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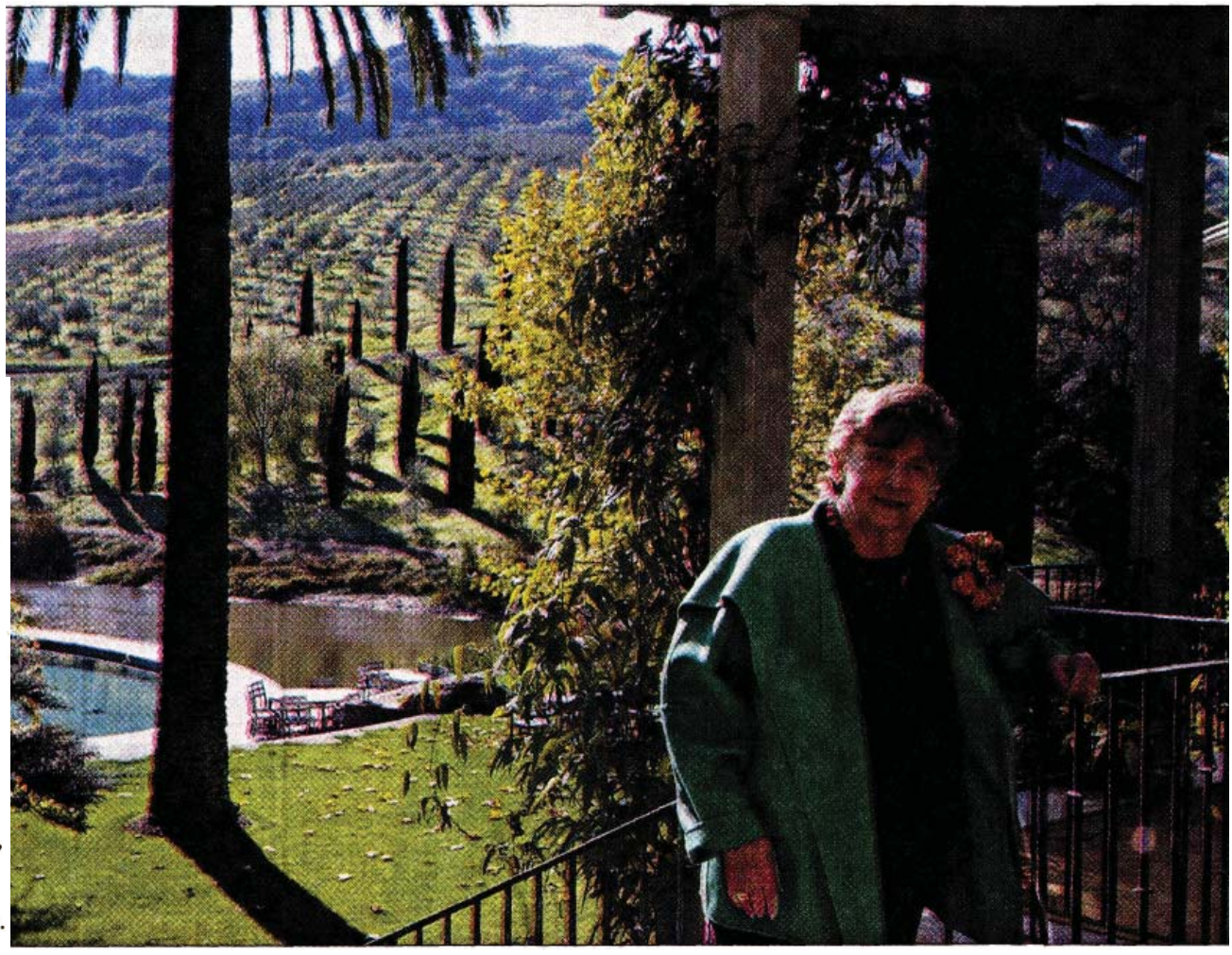
From printing press to olive press



Nan Tucker McEvoy has been a newspaper reporter and executive; chairwoman of an art museum; and Peace Corps administrator. These days, she owns a successful olive ranch.

Former publisher Nan Tucker McEvoy is enjoying a new career at her Petaluma ranch

By Carolyne Zinko
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Nan Tucker McEvoy, one of San Francisco's most influential women, doesn't like to talk about herself.

Not about the feud nine years ago, in which relatives ousted her as chairman of the board of the family-owned San Francisco Chronicle Publishing Co., which ran the paper founded by her grandfather in 1865.

