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Lives of commitment

Dr. Henry Mayer of Woodside still makes house calls; Ollie is a geologic force for conservation

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THE INSIDE STORY

THIS WEEK IN THE ALMANAC



Photo by Ollie Mayer

Hiker's Hut

The Ollie Mayer Hiker's Hut in Sam MacDonald County Park on the Coastsides, where up to 12 people can stay overnight. About 18,000 people have stayed there, says Mrs. Mayer. For a story about her and her husband, Dr. Henry Mayer, see Page 20.

May 19 was Dr. Henry Mayer Day at Sequoia Hospital. As a mark of love and respect, the hospital set a whole day to honor a doctor who helped found the community hospital in 1950. He is the only physician on the original staff still practicing there 45 years later.

"He's a super-physician and super-individual," says Chief Executive Officer Arthur Faro, who presided at the special breakfast in Dr. Mayer's honor.

And yes, Dr. Mayer, who admits to being over 80, still makes house calls — but not as often as when he built a new practice in Redwood City starting in 1948, "I don't do house calls for colds," he chuckles during an interview in the new primary care clinic he recently joined in Redwood City.

Dr. Mayer and his wife, Olive, are an extraordinary couple who have made their mark on the Peninsula. Both their lives display commitment to deeply held beliefs that far transcends their professions.

Besides 50 years of practicing medicine, Dr. Mayer is a passionate advocate for family planning and population control. He is also a notable photographer. His scenic photographs line many corridors at Sequoia Hospital; his documentary films on population and family planning have circulated widely and earned prizes.

A mechanical engineer by profession, Mrs. Mayer may be better known locally than her husband. For more than 30 years she has been crusading for environmental causes ranging from logging issues to coastal protection through the Sierra Club.

Just last summer she appeared on the MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour opposing the proposed Devil's Slide Bypass — the last of the really big highway projects, dating back to 1960. She favors an alternative: a tunnel through Montara Mountain to bring better access to the Coastside than the ever-collapsing route of Highway 1 along the cliffs between Pacifica and Montara.

"They call (the bypass) a two-lane road, but they never changed the grading from a freeway," she says. "It's the same damn road."

Dr. Mayer likes to describe the night in 1960 when he and Ollie first chose the causes that have shaped their lives. They were coming home from a lecture by author Rachel Carson, whose *Silent Spring* — about the poisoning of plants and animals by pesticides — was the wakeup call for the modern environmental movement.

On the way home, he recounts, they decided that he would take on the cause of the future — the necessity to limit population growth — and Ollie would fight the rearguard action to protect the environment we already have.

"All causes are lost if we don't get population under control," Dr. Mayer says, warning to his favorite topic. "It's essential that we win that or we'll all go down the tubes."

No 'dudes'

Actually, both Mayers were environmentalists long before it was a word.

Henry grew up in New York and was an enthusiastic rock climber. Olive grew up in East Orange, N.J., and went to Swarthmore College where she headed the club that organized field trips and other outings.

There she wrote her first conservation letter urging that Mt. Katahdin in Maine be made a state park. And so it is, she notes.

They met in Estes Park, Colo., when Henry came to do serious climbing and didn't want to get involved with any "dudes." Ollie went there to hike.

"She was no dude," he says, sitting under the oak trees on their Woodside hilltop between interruptions by a peregrine falcon

Lives of commitment

In medicine, population and environment, Henry and Ollie Mayer of Woodside have made their mark

By MARION SOFTKY

screaming overhead.

Married in 1941, they will celebrate their 54th wedding anniversary Dec. 31.

After a number of moves during World War II, the Mayers fell in love with the Bay Area and came to the Peninsula in 1948. They moved to their present home in Woodside in 1949.

Then Dr. Mayer was a small town doctor, and Redwood City was a small town.

"There was no Woodside Hills," Mrs. Mayer recalls. "Canada Road looked like Joselyn Lane."

They have two children, Robert of San Francisco and Judy O'Brien, an attorney in Menlo Park, and four grandchildren.

For both the Mayers, 1968 was a key year that helped shape their lives for dozens of years to come. The two took a sabbatical and toured the world.

Theirs was not the typical look-see-snapshot tour. They spent a month or more researching their individual interests — his in population and hers in environment and land-use planning — in Japan, New Zealand, Australia, India, Israel, Kenya, Tanzania, Norway, Holland and England.

Dr. Mayer came back with 20,000 feet of movie film from which he made a documentary on the threats of rampant population growth. The film, called "Tomorrow's Children," was translated into Spanish and was

widely distributed; it received the prestigious Chris Award in the 1971 Columbus Film Festival and is still selling.

