

98-years-old and still in love with the earth



One mile deep into the Fitzgerald farm off Route 646 in Nottoway County table level fields of grain wave in the cool May breeze. The same current moves the honeysuckle as it begins another season of growth over abandoned farm equipment and buildings. Mrs. Petronella Turpin Fitzgerald, 98, stands among her rows of boxwood and shakes her head. “This was a pretty farm once. It doesn’t look it now...It misses Peter Harris.” Her voice cracked and softened to a whisper.

Mrs. “Pat,” as she is called since when was married to Pat Fitzgerald, doesn’t get outside the house very often now. Age and the accidental death of her only son Peter in 1986 have shaken the old lady’s iron will, but not broken it. She still knocks on the obstacles of life with fierce determination. Coming out of the house she whacked away at the door latch with her cane until it gave way.

She still sees her farm with the same sense of wonder she had 74 years ago when

she arrived as a bride. “Oh, I’m so glad to see these flowers I don’t know what to do. Look at this one,” she explained, forcing her stiff back to bend so she could see the late blooming azalea with her failing eyes.

Everywhere her cane touched or pointed she either expressed joy at discovered growth or sadness at growth’s absence. “I’ve planted everything around here but the trees...and my trees are dying.” She lamented. Looking up where decay’s amputations were evident. They were even huge when she came to this house 74 years ago. “I thought I was in heaven when I got there. Pat gave me a horse and I was fixed.”

Mrs. Pat is the only Fitzgerald left on the three original Fitzgerald settlements that grew out of a 3,400 acre land grant given to William Fitzgerald ! in 1742. And she can still walk with strong legs through the memory of her life on this river of Fitzgerald names that have flowed through Nottoway County’s history. Like the earth that lives for the rising of the sun, she had seen two Fitzgeralds come and go from this land that she had come to love so much.

Mrs. Pat had always known what she wanted and she has been happy with what she got, despite the hardships and deaths in her life. “Hard work,” she laughed, “Will never hurt you.”

In 1915 she left her Mecklenburg County to teach in Crewe. “But what I really came for was to catch Pat, and that’s what I got!” Then she learned forwards as if to tell a

secret. “Would you believe I dated but was never kissed until I was engaged to Pat...and I went with one many for two years!”

“He was a farmer!” she said with such pride that you would have thought he had done something really great—but just being a farmer was great in her eyes.

They worked together and in 1927 decided it was time to invest in a dairy herd. With eleven cows and the milking barn ready, and accident with a hatchet changed everything. “From tht cut on his knee he got blood poisoning,” she said, and the event seemed to still bleed pain in her memory. “When he came home from the hospital after three months he was helpless, couldn’t rise his hands to feed himself.”

This was the first time her son Peter Harris, then ten, was able to demonstrate that he had the same determination that ran through his mother’s veins. “Peter Harris would get up and milk those cows, then walk a mile to catch the school bus, and after school continue with the chores. The small boy working with his mother did this for a year while his father regained his strength.

But in the same memory of tragedy there was a vision of ineffable beauty. “The day Pat came home we had a little shower. The next morning when the sun came up it shown on this lot out there of waist high alfalfa. ‘Twas the prettiest field you ever saw, just as level as a table top, and I tolled Pat’s bed to the window and held him up in my arms to see it. The sun was shining on the rain drops and the field looked like was strung with diamonds!”

Then as beautiful as that sight was, another memory. “During the last storm of the season lighting struck the barn the alfalfa was stored in and burned up all the pretty hay.” Death and destruction on the Fitzgerald farm happened as naturally as day and night. Twenty-seven years later her husband was killed when a tractor fell on him. A farmer’s death. He was 72.

Even the dairy herd he had built to 80 cows went. He decided two week before his death to sell the herd. But just as one sun set on the Fitzgerald farm, another rose the next day. Peter Harris took over the farm and started raising beef cattle.

Unlike his father, who was “reserved, quiet, and stayed right on the farm, Peter Harris was active in everything.” Mrs. Pat’s voice seemed to smooth out into a song when she talked of her son’s qualities. He had been on the Board of Supervisors, an originator and president of the local farm bureau, surveyor, local expert on land values, farm architctd, elder in the Blackstone Presbyterian Church, a man who always had tine for people, and a lover of Nottoway County. “He knew as much about Nottoway County as I knew about this farm,” she said. “We had the best time together.”

Everywhere she looked now she saw something either her husband or her son had built, but for the most part it was her son who held the brightest position in her mind. Her cane touched a stone chicken trough that lay in the ground like a tombstone. Across the uncut grass was the barn her son had designed. She recalled how he “could fix lofts so you didn’t need columns to support them.”

“We got water from a well right here,” she said, poking a depression in the yard. “In the 30’s it went dry and we were hauling water from four different places.” Also during those years Mrs. Pat worked as a demonstration agent teaching gardening and canning.

When the war came she even made money from that. First there were Camp Pickett carpenters to board, then soldiers’ families, and when the war ended some

displaced families from Europe. She couldn't remember what country they came from, only that they couldn't speak English so that when "Peter Harris came home they thought his name was 'My son.' That was all she could say. "When he got back I felt like I had the world." He had been away for 28 month building bridges over rivers for American tanks to invade Germany.

Inside her bedroom "she had come inside now as her breath began to weaken) a massive bed commanded the room, its posts like the masts of four ships. Next to it was a table made of the same walnut her grandparent's coffins were made from. "They kept those coffins in the carriage house for years," she said, the memory of them still clear in her mind as well as her youthful curiosity of them. "But they didn't mind seeing them in the roof above the carriages every day. They didn't have any fear of death!" she said



In Memory Of Peter Harris Fitzgerald

Once again the sun set on the Fitzgerald farm. In November of 1986 Peter Harris was killed while trying to fix a gear under his truck. Like his father, he was in his early 70's and killed by a farm vehicle—alike even in death. "When Peter Harris died, the angus herd was sold. We were told it was the best herd in Nottoway County...but Oh, I miss hearing the cows low," she said with almost a moan. It was the first time since she came to the farm that she could not hear that "sacred" sound.

As evening came across the farm, Mrs. Pat waited for the nurse to come for the night. She would be all right, she said, discounting any thought of her advancing frailty. And the farm would be all right too. Her will, she said, would make sure that the land would never leave the Fitzgerald family.

Some day another sun would rise over the collapsing barn and the ancient trees that protect the overseer's cottage. And perhaps the boxwoods would be allowed to grow the way Mrs. Pat liked them—thick, strong, untrimmed an evergreen.