

An interview with Virginia Cornell:

Question:

How did you find out about Kathleen Goddard Jones?

Cornell:

After the success of *Doc Susie: The True Story of a Country Physician in the Colorado Rockies*, I realized that readers are hungry for stories about our foremothers. So I began looking for a new hero. The search proved more difficult than I had imagined. One day I was talking to a friend here in Carpinteria, an elderly environmentalist named Henry Brown.

“Henry,” I said, “I’m looking for an interesting woman to write about, someone who *did* something.”

Henry did not even hesitate. “Why that would be Kathleen Goddard Jones.”

“What did she do?”

“She saved the Nipomo Dunes. Would you like to meet her?”

I knew nothing about the dunes. One rainy March day Henry and I drove to Arroyo Grande to meet Kathy. On the way, he took me to Oso Flaco Lake where we crossed the lake on its new bridge. The wind blew the dripping fog straight into our faces. When we came in sight of the ocean there were huge, unorganized rollers attacking the shore. I was soaked - but thrilled. And I immediately understood the dunes’ grandeur.

But I was also impressed with Kathy. She was 88, energetic, and her memory was excellent. One of the first things she told me was how much she missed Gaylord, her recently deceased third husband. And she confided that she was actively searching for a new love in her life! Clearly, this gal had spunk.

Kathy and I agreed to work together. That spring and summer she took me to many of her favorite places. She taught me the names of plants, regaled me at length about her vigorous love life. I hauled along a small tape recorder. So dedicated was she to her dune work that she paid little attention to the newspapers. Her deafness made it difficult to hear the television set so she rarely turned it on. At one point she even asked me to explain who O.J. Simpson was!

She spoke of her formative years in Santa Barbara, of her studies at Mills College, of her first husband - a Persian named Ali Shiraz - who took her to India and Iran. The dissolution of that marriage nearly cost Kathy her life. She told me of her years in New York when she worked her way up through the NBC radio steno pool to a position as a “girl Friday” for a famous radio writer. It was there she learned the techniques of public relations.

She told me of her adopted children, of her wealthy second husband, Duncan Jackson. She spoke frequently of her devotion to the B’hai religion.

Question:

So, why didn’t you write this book right away?

Cornell:

In November of 1995 Kathleen was hit by a car. She was terribly injured and we weren’t sure whether she would survive. She didn’t feel well enough to work with me for quite a while. I’m afraid I became interested in other projects - which included writing *The Latest Wrinkle and Other Signs of Aging* and then publishing six other books by Frances Laurence and Ted Berkman.

Question:

And why did you return to the project?

Cornell:

Henry Brown, whom I mentioned earlier, became very ill. I promised him on his death bed that I would complete this book. Hey, that’s a serious promise! I finally put everything else on hold, convinced Ted Berkman, who worked with me on Doc Susie, to be my editor again, and got to work.

Question:

Why do you think Kathleen's story is important?

Cornell:

Because of the enormous good she accomplished. That obsession fascinated me. How many times did she attend County Supervisors' meetings? Do you know how boring they are? Sometimes County officials would try to get her to go away by insulting her. She was tenacious, like a bull dog. She badgered her friends as well as her foes, forced them to help her. She could always write one more letter, make one more phone call if it would help. Such devotion must be remembered.

Another reason I liked her story so much was because she was active in old age. When she started her crusade she was nearing sixty, when most people think their lives are just about over. Imagine what older people can accomplish with the time left to us! It just boggles my imagination.

Defender of the Dunes

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