

Cynthia Criley Williams  
*November 1, 1915 – January 29, 2011*

Cynthia Criley Williams  
Memorial Gathering  
*April 24, 2011*  
*Carmel Highlands, California*

Schedule of Events:

11 AM- Traditional Egg Hunt

11:30 AM- Luncheon

2 PM- Program Commences

*“Washerwoman’s Jig”* – Geoff Hoyle, fiddle

Welcome and Remarks by Family

*Let it Be a Dance-* April Masten

*“Three Little Birds”*- Julian Davis  
*“Crossing the Highway”*- Elliot Roberts  
*“Going to Cynthia’s”*- Army of Bark & Co.

## Contributions from the Group Closing- Molly Williams

Cynthia Criley Williams, “the Mother of all Mothers,” died peacefully at home in Carmel Highlands at the age of 95.

Cynthia was born in Rollo Peters’ studio, Peters’ Gate, Monterey. Her parents, painter Theodore Morrow Criley and Myrtle “Tooty” Criley, were members of the early Carmel artists’ colony. In 1917 they moved to Carmel Highlands, where they built one of the first houses, on the southern boundary of the Allen Ranch (later to become Point Lobos State Reserve). Cynthia was two when they moved into the large stone house overlooking Gibson Beach. Her childhood was spent amongst the Bohemian social whirl of the Carmel artists and their families, giving her a lifelong appreciation for artists and their work. Her parents also encouraged her love of nature, giving her the freedom to explore Point Lobos, and taking her to Big Sur and to Rocky Creek, where they helped to purchase land for a nature reserve with a group of friends, the Rio Piedras Club.

She and her older brothers had various adventures, especially when she was left in their care: when she was five, they decided to teach her to drive (she drove into a tree) and also to shoot a pistol (the kickback knocked her down). Living in the shadow of World War One, her brothers dug trenches in the garden, and lobbed pinecone grenades at each other, while Cynthia was only allowed to be “the cross red nurse.” When she was seven, she was bitten by a dog while walking with her friend Flavia Flavin to a dance class in Carmel. Cynthia decided not to tell anyone, fearing that her mother would “make a fuss,” but fortunately Flavia told the dance teacher. The dog turned out to be rabid, and to have bitten several other people in Carmel; they all had to have a course of 21 rabies vaccination shots.

The Crileys traveled widely in Europe. The family spent a year abroad when Cynthia was six; she became fluent in French, and also learned some Italian

when she was left with an Italian artist's family outside Assisi for the summer. They returned to Europe for a year when Cynthia was thirteen, again spending most of their time in France, where she was sent to boarding school (which she hated) but she enjoyed a month with the family on the Adriatic island of Losinj (now Croatian), and some time on a farm in Normandy. Back home, Cynthia attended Sunset School in Carmel, and then Monterey Union High School.

In 1928 her parents began construction of a second house on the property. Mid-construction, when Cynthia was fifteen, her father died suddenly of a heart attack. Tooty and Cynthia lived in Palo Alto for a year, while the new house (now known as "the Criley House") was completed, and then returned to the Highlands. The stone house was sold, and the losses of her father and her childhood home had a devastating impact on her teenage years. Soon thereafter she went off to college, to Scripps in Claremont.

On a picnic at Rocky Creek, Cynthia met physician Russell Williams, a cousin of her dear lifelong friend Valentine Miller. They married in 1935 and moved to New York, where she attended Barnard College, and their daughter Marian ("Bee") was born, the first of five children. In 1940, back in the Highlands, they built a house on the family property, designed by Cynthia's architect brother, Theodore "Ted" Criley. Although Russell's medical training and military service took the growing family at various times to Baltimore, Las Vegas, and Topeka, Carmel Highlands was always home, and they returned to stay in 1947.

Cynthia was very involved in Carmel Highlands neighborhood activities for years. When the old fire station was the heart of the community, and Seizo Kodani was fire chief and school bus driver, Cynthia helped to organize annual events, including a spectacular Halloween party, a jolly Christmas party, and a neighborhood-wide rummage sale. With fewer residents, and all the children attending Bay School through the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, the neighborhood was tightly knit. The community and the family were devastated by the loss of son Richard ("Red") Williams, who suffered from depression and took his own life in 1961. The marriage ended in 1963.

Cynthia's father was from a hotel-keeping family, and perhaps following this tradition Cynthia felt most comfortable with an open home, welcoming neighborhood children, family friends and friends of friends, temperamental artists, struggling writers, serious scholars, lively fishermen, blossoming singer/song-writers, crazy carpenters, earnest scientists, left-wing politicians, student activists, weary world travelers, and wayward teenagers; people might come for the weekend and stay for months, if not years! She collected an ever-evolving eclectic community, and imbued the Highlands neighborhood with traditions and rituals that she devised, including the annual Easter egg-and-beer-can hunt, Christmas caroling from house to house, and a children's Bingo party on New Year's Eve. Generations of children learned the joys of camping from her,

drove her “Big Wheels” around the driveway, and lounged on her couch reading comic books; no television allowed. Other rules: No roughhousing in the living room, No putting your feet on the coffee table, and Be nice. The standard punishment for misbehavior was to be banished from the living room for five minutes.

There were daily rituals as well. Her afternoon nap was sacrosanct, and every evening was punctuated by “putting the chickens to bed” which involved her going out to close the door to the chicken coop, accompanied by a joyous chorus of hysterically barking dogs. Her menagerie over time included dogs, cats, horses, goats, chickens, ducks, geese, parrots, and injured wildlife (including an orphan seal).

