



Making history: The Sonia Fuentes story

Feminist pioneer recalls early years – and predicting Joan Rhulen’s wedding



Sonia Pressman Fuentes, second from right, was honored at last November’s Monticello Cs Hall of Distinction ceremony. From left, emcee Les Kristt, Monticello CS Media Specialist Allison Ruef, Fuentes and Monticello CS Superintendent Daniel Teplesky. Fuentes was a pioneer in the women’s movement.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO
At the founding of the National Organization of Women (NOW). Sonia Fuentes, front row, third from the right, two seats to the right of Betty Friedan. Washington, DC, October 1966.

Return to the Catskills

BY SONIA FUENTES

On November 2, 2013, I flew from Tampa, FL, to Newark Airport, where I was picked up by my friend and former classmate at Monticello High, Joan Rhulen Farrow, and her daughter, Jill, for the two-hour ride to Monticello.

Joan is one of the most prominent and active women in Sullivan County, active in a host of organizations, now and in the past. Currently, she serves as president of the Catskill Regional Medical Center (CRMC) Foundation for the CRMC hospitals in nearby Harris and Callicoon. She is also on the foundation and dormitory corporation boards of the SUNY Sullivan Foundation of the local community college.

Wherever we drove, I saw not only the villages and towns as they are today but those in my mind as they were in the 1930s and '40s. While I saw the houses, schools, and stores there today, I remembered the people who were in those or past houses, schools, and stores so many years ago.

In the Class Prophecy, which I wrote for our class’s 1946 Yearbook, the Monti, I had Joan married to another classmate, Jesse Finklestein. When the Monti was published, they both complained to me about my portraying them as a married couple since they didn’t even date. Then, they got married and were very happily married for forty-eight years until Jesse’s untimely death at the age of sixty-six. Along the line, they changed their last name to Farrow.

While I take credit for Joan and Jesse’s marriage, she takes credit for my going to college. While in high school, I once met Joan in the ladies room where she asked me if I intended to go to college. “Absolutely not,” I responded. “No one in my family has ever graduated from high school so I have no intention of going beyond that. Furthermore, I’d be too old when I graduated.” (I’d be twenty-two and most of



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO
Sonia with President Lyndon Johnson, April 11, 1968. Sonia was invited to the White House when Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1968, commonly called the Fair Housing Act.

my classmates would be twenty-one.) But she planted the seed and after graduation from high school, I did indeed go on to Cornell University and then on to the University of Miami (FL) School of Law.

While Joan has lived in Monticello most of her life, for me going there was a voyage into my past.

Joan told me that beyond the two of us, very few members of our class remain alive and of those who are alive, some are seriously ill. Jackie Herzog, the beauty of our class, is long gone and so are most of the others. It seems as if our classmates have blown away like wispy dandelions in the wind.

As we drove into town, Joan showed me how lovely Broadway looked, but, sadly, the village is in a depressed state. Many of the stores are shut, and jobs are few. Monticello has no movie theater and that is also true of some of the other villages we visited in the area.

As we drove on Broadway, I, however, saw in my mind’s eye the movie theater that had been there in my day, the Ri-alto. Most Saturdays saw me there with my mother viewing the double feature. I was terrified when a man sat next to me because I feared one could get pregnant from sitting next to a man at the movies. I didn’t learn about sex until I was seventeen and my classmate, Doris Smookler, told me about it. I didn’t believe her.

When the owner of the theater changed the price of admission from \$.25 to \$.50, I, along with other students,

picketed the movie theater. The owner, however, knew my parents, and spoke to my mother complaining about my presence on the picket line. As a result, she took me off the picket line.

Joan told me that the village has become much more diversified than when I lived there. In our class of about a hundred, there was one African American student. Now the mayor is an African American. Statistics reveal that of Monticello’s current population of 6,741, whites constitute 52 percent; African Americans, 31 percent; and Hispanics, 30 percent.

It was a revelation to me to see the various types of establishments now on the Port Jervis Road. One was Mr. Willy’s Restaurant, where Joan and I went on the evening of November 2 to attend a reception and dinner made possible by an anonymous donor. At Mr. Willy’s, I met the superintendent of schools, Daniel Teplesky; principal, Lori Orestano-James; and a special ed teacher in the middle school named Christine Worthington. Christine was very excited about the Hall of Distinction and told me that she had established Wednesday as Hall of Distinction Day, when her students study the biographies of the ten inaugural inductees. She purchased a copy of my memoir and plans to read excerpts from it to her students this year and in the future.

See our “Down the Decades” columns on January 14 and January 21 for more of Sonia’s memoirs.

On November 2, 2013, Sonia Pressman Fuentes was one of 10 inaugural inductees into the Hall of Distinction of the Monticello Central School District, from whose high school she had graduated as valedictorian in 1946.

Fuentes’ memoir, “Eat First – You Don’t Know What They’ll Give You, The Adventures of an Immigrant Family and Their Feminist Daughter” is one of the most popular titles on Xlibris, its publisher, which calls her, “one of the most successful Xlibris authors ever.”

Among the achievements of Fuentes, who emigrated from Nazi Germany to New York with her parents and brother in 1934:

- First woman attorney in the Office of the General Counsel at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC).
- Co-founder of the National Organization for Women (NOW) and Federally Employed Women (FEW).
- Speaker on women’s rights issues before audiences in the U.S., Europe and Asia.
- Included in “What Happened to the Children Who Fled Nazi Persecution” (2006), “Feminists Who Changed America, 1963-1975” (2006) and “Women of Achievement in Maryland History” (2002).

