

DANGEROUS BOTTLES AND JARS!

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News travels slowly from Topanga Canyon, one of the last wild areas in Los Angeles. And so it was nearly two years afterwards that I heard of the 2004 death of my old friend Nancy Nimitz, at the age of 84. The Topanga community newspaper headline simply read “Nancy Nimitz Has Died,” and the unadorned directness of that statement was in keeping with the personality of the woman herself. She was one of a kind.

Nancy lived alone atop a remote mountain overlooking Topanga Canyon, the rugged area in the Santa Monica Mountains that is home to artists, writers and nature lovers. Tall and rangy with wild sandy hair, freckles and a gravelly voice, Nancy never married. One of her few sentimental symbols was the ship’s bell she kept on her living room mantel, a reminder of her famous father, Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz.

Fluent in Russian, Nancy was an economist at the Rand Corporation, the Santa Monica think tank, keeping track of the Soviet economy during the Cold War. Penetrating the secrecy then surrounding the U.S.S.R., she studied statistics of Soviet agricultural production and how much funding they were putting into scientific research and development. Her findings helped the U.S. government gauge whether the Soviets would be buying grain on the world market one year, or pouring capital into their military programs the next. She befriended me, as a very young Rand researcher in the 1970s, sending me articles and reports to help with my research project on the Soviet nuclear power industry.

To say that Nancy loved nature is an understatement. Her modest house was always open to the elements, with glass doors flung wide on either side of the mountaintop and the breezes blowing through. She often slept outside, enjoying the beauty of the stars, the distant whisper of the creek and the

calls of foxes, coyotes and other mountain critters. Accompanied by her dogs, she led weekend nature hikes for her colleagues at Rand and other friends, sometimes accompanied by her sister, Mary Aquinas Nimitz, a Dominican nun and biologist, identifying every plant and animal track along the way.

A modern-day Luddite, Nancy shunned appliances and other examples of what she considered the fripperies of modern life,

doing without electricity at her house when the term “off the grid” hadn’t even been coined. No stereo was found in her home, just a grand piano on which she could occasionally be coaxed to play Bach.

One of the funniest parodies I have ever seen was a catalog of household gadgets – Lillian Vernon or some such – that Nancy annotated with acerbic comments about the questionable necessity of the conveniences offered. One item in the catalog was a blender with “fourteen forward and reverse speeds.” Nancy’s marginal note raised the question of whether the reverse speeds would perhaps put the food back together? She highlighted the special dispenser for shampoos and soap that was advertised as eliminating “dangerous bottles and jars” from the bathroom, with a little drawing of evil-faced, two-legged bottles and jars chasing poor humans around with daggers. Her annotated catalog was passed from hand to hand at the Rand Corporation, accompanied by gales of laughter.

The one convenience Nancy grudgingly embraced was a gas-powered refrigerator, and it was always stocked with bottles of champagne. She had a standing offer that anyone who hiked up to her home from one of the neighboring ridges or canyons would be greeted with a bottle of cold champagne on arrival. I lived on Paseo Miramar in Pacific Palisades, the next ridge over from hers, and a fire trail just above my house wound six and a half miles up and down the mountains to Nancy’s home. She kept several sawhorses and an old door handy in her yard for an impromptu table, and hosted dinner parties under the stars where the talk and laughter and wine all flowed freely.

I claimed the bottle of champagne twice, including once when I ran the entire distance in my hiking boots, after realizing I had left home hopelessly late to hike to a dinner party at her house. Somehow, Nancy always seemed to know when you would arrive. The news passed through a chain of hikers and neighbors along the way, and there she would be in her yard as you hove, panting, into sight, standing with the foam gushing from the champagne bottle.

Life moves on and one loses touch with so many interesting people. But I still carry with me a bit of Nancy Nimitz’s no-nonsense practicality and love of nature. Well, at least I chuckle a little when I order items from mail-order catalogs. Belatedly, Nancy, I raise a glass of champagne to you and your ruggedly individualistic life. Ω

