LOCAL

Meet Your Neighbor: Lighthouse Keeper's House volunteers help keep memories alive

Hearth cooking, old recipes made visit to the keeper's house special

Sheri Trusty Special to The News-Messenger

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Hearth cooking is one of the most popular programs at the Wolcott Keeper's House. *Sheri Trusty/Correspondent*

MARBLEHEAD - Before his death in November, 2022, Ray Machar and his wife, Georgette Machar, were the collective face of the Wolcott Keeper's House, the home of Marblehead Lighthouse's first keeper, Benajah Wolcott. As longtime, volunteer chief hearth cookers, Ray and Georgette cooked period food over the home's fireplace, giving visitors a taste — literally — of Marblehead history.

On July 15, Bill and Sharon Coder presented a cast iron Dutch oven for the Keeper's House to Georgette in honor of Ray's memory. The event was attended by Ottawa County Historical Society members, Wolcott house volunteers, and Machar family members. The Dutch oven will be used by current volunteer hearth cooker, Becky Shemenski.

"I was trying to find a good tribute for what Ray and Georgette did," Bill said. "I talked to Becky, and she said the house could use a Dutch oven."

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Wolcott Keeper's House friends share memories of one volunteer

Patrick Lawrence O'Keeffe, Ottawa County Historical Society president, opened the ceremony with remarks about the impact Ray and Georgette had on the Keeper's House.

"The historical society is involved with memories. We're bringing memories alive," O'Keeffe said. "Hearth cooking is one way memories bring the past into the present."

O'Keeffe said Ray transformed hearth cooking at the home by studying the character of the fireplace to learn how to build a fire perfect for cooking.

Georgette Machar poses with the cast iron Dutch oven purchased by Bill and Sharon Coder in honor of Georgette and her late husband, Ray Machar. *Sheri Trusty/Correspondent*

Ray Machar became keeper of the hearth

"Ray was very precise, very procedural as he sought to understand how the fireplace works," O'Keeffe said. "He studied the fireplace because it has quirks like all fireplaces do. He became the 'Keeper of the Fire,' and Georgette did the hearth cooking. That is how the historical society was able to pass on a legacy of what our ancestors actually did."

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It was Bill who first suggested Ray become a Keeper's House volunteer.

"The wonderful thing is, it was a two-fer. We got both Ray and Georgette," Bill said. "I was designated site coordinator, and Ray was my righthand guy."

Bill said Ray and Georgette brought many recipes to the home, including for apple pie, oxtail soup, rabbit and homemade noodles. They gave countless cooking demonstrations for visitors.

"They donated a lot of food and gave out a lot of samples," Bill said.

Georgette was grateful to the Coders for honoring her husband. As she accepted the gift, she shared memories of their time as hearth cookers in the house.

"Ray liked to talk, and he would talk about the kitchen and the utensils. He loved to connect with people," Georgette said.

For Ray, gathering people around the fireplace was like welcoming guests into his home, Georgette said.

"This was home to him. He loved the historical society, and he loved history," she said.

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Bill Coder, right, talks to Georgette Machar, center, at the Wolcott Keeper's House before presenting a cast iron Dutch oven in honor of Georgette and her late husband, Ray Machar. The Machars served as longtime, volunteer hearth cookers at house. On the right is current hearth cooker, Becky Shemenski. *Sheri Trusty/Correspondent*

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