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Monday, May 19, 2014

FAIRFIELD-SUISUN, CALIFORNIA

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Charlotte Toon: Collector and scholarship worker bee

By Archives

November 18, 2010 | Leave Comment

She served as secretary to six Fairfield-Suisun School District superintendents, then add three more during the next 10 years when she worked as a substitute in retirement.

Charlotte Toon and I met many years ago when I needed someone to type up a grant I wrote for the newly opened Grange Middle School library. We had about two weeks to meet the deadline. With her superb assistance, we received the \$100,000 grant, one of three in the top figures, as I recall, awarded in the state.

Recently, she and her daughter Pam invited members of Beta Psi Delta Kappa Gamma International Sorority for lunch and a tour of her hippo collection. Her collection is well known and has been featured a number of times in newspapers around the county.

Everyone wanted to know how she became known as the Hippo Lady of Fairfield. It all began in 1964, she said, when she worked as a secretary at Anna Kyle Elementary School, where teacher Bernice Nesbitt collected lions and Gertrude Weise collected dragons with wings.

The two teachers attended a conference and were told if you collected an animal, you were in tune with the world and everything would be in your favor. Upon returning, the two insisted that Toon collect an animal.

“It just so happened that I was wearing a hippo pin that day and that started it all,” Toon said.

Today, her collection exceeds 5,000 hippos.

Her son-in-law gave her a real hippo tooth, and her dentist made an X-ray of it. Then there’s the hippo ashtray from the Hippo Restaurant in Paris given to her by her daughter’s friend in Michigan. In 2004, Toon had the opportunity to visit Paris and eat dinner at the restaurant.

On a trip to Russia in 1975, she made friends with a Russian girl who videotaped her tourist group. They exchanged addresses and Toon sent her a T-shirt with a Fairfield logo on it. The young woman wore it when she videotaped other tourist groups. Later, a man from Vallejo asked about the T-shirt, and she sent three little glass hippos to Toon because she couldn’t mail glass from Russia.

“It’s like a trip down memory lane when I look at all the names, dates and places from where they came,” she said.

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Retired teacher Bea Hanna-Royce has logged more than 10,000 miles during the years in her camper from Fairfield to her home state of New England with her co-pilot, a large stuffed hippo named Tuffy. Recently, she donated Tuffy to Toon's collection. Teacher Paul Hackman's young sons carved hippo heads from bars of soap. Today, they are both retired Air Force pilots.

The Toons came to the Fairfield-Suisun Army Air Base in 1946 when housing was difficult to find, so they had to live in Vallejo, where their first daughter Pam was born. Nine months later, they headed to a new assignment at Hickham in Honolulu, where their second daughter Pricilla was born. In 1949, doctors diagnosed Pam as one of the first three cases of polio in the Hawaiian Islands. Son Robert was born at McChord Air Force Base in Washington. Today, there are two granddaughters, two grandsons, five great-granddaughters and one great-grandson.

There were numerous military base assignments and jobs with schools over the years, like the one at Harmon Field in Newfoundland, where she worked as secretary to the principal of the Dependent Overseas High School. Toon worked for the Fairfield-Suisun district for 31 years. They bought a home in Fairfield in 1955 on the last street in town, and she has lived in Fairfield from that time to the present for 53 years.

After retirement, she became much more active in the Assist-A-Grad Scholarship program. She serves on the board of directors, speaks to clubs and other organizations and works hard behind the scenes to prepare for the awards ceremony in May each year. In 1983, her family established a memorial scholarship for daughter Pricilla and to date has awarded 50 scholarships.

Not resting on her laurels, she wrote a Grandmother Remembers booklet in 1983 with a to-be-continued promise. She plans to add more chapters and pictures, and eventually publish it.

Mayrene Bates is a member of the Solano County Board of Education.



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