

**The Camarillo Sisterhood  
Stories of Women Who Made a Difference at the Camarillo  
Ranch**



**Each week our research team will present a story for your  
enjoyment.**

**This week: Ave Maria Camarillo FitzGerald**

Research Team:  
Barbara Burrows  
Karin Farrin  
Beth Miller  
Lynn Preiss  
Sherry Reynolds

**Thank you**

**Thank you Martina Nicholson for sharing your wonderful stories and photos and for  
editing the copy and adding detailed information!**

**May 1, 2020**

**Special Note:**

**We will present Rosa Camarillo Petit's story at a future date.  
Our deepest condolences to the family and loved ones of Sally Marvel  
Freeman, Rosa's granddaughter.**

**Ave Maria Camarillo FitzGerald (1892-1974)**

Daughter of Adolfo and Isabel Camarillo

By

Beth Miller

Adolfo and Isabel Camarillo named their third daughter Eva Susana. She was born in 1892, the same year the grand Camarillo home was built. When she was just three years old, Eva Susana announced her new name. She wanted to be called Ave Maria. Musically talented from an early age, Ave had a special devotion to the song Ave Maria, both the Schubert version, and the Bach-Gounod version, which was her favorite. She was very sensitive to melody and harmony, and the song's soaring, clear faith was a big inspiration. She developed a deeper love of Mary the mother of Jesus, from loving the song. From then on the family called her Ave or Abby. The word Ave also means bird, and it was an appropriate name for someone who always seemed to be singing!

During her formal musical training Ave would meticulously study the many different arrangements and vocal challenges of this song, as well as many others. Her sheet music was filed in dark blue leather-bound books, with her name imprinted in gold lettering on the cover, which her father had bound for her, in 1922 and 1924. It was a treasury of her musical training. Her sister Carmen said Ave sang and played the piano all the time. Ave's beautiful soprano voice rang sweetly at formal concerts, in the chapel choir and family gatherings. Her musical selections ranged from operatic renditions of "La Boheme" and other arias familiar at the time, to Spanish favorites like "El Rancho Grande" and "Ojos Verdes." She used music to enliven a party or bring it to a close.

Music was the connection that led Ave to meet her future husband Lieutenant George FitzGerald. He had attended one of her concerts. Their engagement was announced at a formal dinner party at her parents' home.

The world was at war in 1917. The family decorated the dining room in patriotic red, white and blue along with an American flag as the focal point. The war time engagement party would also be followed by a war time wedding.

Because George received his orders to report for duty, the couple quickly planned a simple wedding at the Santa Clara Church where they exchanged their

vows at seven o'clock in the morning. Immediately after the ceremony a wedding breakfast was served at the Camarillo home. The bridal couple, accompanied by family and friends to Los Angeles, left for Rockford, Illinois where George would join his regiment.

Just a month later they were in New York awaiting George's departure to France. At that time, the newlyweds were joined by Isabel for a visit. Ave lived with her parents on the Ranch until George's return from France in 1919.

Shortly after the war, the couple received a musical anniversary gift of a baby grand piano from Adolfo and Isabel. For many years the piano was the heart of Ave and George's home at Rancho Avita in the Santa Rosa Valley, which was built in 1922, just down the road from the Camarillo Ranch.

Today the piano is a treasured family heirloom. It is now in the home of Ave's granddaughter, Kerry FitzGerald Kelly, where Ave's great-grandson, Connor, carries on the family's musical tradition with the beloved piano.

### **Martina Nicholson Remembers Her Nana**

Nana always played several Mexican and Cuban songs—one was "Cu curucucu, Paloma." Another was "La Cumparcita"—an Argentine tango. The era of the 1930s and '40s was a fabulous era for wonderful Latin songs, and Nana could sing them all. Another one I remember her singing is "Amapola". She had majored in music at the convent of Notre Dame in San Jose, where she and Rose went to school. Her favorite for getting a party going or topping it off was "El Rancho Grande." She always whooped "In Camarillo"—after the line "alla donde vivia"- "(there, where I live!"). Her father would call her on the phone, when company came unexpectedly to the ranch, and ask her to please come and entertain, which she usually loved to do.

