

Few students, now busily involved in their first weeks of classes, probably know that Fort Lewis was once situated 25 miles to the southwest of its current location on College Rim. Evolving from a late 1800's military outpost in Hesperus, Colorado, (the "Fort" in Fort Lewis), FLC was at one time or another an Indian School, a high school; a two-year college specializing in agriculture, and finally a four-year liberal arts institution. Alumni of the "Old Fort" as it has come to be known, are still active in FLC's alumni community. Within the annals of the school's history, such folk occupy a place akin to the pioneers of early Durango. They provided an absolutely essential ingredient necessary for the success of any institution of higher learning- the student

body. And, not just any student body. The young men and women who attended the Old Fort from the early Twenties to late Forties belonged to the Greatest Generation. Their parents fought WWI, and survived the Spanish Flu. They themselves endured the Great Depression, fought in WWII, and witnessed the birth of the Atomic Age. Locally, they watched Durango turn from a dusty, somewhat wild burg into the largest and most cosmopolitan city in Southwestern Colorado. And, as college students still do today, the Old Fort students set standards for hipness, passion, and modernity that informed and molded the region.

From 1944 to 1946, a group of four women attended the Old Fort: Billie Kleckner, Lorraine Brett, Bernice (Niece) Gardner, and Elaine Perry. Friends with one or the other since girlhood, the women formed a strong fellowship during their time at school, a bond that included their friend Dorothy Mahoney, who did not attend the college.

Life at the Old Fort campus was self-contained for the girls, and in fact for most of those who worked, taught, and studied there. With gasoline heavily rationed during WWII, trips to Durango, or really anywhere, were uncommon, although the FLC Theatre group did make a weekly excursion to Durango's sole radio station, KIUP, in order to read out the news from Fort Lewis for the community.

This splendid isolation fostered deep friendships, as students had to make their own entertainment and create their own fun. All four girls boarded in the student dorms, which were strictly segregated by gender. Parties, even in the dorms, were themed occasions, with homemade refreshments taking pride of place. Although Dorothy was not part of campus life, she was included in most every excursion the girls made into town and abroad, and was often seen during the holidays.

Jokes and jests were part of the cultural stew among the student body at the Hesperus Campus. Bernice recalled an especially

memorable prank she and her roommate Lorraine, (whose nickname was Dopey), played on the other two girls. The pair of tricksters decided to hide a few mothballs in Billie and Elaine's room, but it turned out that mothballs came in a large pack. Having hidden ten or twelve already and not knowing what else to do with the excess, Lorraine and Bernice decided the most sensible course of action was to hide the entire pack in every nook and cranny available.

Needless to say, Billie and Elaine's room was uninhabitable until all the mothballs were found and disposed of, a process that while now a treasured memory, at the time took, "a few years to get funny."

In 1946, the four friends graduated into the mid-twentieth century workplace with respective degrees in Education & Home Economics. Bernice Gardner continued on to get a four-year degree, attending the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, where she met her husband, Jim Bowra. Billie Kleckner went on to Colorado State University, and met her husband Everett (Rich) Richardson while there. Lorraine Brett became Lorraine Whitlow, Elaine Perry took her husband's name Gedanic, and Dorothy Mahoney married a fellow named Brack. The girls became women and moved on in their

lives, careers, and marriages, yet always remained in touch, fused by those early times at the Old Fort.

In 2013, Billie and her husband Rich were diagnosed with advanced cancer. As both slowly succumbed to the disease, Rich had the idea to make a lasting tribute to his beloved wife. Inspired by the long friendship among the women, he founded a new scholarship in agreement with the Fort Lewis College Foundation. Named "The Hesperus Girls Plus One Scholarship," the fund will benefit female high school students from Aztec or Durango who wish to attend FLC, starting in 2014. Applicants must provide transcripts and an essay and have a G.P.A. of 2.5 or better. "The scholarship is a testament to the love between people," said Gail Frick, Rich and Billie's daughter. "Education changed mom's world (and also changed the other girl's lives)," Gail continued. "Without it, she would have remained a small town girl and never traveled the world or been friends with people from Korea, Egypt, China, Thailand to name a few. That is one of the reasons why dad was pleased to fund the scholarship in the girl's names."

Billie Richardson passed in July 2013. Rich followed three weeks later, and was pleased to



Dr. Everett (Rich) Richardson and Billie Richardson (nee Kleckner)

know that FLC Foundation was working on telling the story of Billie's life and friendships.

Fort Lewis College is fortunate indeed to have alumni whose deep experience, both at the college and in later life, inspire a sense of belonging and responsibility. We are humbled and thankful to join with the Richardson family in honoring their parents' long life together, and the Hesperus Campus Girls +1 story of love and friendship lasting nearly 70 years. Their thoughtful gift ensures the possibility for today's "Rim Campus Girls," to forge powerful relationships that will one day mirror those of "Niece," "Dopey," Lorraine, Dorothy, and Billie.

Hesperus Girls + 1

Lifelong Friendships Foster a New Scholarship for Women at FLC



Three Hesperus Girls + One, 2010

L-R: Billie Richardson (nee Kleckner), Elaine Gedanic (nee Perry), Bernice Bowra (nee Gardner), Dorothy Brack (nee Mahoney), Lorraine Brett is not pictured

The Four Hesperus Girls circa 1945

L-R: Bernice Gardner, Lorraine Brett, Billie Kleckner, Elaine Perry. Dorothy Mahoney is not pictured.



[Click Here to watch the Foundation's Interview with Bernice Bowra \(nee Gardner\)](#)