

LEISURE WORLDERS OF THE MONTH

EUGENE AND HELEN CONSER

SEPTEMBER, 1989

Eugene and Helen Conser met at UCLA. Helen is a native Californian, born in Venice. Her high school years were spent in Alhambra where she took an active role on the debate team, president of the Girl's League, and editor of the yearbook. At UCLA she prepared for a teaching career.

Eugene, as a transferee from the University of Minnesota, was born in the Minneapolis suburb of Robinsdale, but spent many of his teen years in Montana, working in his father's law offices and newspaper. A mid-western urge to "see an ocean" caused him and his chum--as the freshman year at the university ended--to visit the Pacific. Arriving in California, after a brief stop in an Oregon lumbering camp, he vowed never to leave.

Marriage in Pasadena Presbyterian Church followed shortly after the days at UCLA, where Gene had been active in converting the campus newspaper to a daily. Helen was teaching and Gene was successively a financial news editor, securities analyst, and partner in Pacific Financial Publications.

The collapse of the financial markets started Gene on a career as a management "trouble shooter". The financial institutions, having become overloaded with foreclosed real estate, organized the Southern California Real Estate Research Council, with Gene as managing director, to come up with a plan to curtail foreclosures and stabilize the markets.

That plan resulted in the creation of the Apartment Association, with Gene in charge. His career had changed suddenly from "financial" to "real estate."

Before birth of a son, Richard, in 1935, Helen had settled into a career as housewife and participant in community activities. As the economy stabilized, Gene moved successively into the management of county, state, and national apartment organization, requiring constant travel not conducive to home life in California.

At the death of a long-time executive of the California Real Estate Association the directors turned to Gene. In the ensuing eight years a statewide educational program became the basis of many legislative changes in real estate law as Gene commuted between Los Angeles and Sacramento.

The year 1955 was a turning point in the family's life. A request that Gene take charge of the languishing financial affairs of the National Association of Real Estate Boards (now National Association of Realtors) would require a move from California. A son in Stanford and a daughter about to enter San Marino High School, raised difficult questions. Daughter Paula assured: "You can go, but I won't go!" "Naturally," responded Eugene. "No one should leave California."

Family conferences resulted in a decision the move should be made, under agreement to remain 15 years in the East. The new family home in Chicago's suburban Winnetka brought Paula into the nationally renown New Trier High School and Helen into new leadership roles in the community. Gene's duties as Executive Vice President required constant attention to issues in Washington and New York, and travel throughout the states.

Helen's activities soon brought her the sobriquet "Madam President" as she became the leader of the Woman's Society, President of the Winnetka chapter, Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago, President of the Winnetka chapter of Chicago's Lyric Opera, and successive years in her favorite charity as Chairman of the famous "Rummage Sales" of the Winnetka Congregational Church. She continues to return annually to participate as co-chairman of the jewelry department of that "sale". It's recorded in the Guinness Book of Records as the world's largest, now contributing to charity more than \$180,000 in a one-day event.

American leadership in the International Real Estate Federation soon required attention abroad, first in Europe, and later on all five continents. Gene spent many a summer "holiday" helping strengthen real estate organizations, precursors of the present world-wide market, participating in meetings of the European Economic Community as lecturer in real estate, and serving a two-year stint as the NGO (non-governmental organization) member of the U.S. delegation to the United Nations.

Retirement in 1970, and fulfilling his 15-year commitment, opened a new field of activity. Embassies needed more information on real estate. With the cooperation of the State Department to open doors, the Consers set out for Europe. For more than four years they criss-crossed the continent, covering 32 countries, to relate real estate practices in a book dedicated "Wait Here, Helen," and titled "Real Estate--European Style."

Near exhaustion in 1978, they looked to Leisure World, taking possession of their manor on September 7, 1979. Resting during the early months, they gradually became involved. Helen served as a volunteer in the surgery recovery waiting room at Saddleback Hospital, president of Florence Crittenton Services, as well as chairman for five years of its annual benefit, serving in various offices in the California Club and in dance clubs, president of Panhellenic, chairman of Book Reviews for Ebell, chairman of its Nostalgia Antique Guild, vice president-program chairman of Ebell and its president in 1988-89.

Gene became active in the Moulton Kiwanis Club, serving as president, then serving the Cal-Nev-Ha District as lieutenant governor. In Geneva Presbyterian Church he served as treasurer and a ruling elder. Active in Opera 100, he was chairman of Evening-On-The-Terrace, vice president-programs, and president. As a director of the Historical Society, he served as managing editor in production of the 25th Anniversary book "Fulfilling Retirement Dreams" while serving a third year on the Golden Rain Foundation board of directors where he is currently chairman of the government and public relations committee--and looking forward to retiring again.