

Alice Keith Ford
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By Margaret Shuster



There is still no credit – no ‘bylines – given to the person or people who did the reporting, but that all changed in November 1920 when Alice Keith Ford, the Herald’s first society editor, took the helm and published her page under the heading, “Social Courtesies of Cookeville.”

“People usually always invited the social editor to an event so they’d have a nice writeup, and Alice Keith tried to go to everything,” said Cookeville’s Eleanor Mitchell, a relative of Miss Ford’s who knew her and went to many of the same events.

“What was always amazing was she’d go late – she by nature was very tardy – but I think she did that because she could see how the party went and get a picture and visit with the hostess.”

Photos of Miss Ford show her as a woman with a smallish face and large eyes who had a white streak in the front of her black hair.

“It was very distinctive,” said Mrs. Mitchell, a former Tennessee Tech professor of literature. “She was truly a gentle, quiet, little lady.”

Alice Keith Ford organized all the society items on her page under little headers such as “Wedding Announcements,” “Social Items,” “TPI News Notes,” “Cookeville Church Notes,” “School News,” “Card of Thanks” and “Personal Mention,” and she gave detailed accounts of showers, parties and club meetings.

There were many more tales of club events printed by this time, as several clubs seem to have sprung up in the decade since 1910: The Round Dozen Club, the Pierian Club (a literary club), the PTA, the Three Square Club and the Cookeville Music Club, the Palladian Literary Society and the Upper Cumberland Literary Society to name a few.

Miss Ford appears to have been a champion of women’s causes, for in January 1922 she writes a story several inches long about an article she had read in the Knoxville Journal and Tribune about a young Cookeville woman named Johanna Noonan who was enrolled at the University of Tennessee and was the first woman in Tennessee to major in engineering.

Says Miss Ford in her writeup: "Although highly esteemed for all those qualities that go to distinguish the gentler sex, she has entered into this heretofore masculine field with so much energy and perseverance that she is demonstrating the equality if not the superiority of feminine power in this, another of men's own fields."

Minnie Crawford Barbour took over the pose in June 1927 and continued the page in much the same manner, retitling it "Social and Personal."

In 1930, the page included "City Hospital Notes," which told how individual hospital patients were doing. In fact, by 1930, most of the paper – except for the front page – seemed to be made up of society news, including the rare fashion story, such as one headlined "Sun Tan for Health & Beauty Is Verdict of Fashion Expert" which ran January 1930.

Weddings among prominent families were reported with great enthusiasm and abundant detail.

A wedding story printed March 13, 1930, reads: "Artistic and beautiful in every detail was the marriage of Miss Hazel Jenkins . . . to Charles H. Cox." Even the out-of-town guests are listed, along with details of the reception.

The first wedding to feature a photograph of the bride and groom ran on February 24, 1938, along with a lengthy writeup.

In December 1938, Alice Keith Ford returned to her former position as society editor, a post she then held until 1971.

Those who remember Miss Ford remember two things about her – that she was a very kind, sweet woman and that she wrote elaborate wedding stories, full of frills and flourishes.

"At the time they used flowery – I'd call it purple – passages," said Eleanor Mitchell. "She'd embellish everything and make it sound like it was truly Southern culture, always colorful."

Said Charles Denning, The Herald-Citizen's current executive editor who remembers working with Miss Ford, "People would tell her, 'I didn't even recognize my own wedding, you made it sound so nice.'"

In one example from June 19, 1939, she writes that a wedding was beautifully and impressively solemnized: and that "the bride was a picture of loveliness wearing for the occasion her mother's wedding dress of white dotted net over white satin which was fashioned along princess lines with a sheered bodice, a square cut neckline and leg-o'-mutton sleeves."

In another wedding story, the reader is told that “The youthful and petite bride, who was radiantly lovely in her wedding gown of lustrous ivory satin, approached the altar with her father, Mr. Foster, who gave her in marriage.

