

## “Peace” Comes Home to South Jersey

By Robert L. Barnett, 2/21/2009

Somewhere, in a Central American jungle, a little over 2,000 miles from South Jersey, there stands a statue of a woman who walked for peace for over 25 years, and over 25,000 miles. This statue was erected in 2000 to honor Peace Pilgrim and stands on the grounds of the *United Nations University for Peace, the U.N.-Mandated Graduate School of Peace and Conflict Studies* in Ciudad Colon, Costa Rica.

Beginning at the height of the Cold War, in 1953, Peace Pilgrim began her journey from coast to coast, and then back again, and then again, and again, and again... She carried nothing with her but a comb and a tooth brush, and she wore a pinney that said simply “PEACE PILGRIM.” When people would stop her and ask what she was doing she would give them her message that Inner Peace is not achieved through having Outer Things, and that Outer Peace will spread if people will realize ***“This is the way of peace: Overcome evil with good, and falsehood with truth, and hatred with love.”*** If people offered her a place to stay or a meal she would gratefully accept, but if not, she would sleep outside and fast. She would never take food, or supplies, or money, trusting in daily Providence. In time Peace came to be known internationally and was a desired speaker on college campuses in the 1960s and 1970s. The rest of the world started to catch on to the message that peace was a thing worth working for.

After her passing in 1981 Peace’s friends and admirers worked together to preserve her words and tell her story. They formed the Friends of Peace Pilgrim, whose offices were originally in California, but are now in Connecticut. Through producing and distributing books and pamphlets in many languages, Friends continue to spread Peace Pilgrim’s message around the world in all the thousands of places she is known. There is a website for Peace Pilgrim and another for Friends of Peace Pilgrim. There are two Facebook groups dedicated to her life and words. YouTube videos let people see Peace Pilgrim’s face and hear her voice, in interviews and speeches recorded during her life, anywhere on the planet.

But there was one place where Peace Pilgrim was not known very well at all, until recently. That was her home town of Egg Harbor City, New Jersey. Peace was born Mildred Lisette Norman on July 18, 1908 on a small farm. She grew up on Buerger Street between Bremen Avenue and Antwerp Avenue and often walked in the quiet pines near her home where an offshoot of Landing Creek ran behind her farm. Those Jersey Pines must have spoken to her condition, for her long walks became key to discerning her mission.

Mildred’s great-grandfather, Philip Mathias Wolsieffer, was Egg Harbor City’s first mayor when the town was settled in the mid-1850s by German immigrants. Most settlers were leaving other U.S. cities where German communities (as well as Irish), were under assault by anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic mobs. Secret societies which planned these attacks in the 1840s and 1850s were called the “Know Nothing” movement, from the standard response to police inquiries. Many of the other settlers were more recent exiles from Europe, after the Liberal Progressive revolutions of 1848 were harshly suppressed by the Imperial governments. Several of the streets that parallel US 30 are named for heroes of the anti-imperialist revolutions.

Mildred’s family were “Freethinkers” so she did not grow up in any particular established church, and her spirituality tended to the more universal. (While she worked with Quakers on and off from the 1930s, she was not a member of the Society of Friends or any other religious group). Mildred was Valedictorian of her 1926 class at Egg Harbor City High School, and had no trouble finding her way in the world of work. Her pamphlet *“Steps Toward Inner Peace”* begins: ***“In my early life I made two very important discoveries. In the first place I discovered that making money was easy. And in the second place I discovered that making money and spending it foolishly was completely meaningless. I knew that this was not what I was here for, but at that time... I didn’t know exactly what I was here for. It was out of a***

*very deep seeking for a meaningful way of life, and after having walked all one night through the woods, ... I felt a complete willingness, without any reservations, to give my life, to dedicate my life to service."*

In 1952 Peace became the first woman to hike the entire length of the Appalachian Trail, and the next year she began her first pilgrimage for peace. While on her travels she had her mail sent to the Cologne, NJ Post Office near where her younger sister Helene lived. Helene knew Peace's itinerary and would forward the mail to wherever Peace was expected to be next.

In the 1990s Barbara Reynolds, the director of Free To Be Day Care at Richard Stockton College, came to know Peace through her writings and was surprised to learn that she came from just a few miles away. She set out to interest the school children of Egg Harbor City in the person who might be the town's most famous resident. After a few years of holding talks, and planning special events, her efforts encouraged the City Council to get on board in a big way. The park which lies behind the Municipal Building, and across from the Historical Society Building, (London Ave between Campe and Claudius Streets), was improved and fenced. Corbin City artist Sally Laird McInerney sculpted a statue of Peace Pilgrim and the children of the Egg Harbor City schools have designed colorful tiles that surround the statue. A Peace Pole was planted in the Park, and on July 12, 2005, proclaimed Peace Pilgrim Day by Mayor Joe Keuhner, Peace Pilgrim Park was dedicated in her memory. On July 18, 2008, the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Peace's birth, the City held a magnificent celebration that included a two-mile commemorative walk from the Park to Peace's old house on Buerger Street and back, followed by a community picnic with live music and poetry readings. This is to become an annual City event.

Somewhere in the South Jersey Pine Barrens there now stands a statue of a woman who walked for peace for over 25 years. She is finally known and respected by the town from which she came. And another way has been found for her message of Peace to spread.

Websites:

<http://peacepilgrim.net/>

Costa Rica Statue: <http://www.peacepilgrim.net/statue/jemila.htm>

Egg Harbor City Statue: <http://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WM548G>

[Note: this article has been abridged and published in the Spring 2009 edition of "South Jersey Traditions," the quarterly newsletter of the Down Jersey Folklife Center. They have posted the newsletter to the web in the form it was sent to the printer, and the pages are scrambled in a very intriguing pattern.]

Down Jersey Folklife Center: <http://www.wheatonarts.org/downjersey/aboutdjflc>

Spring 2009 Newsletter:

[http://www.wheatonarts.org/downjersey/aboutdjflc/newsletters/Newsletter\\_Spring%202009.pdf](http://www.wheatonarts.org/downjersey/aboutdjflc/newsletters/Newsletter_Spring%202009.pdf)