

A 20TH-CENTURY SPITFIRE

If you think Delray Beach is the hippest town in Palm Beach County, thank this woman: **Ethel Sterling Williams**



Ethel Sterling in 1909: Henry Flagler was so impressed with her, he gave her a portrait of himself.

By JAN TUCKWOOD
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

She had a twinkle in her eye in 1909, when this portrait was taken — and that sparkle was just a hint of Ethel Sterling's dynamic demeanor.

Ethel arrived in Delray Beach in 1896, when she was 5. When she and her mother, Mary — a proper woman from Philadelphia — got off the train in the wilderness then called "Linton," Mary began to cry. "She looked at me and said, 'You poor dear. You will never see anything, hear anything or know any-

thing here,'" Ethel recalled in the 1970s. "But my father told her, 'It's up to you whether she ever sees, hears or knows anything here.' My mother dried her eyes, squared her shoulders and never faltered again from that time on."

And, oh, boy — Ethel saw, heard and learned a few things in Delray Beach, which was incorporated 100 years ago.

She got her fierce independent spirit and innovation gene from her father, Henry Sterling, who followed Henry Flagler's

See DELRAY, 4D ▶



Christmas, 1896. Henry (left) and Mary Sterling (right) pose with friends in their 'backyard.' Ethel, 5, (front) is spending her first winter in the Linton Settlement.

Courtesy Delray Beach Historical Society

Ethel was 'a renaissance woman who wielded a strong fist inside a white glove.' — Grandson WILLIAM STERLING WILLIAMS, a local lawyer

She fought to preserve charm of Delray Beach

▶ DELRAY from 1D

railroad south to find his fortune. First, he helped to turn an unforgiving wilderness into a thriving little town.

"He established a commissary to supply dry goods to local pioneers and trade with the Seminoles. He was a successful farmer and shrewd investor who, at one time, owned much of the available land near the core of Delray (the unincorporated town was renamed in 1898). His business interests included just about everything a start-up town would need to create a viable economy: retail establishments, banks, lumberyards, a cannery and packing houses, and even a plant to produce ice necessary to cool produce and seafood heading north on Flagler's railroad," local resident and author Robert W. Ganger writes in this month's Historical Society of Palm Beach County newsletter.

"My great-grandfather owned and ran the largest canning factory south of Baltimore," says William Sterling Williams, a local lawyer. When Henry Ford started mass-producing cars, Sterling wanted to start a rubber plantation west of Delray Beach to make tires, one of the few ideas he had that didn't work out.

"He was a visionary and entrepreneur, an example of American exceptionalism," Williams says. "And he was the biggest influence on my grandmother."

Ethel became a community powerhouse — a commercial property owner and manager, historian and leader who was behind the drive to retain Delray Beach's "village by the sea" charm. Co-founder and first president of the Delray Beach Historical Society, Ethel was "a renaissance woman who wielded a strong fist inside a white glove," her grandson says.

She was loyal and generous, he recalls — at least once she



Photo courtesy Bill Williams

Henry Sterling: When Henry Flagler told him there was nothing in Delray, Sterling said: 'There will be. Just watch.'

gave the deed to a house to one of her workers "to thank you for being nice to me," he says.

And she was feisty — at a time when women weren't supposed to be.

When her short first marriage went sour, Ethel drove her convertible along Biscayne Bay in Miami and tossed her diamond rings into the water.

She decided "I had enough of him," her grandson recalls.

Ethel's second husband, Dr. William C. Williams, was chief of staff at St. Mary's Hospital in West Palm Beach and on the staff of Pine Ridge Hospital, which served the black community. He also was a driving force for establishment of Bethesda Memorial Hospital in Boynton Beach.

Anyone who's ever enjoyed a stroll down Delray Beach's charming Atlantic Avenue or walked along the beach there — without the shadow of towering condominiums — owes a debt to Ethel Sterling Williams, who lived to be 95 and never lost that twinkle in her eye.

"There are no monuments in the park commemorating their lives," writes Ganger, "but that is what is to be expected in an understated (but decidedly trendy) city that still calls itself 'an historic village by the sea.'"

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Ethel Sterling 'She was an independent thinker'

"My grandmother wanted Delray to have a sense of place, and not look like the rest of southeast Florida," recalls her grandson, William Sterling Williams, a West Palm Beach lawyer.

She told him: "There's nothing so permanent as change. Be ready to accept it."

But a change to make Atlantic Avenue a cookie-cutter street of commercialism was one she would not abide. He remembers her fighting to keep McDonald's off Atlantic Avenue when he was around 10.

"She called rows of condos 'filing cabinets,'" he recalls. "She didn't want the charm of Delray Beach to be taken away."

On Sept. 4, 1911, a meeting was held at the Ladies Improvement Association Hall on Atlantic Avenue to organize the third vote for Delray Beach's incorporation. Voting day: Oct. 9, 1911. Fifty-seven voters were qualified to cast their ballots on decision day.

"Sometimes, we'd go out to the railroad tracks, flag down the train and get the rare treat of a glass of ice water ... So much depended on that train. If there was a freeze coming through, a storm or a hurricane approaching, we'd learn about it by having the train whistle signal us."

"Later I went to West Palm Beach for music lessons. The train would go north at 7 a.m. and return south at 11 p.m. and someone would have to wave a lantern at the brakeman so he'd know where to leave me off."

— ETHEL STERLING WILLIAMS' oral history quoted in the book 'Public

Faces —

Private Lives: Women in South Florida, 1870s-1910' by Karen Davis