

## A Peek at the Past

The indomitable Roxie Strump - LH's witness to history

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About two years ago I wrote a story about a delightful woman named Helen Kessler, a 102-year-old former beautician still living in her own antiques-filled home in Lock Haven. Unfortunately I made the mistake of describing Helen as being "102 years young" in the headline for that piece.

Surprisingly enough, I rarely receive hostile letters in response to my work, but this time I seemed to have inadvertently touched a raw nerve among Clinton County's senior set. A few days after the Helen Kessler piece ran, I receive the following terse – and anonymous – missive:

"Dear Matt: I'm 92 years OLD. I was 18 years old, 30 years old and in the future I will be XX years OLD. NEVER YEARS YOUNG!!

"Helen Kessler is 102 years OLD. If ever you refer to me as being 'XX years young' I hope you break all your fingers and lose your voice until you learn correct use of 'old' and 'young' – like being a young person and an old person: Young 90 years old, not 90 years young."

### Article Photos



Roxie Strump in July 1959.  
PHOTO PROVIDED

After I was sufficiently recovered from the creeping terror of 92-year-old ladies this note engendered in my soul, I went back to my usual habits of wreaking havoc on the English language for this newspaper.

Nonetheless I feel absolutely zero trepidation as I now find myself writing about yet another centenarian beautician still living in her own antiques-filled home in Lock Haven. How many communities, by the way, can brag that they've got two 100-plus year old beauticians living less than a mile from each other?

Roxie Sarvey Strump is a sharply intelligent, quick-witted woman on the verge of her 102nd birthday, and I had the distinct pleasure of sitting with her in the dining room of her immaculate home on Second Street earlier this week.

In addition to having spent 40 years, from 1931 to 1971, as proprietress of her own beauty salon, the Strump Beauty Clinic, Roxie is a civic organizer, historian and longtime supporter of the arts locally.

Indeed, if not for Roxie's intervention, the Clinton County Historical Society might not have a home at the Heisey Museum today.

The Heisey house was in need of significant renovation and repair at the time Cora Heisey, an aged woman dying of cancer, proposed to leave it to the Society. At that time, during the Society's early years, it was presided over by a handful of local citizens including Aida Furst, the wife of a wealthy attorney and one of Roxie's most frequent customers at the Strump Beauty Clinic.

Membership in the historical society was then extremely limited, a fact that Roxie thought was ill-advised given the amount of work to be done on a day-to-day basis. She wanted the society opened up to the general public so that projects like the restoration of the Heisey house – should it be accepted by the Society – could commence with a larger staff of volunteers.

"Imagine the historical society not being open to the public!" Roxie said earlier this week. "They had

people join by invitation only. They invited my husband Alvin and I to join, and they had a big meeting up at the high school. Aida (Furst) said, 'If I get up there and say we want the building and are willing to take it, they won't listen to me even though I do have money. But they know you are a worker, Roxie. They'll trust you. We'll let it go till almost the end, and then I'll say, "I've got Roxie Strump here and I want her to say what she has to say.'" So I stood up and said, yes, I believed we should take it over."

At the time, Roxie pointed out, however, that it would take a tremendous amount of money and labor to bring the Heisey house back to its former glory.

"We can't do this with the few of people we have," Roxie said she told the Society leadership. "We can't fix the place up without a lot of money. It's in terrible shape. It's just awful! The only way I will help and get people to help fix the place up, is if you're open to the public."

Remembering that meeting nearly 50 years later, Roxie says with a laugh, "I thought poor Alvin Snowiss was going to fall right over, because he wasn't in favor of opening it up to the public! He wasn't interested in that kind of thing!"

But not only did the Society finally accept Roxie's terms, they appointed her chairwoman of the Heisey restoration committee, paving the way for the tremendous community resource that the Heisey Museum is today.

"None of that was ever in the newspaper and nobody ever said anything about it," Roxie says today. "And we took the building the next week."

All that happened in 1962, and the story has remained untold till now. So there you have it, gentle reader, a Peek at the Past exclusive!

Roxie moved to Lock Haven from Clearfield County in 1927, the year sound came to the movies and Lindberg flew solo to Paris. It was not her first time in town, however. She had an aunt and uncle who resided in Lock Haven and whom she visited frequently, taking the New York Central train to Mill Hall and a trolley into the city.

"I used to come in from Clearfield when I was about 10 years old," Roxie said. "I remember because I'd get a good smacking because I didn't want to get off the streetcar!"

For a time she worked at Grossman's Dress Shop before she started her own beauty business. There she became acquainted with many of the city's upper class women, as well as a few of the more colorful characters in the community.

"The girls from Nell Bowes' house would come to Grossman's," Roxie said with a laugh. "A taxi would bring three or four of them. Gus (Augusta Luxemburg, wife of Grossman's proprietor Milton Grossman) and I were the ones who took care of them. We knew how to handle them and we wouldn't tell anyone else in the place who they were. They bought a lot of stuff, you know."

For those of you, gentle readers, who haven't heard of the Nell Bowes house, allow me to enlighten you: It was, during the early decades of the 20th Century, Lock Haven's most popular bordello, though not the only one by a long shot.

"There wasn't much said about the Nell Bowes house," Roxie said. "There wasn't a damn thing said about it. Everybody knew it was here and everybody knew that people went there, but nobody said a word."

In fact, Roxie said, Nell "had a doctor check the girls out regularly because the people that were going there were our top people."

Today many of Roxie's old friends – with the exception of 90-year-old Dunnstown resident Lillian Anderson – are long gone. Aida Furst passed away in 1964, and legendary Express editor Rebecca Gross, another close friend, died 10 years ago.

"Becky Gross was a good friend of mine," Roxie said. "One night Becky was in our house for dinner and afterward the kids wanted to go out and show her our new car. She said, 'Oh, I wouldn't miss that for anything. I love the smell of a new car.'"

Sadly, Roxie related, she got a call later that night – long after Becky Gross had left for home – that Gross had been in a terrible accident.

“Before morning the next day, a friend called me before I was out of bed, and they told me that Becky had been in a terrible accident and she’s going to lose both legs. I said, ‘Oh no, no! Not that!’”

After her legs were amputated as a result of that horrific automobile accident, Gross continued her long career in journalism, learning to walk with the aid of prosthetics.

“But to tell the truth, Becky scared me to death when she’d drive,” Roxie said. “I finally stopped going with her to Clearfield because I was scared to death of the way she’d drive. But I liked her. I liked her very much, and her sister, Lydia, too.”

The stories go on and on, until one begins to suspect that there isn’t a person who lived in the last eight decades in Clinton County that Roxie Strump can’t relate a story about, an event that didn’t leave some mark in her life.

In just two weeks, the indomitable Ms. Strump will turn 102, though you’d never guess it from her feisty personality and sharp mind. A voracious liver of life, she’s made a few accommodations to her age – she now reads large-print books and is a bit hard of hearing – but otherwise would put many people 30 years her junior to shame.

Dare I say it? Yes, I dare, perhaps at great risk to my vision and appendages: Roxie Strump is 101 years young, and counting.

So go ahead. Write me a letter.

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