

A Life

By Eunice Mercedes (Latshaw) Ross

I was born October 13, 1923, in Bellevue, Pennsylvania, to Richard Kelly and Eunice Maxine (Weidner) Latshaw. I was eight years old when the Great Depression began. My father had a business euphemistically labeled a pharmacy, but in fact it was the center of life in Emsworth where it was located. There was a lunch counter, a post office, an American Express office, and a place to buy radios and record players. At 11 p.m. my father would close his store and open the door to Jim Knox (later county controller), Jim Layland, poet-post master, Carl Peiper (later owner of Oswald and Hess Packers), and they would debate and discuss far into the night.

Because there was much unemployment, barter was prevalent. So in exchange for credit at the store I received seven years of piano lessons and seven years of dance lessons.

My mother descended from a family of judges and lawyers. Two walls of our living room were covered with books, and I was never forbidden to read any of them. So the summer I was thirteen I read all the great Russian novels and one by the German Hermann Sudermann and walked around depressed.

In grade school I made the highest grade of anyone who had attended Emsworth Public School. I also began my writing career as editor of the Searchlight. I played the piano every day for the other students to march out. In high school at Ben Avon, later Avonworth, I also made the highest grades ever made, except for Marjory Todd, whose grades equaled mine. I was elected to every presidency that one could hold, such as the French Club, was editor of the Annual Yearbook and sang in the A Capella Choir.

It was wonderful in the two summers of 1939 and 1940 that I spent two weeks on the shores of Lake Erie, basking in the sun or swimming or riding bicycles. At night we lay on the beach and counted the stars.

My piano teacher, Margaret Sayre, had a great influence on me. Her mother had been a language professor at Montana University, and Margaret had spent summers in France and Germany so she spoke fluent French and German. She spoke French to me, so I learned that “robinet” is a faucet. She loaned me books written in French. Her daughter and I listened to Glenn Miller on the upstairs radio.

In high school I was in charge of the hot dog sales at sports events, a good way to learn marketing.

I started college at the University of Pittsburgh on a full scholarship. I remember well the news in December of my freshman year of the attack on Pearl Harbor. My later husband, John Ross, joined the Marine Corps that winter, and on May 29, 1942, we were married in Silver Springs, Maryland. Because at first he was stationed in Boca Chica, Florida, I spent my school vacations in Key West until he went overseas to the Pacific War in early 1944. In the summer it was 98° in Key West. German submarines patrolled off the coast.

When the war ended and my husband returned (his last post was Guam, where he was part of a bloody invasion with 3000 dead bodies floating in the ocean), I became an assistant dean of women at the University of Pittsburgh, in charge of the Nationality Rooms, working with their committees and distinguished visitors and Ruth Crawford Mitchell (earlier with UNESCO).

In October 1947 my daughter Gerry was born, and in 1948 I began law school at the University of Pittsburgh, where I graduated first in my class and made the highest grade in the state on the bar exam. In 1951 I worked for the Mellon-funded project that wrote new health and environmental laws for Pennsylvania, directed by Mellon vice-president Adolph Schmidt. I went on to be law clerk to the President Judge of the then separate Civil Court of Allegheny County (called Common Pleas), William M. McNaugher and for Judge John Drew.

In 1954 I became judicial assistant to the Hon. Hugh C. Boyle of the then-separate Orphans' Court, where I drafted proposed rules of court and statutes and proposed opinions and directed the work of the decree clerks of the court, answered their questions and dealt with the public.

I left the Orphans' Court in 1970, after court consolidation in 1969, and became director of the family court counseling office and collection and disbursement office. Again I drafted proposed opinions for the judges and dealt with the public. At this time I appeared often on radio and television programs. Because there was formerly no interdiction on the participation of court employees in politics, I became a Democratic committee woman in 1972 and vice-chairman of the Fourteenth Ward, Pittsburgh, Democratic Committee in June of that year. On December 2, 1972, I was appointed judge of the Court of Common Pleas of Allegheny County and in May, 1973, came in second of 65 candidates for the position. Thereafter I served in family and civil divisions of the court until in November, 1996, I was appointed as senior visiting judge to the Commonwealth Court of Pennsylvania, where I served until 2004.

My beloved husband died January 1, 1978, the year I replaced my former boss, Judge Boyle, in the orphans' court. My beloved daughter died on December 21, 2011, a loss I still mourn.

From 1967 – 1973 I taught as adjunct professor at the Pitt Law School. In 1984 I became a member of the Pennsylvania Board of Inquiry and Review and served until 1989. From 1982 – 1986 I was trustee of the University of Pittsburgh. My awards include the Susan B. Anthony Award, the Estates and Trusts Award and the Order of the Coif. I wrote published law review articles (one early one on offshore drilling), Justice (1985), and co-authored the treatise Will Contests (1992). And, of course, there are many published opinions. My greatest honor came when I met the great Judge Alfred L. Taxis of Montgomery County and he said, “At last I meet the great Judge Ross.”