



**2012 - Grand Marshal ~ Martha Webster**

### **Grand Marshal Adopts Middletown**

I've written the stories for the Middletown Day's grand Marshal & Pioneer Award going on 30 years now, so it's more than a little odd finding myself the subject of the piece.

I politely declined when it was first suggested that I be Grand Marshal for this year's Middletown Days parade. Yeah, I volunteer for lots of stuff, but that's not anything special in Middletown, home of the dedicated volunteer corps. And I don't like being in the limelight. That got a laugh from folks who have seen me stand up at meetings and babble on about whatever. The big difference is that I'm talking about whatever - usually Middletown. It's not about me.

Then Fletcher Thornton got into the act. He's part of the dedicated volunteer corps, but we haven't always been what you'd call buddies. When the Middletown Area Town hall (MATH) got started, Fletcher suspected that I was one of them tree hugger, anti-growth types. (He's right about the tree hugger part.)

So we had a couple of stare downs, but soon came to realize we both wanted to see Middletown grow and prosper even if we didn't always agree on how that should happen.

Then Fletcher shows up at a Middletown Central Park Association meeting and says I have a responsibility to accept the honor of Grand Marshal. Ah, jeeze. But he also said that he had learned one thing about me over the years, and that is that is that I don't have an agenda. I just want what's best for Middletown.

It's like to say it brought tears to my eyes, but I'm not the type. It was a very nice thing to hear, however, so I gave in and now Fletcher will be driving me at the head of the parade in some long black Cadillac.

So since it's now all about me, here's everything you probably didn't need to know.

I grew up in Marin when it was still wonderful place to live, before the subdivisions and the million-dollar homes and the traffic. I kept my horse on one of the big ranches that dominated northern Marin until the housing boom of the mid-60's. By the time I graduated from high school in 1969, I couldn't wait to get out.

I went into x-ray training at Stanford Medical School right out of high school, and two years later I came back to Marin to get an x-ray job and live at home until I could pay my debts and go back to college. I graduated from Humboldt State university in 1979 with a degree in journalism and started looking for a job on a rural weekly newspaper.

There weren't many of those left even back then, and there are fewer now. One of my letters went to the Middletown Times Star, where the publishers had bought the paper on a whim and was finding out how hard it is to make a small newspaper work. She needed help, and offered room and board but no money.

Well, what the heck. I started coming up a couple of days a week, and going home to work weekends at the hospital. Being an x-ray tech has allowed me to pursue a lot of crazy things, like riding trains all over the western hemisphere and working on a newspaper without pay.

Anyway, I got hooked on Middletown. It had everything a country girl could want, and the bar was practically next door to the newspaper office. Soon I borrowed a friend's bread truck and remodeled it for living quarters. I met my future husband when I lived in my truck on his mother's family ranch.

Dan Leigh wouldn't become my husband for about 20 year, but that's another story.

So from 1980 to 1983 I worked with Pat Donohue to make the Times Star a real newspaper again. It was fun but exhausting, and she decided to sell the paper. I returned to Marin to work for a large weekly paper, the Novato Advance.

I loved the job, but hated living in Marin. When I heard Teresa Sanders was buying the Times Star I jumped at the chance to come back.

That was 1986. Since then I've bought a house here, returned to school for my master's degree in English, taught at the Clear Lake Campus of Yuba College, and got married for the first time at the age of 50 to that guy I met when I was 30.

I was drawn to the newspaper and Middletown in part because I'm a big history nut, and both the town and the newspaper evoke a very American story: Settlers seeking opportunity brave hardship to find a place that feels right, and soon that place sprouts a store, a church, a saloon, and a newspaper.

The Times Star is an incarnation of the newspaper that started publishing here in 1886. The Middletown Independent was unable to rise from the ashes of a fire that destroyed the town in 1918. The rest of the town quickly recovered, and townsfolk soon began looking for someone to start a newspaper here. Don Runyon answered the call in 1926 but changed the name of the paper

Middletown's leaders knew what too many of us have forgotten: Newspapers are the backbone of a community. They express our needs and desires, our hopes and our failures, along with the pot luck fundraisers and spelling bee winners.

Being part of the newspaper also meant being part of things that are important to the community, like Central Park. For many years my only contribution to Middletown Days and the park was support and publicity, but then I kind of inherited the parade planning.

Same with the Middletown Luncheon Club. I haven't missed very many of those meetings since 1980, send somewhere along the line I ended up on the board.

The Luncheon Club is actually a very special and little known organization. Its struggles now reflect how things have changed in Middletown. Not too long ago the monthly meetings would be packed because most people worked in the area. Now its a few retirees and a very few people who still work in the area.

The Middletown Area Town Hall (MATH) is an attempt to carry on the Luncheon Club's work with a little more force and evening meetings that more

people can attend. Unfortunately, few people take the opportunity to participate in a true grass roots governing effort.

MATH doesn't actually govern, but it can make recommendations to those who do, and it does get respect from government officials. I'm proud to say it had accomplished a lot in the six years since it became the only municipal advisory council in the county.

It's rewarding that a few people remain committed despite the frustrations. I hope it is able to continue until more people start to see that change is best effected from the bottom up, not from the top down.

Probably I won't be here to see it. I have terminal lung cancer, so 2012 will probably see my last gasp. I've had a wonderful life and don't mind leaving because I know there are a lot of good people who will carry on at the newspaper, the park, the Luncheon Club and MATH.

Those people are, more deserving than I of the Grand Marshal honor, and someday I hope to be looking down from my star to see them riding at the head of the parade.

by ~ Martha

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*Anyone that has had the privilege to meet and work with Martha, considers themselves to be blessed. We hope to continue to be blessed with her presence for many years to come.*