

At 100, life is never dull for Bea Patchin



"I guess I am a character. I never paid much attention to what people said. I only thought I should please God."

Story and photos by Penny Loeb

Beatrice Patchin can't abide a messy yard. She rises at dawn and often spends the morning pulling weeds, ripping vines out of trees and sweeping the road.

She recently studied the history of China, is recataloguing her button collection, likes opera and horse races and is happy women are wearing pants.

She welcomes visits from family and friends who love to chat and listen to her tales. But she won't let them leave until the next visitor comes.

On Sunday, Sept. 6, nearly 100 of her family and friends helped her celebrate her birthday which was Sept. 8. Beatrice is 100 years old.

"I'm interested in everything. That's what keeps me young. Wrinkles and grey hair are no reason to be old," Miss Patchin said.

"I can't believe I'm 100. I feel just as young. If I get downhearted here, all I have to do is go outdoors, and it soothes me," she said.

"She's Beautiful"

"She's beautiful. I never saw anyone with as sharp a mind," her friend Betty Bradley said.

"For her, life is never dull. Her understanding of nature provides her with a constant source of beauty," wrote her niece Jean Widdicombe in her history of the Patchin family.

"Sometimes she is probably lonely... But her imagination, her world of make believe, and her capacity to pull herself out of the ruts of boredom make her something very special for each of us to have had in our lives," Mrs. Widdicombe, who is now dead, wrote four years ago.

"The Patchins represent a stability, a fixed system of values. It's like looking at the stars in the firmament. Aunt Bea is the same person today she was 45 years ago," Gould Coleman, a great nephew.

Miss Patchin, who is known affectionately as Aunt Bea to family and friends, is the fourth of 10 children of Mary Comesky and Frank Patchin. Paul, 87, who lives in Hyde Park is the only other child still living. Because there was a 26 year spread between Frances, the oldest and Gould, the youngest, there are now many grandchildren and nieces and nephews of many ages.

For all of them, being a Patchin has given them stability and a feeling of being special. The long white house across from the family mill at the end of North Main Street in Pine Plains is where many spent their summers with Aunt Bea, Aunt Agnes and Aunt Mary, all three school teachers who never married.

"The Patchin Protection"

Mrs. Widdicombe remembered the time her son John met a new dog at Aunt Bea's. "It's all right, doggie. I'm Jean Sanford's little boy," he said. "Even the very young knew that if you were a member of the family, you automatically could count on the universal Patchin protection," Mrs. Widdicombe said.

"Aunt Bea has had an effect on all her direct relatives. The key to it all is the house. It's a little scary. When Bea's gone, the whole thing is going to unravel. There will be no common denominator to hold it together. It is probably what is happening to the United States," "Big John" Widdicombe, now in his 40's said at the birthday party.

Miss Patchin describes the Patchin family as "all good,

God fearing people. There's not a black sheep so far, knock on wood, and all teetotalers," she said.

There's even a horse in the book about the history of the Patchins. Dan Patch, a pacer, held the world's record for the mile from 1903 to 1938.

The Patchins came to Pine Plains when Miss Patchin's grandfather Mark came to fix the mill which he later bought. He also built about half the houses in Pine Plains. The mill was later passed on to Miss Patchin's father and finally to her brother Gould. It was shut down about 60 years ago.

Miss Patchin is very glad she grew up in a large family. "There was love, a closeness, a beauty in sharing. It was one for all and all for one. If one got in trouble, they were all there to help. I was grown up before I realized other homes weren't like mine," she said.

Respected Her Mother

She remembers her mother with love and respect. "I loved her, but I knew I had better do right, or else. I never knew what corporal punishment was. I would have rather had 10 thrashings than have my mother tell me what I did wrong," she said.

Independent

Miss Patchin is strong willed, and no one tells her what to do.

"Right was right, and wrong was wrong. If I thought it was right, I did it. My mother was the only one who could change me," she said.

Miss Patchin has been fighting for women's rights since she marched for women's right to vote some 60 years ago.

"I borrowed money to buy clothes downtown (in Suffern) and asked them to give us the vote. I went up to a man and said, 'I teach your child, shouldn't I have a right to vote.' He stamped his feet right there on the street and said 'I'm going to New York City and vote against it.' I was so mad, I worked everyone on the street. When we got the vote, we drove around town and honked our horns in front of the houses of the men who were against us," she recalled.

Like Today's Women

"I like the women today. They look trim, and don't wear too much makeup. My great niece is an executive at Atlantic Richfield, and you know who got her the job, the young men. They said women beat us in college, so why shouldn't they be

marriage. I didn't crave love. Why take the chance. I was having a good time," she said.

