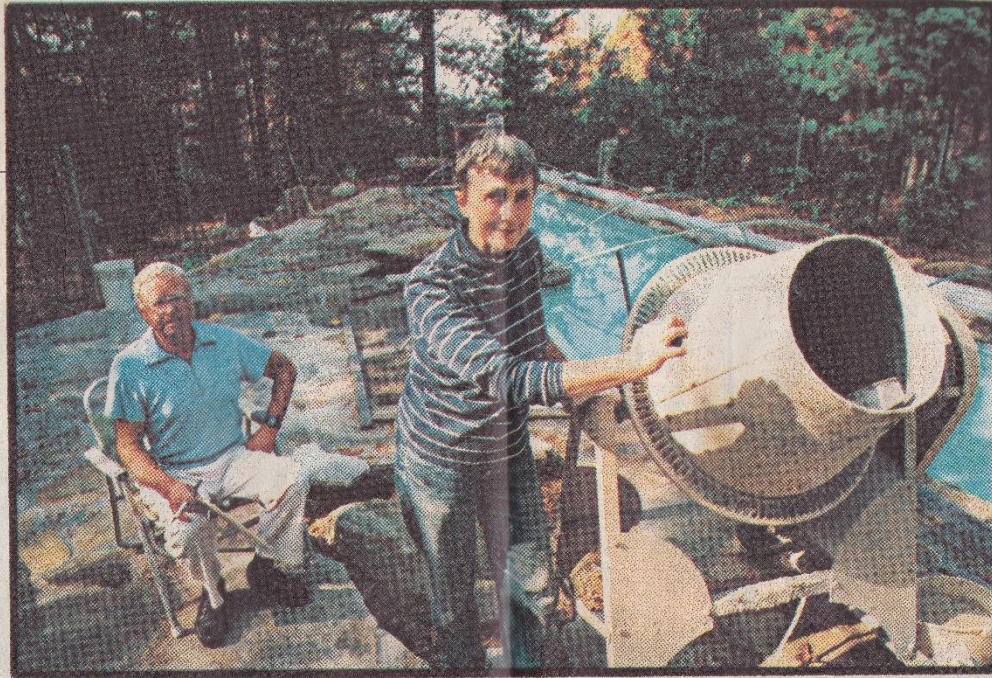


Providence Journal, November 19, 1991



HE GOES WITH THE FLOW: Husband John Butler, left, "grew up in a family where all of the males were helpless and proud of it."

She builds on her successes

She builds on her successes

Florence Butler is 'on her second cement mixer,' her husband says proudly



MARTHA SMITH

John Butler sits in the living room of his house, deep in the woods of Smithfield, and recalls the first time he visited the home of the woman he planned to marry. "I went to the farmhouse in Maine where her parents lived and her mother pointed to a wooden lawn chair that was so beautiful it looked like something you'd see in one of those exclusive catalogs. She said, 'Florence made that when she was 9.'"

If he didn't already know that Flo was the one for him, seeing her handiwork sealed the deal.

"I was helpless when it came to doing anything around the house," says Butler, now 65 and a retired English professor. "I grew up in a family where all of the males were helpless and proud of it."

As Butler sits in the Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired house that is made of wood, fieldstone and glass and seems to blend into the forest around it, there is a gentle whirring from somewhere in the distance. It is a cement mixer: Flo Butler, also 65, is making a stone patio to surround the swimming pool that she dug — taking over from a contractor who declared it too tough for his backhoe and — pounding away at the solid ledge with a sledge hammer.

John Butler, whose snowy white hair is meticulously cut — Flo has been his personal barber since shortly after their marriage 42 years ago — smiles proudly as he recounts an incredible list of his wife's accomplishments.

She has made most of the contents of their home — including the couch, a chair and portable typing stand, coffee table, handsome dining table, a pair of bureaus, bed, and a lamp fashioned from birch, steel tubing and a homemade wire-and-paper shade — in a spare wooden style that crosses Swedish modern with classic Adirondack outdoor furniture.

