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One Hundred Years Later, Scrapbook Is Back In The Family

By KAREN B. HUNTER

Irish pilot Lady Mary Heath was at the height of her fame and one of the best-known women in the world in the 1920s when, just before the National Air Races in Cleveland in 1929, she crashed her light plane into a factory roof and was seriously injured.

Lady Heath was taken to Lakeside Hospital, where she remained in a coma with life-threatening injuries for several weeks, tended to by a young nurse named Ruth M. Stewart.

Lady Heath survived. When she finished her convalescence at the hospital she gave Ms. Stewart a signed photograph of herself and the hand-drawn map of the airport that had been in her pocket when she crashed.

The young nurse carefully placed the items and an article about the crash into the scrapbook she meticulously kept about her life in the 1920s.

Almost a century and a long journey later, the scrapbook made its way into the hands of the daughter of that young nurse.

The journey started when a collector bought the scrapbook as part of a lot sale at an auction near Buffalo, New York, because it contained the signed photograph of Lady Mary Heath.

A year after that, the buyer listed

the scrapbook for sale on eBay.

For close to three decades, Elmer S. Mekker has worked doing masonry and exterior restoration on old buildings in Cleveland, including at the old Lakeside Hospital, which was part of Case Western Reserve University.

Mr. Mekker maintains a continual search of "collectibles" on eBay. One of his searches is labeled "Cleveland, photographs."

"I check my searches on weekends," he said by phone from Ohio. "It's like a museum in my house," he said of the historical items he has found on eBay.

Mr. Mekker was not looking for scrapbooks, or nurse's scrapbooks, but he paid \$300 for Ruth Stewart's book because it contained photographs of the old Lakeside Hospital.

"My wife and I spent an entire weekend going through the scrapbook and reading everything," he said. "I couldn't believe the level of detail it contained."

"It read like a book. We stepped back in time," Mr. Mekker said. "It was such a privilege to go through it. I felt like I was introduced to Ruth; I was intrigued by the family."

Mr. Mekker joined Ancestry.com in order to find Ruth's family and plugged in names he found in the scrapbook, he said, noting, "I

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KAREN B. HUNTER/ENTERPRISE

Jean Steel of Falmouth shows off the scrapbook made by her mother, Ruth Steel, in the 1920s. Ms. Steel had no idea the book existed until it made its way to her via the Falmouth Genealogical Society.

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figured if there was any family left, they should have the album.”

In addition to information about Ruth's parents (from Edinburgh, Indiana) and her siblings, he was able to find that Ruth Stewart Steel and her husband, Dr. David Steel, lived in Falmouth when they died. He was also able to find out that Dr. and Mrs. Steel had two children: a son, David, who is deceased, and a daughter, Jean.

An internet search led Mr. Mekker to the website for the Falmouth Genealogical Society, where he contacted the group's vice president, Timothy J. Martin, and requested copies of the obituaries for Ruth Stewart Steel and her husband. The obituaries were sent to him.

“One of the unique contributions of The Falmouth Genealogical Society is our obituary index from The Falmouth Enterprise,” Mr. Martin said.

Upon hearing Mr. Mekker's account of the scrapbook, Mr. Martin became equally enthusiastic about finding any Falmouth relatives of Ruth Stewart who might be interested in the book.

“I consider this ‘orphan object movement,’” he said. “Many people in the genealogy community like going after orphan objects, which are usually photographs. They know the object will matter a lot to somebody, who doesn't have it. It is fun to connect the object with someone who cares about it.”

Last week, with a copy of Ruth and David Steel's obituaries in hand and a probable street address

for her residence—acquired after a search—Mr. Martin arrived at the door of Ruth's daughter, Jean E. Steel, on Scranton Avenue.

On his way to the house, having noticed that funeral services for Ruth had been held at the Waquoit Congregational Church, he called the Reverend Nell Fields of the church to ask if she knew the Steel family.

Although Ruth Steel's funeral had been held before her time, Ms. Fields knew the family very well; they had been neighbors across the street from her home in Waquoit. She was able to confirm that Jean Steel was indeed alive and well.

Ms. Steel, who celebrated her 85th birthday this month, said she was overwhelmed when Mr. Martin came to the door.

“At first I thought it was a scam,” she said. “But he had too much information; he had my parents' obituaries.”

“I knew Mother pretty well,” Ms. Steel said, “And I am sure I never knew about, or saw, this scrapbook.”

Upon hearing about the scrapbook, Ms. Steele said, she spent several sleepless nights thinking about it until it arrived in the mail from Elmer Mekker, filled with photographs and memorabilia she had never seen from her mother's life as an unmarried nursing student and young nurse.

Going through the scrapbook during an interview at her home this week, Ms. Steel pored over the pages, showing a photograph of Ruth in her nurse's uniform; a brochure of the old Lakeside Hospital; photos of Ruth holding babies at

the Cleveland Babies and Children Hospital, poems Ruth had written, theater brochures, photos of old boyfriends...all carefully indexed in her mother's handwriting at the front of the book.

“There are so many unknowns,” Ms. Steel said. “Why isn't the scrapbook ragged? It's almost 100 years old. How did the book get from my mother to being sold on eBay?”

Although she has some ideas about how the book might have left the family, Ms. Steel has not been able to confirm any of them. That remains a mystery.

Jean Steel's family spent summers in Waquoit starting in 1937. Her parents built a house on the first lot sold at the head of Waquoit Bay in 1949 and they moved there permanently when her father retired in 1960.

As a retired physician, when Dr. Steel moved to Falmouth full time he was a consultant to the staff at Falmouth Hospital, Barnstable County Hospital, and Otis Hospital.

“He always got lost when he got onto the base, so they would send an ambulance to the gate to pick him up,” Ms. Steel said of her father's trips to the base hospital.

Ms. Steel's parents married six weeks after they met: she, a young nurse and he, a doctor. “It was a true love affair until they died,” she said. “I loved them dearly.”

Ms. Steel grew up in Cleveland, where her father spent the bulk of his medical career.

After a short stint attempting to become a secretary, which she said she neither liked nor was good at, she, like her mother, went into nursing and graduated from



KAREN B. HUNTER/ENTERPRISE

Jean Steel of Falmouth shows the scrapbook made by her mother, Ruth Steel.

Cornell School of Nursing in New York City.

As a nurse in Cambridge in the 1970s, Ms. Steel became intrigued with the idea of the “nurse practitioner” and took a course at Peter Bent Brigham Hospital, after which she joined the Cambridge medical practice of Dr. Robert Fankhauser as one of the first nurse practitioners in the country.

“We became better working together,” she said of their partnership. “It is a great way to practice nursing.”

Ms. Steel created a nurse practitioner curriculum and established

nurse practitioner programs at several universities, including the University of Connecticut. She was featured in a 1976 PBS documentary called “Portrait of a Nurse.”

The film was screened six times a year on PBS for two years, and was sent to medical schools and legislators to educate as many people as possible about the new profession of nurse practitioner.

Ms. Steel sold the Waquoit house in 2014 and moved to a smaller house on Scranton Avenue where, as a lifelong, avid sailor, she has a view of Falmouth Harbor from

multiple windows.

Her mother's scrapbook, stuffed full of details about her mother's life as a young woman in 1920s Cleveland that Ms. Steel had never known, has a place of honor on the living room table.

“This is a bucket list item for me,” Mr. Mekker said. “I'm really glad that Jean is able to have the book. It is an important piece of history.”

Because Ms. Steel has no children, she has agreed with Mr. Mekker that upon her death, Ruth Stewart's scrapbook will be returned to him.