

Leisure Worlder

OF THE MONTH

SARAH LEDERER

The year was 1943 and Gen. Dwight Eisenhower was becoming the country's wartime hero. When his wife Mamie displayed her own patriotism by joining the American Women's Voluntary Services, there was a mad publicity rush to photograph her in uniform.

The only size 10 outfit readily available in the nation's capital belonged to a young woman named Sarah Lederer, captain of the AWVS Rescue Squad and assistant head of its Motor Corps.

Mrs. Lederer proudly loaned out her uniform for the occasion. It was only one of many highlights in a multi-faceted career that has led the former housing relocation specialist and current United Mutual president to be selected as Home Federal Savings' Leisure Worlder of the Month for September.

Born in Berwick, La., Sarah came with her family to Los Angeles at the age of six. She graduated from high school at 16 and received a bachelor's degree from UCLA before attending the USC Graduate School of Social Welfare.

Her first job was as a social worker with the Los Angeles Bureau of County Welfare and she soon advanced to casework supervisor of the California State Relief Administration.

As an "almost" native Californian, young Sarah longed to go east to work and complete her graduate studies. One week after she landed in New York City in 1935, she was introduced to Jerome Lederer. Five weeks later she and the future NASA safety director were married.

"I gave up my M.A. to become a ma," she says with her characteristic wide grin. Although motherhood actually came several years later, Sarah's career was to be greatly influenced by the growing importance and subsequent transfers of her aviation-safety-specialist husband.

But first she spent two and a half years as a social worker for the New York City Department of Social Welfare. This period was marked by encounters with disgruntled welfare seekers and illegal gin mill operators in the rat-infested slums of Harlem. Mrs. Lederer learned to maintain the calm demeanor that has become her trademark, although admitting that "at times I was afraid they might hear my knees knocking."

When her husband was called to Washington, D.C., in 1940, she started training with the American Women's Voluntary Services. "We learned to put on splints blind-folded and practiced driving without headlights in order to deal with blackout conditions," she recalls.

She also began private flying lessons and completed a memorable solo flight in which, disorientated by the absence of her 200-pound instructor, she came down for what she calls "a nine-point landing (bounce, bounce, bounce) instead of the perfect three-point required."

Pearl Harbor put an end to her flying and accelerated her work with the AWVS whose Motor Corps provided transportation for civilian and military officials in the nation's overcrowded capital.

In 1943 Mr. Lederer was transferred to New York, and his wife, now a mother, served as a Red Cross volunteer social worker until the birth of their second daughter.

The couple lived in suburban New Rochelle, where Mrs. Lederer's expanding civic activities included presidency of the League of Women Voters. After the league conducted a study revealing the need of local middle-income families for affordable housing, the city's mayor appointed Mrs. Lederer as chairman of the Housing Advisory Committee. She later was appointed to the Housing Authority and to the Board of Education.

In 1960 she re-entered the working world as relocation supervisor for the New Rochelle Department of Urban Renewal. She held this job until 1967 when her husband was returned to Washington by NASA to organize the safety program for the Apollo moon mission.

Mrs. Lederer soon found herself lured back to work by the Redevelopment Land Agency in the District of Columbia, first as assistant relocation officer and then as information and procedure specialist for a total of six years.

Utilizing social work skills, her specialty was to use improved housing as a tool to raise the living standards of people moved from slum areas through urban renewal programs, highway construction and government transfers. In her last position she wrote the relocation regulations for the District of Columbia and supervised the moving of families and businesses displaced by government action.

When the Lederers "relocated" themselves in Leisure World seven years ago, Sarah began a string of activities which included serving on the Saddleback Valley School District citizens budget committee and Saddleback College liaison committee, as a Foreign Policy Association discussion group leader and on the Golden Rain Foundation nominating and management contract committees.

In her current role as the first woman president of United Mutual, she presided over the first open meeting ever held by the board that governs 6,323 cooperative living units in Leisure World.

And to add to these record-book achievements, she is also the first woman to join her husband on the Leisure Worlder of the Month Honor Roll as an independent recipient. Jerome Lederer was so honored in April of 1976. One other couple, Lenore and Glenn Giddings, were honored jointly in April 1979.