In the days when it was risqué but not forbidden for women to smoke, she would sit at the piano and, with a big flourish and an arpeggio, and a cigarette hanging from her lips, play some rousing music. When it was time to sing along, she would

have to put the cigarette into an ashtray where the tip would turn to ash and curl away as she sang.

When my dad, Jim, played, she would stand next to him and sing, which also was fun. She swayed to the music, and did a little curtsy with her skirt. She loved red lipstick and red fingernails, and sometimes would pin a red rose into her hair. She had a flair for the dramatic!

She and Carmen both could play “happy birthday”, and they both liked to have a party and had fun singing. We also sing as a family, to honor someone’s birthday, the chorus to “Las Mañanitas” (but I did not learn the rest of the words until later in my life, in school in Mexico). Nana had sheet music, which I still have, in two leather-bound books of her sheet music that her father gave for a birthday present in 1922 and 1924. My dad used to love to play the songs for her, and let her sing—her voice was like honey in the air. My grandfather George’s favorite song was “Our sweet little home in the west.” He also loved the Irish songs, and enjoyed her singing them.

My favorite of her songs is called “Forgotten.” Another is “Love, Here Is My Heart.” If we ever have a soiree (at the Ranch), I would love to have someone play the songs! I love to sing them, but now a younger voice would be better! I made a copy of the songs she loved best, which I gave to each of my sisters.

Nana loved opera and she loved Puccini. She loved to sing Madame Butterfly’s “Un bel di” and other arias, also from La Boheme, among many. She sang these arias, walking around the house. They are so familiar to me because she sang them when I was little—made them familiar and loved melodies.

Carmen played the piano too, and I own Carmen’s piano from the house (Adolfo and Isabel’s) in Los Angeles, 609 West Manhattan Place. I remember the house, because my parents (Carmelita and Jim Nicholson) lived there with me until I was about 4 or 5, when we moved to Fillmore, where I went to kindergarten. Carmen could also sing, but Nana’s voice was better. They both could entertain and sing, both in English and Spanish. They also played and sang in the choir at the chapel, St. Mary Magdalene’s. Nana always said the window in the choir loft was for her, as her uncle Juan Camarillo picked it out especially because it has a musical theme. It depicts 4 girls singing, perched on the stool of an organ. Their faces are angelic!

Ave Maria Camarillo when she was studying "voice" in San Francisco.



Here are some of Ave's favorite songs as performed by various artists:

Martina recommended these websites:

<https://youtu.be/0uQ4W7afKLU>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWukNdkYU6Q>



*George and Ave Camarillo FitzGerald's wedding day December 1917*

**Carmelita FitzGerald Nicholson (1921-2012)****Geraldine FitzGerald (1923-2011)**

Daughters of Ave and George FitzGerald and Granddaughters of Adolfo and Isabel Camarillo

By Beth Miller

Rancho Avita was the childhood home for sisters Carmelita FitzGerald Nicholson and Geraldine FitzGerald along with their younger brothers Gerald and Jim. Carmelita and Geraldine's lives centered around family and teaching. Carmelita earned degrees in history and education from Stanford. Geraldine did the same. Carmelita taught for several years in Camarillo and Oxnard. So did Geraldine.

When not in the formal classroom, Carmelita continued her mission to educate both children and adults. In 1965 she and husband Jim took their six daughters, ages 3 years to 14 years on a six-month educational grand tour throughout Europe. Not wanting to waste a moment, Carmelita planned a trip that was nearly nonstop.

Everyday Carmelita planned which museums, towns and events they would visit. She made a game for the girls to learn a few words in the language of the country they were visiting and some important historical dates. When Jim asked for a day off from touring, Carmelita explained that he could rest when they returned to California. The trip had a profound influence on all the girls. Their eldest daughter returned to Vienna for her junior year in college.

