

Rebecca F. Gross, Editor of the Lock Haven Express was one of Pennsylvania's most distinguished journalists and public servants. Miss Gross was graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1928 and was appointed managing editor of the Lock Haven Express in 1931. She was one of the founders of the Pennsylvania Women's Press Association in 1937, later serving as its president and as president of the Pennsylvania Society of Newspaper Editors and the Pennsylvania Associated Press. She was a Commander in the U. S. Navy in World War II and was appointed a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University. Miss Gross served two terms as a member of the Board [now Council] of Trustees of Lock Haven University, and in 1969 was named to the Board of State Colleges and Universities Directors. She was appointed a member of the Board of Governors of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education.

A Peek at the Past

Rich and colorful history

By MATT CONNOR

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This is the first in a series of weekly columns by Matt Connor focusing on Clinton County's rich and colorful history. The tiny, birdlike woman with the large spectacles rises from her wheelchair with the help of a nearby assistant and two crutches, nodding in appreciation for the widespread applause of the surrounding visitors. It is April 1984, Rebecca Gross Day at Lock Haven University, and Dr. Craig Dean Willis, the then-President of LHU, has asked us all to acknowledge the woman for whom this day is named. It is one of my only fleeting memories of Becky Gross, often described as a pioneering figure in Pennsylvania journalism, and a towering presence in the life of the community and the university. Nearly 20 years later I would return to LHU to accept the Rebecca Gross Alumni Award from the university, an event that would trigger the purchase of my home in this town and my subsequent work for this newspaper. More recently, my partner and I accompanied Carol Fredericks - who made the Fredericks Family Guest House, Carillon and Alumni Center Library possible through her philanthropic endeavors - on a drive to Williamsport. I was nattering on about how much I enjoy writing about the history of this community for the Express. Carol suddenly turned to me and said, "Did you know Betty Achenbach?" "No," I answered, "but of course I read the 'Peek at the Past' books." "She was a wonderful lady," Carol replied in her soft Texas drawl. So now we come full circle. After three years of compiling stories about Clinton County's historic structures for the newspaper, I was encouraged to begin a weekly column on the history of the community. But what to call it? To me there was only one answer. Between 1980 and 1997 four different volumes of anecdotal history were published by the Ross Library under the "Peek at the Past" umbrella: The first three by Gross and Achenbach, the fourth ("A Final Peek at the Past") by Elizabeth "Betty" Achenbach alone, with a small contribution by (and about) Rebecca Gross, published posthumously. "We hope this good-humored booklet will keep alive a few of our rich heritage of stories that illuminate the fading memories of our community in its earlier stages, and give a few authentic glimpses of the way our progenitors lived and laughed and spent their time," Achenbach and Gross wrote in the introduction to their first volume. "In another 50 years," they wrote later, "no one will remember any of it, perhaps, except what has been put on record." And thank heaven these two great women took the initiative to put down on paper so many wonderful stories about the past life of the community, to preserve its colorful history for future generations. Because I found their charming reminiscences such an invaluable tool in my own research into the history of Lock Haven and its surrounding area, I felt strongly that a column like this one should be an ongoing tribute to the work of Elizabeth Achenbach and Rebecca Gross. When the two women published their third book in the "Peek at the Past" series, in the final weeks of 1985, both fully expected it to be their last. At that time Gross was 80 and Achenbach 69, and they assumed they had told as many stories as they were wont to do. "Whether there will be more 'Peeks at the Past' is doubtful, at least as far as we are concerned," they wrote. "but we hope that future collectors of little stories people like to tell on each other, and on earlier 'movers and shakers' of the community, will arise as time passes." I would never presume to be the kind of clever storyteller as the indomitable Becky and Betty. But I hope that, in future weeks, we can travel the road along F. Scott Fitzgerald's "ceaseless past" together, sharing funny, poignant, revealing, thrilling, scandalous, bizarre and charming stories wherever they can be found. If we can learn something about our own history along the way, so much the better. And if there's an Internet in heaven, let's hope the spirits of Rebecca Gross and Elizabeth Achenbach will log on to lockhaven.com and read along with a smile.

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