"Who are you sticking the knife into, if you rehash it?" the 85-year-old asks.

Not about her political views, as a black sheep Democrat in a staunchly Republican family.

"I was on pins and needles on election night, but let's not talk about that," she says firmly.

Nor does she go into detail about her work as one of the early members of the Peace Corps with Sargent Shriver in 1961, or her days in convent school in Rome and Paris, or the seeming dichotomy between her religion and her role as a co-founder of the first abortion clinic in Washington, D.C., where she lived for much of her adult life.

What McEvoy wants is to focus on the present. At present, she is reaping sweet success with yet a new direction in life: olive oil, pressed from fruit grown on 18,000 Italian trees on her ranch in Marin County.

As with many of her ambitions, she was discouraged from the project. She was told that on her land, olive trees would not succeed. As with many of her ambitions, she confidently plunged ahead and proved people wrong.

McEvoy has hit it big in three ways: in coincidentally timing her product to the market — with recent studies showing that extra virgin olive oil is beneficial to heart health; in taste testings — her brand won over 17 others in a recent ranking by Consumer Reports magazine; and by pioneering a "new" agricultural crop in grape-laden Marin, Sonoma and Napa counties.

Whether by luck or providence, that's typical McEvoy, say those close to her — always ahead of the curve.

"When you know that Nan was an original member of the Peace Corps, when you know she was chairman of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, and when you know she's created a Shangri-la of fantasy

▶ **MCEVOY**
From Page M1

and imagination at her ranch in Petaluma, which is one of the really stunning residential achievements of our era, you realize that she's a real agent of change and innovation," said Harry Parker, director of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, of which McEvoy and her son, Nion, are multimillion-dollar patrons.

Her ranch on 550 acres sits in hill country between rural Nicasio and Petaluma. It's an escape zone, with olive orchards striping the hillsides, an American country-style farmhouse, a hot house, organic produce gardens and an exotic, 42-foot-tall Chinese pavilion designed by Michael Booth, just for entertaining.

It's here that the gentlewoman farmer spent last weekend celebrating the crop with a festival for 600 friends, neighbors and family members — including artist Wayne Thiebaud, who came from his home near Sacramento, Virginia Mecklenburg of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., and Maurizio Castelli, the Italian vintner and olive expert from Tuscany who helped McEvoy plunge into the effort.

"She's taken raw mountains and turned them into sculpture, with beautiful texture and pattern," said Thiebaud, whose social and political views, not to mention his artwork, have contributed to a fast friendship with the hostess. "It changes every time we come."

McEvoy, often described as strong and determined, is also shy, friends say. She's not a devotee of the society pages, which means the party is not thrown for attention.

Her son and only child, Nion McEvoy, 52, says his mother's life has been motivated in large part by aesthetics.

"She doesn't express herself philosophically. She's not doling out maxims, homilies, words to live by. She really values things that are beautiful, in terms of food, cooking, art, nature and has a very strong aesthetic sense," he said. "That's part of what keeps her focused in the present, and in a sensuous engagement with life."

Gracious business style

Guests at the olive harvest were fed a variety of pizzas crisped in a wood-fire oven, and a buffet with lightly smoked sturgeon and roasted red pepper sauce, lettuce and celery salad topped with shaved Pecorino, a spit-roasted pig, and of course, trays of cured olives, and olive oil to dip bread into.

The gracious style extends into the way she runs the business as well.

Staff meetings at the ranch are typically conducted during meals, like the lunch served on a recent Tuesday by head chef Gerald Gass and assistant chef Mark Rohrmeier, which consisted of roasted halibut and potato puree topped with leek quenelles, a salad of freshly picked carmona lettuce and Granny Smith apples. Dessert was sauteed apples with persimmon puree, butterscotch sauce and mascarpone zabaglione for dessert. French red wine was served.

McEvoy oversees operations by delegating to hired experts instead of micromanaging; she's decisive but also flexible; and she doesn't work a strict 9-to5 schedule. Not only because she doesn't have to (she ranked No. 384 on the Forbes 400 list of wealthiest Americans in 2003, with $640 million), but because she doesn't want to.

"I feel sorry for people who have typical days," she said at a staff lunch. "You can't get away from the routine."

Those familiar with her personal style say she is quietly decisive and comfortable in her certainty. That kind of self-assurance and power is remarkable for someone who never went to college, earned a business degree or ran a Fortune 500 corporation.