In 1955 Cynthia’s mother “Tooty” died. Receiving a small inheritance, Cynthia began purchasing small rental houses in Pacific Grove, and gradually developed a career as a landlady. Her reputation for fairness and generosity spread, and her little houses are much in demand; many of her tenants have become part of her extended family community, and many family friends have become tenants.

Like her Civil Libertarian brother Richard Criley, Cynthia was a committed advocate for civil rights (although unlike him, she hated attending meetings). During the 1960s her house was a regular retreat for student activists: “the rest home for tired radicals.” Even into her 90s she attended neighborhood peace demonstrations on Highway One. More practical than idealistic, she sometimes shocked her pacifist friends by providing their children with toy guns and swords. She was a true egalitarian who treated everyone alike (except for pregnant women, who got to put their feet on the coffee table; and parents of small children, who got special dispensations) but while her household fostered community, it was not a “commune”; there was a clear hierarchy and she was the ultimate and unquestioned authority.

In 1967 Cynthia traveled in Japan for two months with her daughter Molly, aged eleven, and her friends Mitz and Yuri Sato. They stayed with Mitz’s family on an apple farm near Fukushima, and toured the islands from there. She also traveled to England and Ireland several times, taking her grandchildren along on one trip. She went to Mexico and Brazil with her daughter Bee, and traveled widely in the USA. She enjoyed being a tourist, but when she got home she always said “I like it here.”

Cynthia had a deep appreciation for language and literature. Widely read, she could quote long passages of the bible, Shakespeare and other poets, and famous historical political addresses. Her memory was phenomenal, her scope of knowledge was amazingly wide; she was our source of all knowledge before there was Google! Her love of learning was life-long: she began studying ancient Greek in her 80s, with her friend Barbara James. She was a dedicated

patron of the county's Bookmobile library, which comes to the Highlands every two weeks.

Her open-mindedness, her generosity of spirit, and her passion for thriftiness are legend. Her mottos were "Waste not, want not" and "It's a great life if you don't weaken." She hated tobacco smoke and campaigned against smoking long before it was fashionable to do so. She loved her garden, her view of Point Lobos, summer fog, and a good cup of tea.

Marian "Bee" Chaffey, John Williams, Margaret "Honey" Williams, and Molly Williams are her living children. She leaves four grandchildren: John "Els" Chaffey, Margaret "Midge" Chaffey, Richard Russell Williams, and Sarah Williams; four great-grandchildren; a vast network of friends; and her devoted dogs.

In her last year Cynthia's health declined. We gratefully appreciate her superb team of caregivers: Henrietta "Cha Cha" Nuno, Eustacia Pedraza, and Anna Casteneda; and the wonderful services of Hospice of the Central Coast.

Many people helped to make her last year as comfortable as possible, but special mention must be made of Dr. Alan Steinbach, who flew out from Woods Hole when Cynthia first fell ill, to pay a 5-day house call. He was available from then on for medical consults at anytime. (He paid his last house call on Jan 29<sup>th</sup>, driving down from Berkeley and arriving several minutes after Cynthia died.) Cynthia Dyer-Bennet sent Cynthia a postcard nearly every day of her last year; Greg Minshall sent post cards (and so much more); and Paula Singer and Martin Pato looked after the household for weeks at a time, while Molly and Honey took much-needed holidays.

For her memorial, Cynthia wanted us to have a good party, with "plenty of booze, and REAL FOOD," and she requested that her friends honor her memory with donations to the Bookmobile (The Monterey County Free Library System).

Nothing we can say here can adequately express our gratitude for her life.

## **Crossing the Highway**

*for Cynthia, on her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday  
October 1, 2005*

There was a time when our children could cross the highway by themselves,  
The traffic minimal, and what came, came at moderate speeds. Now,  
The constant noise of motors, of tires, of grinding gears, as drivers  
Speed around the blind curve.

So, when you leave the bookmobile,  
Now, every other Friday—they are trying to tear the books  
From our hands and replace them with ipods, cell phones, computer  
Games and t.v. remotes;

So, when you leave the bookmobile,  
Which now has a section of books “Cynthia Recommends”—it is probably  
True that but for your gargantuan reading habit the bookmobile would  
Not visit the Highlands at all;

So, when you leave the bookmobile  
Bearing your load of books in a bag in one hand, your walking stick  
In the other, and start to cross the highway on the way home,  
We hold our breath as you wait for a gap in the northbound traffic,  
Then walk on tarmac, stop halfway, check the southbound traffic,  
And seeing none, step onto the southbound lane just as a car  
Careens around the curve. But you have started to cross the highway,  
And what you start, you finish, so you keep walking.

Head up,  
You raise and shake your walking stick at the car’s driver,  
And he, eyes now opened in amazement as though he is witnessing  
Some miracle, like Jesus walking on water, slows down, the car  
Like a feather falling to earth; and the driver behind him slows down,  
Another feather; and the driver behind her, traffic brought to stillness  
Until you are safely across.

So today, as you shake your walking stick  
Of ninety years at us, one after the other, we bring our busied,  
Hurried lives to a halt, a great procession of people, pilgrims all,

To witness and celebrate this page in the book of your life. We breathe deeply.  
Once again, you are safely crossing the highway.

*~Elliot Ruchowitz-Roberts*