating.

In fact we've spent the last 75 years working hard to earn the trust of homeowners, builders and developers throughout the Farmington Valley. Selling and working on everything from high-efficiency European products to warm-floor radiant systems. And when it comes to design and installation at your residence, we're a perfect fit.

Working Showroom | Distinctive Product Line
Full Installations | Service & Repair
Parts Department | 75 Years' Experience

AVON PLUMBING & HEATING
kitchen and bath showroom

Mon. thru Fri. 8am – 5pm | Sat. 8am – 12 noon. | www.AvonPlumbing.com