

Ecologist, Advocate Of Meaningful Literature Jere Knight 1908 - 1996

by GEOFF GEHMAN, The Morning Call

Shortly after Jere Knight received a 1995 honorary doctorate from Lehigh University she insisted the degree wasn't just for service to humanity.

Yes, she'd supported loyally the Friends of the Lehigh University Library. Yes, she'd edited a Pulitzer Prize-winning series of books by a Lehigh history professor. And, yes, she'd shared with the school a lifetime of advocacy for meaningful literature and human rights, conservation and peace.

But Knight, who could be modest and impish at the same time, couldn't help suspecting she was honored for devotion to all creatures great and small, notably dogs, specifically collies. With a lark in her voice, she allowed that maybe, just maybe, she should donate her degree in humane letters to a humane society.

Yesterday morning Jere Knight -- widow of "Lassie Come-Home" author Eric Knight, Olympic-caliber fencer, major in the Army's first all-female brigade, editor, teacher, ecologist, poet and citizen of the world -- died at age 88 in Pennswood Village in Newtown, Bucks County. The retirement community is about 30 miles from the farm in Pleasant Valley, Springfield Township, where for a half-century she did many of her good deeds.

Jere Knight was born Ruth Frances Brylawski in Philadelphia to Edward and Hortense Brylawski. From the University of Pennsylvania she received a bachelor's degree in psychology and languages, and a master's in political science. She parlayed the latter degree into a job as secretary for the Pennsylvania chapter of the League of Nations Association. She held this position when she met the man who turned her world upside down.

Eric Knight was cinema editor of The Public Ledger in Philadelphia, a fellow Quaker with similar interests in the arts, equestrian sports and the nature of war. Jere Knight recalled she was "a horrible bluestocking" until she met Eric Knight, and that she was liberated by his "leaven" of humor. After marrying in 1932, an event Eric Knight wrote as a news flash in that day's edition of his paper, they shared a decade of adventures.

When Eric Knight struggled as a screenwriter in California, Jere Knight served as assistant story editor with Selznick International Pictures. For the studio she supervised a bunch of eventually well-known sons of well-known authors, including Budd Schulberg Jr. and Ring Lardner Jr. While Eric taught fiction for the University of Iowa's new Writers Workshop, she worked for Selznick's New York office, overseeing the development of such films as "Gone with the Wind."

Jere Knight helped edit all of Eric Knight's writings, including "Lassie Come-Home" (1940), the book that launched the industry of collie-as-hero(ine), and the 1941 war novel "This Above All," which became a movie starring Tyrone Power and Joan Fontaine. In 1941, when he was in England, reporting for The Saturday Evening Post on the lend-lease program, she was preparing an article for the same publication on that nation's women warriors.

Jere Knight's career blossomed after Eric Knight died in January 1943 in the crash of a military plane in Surinam (Dutch Guiana). In addition to helping Eric Knight's three daughters from his first marriage, she served as an important aide to Oveta Culp Hobby, founding director of the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps, later known as the Women's Army Corps and popularly known as the WAC. A specialist in well-being and intelligence, she wrote a speech on logistics for Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower.

After World War II Knight focused on history and literature. For two years she taught at Moravian Preparatory School in Bethlehem. She worked as research and editorial associate to Lehigh University history professor Lawrence Henry Gipson on his series of books on the British empire from 1748 to 1776, one volume of which won a Pulitzer Prize. In 1967 The Globe-Times published her book-length supplement on the Lehigh Valley's economic history.

Knight never lost her love of poetry. She shepherded the literary estate of E.E. Cummings. She wrote the libretto for a 1970 opera based on "Helen in Egypt," an epic poem by H.D., born Hilda Doolittle in Bethlehem. A 1984 trip to Nicaragua led her to translate poetry by Central American women. Nine years later Petoskey Stone Press printed "The Uphill View," a collection of her poetry.

All the while Jere Knight tirelessly promoted Eric Knight. She wrote two children's versions of "Lassie." She demonstrated the book for youngsters by demonstrating the behavior of her own collies. In 1990, to mark the 50th

anniversary of "Lassie" the novel, she appeared on "Good Morning America" in England, where Knight set the book. She also petitioned the U.S. Postal Service for an Eric Knight stamp.

Jere Knight's influence as an ecologist was particularly widespread. In 1972 she attended the United Nations' first global conference on the human environment, documenting her experiences in Sweden for The Globe-Times. She collected information and wrote reports that helped make Cooks Creek, which runs through Springfield and Durham townships, a state-protected conservation area. For her efforts in land husbandry a nature trail in the watershed area was named for her.

In 1994 the Springfield Township supervisors elected Knight their first community quality-of-life honoree. Noting the long list of her accomplishments in the proclamation, she quipped, "They put in everything but the kitchen stove."

At the award ceremony Knight typically shifted attention from herself to her causes. She hawked a videotape, sponsored by the Bucks County League of Women Voters, on county water pollution. "As long as I'm around this community," she vowed, "I'm gonna yack."

Jere Knight is survived by a son, Jeffrey Lindtner, born to her and her second husband, the late Frederick Lindtner, of Pleasant Valley, and a sister, Jean Jaffee, of Aspen, Colo.