

# In Memoriam

Phebe Underhill Smith '23  
Frederick E. Willits '30  
John C. Dempsey '55

## *John C. Dempsey '55*

John C. (Jack) Dempsey died early Saturday, May 8<sup>th</sup> following a brief and undiagnosed illness. Born on December 27<sup>th</sup>, 1936, he graduated from Friends Academy in 1955, Hobart College in 1959, and went on to get a master's degree in business from Cornell University in 1961.

Before moving to the South Fork of Long Island, Jack Dempsey had worked in his family's business which he would eventually run, Armor Products Export Company in Wilton, CT. He moved to Springs, NY year-round in 1991, selling real estate for Cook Pony Farm in Amagansett.

Jack was a passionate sailor and a longtime member of the Devon Yacht Club and the president of the Eastern Long Island Yacht Sailing Association. He was also an active member of the Amagansett Fire Department and a dog lover.

## *Phebe Underhill Smith (1906-1999) '23* by Kathryn Abbe, Former Trustee and Alumni Parent

Phebe Underhill Smith, a 1923 graduate of Friends Academy and a member of the Board of Trustees from 1945-1961, died at her home in Muttontown on March 13, 1999. She was 92 years old and an 11<sup>th</sup> generation descendant of the 17<sup>th</sup> century settler John Underhill. She was born in Jericho at her family's farm and was a five-day boarder at Friends Academy.

Phebe was proud of the fact that seven other members of her family attended Friends: her father Samuel S. Underhill, her older sister Alice Underhill Mitchell '20, her son Morley Smith '56 and his wife Ann Wauchope '56, her daughter Phebe Alice Apgar '65, and her husband Holt Apgar '65, and her grandson Mark Smith '82.

A tireless worker, Phebe volunteered to help at the Friends Academy phonathons for many years. "She participated in every phonathon until she was in her late 80s and loved talking to her classmates and to younger alumni," her daughter said.

Phebe's spirited accounts of life at school reflect her sense of humor and her zest for living. Always positive and enthusiastic about her years at Friends, when Phebe was interviewed for the spring 1976 *Meeting House* about her days as a boarder, she remarked, "On Wednesday nights the cook had off, so we had baked beans

and dancing to the Victrola, in that order." She also recalled "playing field hockey in bloomers down to our ankles" and she reminisced about a glee club concert in Locust Valley "for which the girls made pastel organdy dresses and big organdy hats."

As a five-day boarder, Phebe went back to the family farm every weekend and brought home-cooked goodies to her classmates. She added, "I was very popular then." Towards the end of her interview, in her typically light-hearted way, she said, with a twinkle in her eye, "I hope the old report cards are illegible and mildewed now." Phebe kept the history of the school alive for students with her vivid and humorous picture of life in the 1920s.

Marcus Hurlbut, Headmaster of Friends Academy and an ardent admirer of Phebe, recalled: "Phebe always made an effort to attend all our events. After two back operations and a hip replacement, we would have made any preparations to enable her to come. Typical of her spirit, she would park in the schoolyard and walk, literally, a 100 yards or more. When I assured her that there was always room in front of my house, she explained that she was leaving the space for others."

Phebe was a woman with a modern and progressive outlook about

the merits of travel. She liked nothing better than visiting and exploring new places.

Phebe Alice observed: "My mother was always interested in education and travel. She sent me to France with the Experiment in International Living. I spent the summer of my sophomore year in college living with a family. She was generous and loyal to friends and family. She sent three of her four granddaughters to Europe. When she was in college, she wanted to study for a year in France, but her family thought it was not proper for a young girl in the 1920s to live away from home. She wanted her children and her grandchildren to enjoy the experience that she had missed. One of her last wishes was that my daughter, Sara, make a trip this summer."

In addition to her service on the Board of Trustees at Friends, Phebe was an active member of the Society for the Preservation of Long Island Antiquities, the Jerusalem Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, and the Nassau County Historical Society. She was a valuable source of local history speaking at historical societies, libraries, and houses of worship until last year. Phebe Smith transcended the decades and enriched all who knew her.

## Frederick E. Willits '30

Alumnus, trustee, alumni parent, and Friend in every sense of the word, Frederick E. Willits, a member of the class of 1930, died on Tuesday, July 6<sup>th</sup> at the family home where he was born. The Willits family has been an integral part of Friends Academy, reaching back to the school's founding in 1876.