"She can be more effective making things happen while saying less than anyone I know," said Betsy Broun, the Margaret and Terry Stent Director of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, who has known McEvoy since her stint as the museum's board president in the 1980s. (The Stents, descendants of de Young, are museum contributors.)

"It's the sheer force of her character," Broun said. "She never argues a point. She never out-talks somebody. She listens thoroughly to everything everyone is saying. Sometimes she'll sit quietly, and at the end, look at them and say, 'I

don't think so.' But there is an amazing sort of respect somehow that comes to her, so that people know she means, 'Let's try again.' It's just a kind of quiet sense of what's important."

McEvoy's mother was Phyllis de Young, the youngest daughter of Michael H. de Young. She married Nion Tucker, a broker, and the family lived in Burlingame. Nan Tucker's only sibling was an older brother, Nion Jr., who died as a Marine of wounds incurred at the landing at Iwo Jima in World War II.

Early independent streak

Phyllis de Young Tucker was actively involved in charitable causes and also in high society. She established San Francisco's Cotillion, at which young girls of good standing made their debuts (by invitation only), and became the arbiter of who belonged and who didn't.

Young Nan was discouraged from attending college. But she didn't care much for high society or fancy clothes. Already, she had an independent streak, going against the grain. She wanted a job.

In her heart, she longed to be a ballet dancer, but knew her body type wasn't suitable. She decided she would be a reporter — at The Chronicle.

After her grandfather died, he left the paper in a trust that could not be broken until the last of his four daughters died. In those days, the business of running the paper went to men — and her Aunt Helen's husband, George T. Cameron, or "Uncle George," as he was known to the staff, was in charge.

Not only did Uncle George not want her to be a reporter, but also "he didn't want me to be anything," McEvoy said. "He thought it would be a disastrous thing if I turned out to be a bad worker."

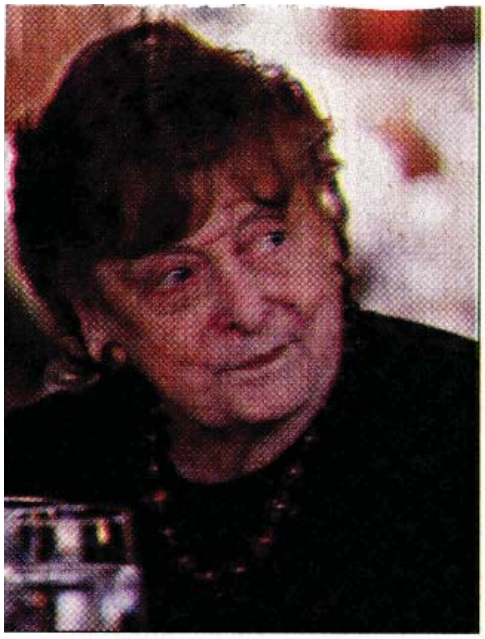
In her 20s, she launched a sit-down strike outside his office that lasted only a few hours. He talked it over with editor Scott Newhall, she said, and told her she could go to work for a section called "This World."

She started with small assignments and worked her way up. "I just liked everything about the newspaper business," she said. "Going out and trying to get the story, whatever it was — like throwing a ball to a dog and bringing it back."

In 1945, when San Francisco hosted the talks that formed the United Nations, she surprised everyone on the staff by getting a big scoop: bringing a copy of the first draft of the United Nations charter back to the newspaper. Bill German, an editor at the time, had a team of seasoned reporters, including Stanton Delaplane, covering the story, and had strategically included socially connected Nan Tucker in the bunch.

"I'd run out of veteran hacks who could handle everything," he said, "and I thought, 'How about Nan? There will be a lot of cocktail parties surrounding this event. She won't be out on the sidewalk, waiting to get in. She'll probably be invited to them.' "

As it turned out, she did have a contact privy to the U.N. discussions; she asked him for a copy of the charter, and he got one for her.



