

Picturing the past: Elizabeth Jean Mount Silversteen

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The Silvermont mansion remains as a monument to the early days of Transylvania County's industrial boom era. Many know about owner Joseph, who is certainly a key figure in that story, but his wife, Elizabeth Jean Mount Silversteen, was an accomplished figure in her own right as well.

Elizabeth was born in East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, on Aug. 12, 1878 to the Rev. George Washington Mount and Mary Garriss Mount. Her family had ancestry in Virginia as well. Elizabeth attended East Stroudsburg Teachers College (now East Stroudsburg University) and earned her master's degree in elocution from the McGibony College of Oratory in Philadelphia in 1898.

After graduation she continued to live with her parents, becoming a public schoolteacher who was a leader in her field. Early in her career she led a pedagogy workshop for teachers before she was hired at East Stroudsburg Normal School as the elocution teacher, as announced in the Aug. 9, 1902 Pennsylvania newspaper, The Wilkes-Barre Times Leader.

There is a piece of the story missing here because extracted records show that little more than one week after that announcement she married Joseph Simpson Silverstein in Manhattan, New York on Aug. 17, 1902. It would have been unlikely that in that era a married woman would have stayed employed as a schoolteacher, so it is unusual that she accepted the job only to have to leave it so



Elizabeth Mount Silversteen with daughters Miriam, Dorothy and Adelaide.

soon afterward. The couple was not characterized by impulsivity.

Joseph was just as driven as Elizabeth at a young age. He attended Woods College in Pennsylvania beginning at age 13 and was so proficient that he graduated in three years and began teaching at the same college after. He was on the path to study law at Yale University before switching gears to take on the lumber and tanning industry in western North Carolina. Sources indicate that Joseph first bought land in Transylvania County in late 1902, but it's likely that he was in the area before then to engage in the initial startup activities of his lumber and tanning businesses, collectively known as Silversteen Industries.

This decision impacted Elizabeth's future profoundly, as it set the circumstances that meant the majority of her life took place in Transylvania County. She enthusiastically

embraced life in the Carolina mountains and set about making things better for the community and her family.

The first civic improvement that Elizabeth is credited with is working for a dedicated schoolhouse built in the Rosman community. Prior to the arrival of the Silversteens, a one-room wooden building was used that was also the Presbyterian Church (currently a Methodist church). With funding, land donations and advocacy, the Silversteens aided the construction of a new five-room school completed in 1907. In 1906 their first daughter Miriam was born, followed by Dorothy in 1908 and Adelaide in 1913. During her daughters' youth Elizabeth formed the Rosman Literary Society as its president and engaged in other committee work related to education and health care. During World War I she focused efforts with the local chapter



Elizabeth was honored by the DAR at Silvermont with Elizabeth and Joseph Silversteen in the front row to the right.

American Red Cross and was the head of the Civilian Relief Committee, earning a medal for outstanding service.

After Silversteen Industries became more financially successful, the family moved away from Rosman and lived in a couple of different Brevard houses before moving into Silvermont mansion once the construction was completed in 1917. With closer proximity to Brevard's social scene, Elizabeth became more involved there, active in numerous women's clubs, such as the Wednesday Club, and served as the president of District I of the North Carolina Federation of Women's Clubs.

Elizabeth was proud of her lineage and joined the Edward Buncombe chapter of the DAR before lobbying to start a new chapter

in Brevard alongside the Gash sisters. The chapter was named for the Gash ancestor, Waightstill Avery. Elizabeth's connection was through ancestor Henry Van Wey, a last name daughter Adelaide later used as a stage name.

Elizabeth was a local DAR Regent and was elected as the North Carolina state Regent in 1940 during the era containing their Jubilee Forest dedication on the Blue Ridge Parkway, a milestone for the group.

She was also very active in the St. Philip's Episcopal Church once the family moved to Brevard and has the distinction of being the first woman to serve on the vestry, or administrative group for the church, as a treasurer.

Her health concerns with diabetes and heart disease eventually led to a heart

attack while visiting daughter Dorothy in New York. Elizabeth Jean Mount Silversteen passed away on Nov. 3, 1956. Her widowed husband and adult daughters contributed to the St. Philip's Church to have three stained glass windows installed in her honor. They depict her namesake St. Elizabeth, the church namesake St. Philip, and a central scene of the nativity, honoring her role as a mother.

Elizabeth Silversteen's many efforts in Transylvania County have left a legacy of community service.

Photographs and information for this column are provided by the Rowell Bosse North Carolina Room, Transylvania County Library. This article was written by Local History Librarian Laura Sperry. Sources available upon request.