

# Writing what she knew Rowayton woman's memoirs reflect an unsparing portrait

By **Beth Cooney**  
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In her 85 years, Emilie Betts has lived in 29 homes.

They have included fine homes such as the elegant stone cottage she now occupies on Rowayton's Wilson Point. There were awful places, too: tent cities, decrepit apartments and boarding houses - the places where her vagabond family was relegated after it lost everything to a single bad investment during the Great Depression.

For all the drifting her early years required, it seems Betts learned to pack a lot

in. Every house she lived in came to represent a new chapter in her personal story.

In a tent, she was a destitute child told by her parents she was "camping." In a World War II-era boarding house, she was an anxious bride with a soldier husband. In 1960s Chappaqua, N.Y., she was a desperate housewife. In a Manhattan townhouse, she was the widow of a successful CEO and soon after, a grieving mother, losing her adult daughter to cancer. It was in Wilson Point that Betts says she found serenity in widowhood, and the feeling of home that eluded her since she left the elegant East-

ton, Pa., home her bankrupt parents lost when she was 6.

"Moving from my first, beautiful house, when we lost everything, tore me apart," says Betts. "It was like my whole life I tried to capture the feelings I had in that house. When I walked in the door here, I knew, immediately, I belonged. I had that feeling I had so many years ago...."

So Wilson Point became a fitting place for Betts to put the finishing touches on her recently published memoir and first book, "Shadows in My House of Sunshine." Betts describes the memoir, which took 10 years to complete, as "the best possible way to celebrate my 85th birthday."

Although her first love was always singing, the daughter of vaudevillian performers long had a knack for writing. "My memory is so sharp and I had a story to tell. I got tired of people saying, 'Emilie you should write a book.' I just had to go for it, but I have to tell you it wasn't easy." The book is "partially" self-published. Betts worked with a small house that takes writers' manuscripts and agrees to share some of the publishing and promotional costs. "It is hard to get a memoir published at any age if you are not famous. So this was a good route for me."

From the beginning, Betts set out to write an unsparing portrait of her life. "A memoir has to be authentic. Otherwise, it's just Barbie stuff."

The result is a book that romps through the last century's history in the same way the fictional Forrest Gump did on film. "I really did experience each decade in the way history remembers it."

During the Depression, it was stifling poverty. "My father was a talented pianist, my mother sang light opera and we were



Rowayton resident Emilie Betts wrote from the heart in creating "Shadows in My House of Sunshine." "A memoir has to be authentic," she says. "Otherwise, it's just Barbie stuff."

(Kathleen O'Rourke/Staff photo)

quite successful, but he foolishly put our life savings in one stock and that was it." For a while, her family got by with odd jobs and selling eggs, only to end up starving when the birds took sick and died. Although her father eventually got steady work, he struggled with alcoholism. Long shamed by her poverty and circumstances, Betts eventually married her high school sweetheart, the late Bob Betts, when he was on leave from combat during World War II. "I don't mind saying he was my piggyback ride out of a bad existence. When I grew up, you didn't have too many choices. I certainly wasn't going to college although I would have loved to... I saw my future in Bob Betts."

Still, while Betts writes and speaks of her husband with great admiration, she openly discusses the strains of their long marriage. Bob hit her when he drank. She cheated on him when they lived in suburban Chappaqua. "The 1950s were pabulum, it was all very nice, but we were hopelessly bored. Then 1960s rolled around and we all got caught up in it. I'm not proud of my affair - I'm not even sure I would call it that - but we were all drinking and carrying on. In the end what got us through was commitment. It got me through everything in my life. It was what I learned from my mother in the way she stayed with my father when the bottom fell out. You know, I'm not sure how my life would have turned out if I had come of age today. I have often wondered if I would have divorced. But I think there is something to be said for sticking it out."

Before her book was published, Betts says she had to prepare her two surviving children, Brooks and Budd, and extended family for her revelations. It was hard to write about her husband and the difficulties she encountered when the couple became parents to five additional children overnight. Bob's sister-in-law and brother died suddenly, six months apart, and the couple took in their children. The youngest was 7, the oldest 22. Betts was in her 50s then and says, "I thought I was done with the discipline, the conferences and PTA meetings and taking the kids to the bus stop." Taking the children in also forced her to end her affair.

"I struggled writing about that time be-

cause I didn't want to hurt those kids again. It was hard for me to say I was ambivalent about them coming into our lives, because can you imagine what they had lost? We had no other choice and did the very best we could.

"And I had to tell my daughter, 'There's going to be some stuff in here about your Dad and I that may shock you.' "

Her daughter told her, "Mom be honest. I don't want to read anything else."

"So I put it all out there and just hoped everyone would understand. And you know, people have been great because I think I put everything in perspective."

She preaches the same self-effacing honesty when she teaches memoir writing to classes at Noroton Presbyterian Church, where she worships. "I tell them just write

it. No one wants to read a bunch of sap."

Next for Betts is a novel, inspired by some of the imagined history of old inhabitants of her Wilson Point home. "I can't tell you anymore or you won't want to read it."

Betts stays nimble by working with a personal trainer, "takes a lot of vitamins" and devotes several hours a week to writing on her computer when she's not busy promoting her memoir. "Maybe when I'm 90, we'll be talking about my first novel," she says.

"Shadows in My House of Sunshine" can be purchased at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).

Another story for Emilie Betts to tell.

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