

VINEYARD GAZETTE

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Nancy Whiting Dies at Age 82; Was an Activist in Civil Causes

By JULIA WELLS

Nancy Weadock Whiting, the former West Tisbury librarian and town tax collector and a pioneering civil rights activist in her day, died on Nov. 16 at the Falmouth Hospital following complications from lung disease. She was 82.

A resident of West Tisbury since the early 1950s, Mrs. Whiting was a person of many interests, sturdy character and liberal politics. She was recently honored for her role in helping to found the Vineyard chapter of the NAACP on Nov. 22, 1963, the day President John F. Kennedy was shot.

“We went ahead and did it that day, even though he’d been assassinated, thinking it was an appropriate thing to do . . . that had been in the works for a year,” Mrs. Whiting told Island oral historian Linsey Lee in a 1993 interview for her book *Vineyard Voices*. “The original cast was an odd mix, us good liberal kids, a few blacks . . . the clergy and some people from the Jewish community.”



Nancy Whiting in West Tisbury.

In the spring of 1964 Mrs. Whiting and four other Vineyard women drove to Williamston, N.C., to deliver clothing and other donations that had been collected on the Vineyard for the black community in Williamston. The women were trying to help the Williamston people register to vote and were arrested and spent a night in jail. In

her interview with Ms. Lee, Mrs. Whiting chronicled the experience in detail.

“The cells were just awful. Perfectly designed to humiliate. We spent one night there. We paid our bail and got out . . . and that’s when I was really scared. I knew from the day before they felt like killing us, and they might do it . . . I remember being in the car and wanting to get away as fast as we could.

“Afterwards, I think we felt we’d been empowered, we’d been strengthened. That’s one of the great pleasures of it because you really lose your sense of self-consciousness. You are a part of something.”

In September of this year a plaque was placed outside the former West Tisbury Library on Music street, honoring the five women. Mrs. Whiting’s son Tom Hodgson of West Tisbury said that while his mother was unable to attend the dedication ceremony due to illness, she did have a chance to see the plaque before her death.

Nancy Weadock was born on Sept. 23, 1925 in Detroit, Mich., the daughter and only child of Gerorge Phillip and Martha Currie Weadock.

Her family moved frequently when she was young and she attended 11 different schools between first grade and high school. She enrolled at Antioch College in Antioch, Ohio, where she majored in philosophy. She was unable to finish her degree at Antioch and later earned a bachelor’s degree from Goddard College in Vermont.

One of the 11 schools she attended was the Out of Door School in Sarasota, Fla., where she met her future husband Sloat Hodgson. They were married in 1947 and had two children: Thomas and Michelle. The marriage ended in divorce in 1954.

In the late 1940s Nancy began coming to the Vineyard in the summer, early on renting a house from the Whiting family at Quenames in Chilmark. She moved to West Tisbury full time in 1954 and made it her home, encouraged by her friend Shirley Mayhew. After renting and moving around town a bit, she bought land off Music street from Percy Burt in 1956 and built a house.

She worked a variety of jobs and became involved in town service. Her first town job was as a member of the committee to study James Pond, which decided that the town would not dredge the channel and convert the pond to a marina.

She was the West Tisbury tax collector from 1962 to 1964.

In the early 1960s she went to work for Dr. Milton Mazer, the Vineyard psychiatrist who founded Martha’s Vineyard Community Services and the Vineyard’s first mental health center. She worked first as his secretary and later became Dr. Mazer’s research assistant. After that she spent a year working at the Academy of Arts and Sciences in Brookline, but was drawn back to the Vineyard.

In 1971 she married Everett Davis Whiting, a prominent West Tisbury sheep farmer and West Tisbury selectman whose family farm remains a town landmark in the rural agricultural heart of the Island. He died in 1981 at the age of 66.

Also in 1971 Mrs. Whiting became the West Tisbury town librarian, a job she held for 12 years. Among other things, during her tenure she eliminated the practice of collecting library fines. During this time she also took graduate courses in library science at the University of Rhode Island.

“She nurtured a new culture at the West Tisbury library and made it the warm encouraging place it still is today,” her son Tom Hodgson said.

Descended from generations of Irish Catholics on her father’s side, she was a deeply spiritual and religious person. She was active in the affairs of the West Tisbury Congregational Church until the early 1980s when she joined Grace Episcopal Church in Vineyard Haven. She remained active in Grace Church until her death.

Her many other interests included art, music, nature, politics and baseball.

“She was a person of strong opinions and she had a great deal of character and enormous integrity. In a lot of ways her life was a struggle but it was a good struggle. She worked at every possible opportunity to contribute to her community, and the world,” her son recalled.

“As far as I am concerned, the survival of Whiting Farm and what this acreage contributes to the agrarian feel of our community is due in large part to Nancy’s contribution. After my father’s death in 1981, she worked tirelessly for what she believed to be the best interest of the farm, the Whiting children and the town,” said her stepson Allen Whiting.

In 1995 Mrs. Whiting suffered a respiratory collapse and was on life support in Boston for a month and a half. Doctors gave her little chance to live for more than a year, but she defied the predictions, recovered and continued to live at home.

She is survived by her son Thomas Sloat Hodgson of West Tisbury and daughter Michele Weadock Hodgson of Durham, N.C.; stepchildren Prudence M. Whiting, Daniel J. Whiting and his wife Dorothy, and Allen D. Whiting and his wife Lynne, all of West Tisbury; five grandchildren, Lucy Hodgson Morse, Darcy Hodgson, Rebecca Hodgson, Emma Thomas and Ian Phillips; six step grandchildren, Daniel Whiting, Tara Whiting, William Whiting, Everett Whiting, Beatrice Whiting and Davis Solon; and two step great-grandchildren, Emma and David Whiting.

A memorial service will be held at Grace Church on Dec. 15; the time of the service will be announced in a future edition of the Gazette.

Contributions in her memory may be made to Grace Church, P.O. Box 1197, Vineyard

Haven, MA 02568, the West Tisbury Free Public Library Gift Fund, P.O. Box 190, West Tisbury, MA 02575, Martha's Vineyard Community Services, 111 Edgartown Road, Vineyard Haven, MA 02568, or to a charity of choice.

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