"You have to change the culture," Dr. Mayer says. "People look on their children as insurance for their old age, particularly in societies with high infant mortality. They don't understand the relationship of violence, hunger, drought and environment to population."

Physician, photographer

"Dr. Mayer is a man of many talents," says Noreen de Vito, director of the professional staff at Sequoia Hospital, who helped organize Dr. Henry Mayer Day.

The first to surface may have been photography. At Princeton, where he recently attended his 50th reunion, Henry Mayer Jr. was president of the Princeton Camera Club and on the staff of the *Princetonian*. He earned spending money by taking pictures of the football and basketball teams and selling them for 50 cents each. He even got to snap a picture of Albert Einstein in a classroom.

As a young internist, Dr. Mayer opened offices in Redwood City in 1948 — and stayed there until last summer. "I chose Redwood City because I wanted a working class clientele," he says.

He built his practice doing house calls. "I took care of most of my patients at home," he

recalls. "I made my overhead the first month. I really had a nerve. I didn't know a soul and didn't have enough sense to worry about it."

House calls are very inefficient and time-consuming, he adds, "But it's funny how important they are to people."

In those days there was no hospital for emergencies closer than Hoover Pavilion at Stanford, so Dr. Mayer and some others planned a new hospital to serve South San Mateo County. Built with taxpayers funds, Sequoia Hospital opened in 1950 with Dr. Mayer on the staff.

Times have changed in medicine since then, and Dr. Mayer is moving with them. Just last summer he and his longtime partner, Dr. Victor Sborov, left the downtown office they had occupied for 43 years.

They joined the new wave in medical care by associating with a new eight-doctor primary care group. Dr. Mayer still sees 15 to 20 people a day through Sequoia Medical Associates in the modern offices of the Sequoia Medical Clinic next to the hospital.

Dr. Mayer has mixed feelings about the new world of medicine. He loves not having the hassle and paperwork of running his own office and dicker with insurance companies. But he is uncomfortable with the new cost-conscious emphasis in medicine.

"Hospitals are pushing patients out before they're ready," he says. "If you're very sick

Growing like compound interest

Why worry about population growth? "The key issue is the numbers," replies Dr. Henry Mayer.

Population grows like compound interest. If it grows at 1 percent a year, the population doubles in 70 years; at 2 percent, it takes 35 years to double, and at 4 percent, just 17.5 years.

"Very few people understand the concept of doubling time," he says. "Doubling starts slowly, but builds up fast," he explains.

It took all of human history until 1850 to achieve a population of one billion people. By 1920 there were two billion, and by 1960, three billion. "Now we're at five and a half billion," he says.

As an example, Dr. Mayer suggests: consider the world as a water lily pond.

If the number of water lilies doubles each day, and would be full in a month, when will the pond be half full?

No, the answer is not on the 15th day. If the lilies double each day, the pond will be half full on the 29th day. On the 30th day there will be no more room.

"In the world, we're probably at the 25th day," Dr. Mayer estimates. "If we don't wake up soon, it will be the 29th day — and too late."

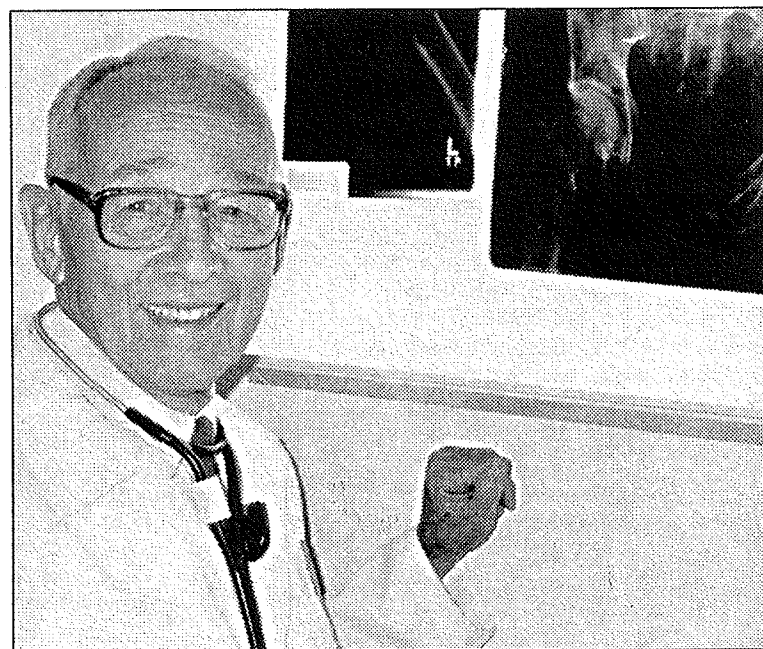


Photo by Marion Softky

Dr. Henry Mayer: "All causes are lost if we don't get population under control."