Carmelita had a great affection for children with learning disabilities which came from her years as a teacher for special needs students. She was also a Girl Scout troop leader with her aunt Carmen Camarillo. The Camarillo White Horses were an important part of the troop activities. Carmelita had proudly ridden in countless parades with Adolfo and Carmen and especially shared her love of the horses with her daughters. It has been said that she felt better on a horse than standing on the ground.

In 1998, with the establishment of the Camarillo Ranch Foundation, Carmelita and Geraldine began sharing family stories of the Camarillo Ranch and the Camarillo White Horses with the docents, staff and CRF board. Carmelita's 1944 Stanford thesis, [El Rancho Grande: The Story of Camarillo](#) covers the history of the Camarillo Ranch. She had designed it as a California history teaching model for 5th graders. Today it remains an essential reference book for Camarillo Ranch docents.

She was very proud that all of her girls graduated from college, and continued her love of education in ways both formal and informal. Carmelita died in 2012 at age 90.

Though both Carmelita and Geraldine loved the Ranch life, Geraldine did not share her sister's passion for riding the Camarillo White Horses. Perhaps it goes back to the time that Geraldine's pony dropped her on a particularly thorny cactus.

Geraldine enjoyed cooking. Carmelita did not. Just like her grandmother Isabel, Geraldine made delicious enchiladas. Carmelita married, but Geraldine would tell people she did not want to give up the FitzGerald name. It was Geraldine who introduced Carmelita to her future husband Jim who was a teacher where Geraldine was working, at Oxnard High School, before Camarillo High School was built.

### **Martina Nicholson Remembers Her Aunt Geraldine**

Carmelita and Geraldine were very close, about 18 months apart, and Ave's first two children and best friends, although there was some sibling rivalry. They were both good students and smart in school. Both majored in history at Stanford. Both got teaching credentials. Geraldine was the Dean of Girls at the high school and also helped a lot of young women experiencing traumatic events, to stay in school when possible. She tried to help support them when there were hardships in their private lives. After teaching Civics for ten years at Oxnard High School she transferred to the newly opened Adolfo Camarillo High School as guidance counselor in 1956. She was especially pleased to be employed at the school built on land donated by her grandfather.

As an auntie she was very good at giving advice to us as we grew up into young women. She was affectionately called "Aunt Popie" by her nieces and nephews because she always knew the answer to things. Someone in college gave her that name and it stuck.

*Note from Beth:*

*After Sunday Mass, Geraldine would stop by the Camarillo Ranch to visit with her grandfather. Adolfo would share with her the books he was currently reading. The conversation often settled on history and Adolfo spoke about his favorite historic*

*figure Napoleon Bonaparte. Geraldine made arrangements for the Camarillo High School Marching Band and Cheerleaders to perform a musical surprise for her grandfather's birthday in 1957 and 1958.*

*After retirement she continued to teach history at the Camarillo Ranch sharing her many humorous stories with her sister Carmelita. Geraldine died in 2011, just three months before Carmelita. She was 88 years old.*

### **Barbara Burrows Remembers Miss FitzGerald**

Miss Fitzgerald was my counselor in school from 1952 to 1955. After I graduated in 1955, I started working for the Oxnard High School in the counselors office. I was the receptionist and relief switch board operator. Miss Fitzgerald was one of the counselors I worked for.

She was professional, witty, funny and a good listener to her girls that came to see her. She was good to work for, especially for a young 18 years old high school student who had just graduated. In 1956, when Adolfo Camarillo High School opened, Miss Fitzgerald had the opportunity to apply for the girls' counseling position. She did get hired.

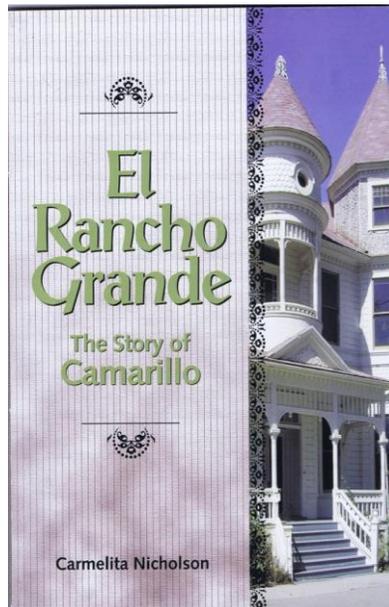
Her comment was "I better be hired at ACHS." At that time, I had no idea she was Adolfo Camarillo's granddaughter. I didn't learn that until I started training to be a docent.