Miss Ford dedicates nearly her entire society page to the story of the wedding of Margaret Alice Carlen and Dave H. Maddux. Here’s how she described the bride: “Her blonde beauty was accentuated by her wedding gown of shimmering bridal satin fashioned with a basque bodice and voluminous skirt ending in an extremely long train.”

This description continues on for a l-o-o-o-ng paragraph, and the story goes on to name every person who served in or helped with the wedding or reception in any capacity, as well as every decoration and food item served at the reception, all the out-of-town visitors, several inches about the rehearsal dinner and several more about a pre-wedding dinner party along with a complete list of guests.

Ironically, Miss Ford herself never married.

Though mainly the prominent families were given big writeups, it wasn’t because of snobbery on the part of Miss Ford, according to Mrs. Mitchell.

“There weren’t any other people to write about. The people out in the rural areas were busy farming, and it wasn’t popular then to live far out. Everyone wanted to live close to the conveniences,” she said.

In 1941, the first non-wedding photo - which was for the Cookeville Cotillion Club Christmas dance – ran on the society page, heralding what would become a long tradition of ‘society’ photos. Also in 1941, the society news began over-flowing its single-page allotment onto another page in the paper titled “Additional Locals.”

Miss Ford also began covering the news from colleges and sororities, with stories including “Visitors and College Girls Are Feted at Many Social Courtesies During Week” and “Cookeville Represented This Year at Various Colleges and Universities.”

The year 1943 saw a bumper crop of wedding stories, nearly all of them with the military men of World War II as grooms. Between 1944 and 1946 – the war years and just after – there were practically no wedding or engagement stories.

In 1947, actual photos of the bride began to run with engagement announcements, and they gradually became larger and larger, some taking up as much as three columns of newspaper space by 1950.

Photos of wedding anniversaries and club events began to run in 1950, as well as one titled, “Mrs. Derryberry party set sail for England June 8.” By 1960, Miss

Ford had an assistant, Bess Prichard, and a big fancy “Herald Society” page header.

She wrote a column every Tuesday called “On the Social Whirl” in which she presented her who-went-where information and the rest of the page is filled with small articles about more significant meetings and events.

Miss Ford also began a column titled “Down Memory Lane,” reprinting little bits of society news from 25 years before. Bess Prichard wrote a column called, “this Woman’s World,” which featured fashions, recipes, beauty care and homemaking ideas, and the Society page also featured locally-written columns such as “Famous Dress Patterns,” “Needlework Patterns” and “Teen Topics,” which gave news of high school clubs.

By 1966, the wedding writeups were a little less elaborate, and the bridal photos had become smaller. Shower photos began to be printed, and the little social items were placed in a smaller section on the page titled “Personals”.

“On the Social Whirl” began to include more significant items, such as anniversaries and information from letters that readers had written in to Miss Ford. And for the first time, she begins running birthdays and photos of children.

There was another sign of the times in the late 1960’s. Charles Denning recalls hearing Miss Ford ask a question of the then-editor Coleman Harwell, who had left the Tennessean in Nashville and come to Cookeville to publish the Herald and Citizen along with John Mott.

“What are we going to do,” Miss Ford asked him, “if a colored girl brings in her engagement announcement and picture for us to put in the paper?”

Harwell, a soft –spoken, courtly-mannered man, almost snapped “Why,” he said, “we’re going to run it, of course!”

1970 marked a big transition for the society page, because, for the first time, the copy was not all locally written. The Herald-Citizen had joined the Associated Press news service, and the pages reflected that expanded outlook with syndicated columns and stories and photos about fashion and food.

An advice column titled “Molly Mayfield Says...,” which was similar to Dear Abby, started running, and Miss Ford began to run photos of bridal and baby showers. We see once more evidence of Ford’s pro-feminine stance in a January 1970 article that begins with the six-column headline “1969: Male Strongholds Succumb to Woman owner,” followed by large photos of seven or eight prominent and powerful international female figures and a story.

