

'IF I CAN, I WILL': Entrepreneur Kate Gleason helped shape Beaufort's future **3A >>**

LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION: Beaufortonians' work selected for film festival **1C**

WEATHER: Sunny and mild — the perfect Sunday. High: 62. Low: 42. **8B**



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Kate Gleason's short time in Beaufort made a lasting impression

Kate Gleason is one of the greatest Americans nobody knows.

Long before women were granted the vote, she excelled in a man's world at her father's machine tool company. She was a child bookkeeper, then an engineer, sales executive and corporate secretary. She retired at 49 and became a developer, banker, manufacturer, visionary, philanthropist and suffragist.

Along the way, Gleason was called eccentric, bossy, pushy, humorous, busy, fun, daring, uncompromising, unconventional, impatient, generous and an angel.



DAVID LAUDERDALE

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In 1927, Gleason turned her can-do energy to an impoverished Beaufort.

She was a part-time resident for only 5½ years, until her death of pneumonia at age 67. But in that short window, she created a thriving tourism business downtown called the Gold Eagle Tavern and Lodge. She developed the first resort golf course in Beaufort County, around affordable apartments and estates for artists called Colony Gardens on Lady's Island. She quietly bailed out the People's

State Bank by depositing \$25,000 when it was about to go under in the Great Depression. She bought Dataw Island and gave many people work building three causeways. She left the land where Beaufort Memorial Hospital and the Kate Gleason Memorial Park now sit on the banks of the Beaufort River.

Last week, the Beaufort Yacht & Sailing Club was brimming with people laughing and gasping at Gleason's exploits shared by the writer of a new book, "The Life and Letters of Kate Gleason." Janis F. Gleason, who married into the family in 1959, spent 20 years piecing together a story Gleason's own family did not know. One of her brothers made Kate Gleason the target of contempt, painting her as a spoiled eccentric who took credit for the accomplishments of others.

Please see GLEASON on 4A



Special to the Packet and Gazette

ABOVE: Kate Gleason lived in Beaufort part time and spent her days in the house side of what became the Gold Eagle Tavern. This postcard of the tavern was made when it opened in 1930. It was named to honor Henry W. DeSaussure, who was born in Beaufort and was responsible for America's first gold coins. **LEFT:** Janis F. Gleason's book 'The Life and Letters of Kate Gleason' took her 20 years to complete after marrying into the family in 1959.



GLEASON

Continued from 3A

But over the years, Janis Gleason kept hearing a much different story outside the family. And when she discovered a stash of Gleason's personal letters and notes in a filing cabinet at the Gleason Corp. in Rochester, N.Y., she held in her hands the backbone of a book that gives new details and insight into one of Beaufort County's most remarkable episodes.

SEA ISLAND INC.

By the time Gleason got to Beaufort, she'd put her father's company on the map as it literally put the world in gear, facilitating the making of bicycles, then automobiles and oil exploration. Gleason then turned around a failing bank, and developed low-cost housing for workers as part of a full planned community. She opened a number of factories, one making trailers for cars. She pioneered the use of concrete in home construction, built a personal castle, rebuilt the village of Septmont in France after World War I, and bought land and developed housing in California.

Gleason was invited to the Lowcountry by her secretary, Libby Sanders, a native of Beaufort.

"Kate Gleason's ambition was to rescue Beaufort," Janis Gleason told the monthly

meeting of the Beaufort County Historical Society on Thursday. "Her purpose was not to make money. She said, 'I want to go where people need me.'"

The "serial entrepreneur" was needed here. She pushed the production of vegetables and turkeys.

But she saw the Lowcountry as a beautiful retreat for active and creative people from colder climates. This was decades before the same visions transformed Hilton Head Island, and thereby the county's economy.

She felt the climate and natural beauty could be commercialized, and she urged locals to put in place attractions to bring people here: Boating, equestrian trails, affordable housing, the arts and fine dining.

Many wealthy Northerners came to the Lowcountry in Gleason's era, but it was to buy large private reserves for exclusive hunting. Gleason came to spread entrepreneurialship. She incorporated Sea Island Inc. and got to work.

Her Gold Eagle Tavern featured a stunning concrete Norman tower. Locals called her "Concrete Kate" and wondered if she weren't trying to make a little Florida out of Beaufort by covering everything in stucco.

LATIN MOTTO

At Thursday's meeting, Charles Aimar recalled seeing

Kate Gleason often as a child, walking around the Point neighborhood where he grew up near the Gold Eagle.

"She gave me my first dog," he said. "It was a water spaniel we named Checkers."

The Gold Eagle attracted luminaries like Clark Gable and artists like Francis Griswold, who wrote a Beaufort novel, "A Sea Island Lady." Guests were drawn to its sunsets and famous rice curry brought on silver trays to tables covered in starched linen.

It closed in 1961 and was torn down. Colony Gardens is long gone.

When Gleason died in 1933, her \$1.4 million estate went to help many. Her younger sister, Eleanor, came to town to help finish Colony Gardens. It was Eleanor, a librarian, who deeded the old sawmill land to the hospital.

But Gleason's remarkable story did not end. Much of the opportunity she foresaw in Beaufort County — and showed us how to do — finally did bear fruit.

As we glean hints from the new book on how to face the future, perhaps it is "Miss Gleason's" attitude that is most important.

We now know that she lived by a Latin motto *possum volo* — "I can, if I will."

"Kate was a teacher," Janis Gleason told me. "She taught that you can do anything if you're willing to take the risk and try hard enough."