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NAN TUCKER MCEVOY

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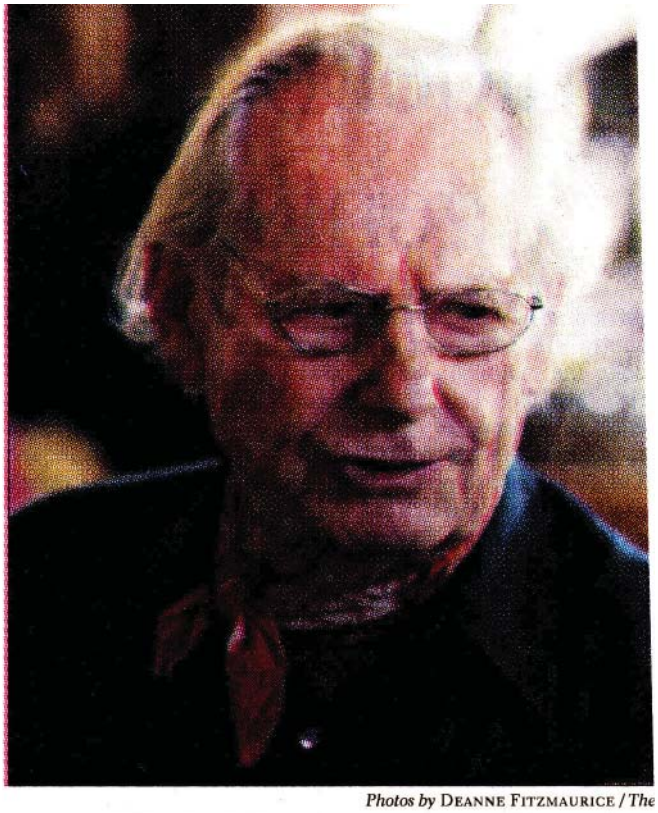
MAURIZIO CASTELLI, *Italian vintner and olive expert*



Photos by DEANNE FITZMAURICE / *The*

"She's taken raw mountains and turned them into sculpture, with beautiful texture and pattern. It changes every time we come."

WAYNE THIEBAUD, *artist*

A career made of confounding naysayers

Left: Nan Tucker McEvoy and son Nion at the harvest party.

Apprenticing back east

She moved to the East Coast, where she worked for the New York Herald Tribune and also the Washington Post, to learn how the papers were operated.

"I was hoping to run ours," she said, "and they were family-run."

She married Dennis McEvoy, a senior editor at Reader's Digest, in 1948, and they lived in Japan and Madrid. The couple had Nion, and later divorced.

McEvoy considered New York City, but settled in Washington, D.C., Nion McEvoy said, because it was smaller, and she thought it would be an easier place to raise a son on her own.

She became involved in Democratic politics and philanthropy; among her friends were former Illinois governor and U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Adlai Stevenson; Shriver, who was brother-in-law to President John F. Kennedy; and Katharine Graham, who became the publisher of the Washington Post.

In 1961, she went to work for the Peace Corps. She helped run its operations in Africa and ended up as special assistant to Shriver. Four years later, she opened the Washington office of the Population Council, formed by John D. Rockefeller III.

In 1970, she co-founded and was a deputy director at Preterm, Inc., a nonprofit abortion clinic in the capital. Later in the decade, she was named Washingtonian magazine's "Woman of the Year," and joined the commission of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. She was chairman from 1982 to 1986. She had not been an art collector previously, but began to acquire many works of modern art afterward, especially works about people, bodies, dancers, whether painting or sculpture. McEvoy responds to works with "a life-enhancing embracing quality, which doesn't always translate into pretty — pretty colors or pretty impressionism, but the true essence of what makes us feel good to be alive," Broun said.

In San Francisco, however, changes in the family business were about to pull her home.

In 1988, her mother died, which meant that the trust dissolved and shares in the company were divided among family members.

Changes at the top

As the economy soured in the early 1990s, so did The Chronicle's fortunes. A subset of the board called for an audit by an outside consultant; it showed debt and lack of strategic planning, and recommended outside expertise be brought in.

In 1993, the company hired John Sias, the former head of Capital Cities/ABC, as publisher, and he brought the publisher of the Kansas City Star, James Hale, to run the San Francisco Newspaper Agency.

The agency had been formed in 1965, with the Hearst Corp. agreeing to shut down its paper, the Call-Bulletin; turn its other paper, the Examiner, into an afternoon paper; and to put out a joint Sunday paper with The Chronicle. The idea was to save both the Examiner and The Chronicle from folding. The lifespan of the agreement was 30 years and was set to expire in 1995.

Sias began streamlining operations and some family members began to talk about selling off assets — three TV stations, two newspapers in other states, a cable business, two book companies, and even The Chronicle itself.

McEvoy was overheard in the newsroom, when the topic of selling the paper came up, saying, "Over my dead body."