In pursuit of his dream of "establishing a seminary of learning," Gideon Frost held an organizational meeting with several of his Quaker friends at the Willits family home on Duck Pond Road in Glen Cove. Fred's grandfather, James R., and his father, Frederick E., were among those who helped to establish Friends College, as the school was originally named. Both were officers on the initial Board of Trustees, with Fred's father serving 46 years, 1877 – 1923. Several other members of the family, including his grandmother, Anna W. Willits (trustee 1889-1923), also served as trustees. Fred himself served as a trustee or honorary trustee from 1949 until the present, 50 years! He was President of the Board from 1953 until 1959. The incredible service by the Willits family to Friends Academy over so many years and generations demonstrated their deep commitment to the school and its Quaker roots and philosophy. The Willits family has deeply impacted the spirit and core of Friends Academy.

As a student, according to the 1930 yearbook, *The Red and Black*, Fred "made a consistent, steady, intelligent record in the various departments of school life, scholastically and athletically. His scholarship record has been particularly good...His judgment, intelligence and loyalty to the genuine things of school life are true to the characteristics of the man whose name he bears, the late Frederick E. Willits, his grandfather, whose long connection with Friends' Academy as trustee and as president of the board, will never be forgotten because of noble helpful, and distinguished service."

After graduating from Friends in 1930, Fred attended Swarthmore College. After graduating from Yale Law School in 1937, he went to work at the law firm of Cullen and Dykman, where he stayed his entire career, with the exception of serving as a Marine in the Pacific during World War II.

In addition to loving both the law and serving as a Marine, Fred was a member of the Meadowbrook Hunt and Buckram Beagles. Another love was race car driving. Highlighted in the spring 1984 *Meeting House*, Fred talked about his 1927 Bugatti 35 C, which he called "The Bug." According to the article, Fred drove "into the inner sanctum of North American vintage car racing. On tracks from Watkins Glen to Charlotte Motor Speedway, he pits The Bug against such other classics of the pre-war class...the blue Bug with Willits tucked inside, in his fireproof driving suit, black goggles, and blue crash helmet, metamorphoses into a Pegasus of the vintage car world."

After he and The Bug won the Vintage Grand Prix of the United States at Watkins Glen, Rene Dreyfus, history's greatest Bugatti driver, called to congratulate Fred. "That was a thrill Willits still cherishes, not only because Dreyfus is the 'greatest Bugatti driver ever to oil a shoe but because he is a gentleman in every sense of the word, who shares my beliefs in the importance of basic ideals, decency and courtesy.'" These beliefs defined Fred Willits throughout his life.

A member of the Matinecock Meeting, he described the Meeting House to an interviewer in 1977 as ageless, "because it has an honesty of design; the windows are not evenly spaced, it is not divided into geometric parts, and yet it hangs together as a whole." (*Meeting House*, spring 1986) In an address delivered in April of 1971 at the Friends Academy Spring Dinner Dance, he spoke about Friends being a Quaker school and the Quaker philosophy: "But if being a Quaker school does not, per se, generate narrowness of view, what does it in truth signify? We can, perhaps, come close to an answer by considering certain Quaker beliefs which seem to me to be the essential core of such a

school and give rise to a continuum of character which sets our institution apart from all others of differing persuasion. A prime tenet of Quaker faith is the belief that there is in every human soul a divine spark...Call it what you will, the inner light, divine insight—by any name, it is there, vibrant and powerful, and dependent not at all upon intercession of clergy nor form of expression. Now, if this be so, then every man alive, including one's self, is worthy of respect as a fellow child of God and, as such, has something to say to his fellows, without regard to age or position. Thus we have a good sound Quaker basis for interest in the student as an individual, important in himself or herself and entitled to develop as an individual as well as a component of society."

Fred's wife, Glenny Oelsner, a noted artist, died in 1998. Fred is survived by three children, all of whom attended Friends: Karen Willits Zentgraf '59, Frederick Willits Jr. '66, and Phebe Willits Bergenheim. Services were held at the Matinecock Meeting House.



Left to right: Frederick E. Willits '30, his grandfather Frederick E. Willits, aunt Martha Willets Bowne, and grandmother Anna Willets Willits.