At one of the events that Shirley Williams Fitzgerald and Miss Fitzgerald attended, I went over to their table and said hi to her. She asked me "if I was one of her students". I said, "Yes, from 1952 until 1955." I also told her that after graduation, I started working in the Counselors Office as their receptionist before she went to ACHS. I did not see her after she transferred to ACHS but met her again when I became a docent.

She was always a teacher even years later when my grandson, Joey, filmed an interview with her. At the time Joey was applying to film school at USC. After the interview, she smiled and gave him an "A" and said he was very well prepared. That is all I can remember. Miss FitzGerald was a great person both as my counselor and my boss.

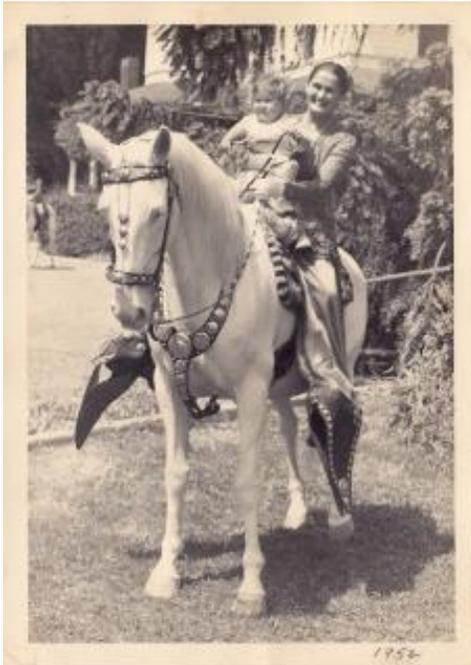


*Gerald, Geraldine, Jim and Carmelita*





***Carmelita on Diablo***



***Carmelita with her daughter Martina 1952***



1934

***Carmelita's first Fiesta Parade 1934***



***Adolfo enjoyed the visits by the Camarillo High School students to celebrate his birthday.***

DEDICATION  
OF  
ADOLFO CAMARILLO HIGH SCHOOL  
Camarillo, California

Mr. Adolfo Camarillo is one of the most public spirited citizens in the State of California. He has given generously and unstintingly of his time and money to many worthy causes and through service on innumerable public agencies. He served on the Pleasant Valley Elementary School Board of Trustees for fifty-seven consecutive years (1894-1951). In May 1950 he gave to the high school district this fifty-acre site. The Board of Trustees, in grateful acceptance of the deed, officially named the school "Adolfo Camarillo High School." This school will serve as a living memorial to his great interest in the educational welfare of the youth of this area.



