

A day in the high-flying life of a nonagenarian

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By Nicole Carter

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PERU — “I was born on Monday, May 4, 1931 at 7:22 a.m., in Quincy, Massachusetts,” Frann Bird, a walking and talking firecracker who came to the attention of the Advertiser Democrat during a random meeting at Stephens Memorial Hospital, starts telling her story in her Oxford county home. “The doctor came out and said to my dad that my mother was fine, but he could not save their baby.

“I am not supposed to be here. But God said, ‘I have other plans!’”

The almost 93-year-old Frann Bird, née Fowler, (ironically) barely stays seated, never mind keeping her feet on the ground. She has ridden in helicopters. She went up in a hot air balloon 20 years ago. She rode an elephant. She has driven and ridden her own horses.

“I went by biplane over Lake Winnepesaukee. And I’ve flown out of Worthley Pond [across the road],” Bird laughs. “I didn’t really know the guy but someone said ‘he’ll take you up. I know how you love flying.’ So I did.

“People are awful good to me. Sometimes I think it’s wonderful to be old. We flew off the pond and around the whole town and back. That was great.”

Bird says the biggest air adventure she’s done was ski-diving, at the age of 82.

What made her decide to step out of a plane at high altitude?

“Because I always wanted to!” she said with a giggle.

And why did she wait until she was in her 80s to do it?

“I didn’t have the opportunity,” Bird answered. “My granddaughter went the year before and I watched her, and I was like ‘oh, yeah!’ So the next year I did it.”

Bird has been charming everyone she meets for the past 92 years. She shared a vivid memory of early childhood:

“When I was five my mother took me by bus across-country to California, to visit my aunt and uncle. I had such a good time on that bus,” she said. “Shirley Temple was the biggest thing. There were a whole bunch of college guys on the bus, going to California. They latched onto me.

“They took a fellow’s hat and told me to go around and gather pennies [from the other passengers]. I thought it was kind of silly, but I did it. And at the next stop they got off and bought lollipops and wanted me to perform ‘The Good Ship Lollipop.’ They made that trip for a five-year-old!”

Since that bus trip in 1937 Bird has racked up countless travel miles in the air, and on the ground by wheels and by foot.

“Once, I rode on the back of a motorcycle, with my pastor,” she said. “I told him I did not want to do that but he talked me into it so I did it once, with my head in his back.”

Vehicles with more than two wheels were no problem for her, including those hitched to horses. During her first marriage Bird and her husband Roy lived on a farm in New Hampshire where they operated horse carriage rides for hire.



Mementos of Fran Bird’s ski-diving adventure when she was 82.
Nicole Carter / Advertiser Democrat

"We would do wagon trips from Raymond to Alton Bay in New Hampshire, through the woods. With 17 kids. And when we had the horses, we provided wedding carriage rides."

In the 1980s Bird's oldest son called her from his home in New Mexico.

"He said, 'Mum, the other kids have had you forever. Come out and live with me,'" she recalls. "Well, I had an old school bus. And I packed it with everything I could fit in it, all my Sunday school stuff and all my kindergarten teaching stuff, because I didn't know what I would do when I got out there.

"So when I got to New Mexico, I decided I wanted to do something different. I had been a teacher all my life. So I went to work for the forest service."

Despite having no secretarial skills, Bird was hired as an office clerk at Lincoln National Forest in Alamogordo. There, she befriended a young woman who thought Bird should go on a date with her father.

Bird resisted – she had just started a new career. But in the end, she went on that date, and set her friend up with her son. Both couples married.

"So she became my daughter and my daughter-in-law, and my son became my son-in-law!"



Fran Fowler Porter Bird married Roy Bird on a mountain top in Mescalero, New Mexico. The couple moved to Peru, Maine in 1998. *Supplied photo*

Bird married her second husband, Joe Bird, on a mountain Mescalero, New Mexico, home to an Apache reservation where she also taught speech and language to children residing there.

