

Historian named LWer of Month

Retirement offered Dr. Olive Gilliam a chance to write

By Mary Roda
NEWS Staff Writer

The stalks of gladiolus provided a splash of color in the center of Dr. Olive Gilliam's manor, six stories up in the Towers.

Although the flowers appeared to be fresh from a florist, Dr. Gilliam admitted that they were the product of hours spent at the Garden Center. "I've gone in for flowers now, instead of vegetables," she confided.

Her interest in gardening is only one example of the complex personality — historian, author, professor and observer—who has been selected Leisure Worlder of the Month for July by Rossmoor Corp.

And if anyone needs evidence that retirement can be a fruitful time of life, 84-year-old Dr. Gilliam, a Leisure World resident for 11 years, is living proof of it.

She has written seven books since her "retirement," including five as a Leisure World resident. Another work is awaiting publication now.

As a historian, she always wanted to be elbow deep in research, but a heavy teaching schedule as a professor at San Jose State College, where she taught for 34 years, didn't provide the opportunity. "I never forgot that I wanted to go back (into research)," she explained, "and here at Leisure World I finally got my chance to write." I began to write for fun. I didn't care if anybody read it."

She's modest about the accomplishment, even though one of the books, "Paths of Empire," received an award from the University of California Irvine Friends of the Library. "I wrote it as if I were going to give a lecture," she said.

Her specialty is Roman history. Dry? Hardly, according to Dr. Gilliam. "It was a tense, exciting time after Caesar's assassination," she said, "like American politics."

Much of her first and favorite book, "Memoirs of Augustus," is based on research begun by Dr. Gilliam's mentor a history professor, Richard Sholtz, who



Dr. Olive Gilliam

died at the age of 42, while Dr. Gilliam was in London as a Rhodes scholar. She collected Sholtz's papers and started where he left off.

She compares the research to "detective work," explaining that she tries to determine "the source behind the source," sifting lively gossip from bits and pieces of history in the written works of the children of the characters.

The work requires "sensitivity as a scholar to the motives" of the writer, Dr. Gilliam explains, which in the end leads the contemporary historian to a greater insight into the actual events of the day.

In a much shorter work, Dr. Gilliam departs from Roman history to take a look at her own experiences in "Living Through the Twentieth Century." "I didn't think I could ever write about myself," she added, but she did and she said she found great satisfaction in it. The first chapter was written as an assignment for a Leisure World writing class. She had no idea it would be the start of a book.

Another work, "The Two Messiahs," examines the Bible from a scholar's viewpoint, again trying to piece together original sources, another offshoot from Sholtz's papers.

"Religion—I think that is the thing that comes closest to you besides the family. We should make an effort to try to

understand religion historically," she explains. "You don't have to justify it."

Another book is entitled "Philosophy is Dead." Dr. Gilliam grinned and said, "I like to shock people."

Her latest book takes on a Bicentennial theme, "State of the Union—1776 to 1976," and will be published soon. In it Dr. Gilliam explores two institutions, government and corporations. "There's a fight going on," she remarks, "and the question is who's going to win out."

The two are competing for power. Government appears to be increasingly ineffective, Dr. Gilliam notes, but "the fear of bigness is ingrained in America" and works against the corporation.

Eventually she predicts that America may return to a type of feudalism, in which individuals must fend for themselves, "much like we do at Leisure World," leaving behind a crumbling government bureaucracy.

But, she says she really takes an optimistic outlook. "I don't fool around with warnings," she remarked. "People would have the world end next week."

Her background in history "has given me a scope most people don't get any more. I enjoy history," she added. "There are so many ironies." And it tickles her sense of humor more than artificial jokes. "We see the

South come up in the Democratic party," she observed with a shake of the head, "and we see Mississippi go for Reagan!"

Dr. Gilliam has been an innovator; she was among the first women to tackle the male-dominated field of history, and was the first woman to earn a doctorate in history at the University of Washington, after undergraduate and graduate studies at the University of California at Berkeley.

"We had our own type of women's liberation," Dr. Gilliam acknowledged. "One of the first things we did was to throw off the corset."

But like many other aspects of today's society, the movement emphasizes sex too much, she observed. "It's too bad sex dominates so many things today," she added. "Life is much more full than Freud has made us think."

What does the future hold for Dr. Gilliam? She's not sure if there are more books to be written, but she added, "I love Leisure World, and I want to be a promoter of Leisure World."

"It's a chance for a new life," she said, and Leisure World is a place a person can retire and be assured that he "won't be put on a shelf."