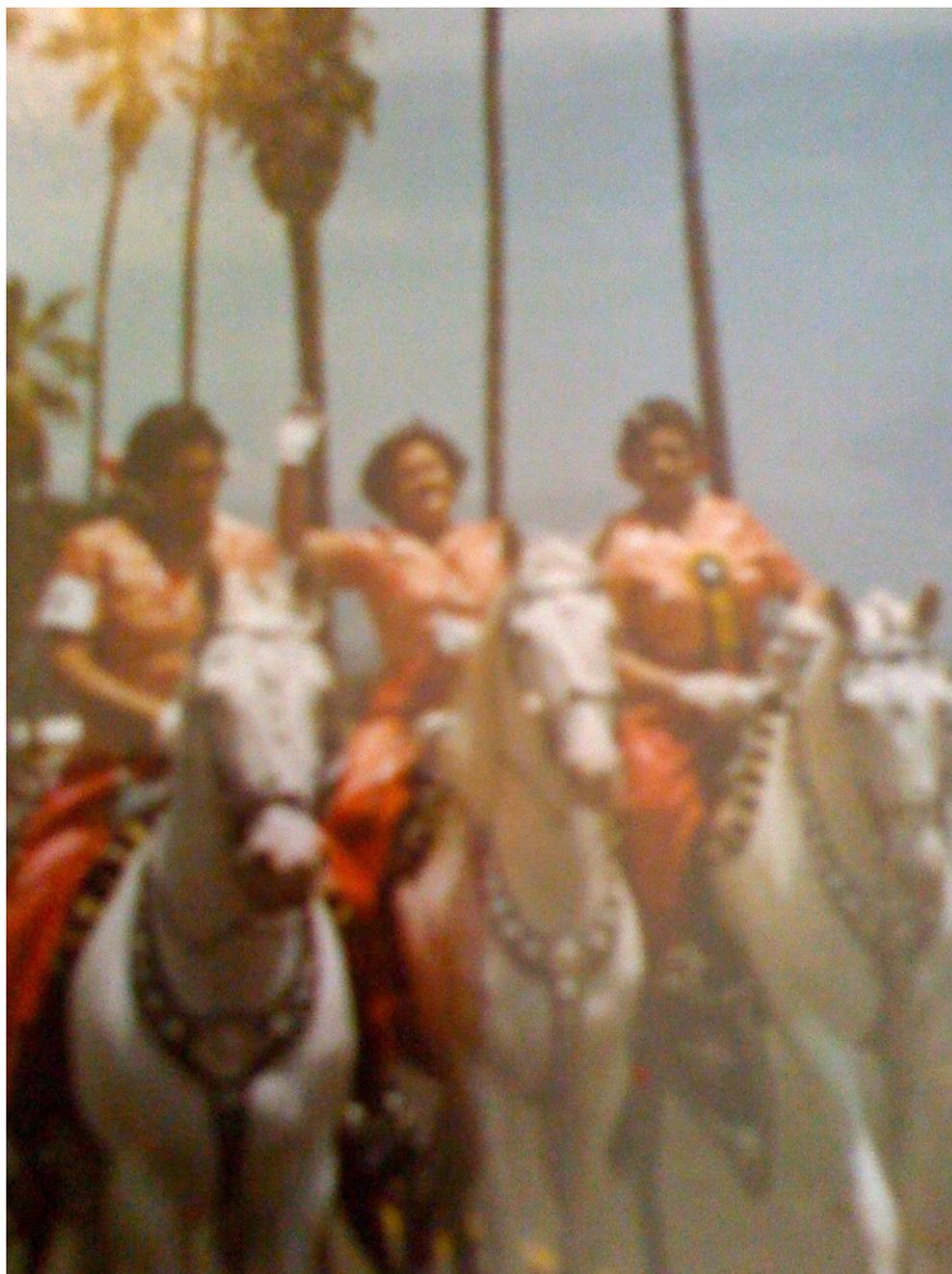
FACULTY

James R. Ackerman, Principal	Victor B. Kelley, Soc. St., Boys' P.E., Cadets
Tom Rosser, Soc. St., Attendance	Thais Leyden, Art, Homemaking
Geraldine FitzGerald, Soc. St., Girls' Counselor	John G. Lowry, Sci., Boys' P.E., Coach
George B. Longo, Soc. St., Boys' Counselor	James C. McElmurry, Sci., Agric.
Frank J. Arnich, Librarian, English	Mary Lou McNeal, Eng., Girls' P.E.
Esther A. Sizer, School Nurse	James B. Moore, Improvement Classes
Gertrude B. deSilva, English, For. Lang.	Howard W. Plank, Inst. & Voc. Music
William T. Gannon, Math., Mech. Drawing	Joan D. Peleske, Eng., Pub. Speak.
Ann I. Hinkle, Business Education	Alex S. Tomlinson, Crafts, Wood Shop
Walter Jessup, Mathematics	Ronald Yung, Eng., Latin, Journalism

Sunday, September 9, 1956  
2:30 p.m.



*Geraldine at Camarillo High School*



*Paquita, Martina and Carmen*

*From Martina's Photo Album*



*Nana at the piano with my Dad, Jim Nicholson. Probably around 1964.*



*My favorite photo of Ave Camarillo FitzGerald*