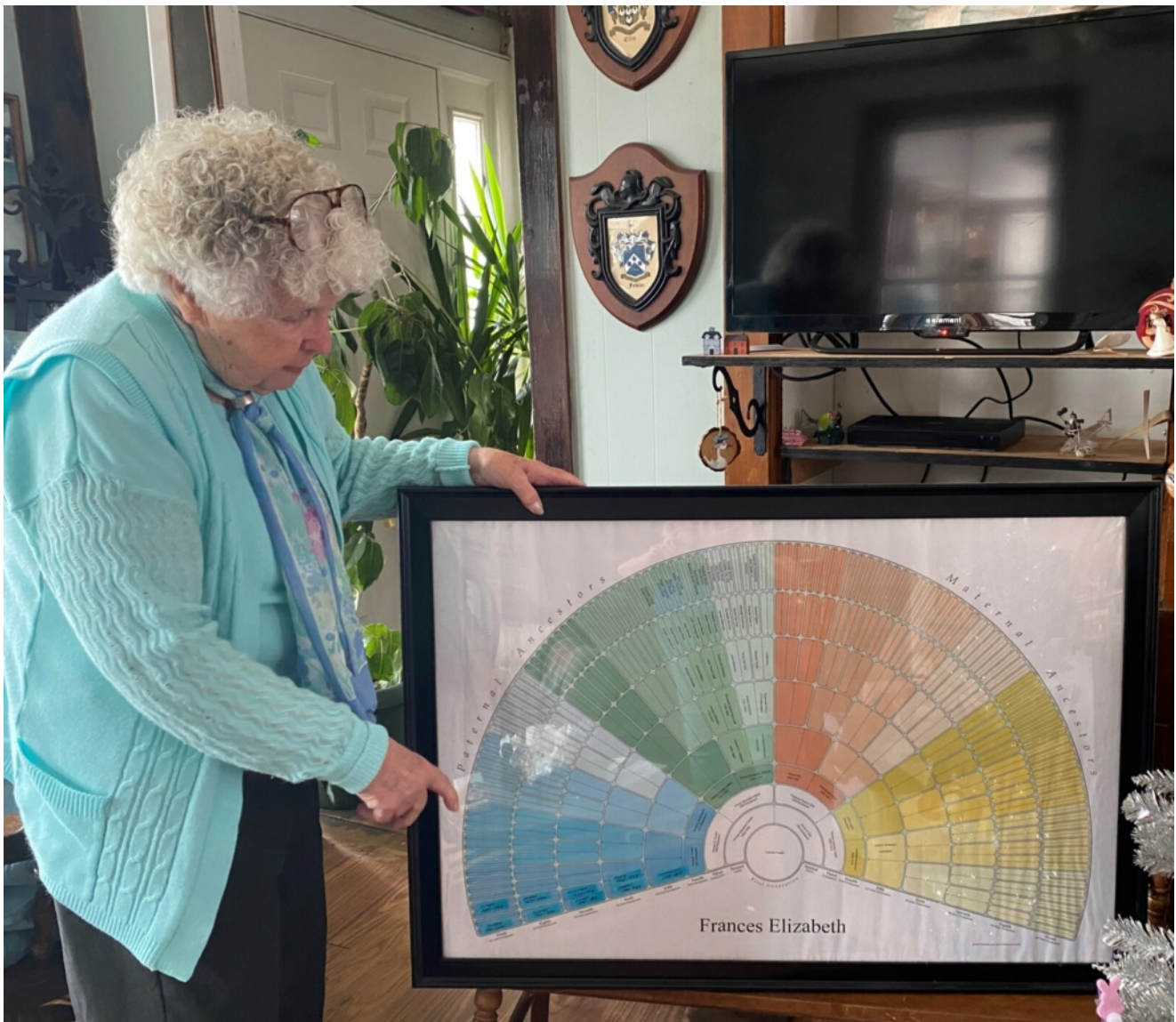
Bird and Joe eventually made their way back to New England where most of her family was, with plans to have a summer place in western Maine. The two were on a drive, looking for the Rumford home where Joe's first wife had grown up, to take pictures for his kids.

A wrong turn took them to the shores of Worthley Pond in Peru.

A realtor pointed them in the direction of an antique New England farmstead.

"Needless to say, we bought it," Bird said. As the pair settled in their 1840 Cape Cod Joe's health began to decline; seasonal travel would no longer be possible for him. "So we stayed here. This was home."

Bird paints. She took guitar lessons. She has traced her family roots back to the era of Richard I and the Crusades. She collects fossils, rocks and shells from all over the world. She is taking classes about neuroscience so she can talk with her grandson about his work at MIT.



PERU, ME – APRIL 4, 2023: Fran Bird, a 92-year-old volunteer at Stephens Memorial Hospital, shows her genealogical work that dates back to the 11th century and involves King Richard I and the Crusades. *Nicole Carter / Advertiser Democrat*

Not surprisingly, Bird has made an indelible mark on her most recent adopted home. She has volunteered for the Worthley Pond Association, inspecting boats at the boat launch to prevent milfoil contamination. She has worked on seasonal loon counts. She held Bible study with residents of a Canton nursing home, and volunteered at Stephens Memorial Hospital as a greeter, until the pandemic three years ago.

But if volunteering is not as simple as it used to be, Bird is determined to remain involved.

"I hope to get back, now that things are letting up. I really miss the hospital," she said. "I love my girls there! I still go in and visit.

"The first time I went back to see them, there was an Army fellow doing the greeting. And I said, 'it takes the U.S. Army to replace me!' Those girls are so special."

Recently, Bird realized there was one thing she had never done before.

"I had never cleaned a fish!" she said. "The fellow that plows me out, he came and asked if I like fish so I said yes. And he hands me this brown trout, out of Worthley Pond. I thought, 'I've got to clean this if I'm going to eat it.' I sat there looking at it.

"So I froze it and later I used a saw to cut it up. It was delicious."

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