Loves Children

Miss Patchin loves children, though, and she has spent her life educating them and entertaining them, first as a teacher and principal of Suffern Grammar School until she retired and then as Aunt Bea to countless relatives.

Everyone has a favorite Aunt Bea story. Her nieces and nephews remember she made a game to make chores less boring and even education.

"Aunt Bea used to pretend one of us was Pete and one was Bill out prospecting for gold when we dug up weeds," said her grandniece Beatrice Anne Aldredge.

"It was wonderful to me, the education we got just being here," Mrs. Aldredge said.

"Aunt Bea had a way of making an occasion out of the duller of tasks — going to town to pick up something at the store — she could make me feel like Paul Revere ringing warning of the British," Mrs. Widdicombe wrote.

"I wake up in the morning, and sometimes I have to go back to bed. But you go on. Don't give in."

"She was a storyteller for all time, and there is not one among all those nieces and nephews who does not have an enormous fund of American lore from Aunt Bea's stories. Even today, when I do crossword puzzles, I find I have a rich source of data from her tales," Mrs. Widdicombe wrote.

Miss Patchin has also been known to stretch her tales beyond the truth.

"Mother always asked, 'Well, what's the news from downtown today?' Not wishing to disappoint Mother, Aunt Bea created a tale of a hideous railroad accident just outside of Poughkeepsie complete with deaths.

"Anyway, on this day when mother was all concerned about the gruesome railroad wreck, the chairman of the Suffern Board of Education dropped in, and the first thing my mother said to him was, 'Did you hear about the terrible railroad wreck at Poughkeepsie?'"

"Things were completely out of hand by this time as, you will remember, Aunt Bea was a respected school teacher in the Suffern school system and the caller was the chairman of the Board of Education. Aunt Bea was forced to face the music and confess her horrible hoax in front of all. She thought it was very funny. Mother didn't. I wasn't sure," Mrs. Widdicombe wrote.

Miss Patchin is religious, though she criticizes much religion today as "just talk." "Praying over and over is like saying you have got to make dinner over and over. Will the dinner get made? All you need is one time," she said.

She has faith in what God plans for her. "I'm anxious to see what is coming," she said.

Miss Patchin's hearing is still sharp, and she only wears glasses to read. She does, however, have arthritis. She broke her hip in 1975 at the age of 94 when she tried to make a basket while some of her young relatives played basketball.

"She tells me, 'I wake up in the morning, and sometimes I have to go back to bed, but then I get up. You have to go on; you can't give in,'" her friend Betty Bradley said.

Miss Patchin thinks Pine Plains is a fine town with some "wonderful" people. She recalls how Dr. Walter Wicks stayed up all night with Gould and saved his life.

"I'm real proud of Pine Plains. One helps the other. I'm proud of the way they go to the dump (on the road past her house)," she said.

Some people in Pine Plains know her as the little old lady who sweeps the road. She does so because the road is so close to the house that the dust gets the house dirty.

"Yes, I guess I am a character. I never paid any attention to what people say. I only thought I should please God.

"I just tend to my own business. I like people. I like them to be successful. It grieves me when they aren't.

"If I lived my life over again, I would do the same things. There's still an awful lot to learn. Don't get discouraged, the young people will get there," Miss Patchin said.



The Patchin family: From the left, front - Agnes, father Frank, mother Mary, Mary Susan; back - Nettie, Dan, Gould, Mark, Paul, Beatrice, Frances, John. Photo contributed.

Miss Patchin believes she is healthy now because her mother put her outside with her young brothers after she had malaria as a child.

"I think it's the outdoor work that has kept me healthy. When I was little I was put outdoors to work and play with my brothers," she said.

Until her sister Mary died in 1973, Aunt Bea did the yard work while her sisters cooked and cleaned the house. "I've only been cooking for eight years," she laughed.

executives. I'm so glad to hear it. My grandfather never would have said that," she said.

Why Never Married

Her independence is one reason she never married. She recalls the day a boy thought he could control her, but found differently.

"One day we decided to have a circus. So we took all the bags with holes from my grandfather's mill and made a tent.

I said I would be ringmaster, but the boys objected.

"So they decided to have a mock wedding. They asked me if I would marry Clay, and I said okay. They said that if Clay married Bea, he could be ringmaster. I asked why. They said that if I married Clay, I would have to obey him. I said no way, and ran over and ripped the tent down.

"I loved my family, and it was sufficient. I didn't need