Sonia Pressman Fuentes graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Cornell University in

1950 and first in her class at the University of Miami School of Law in 1957. She had a 36-year career as an attorney and executive with the federal government and multinational corporations. She drafted many of the EEOC’s

initial landmark guidelines and decisions. In addition to being one of the founders of NOW, she was also a founder of the Women’s Equity Action League (WEAL) and Federally Employed Women (FEW).



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO
Sonia Fuentes with her parents, Zysia and Hinda Pressman, graduation from Cornell University, 1950. Sonia credits classmate Joan Rhulen Farrow with inspiring her to go to college. She later attended the University of Miami School of Law.

The recent blast of frigid air that has, for the time being at least, made “polar vortex” part of our vocabulary has re-ignited a debate that is never likely to end, while furnishing us with yet another potential contender.

It is the argument over the worst winter ever in Sullivan County’s history, and it is nothing new. While today most folks of a certain age are likely to reference the winter of 1957-58, when so much snow fell in Monticello the large dump trucks from the construction of Monticello Raceway had to be employed to haul it away, real old-timers will repeat stories they’ve been told about the winter of 1888, which culminated in the March blizzard many consider the worst storm in local history, or that of 1914, which also saw a devastating blizzard.

And there are other candidates, largely unknown by all but the most avid historians. The winter of 1883-1884 was a particularly frigid one, and in 1858-1859 there was an extraordinary amount of snow. That winter, the first snow fell on Thanksgiving Day, and according to the New York Times, “from that time until March 28, 1859 there was but one week during which snow did not fall every day.”

The winter of 1822 was also

a brutal one, and was long thought by many old-timers to be the benchmark against which all other severe winters should be measured.

But at least one Sullivan County old-timer, whose name was not recorded, considered the winter of 1800 – before the county was officially formed – the worst ever.

“It is doubtful if ever there was so terrible a winter in this part of the country,” he told the New York Times on January 7, 1884. “I have no personal recollection of it, but I have good reason to know something about it, as you will see. For three months during that winter the snow lay four feet deep on the level, and there were very few people living here-about, especially in Sullivan County. That county was still almost an entire wilderness, and the settlers lived miles apart. In what is now the town of Fallsburg, there were not more than half a dozen families. There was one by the name of Smith, and two miles from his log cabin was the cabin of my father’s family. On one of the most frightfully stormy nights of the winter of 1800, the burden of snow on Smith’s cabin crushed the roof in and left the inmates, consisting of Smith, his wife, and three small children, exposed to

RETROSPECT

JOHN CONWAY

The worst winter ever?



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO
When discussing the worst Sullivan County winters ever, 1914 is usually mentioned. This photo by well known Monticello photographer Howard Thompson shows Cold Spring Road just past the train station after a blizzard that year.

the fury of the storm. “Fearing that they would perish before morning, they concluded to make their way through the woods to my father’s. Smith took the two eldest children in his arms, and his wife carried the other, a baby only a few months old, and they started on their journey. “It was midnight, very dark, and snowing hard. They struggled along through the

storm for an hour, when they became separated. Smith shouted to his wife, but, receiving no reply, hurried on as best he could to place his two perishing children in safety and procure aid to return and search for his wife and other child, whom he could only believe had perished in the snow. “He could not tell if he was going toward or away from his neighbor’s cabin, but

after struggling aimlessly about for a long time, until he was almost helpless from exhaustion, he came out in my father’s clearing and was soon inside the cabin. The children were almost dead, but were given every care. My mother was very ill that night, and my father had not gone to bed. Smith told him of the fate he feared his wife had met, and as sick as my mother was, with no one to render any aid but my sister, a girl of 12, she urged my father to lose no time in going back with Smith and searching for Mrs. Smith and the babe, as they might still be alive.

“The men lighted blazing pine-knot torches and started back through the woods. At intervals they shouted and called the missing woman’s name, but received no response. They wandered about in the forest until daylight, when, themselves almost exhausted, they concluded that it was useless to search further.

“The storm had ceased just before daybreak, and shortly afterward, the two men found themselves in sight of Smith’s unroofed cabin. The thought then presented itself that Mrs. Smith might have wandered back and found refuge in the cabin. The men hurried forward and when within a few rods of the cabin

they heard a moan. It came from the left of the woods.

“They hastened in that direction and found the lost wife lying beneath the fallen trunk of a large hemlock tree, with her child clasped to her breast. A large bush, or clump of leaves, had served as some protection against the storm. Mrs. Smith was unconscious and terribly frozen. The baby was sleeping as snugly as if it had been in its bed at home, so warmly had its mother wrapped it and so completely protected it from the storm and cold.

“The poor woman was brought to our cabin. She was revived and given every care, but she died from the effects of her terrible night’s experience two weeks later. When my father returned to his cabin after finding Mrs. Smith with her baby warmly snuggling down in her arms, he found another baby snuggling down in its mother’s arms. I was born during his absence, and the very first thing I can remember was my mother telling me of that terrible night.”

And that’s the kind of story one is not likely to forget.

John Conway is the Sullivan County Historian. His class on local history will be offered at SUNY-Sullivan on Monday nights during Spring Semester, which begins on January 22. Call the college to register.