"She was independent, in favor of women's liberation, and extremely liberal, as were most of the women in the newsroom — she was their champion, and they loved her," said Phelps Dewey, a Chronicle executive from 1953 to 1996, noting she once took all the newsroom women to lunch at a nearby watering hole called the M&M. "Anyone could walk into her office at any time, and talk about anything, tell her their problems, make suggestions, and she really appreciated that."

But McEvoy, who had made the executive staffing changes and also ushered in liberal views on the long-conservative editorial page, was growing unpopular among some members of the family, who apparently were interested in selling the publishing company and its assets, worth hundreds of millions of dollars.

McEvoy had indicated she

Chronicle file photo

Right: The heiress and her young son, in the Chronicle photo lab, in 1952.

would step down as board president in 1994, but didn't. It was said that she hoped — or perhaps the newspaper staff hoped — she would be the Kay Graham of the West. That dream ended when, at a special shareholder's meeting in April of 1995, she was ousted not only as chairman, but also as a board member. Board members passed a bylaw stating that nobody over the age of 73 could sit on the board. McEvoy was 75. The joint operating agreement did expire; Chronicle Publishing sold many of its assets, and the Hearst corporation, which had the first right of refusal, bought The Chronicle for $660 million.

For McEvoy, passionate about the family business, it was the ultimate rejection.

"Nan was very upset about this," said Dewey, who was executive vice president of the Chronicle Publishing Co. when he retired and shared part of an office with her in the building. "She felt this was what she'd been raised for."

Childhood home inspired her

Instead of dwelling on it, McEvoy turned her attention to arts, to culture and her grandchildren.

She donated $10 million to the Smithsonian American Art Museum in 2001, which inspired other donors to follow suit. A new auditorium there will bear her name. McEvoy and her son contributed a total of $10 million toward construction of the new de Young Museum in Golden Gate Park.

"I have very few people I turn to for advice, and Nan is one of them — she has a great overview of the world and is very intelligent," said Dede Wilsey, president of the board of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. "The reason that Nan would move on from anything is that she — just frankly — is superior.

"It wouldn't make a difference what the situation is, she would put it behind her, whether getting a parking ticket or a lawsuit. Her intellect is superior; her emotional state is superior. Whoever bothered her is beneath her, and she would make her next move and look ahead."

In 1991, McEvoy bought the ranch in Marin County, with the aim of giving her grandkids a place to run free, as she'd done as a child, at a ranch her parents owned near Medford, Ore., and where they ate broiled fresh trout on toast for breakfast.

The property was zoned for agricultural uses, but she didn't want livestock or fruit orchards. She finally decided on olive trees. "They don't have to be milked or fed," she said. "I'd traveled to Italy, and thought, 'Aha! Olive trees! They're very pretty.' "

She was told by Marin County agricultural officials that olive trees would never grow in the soil, but that didn't daunt her. She consulted Maggie Klein, the author of "Feast of the Olive," who put her in touch with Castelli, and then McEvoy flew to Italy to consult with him personally.

She imported 1,500 trees and had them planted, and they took.

Now, through propagation, there are 18,000 growing on site. The county agricultural official has since apologized for saying it wouldn't work. McEvoy has made

sizable investments in special equipment, including a state-of-the-art press from Italy.

In 2000, her McEvoy Ranch Certified Organic Extra Virgin Olive Oil won the "Best of Class" award at the Los Angeles County Fair. Travel & Leisure and House & Garden magazines have raved about it, too. It's now sold online — $20 for a 375 milliliter bottle — as well as at gourmet stores such as Dean & DeLuca, Draeger's and Whole Foods.

Castelli, who has flown in with his expert taste buds to help with blending the oil, cannot say enough about McEvoy.

"This is unique in the world," he says. "She is very decisive. Her brain as an 85-year-old works faster than many of my clients who are much younger. . . . It's easy to work for people who know what they want. She wants the best quality, the best oil."

McEvoy also wants to have fun. As the party winds down, and the dance band plays its last funk tune, Nion McEvoy and Castelli and a few others are dancing away. Thiebaud, who has just had a birthday, celebrated at the harvest fest with a cake provided by the hostess; other guests stroll in the vineyards and the organic vegetable gardens, admiring what McEvoy has made from scratch.

It's all new, which is what McEvoy is all about — new ideas, trends, forms of expression.

She is not only surviving — she is happy, and feels lucky.

"What I've done, I've loved," she said, "and it's never been boring."

E-mail Carolyne Zinko at czinko @sfchronicle.com.