Alice Keith Ford's personal coverage of the Cookeville social scene gradually became smaller and smaller – perhaps Cookeville had simply grown too large to cover everyone as intimately as she was accustomed to doing. The former 'prominent' and elite families had faded in importance as newcomers moved into the growing little city and outsiders took the reins of power and influence. Besides that, Miss Ford was elderly and less energetic.

But she still kept her plate full of work.

“Every night before she left, she would rake everything from the top of her desk into several shopping bags she had brought with her and go trudging home with them... her house was on South Madison, practically behind the Herald-Citizen building at that time,” said Charles Denning. “But of course, she was too tired to do anything with all that work when she got home so she'd come trudging back in with those bags in the morning.”

After Miss Ford retired in 1971, the society page no longer listed an editor. Numerous photos of social event, birthdays, showers and club meetings filled the void that Miss Ford's detailed coverage had previously filled – perhaps a picture really is worth 1,000 words – and news, photos and columns from the AP was filled into the remaining space.

That's the tradition that continues to the present, though the section has undergone a few name changes in keeping with the times. By 1980, it had changed from “Society” to “Family & Friends.” In the early '90's, that was changed to “Lifestyles,” which was changed again this past year to “Living.”

The “Living” page continues to run in every day's paper along with three or four pages on Sunday where the weddings and engagements are published, along with the occasional feature story written by the Living editors – Amy Goodpasture and this reporter – another recent first for the section.

As for weddings, many brides have continued to follow the old-fashioned wedding writeup pattern, in which all the attending are named, the bride's gown and flowers and attendants' gowns are described in detail and details are given about the music, church decorations and mother's outfits. But the brides must provide the information themselves, because the Herald-Citizens now offers this service to everyone – not just the prominent few – and reporters are unable to attend weddings in person anymore.

But with the more casual lifestyles of people today, brides are tending toward simpler, more concise wedding stories, sometimes no more than a few lines of type under a photo.

Alice Keith Ford: b. 11 August 1894, Cookeville, TN – d. 22 October 1977 – Never married. Buried: Cookeville City Cemetery, Cookeville, TN – d/o Thomas Draper Ford & Virginia Belle Birdwell – Both Buried: Cookeville City Cemetery, Cookeville, Putnam Co., TN. * *See Birdwell Bible – Birdwell family.*



Alice Keith Ford retired in 1971. With her went the detailed coverage of the Cookeville society scene and the news of local neighbor's comings and goings.

Picture in the Herald – Citizen Centennial Edition
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Laura Walder's music class. Front row, from the left: Willie Wallings, Mary Alice Whitson, Clara Denny, Frances Ford, unknown, and unknown. Second row from the left: Joe Pincus, Bessie Holladay, Marjorie Boyd, Laura Walder, Alice Keith Ford, unknown, and unknown. Third row, from the left, unknown, Luke Shanks, unknown, Thurman Whitson, Lena Terry, unknown, and Minnie Pincus. Courtesy of Billy Carlen. Picture from the book: Pictorial History of Putnam County Tennessee – pg. 158.



The Cookeville Sewing and Garden Club was one of many clubs which sprang up in Cookeville in the 1920's and 30's. Society editor Alice Keith Ford, shown fourth from left on the third row, was a member of many of these clubs and attended many of the weddings and social events she reported on. From left, in front, are unidentified, Miranda Carlen, unidentified, unidentified, Belle Ford, unidentified, Nell Pendergrass; second row, Bunola Marchbanks, Mrs. Stacy Wilhite, Lorelle Maddux, Callie Massa, Bunola Whitson, Flossie Lowe, Mrs. Hayden Young, Elizabeth Shanks, unidentified, Mamie Carlen; third row, Mathi Massa, Elizabeth Rice, unidentified, Ford, Fannie Lou Carlen, unidentified, Mae Drake, Mrs. Jim Anderson, Mrs. Elizabeth Carlen; and in back, Maud Terry, Mary Alice Whitson and Lockie Haile. Picture in the Herald – Citizen Centennial Edition – 3 June 2003 & Picture from the book: Pictorial History of Putnam County Tennessee – pg. 152, courtesy of Mrs. Martin Medley.