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Miller Place in another time

Author recounts her mid-century childhood here in new memoir

By Anna Gustafson

For Ethel Lee-Miller, Miller Place was the perfect place to come of age.

Ms. Lee-Miller spent her childhood summers in Miller Place in the 1950s and SSRq60s, when dirt roads were still prevalent in the hamlet and children roamed free from sunup to sundown. Over the years she spent there, Ms. Lee-Miller learned about death -- her cousin threw an apple at a rabbit and accidentally killed it, and she survived Hurricane Carol. There were, of course, the more routine events -- walking along North Country Road with her twin sister Eileen, gazing out on Long Island Sound from inside Mount Sinai Congregational Church and swimming at Cedar Beach.

It was a pretty regular childhood, she said, and her "safe" memories of an "idyllic" Miller Place pushed her to write a recently released memoir she credits with helping her learn more about herself and her family.

"It's nothing terribly exciting, but it is very comforting," she said of the memoir. "The book is all about celebrating childhood."

"Thinking of Miller Place: A Memoir of Summer Comfort" came out in January, and Ms. Lee-



Sun courtesy photo Ethel Lee-Miller's new memoir will take you back to the Miller Place of the 1950s and '60s - the days at Cedar Beach, bicycling down North Country Road, watching the Sound from Mount Sinai Congregational Church.

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Miller has since been on a whirlwind tour of Long Island and the surrounding area to discuss a place she said can serve as a metaphor for the coming-of-age experiences to which so many Americans can relate. Most recently, Ms. Miller spoke at the Miller Place Historical Society, and she will be discussing her book at Comsewogue Public Library Sept. 8.

Since the book's release, people from New York to Washington State have told Ms. Lee-Miller that it evoked many childhood memories they had long tucked away.

"I've gotten e-mails from people who also spent summers in Miller Place, and I had someone from Washington State e-mail me and tell me how my book reminded them of their own childhood," she said. "Even someone from Albania, who grew up on the shore, said my stories reminded her of growing up. All day they were at the beach and had that sense of freedom."

The book, which tells of Ms. Lee-Miller's life in Miller Place from age 6 to 12, has inspired several readers to send her pages of letters detailing their childhoods. For her readers, Ms. Lee-Miller said she hopes the book serves as something of a security blanket, a way to remember childhood dreams and the friends and family members who once played pivotal roles in people's lives but have now passed away.

"I think anyone who has had special relationships with family members or summer places can really relate to this book," she said.

For herself, she said the book helped her to "explore a lot more about family dynamics."

"Writing the book was a deepening experience for me," she said. "It really made me look at my relationships with my family, especially my twin and my older sister. My mother was still alive when I was writing this book, and I would take chapters to her in the nursing home. It was a wonderful experience; we'd look through old picture albums together."

She started the memoir four years ago, decades after she and her family spent their last night at the Miller Place house her grandfather had bought in the 1920s. Because her grandfather sold the house, located on a former dirt road now named Passway Lane, in the 1970s, Ms. Lee-Miller had to spend nights at the bed and breakfast in Miller Place when she needed to jolt her memory of the place. She has frequently brought her husband to Miller Place for day trips, and she and her twin, Eileen, even recently visited their former home together.

It's different, she said -- there's indoor plumbing and paved roads, but it wasn't that hard to remember herself in those preadolescent days, running around in bare feet.

"It's the same house, but it's totally modernized," she said. "The shed was still there, and the old stone fireplace was still there."

The house is a bit like the story of Miller Place itself, Ms. Lee-Miller said.

"The roads aren't dirt anymore, but there's still something about it that's the same," she said. "It's still beautifully green, and there's a slower pace. The beach is still gorgeous. There's the small town feel. You walk by people on the street, and people will say, 'Hi, how ya doing?'"

Ms. Lee-Miller will also host a memoir writing seminar on Sept. 2 from 1 to 2 p.m. at the Miller Place-Mount Sinai Historical Society's annual country fair.

For more information about Ms. Lee-Miller or her upcoming events, visit <http://web.mac.com/etheleemiller>.



Survey 08/28/2008

Are the Yankees done in 2008?

Yes. They will not make the playoffs.

No. It ain't over 'til it's over.

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What do you think the Rocky Point Monster is?

- 18 % Raccoon
 - 16 % Dog
 - 00 % Possum
 - 00 % Rabbit
 - 04 % Groundhog
 - 00 % Cat
 - 18 % Monster
 - 07 % Woodchuck
 - 04 % Goat
 - 33 % Other
- Total Votes: 45

