



PACKET



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Southern Beaufort County's Newspaper

"(Adrianna Ford) said she dreamed about talking to elders, leaders in the community. They encouraged her. They asked her to become the island's midwife."

— Gardenia White, Ford's granddaughter

Legacy of loving

Street recognizes island healer

BY MARTY TOOHEY
THE ISLAND PACKET

She was simple woman with a divine mandate.

In her day, in her community, Adrianna Ford was the person you called when you were sick, or when you were having a baby, or when someone died.

Everybody knew her as "Miz' Adrianna." And everybody knew Miz' Adrianna.

Today, nearly 30 years after her death, an entire generation of native islanders holds her name in high esteem. She delivered many of them into the world, from the early 1930s to the late 1960s. She later treated many of their injuries.

Every day, almost 50,000 vehicles drive by the north-island parcel that was her home, what is now Fairfield Square. There is a small road there, just before Spanish Wells Road: Adrianna Lane.

Gardenia White is sitting in her Bluffton home, talking softly about the influence of Adrianna Ford on her life. White, a granddaughter of Miz' Adrianna, knew her better than most; Miz' Adrianna raised her from birth until the age of 17, while White's parents worked in New York City.

"I think she was a wonderful woman — caring, concerned, active in the community, active in the church," White says. "I'm who I am today because of her."

White was part of the full house that Miz' Adrianna kept, even after her four children left. Guests, both related and not, stayed for long periods of time — "However long they needed," White says.

When guests arrived, White said, Miz' Adrianna would greet them and always ask, "What can I do for you?" "And she meant it," White says, offering a guest a beverage. "She would help any way she could."

DIVINE INTERVENTION

The idea came to Adrianna Ford in a dream.



Jonathan Dyer/The Island Packet

Top: Pictured here in an undated photo is Adrianna Ford, who worked as a midwife on Hilton Head Island from the early 1930s to late the 1960s. Ford, who delivered many of the children born on the island during that time, died in 1974. Adrianna Lane near Spanish Wells Road is named in her honor. Above: Gardenia White (left), Ken James, Michaela James and her son Andreas stand at the entrance to Adrianna Lane. The street is named after Adrianna Ford, their grandmother, a midwife and healer.

"She said she dreamt it, several times for a year," White said. "She said she dreamed about talking to elders, leaders in the community. They encouraged her. They asked her to become the island's midwife."

Miz' Adrianna, a deeply religious woman, would call it a divine calling. She was raising her children alone at the time, in the early 1930s, working in the garden and volunteering in the community. Her husband, Harry, had passed on a few years earlier.

Back then, there was no doctor on the island.

"Unless you had a terrible accident, you really didn't go to the doctor," White said.

A public health nurse visited the island once a month. That nurse

trained Miz' Adrianna in a number of medical disciplines, including midwifery, and provided her with medicine.

Miz' Adrianna had conventional remedies, and she had home remedies. She had her little black medical bag, and she had her roots and leaves.

"One day I hurt my ankle playing ball at school, and by the time I got home I couldn't walk on it," White said.

Miz' Adrianna left the house for a few hours, and returned with some clay wrapped in leaves.

"She had me put it on my ankle and hold it there for the night," White said. "The next day, I could walk fine, and I went to school."

Miz' Adrianna practiced different

types of healing. Sometimes she would walk all day to deliver a baby; sometimes she would walk all day just to listen.

She never took a cent for her services.

A DIFFERENT TIME

Hilton Head Island was a different world when Miz' Adrianna delivered babies.

"Man, it was wild," says Ken James, a grandson of Ford, sitting at the kitchen table in the house on Adrianna Lane. "It was a great life. We didn't have any money, but we had most of the things we needed."

Most islanders were farmers. It was a community of sharing.

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Please see **LOVING**, Page 9-A



Special to The Packet

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Please see **LAWI**

Loving

Continued from Page 1-A

house, smell something good cooking, and someone would say, 'Hey, you want dinner?' " said James, who grew up in New York but spent summers on the island.

It was a simple time. Charlie Simmons' boat would take peoples' goods to trade in Savannah. On Sundays, Simmons would return with little luxuries, like ice for the drinks at Sunday dinner.

There was no bridge back then; the main road was a dirt one running down the middle of the island. There were only a few automobiles. Some people rode horses and buggies. Everyone else walked.

Adrianna Ford did a lot of walking. "And she was always proper," said Tom Barnwell, one of the native islanders Miz' Adrianna delivered. "When she walked along the road, her uniform was always just so."

DISCIPLINE

Those who knew Miz' Adrianna say she lived by simple principles.

She was humble, devoutly following Biblical teachings. She valued those in her community and never strayed farther from them than Savannah.

She preached gumption and emphasized education. She put notches in the kitchen door; each time a child got in trouble, they got a notch. Each time they got a notch, they got the switch.

"I got the switch a lot," said Florence Brown, a granddaughter of Miz' Adrianna. "She was a loving woman, but she was strict."

At Miz' Adrianna's insistence, James carried a book everywhere he went during his summers on Hilton Head. When he wasn't working, he was reading. He slept with a textbook under his pillow. Miz' Adrianna insisted it would help him absorb the material.

After a summer with Miz' Adrianna, he started first grade in New York. His teachers promptly skipped him ahead to second grade.

Miz' Adrianna held all her charges to high standards. White would go on to run the nonprofit East Harlem Block schools. White's three children all hold advanced degrees.

Miz' Adrianna's skill with medicine made her somewhat of a community celebrity. In the afternoon, during recess at the school across the street, children would talk to her while she sat on the stoop and smoked her corn cob pipe.

"Even at that time, she was famous," James said. "The kids wanted to talk to someone who knew something."

Miz' Adrianna was famous, and she was trusted.

When the first public health clinic opened, island residents weren't sure what to make of the outsiders. Miz' Adrianna would spend days in the lobby, introducing patients to the doctors. If Miz' Adrianna said the doctors could be trusted, they could be trusted.

"She had that kind of effect on people," James said.

On March 8, 1974, a seemingly healthy 67-year-old Adrianna Ford walked from her home to Barker Field. The next day she took ill. Five days later she died. Natural causes, the doctors said.

White keeps a shoebox filled with the letters sent to the Ford family after Miz' Adrianna's death in 1974. The signatures read like a roll call of native islander families: Driessen, Barnwell, White, Williams, Ferguson, Gadsen, Campbell.

"I think she delivered every Campbell kid," White says, chuckling.

She dabs at her eyes, takes a quick deep breath and closes the lid on the shoebox.

"I think Adrianna touched a lot of lives," White says.

"That's why we named it Adrianna Lane."

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