Photo by Carol Ivie

and need a long hospital stay, the hospital has to eat the costs. That can be dangerous."

During his years at Sequoia, Dr. Mayer has also been active locally in family planning with Planned Parenthood, and chaired the Committee of Family Life Education for the San Mateo County Medical Association.

Dr. Mayer made two of his eight documentary films locally. In 1971, a film called "A Baby Is Born" showed an actual delivery of a baby at Sequoia Hospital by Dr. John Hoff, to help introduce high school students to reproduction. "It was the easiest film I ever made. It was all in one night," Dr. Mayer says.

Later Dr. Mayer made a film for teen-agers facing decisions about sex. So he got a mixed group of bright youngsters and filmed them talking. The result is, "Are You Ready for Sex?"

"It's still selling," he says with pride.

Powerful voice

Of the dozen or so plaques and awards in her cluttered office, Mrs. Mayer particularly values two:

■ A Special Achievement Award from the national Sierra Club in 1983 "for her dedica-

tion to the hike and hut program in the Peninsula hills and for her vigorous involvement in open space, highway and asbestos-contamination campaigns."

■ A 1957 commendation from the Engineering Societies of the San Francisco Bay Area that said in recognition of "his" outstanding contributions.

When Mrs. Mayer founded a machine shop in 1948, she was one of the few women licensed engineers in California. "She was a rare bird in those days," says her husband proudly.

Her machine shop evolved into an equipment design shop and then into Science Education Products Co., where she designed and produced materials to teach conservation in schools. Her kits, sold across the country, included soil conservation, and a model water-treatment plant. She specially enjoyed the model hydroelectric dam, with generator and transmission lines, that would allow students to light a string of flashlight bulbs.

By 1967 she had sold her company and retired after 25 years in engineering. "I decided I was going to spend the rest of my life on conservation," she says.

Over the last 30 years and more, Mrs. Mayer has been a powerful, eloquent and persistent voice on conservation issues affecting the Peninsula. "I saw what happened to Long Island and New York, with all the beauties of nature destroyed," she says. "When I came to California — the most beautiful place in the world — I decided they're going to destroy this over my dead body."

People who have encountered Mrs. Mayer's relentless and passionate arguments for preser-

vation of beauty and resources often don't recognize her marvelous personal warmth. She radiates joy as she describes her efforts creating new trails and promoting their use in San Mateo County's wildlands and parks.

Now she's a bit lame, but over many years, when landowners weren't so nervous, Mrs. Mayer nurtured a whole generation of hikers, leading weekly walks over public and private lands of the Coastside. "At that time it was easy to get permission to go over land," she says.

For seven years she led week-long hikes, introducing local children to nature and camping. Many young adults remember the final swimming party and barbecue at the Mayers' Woodside home.

Her special joy is the Ollie Mayer Hiker's Hut in Sam MacDonald County Park on the Coastside. With the help of some public park funds, she brought over a prefabricated hut and some carpenters from Denmark. With the help of Sierra Club work crews, they built a hut for hikers up the road from the Jack Brook Horse Camp.

"About 18,000 people have stayed there," Mrs. Mayer says proudly. "It's been a great success."

A more difficult period was her term on the Woodside Town Council from 1974 to 1977. She had hoped to apply what she had learned in other countries about land-use regulations.

As the town was redoing its general plan, she fought — unsuccessfully — for several key goals: to block building on many undeveloped lands, to zone prime soils for open space, and to adopt geologic maps to control building.

"The geologic maps were not adopted; they were buried," she says. "It was real frustrating."

Nevertheless, thanks to the efforts of Mrs. Mayer and thousands of others who rose in the 1960s to block freeways, protect open space, and save the Bay and Coast, the Peninsula is a far different place than shown in the official plans or developers' dreams of the 1960s.

"There were many, many major victories," Mrs. Mayer reflects. "But they were not my victories; they took a lot of people."



Photo by Henry Mayer

This photo by Dr. Henry Mayer shows teen-agers on a week-long "hike and hut" program, where they learned about nature from Ollie Mayer and stayed at the Hiker's Hut named for her in Sam MacDonald County Park.



Photo by Marion Softky

By 1967, Olive Mayer had sold her equipment-design shop and decided to devote her life to conservation.