She custom tailors all of her husband's clothing, from suits to the cheery plaid flannel shirts that look as though they came from L.L. Bean. She is a gourmet cook. She is a chemist and holds the dual positions of vice president and director of chemical research at Technic Inc., in

Cranston. The three acres of woodland surrounding their home are ringed and divided by stone walls she built from chunks of boulder she dug from the earth.

Several cords of wood, which she chopped, are stacked near the two-car garage she put up. She does wiring, plumbing and, of course, the enormous construction projects for which she has become legendary in the Butlers' circle of friends and family.

She's also much in demand among these admirers when any sort of appliance breaks down. She fixes chain saws, washers and dryers, vacuums cleaners and drills. She shakes her head and says that the only area where she falls short is auto repair. "I can fix the car and the tractor, but really only minor jobs. I'm not that good at motors."

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Butler: 'My projects have sort of grown'

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Somehow, Flo Butler found time to have three children, two daughters and a son. As might be expected, both daughters are very handy but the son is not.

"She started her projects soon after we were married," says John Butler. "We couldn't afford anything, so she began making furniture. She borrowed tools from the buildings and grounds department at Amherst College, where I was teaching. She's always made everything with dowels, no nails, as things were constructed in the 18th century."

During their married life, the Butlers have lived in several states as John Butler accepted new teaching assignments. During the early '70s, when he taught at Drexel University, in Philadelphia, his wife built their first swimming pool. She's now got three pools on her resume, including the one she's still putting the finishing touches on in Smithfield.

She is a woman undeterred by rock walls and seemingly impossible obstacles.

"In Pennsylvania," he husband recalls, "we owned a small house that rested on a rock foundation, and she decided she'd like to have a cellar. The first contractor said it couldn't be done; the second said he could do it for what amounted to 40 percent of my annual salary. Flo rented a jackhammer, made a four-foot wide opening in the rock wall

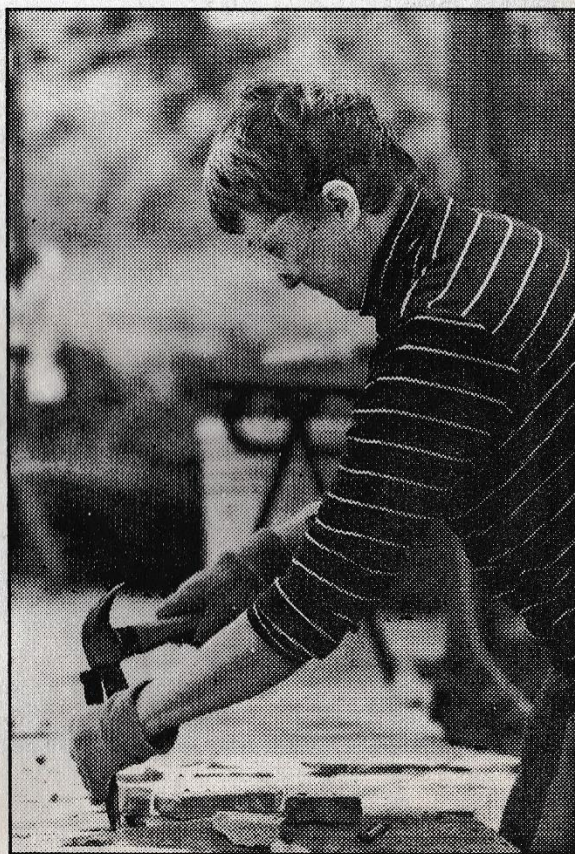
MARTHA SMITH

and, with a shovel and wheelbarrow, dug a cellar."

In Smithfield, when the Butlers decided they wanted a 75-foot-long pool in which to swim laps, Flo dug, poured the cement foundation, lined the pool with small ceramic tiles, and devised a plastic tunnel over the top of the whole thing for solar heat, so they can swim from March to November. She also built a deck and a fishpond with a little waterfall. Besides the stone patio around the pool, she's currently working on cutting a window in the bathroom wall.

"She's on her second cement mixer," says John Butler proudly, noting that she wore out the first, a small version from Sears. "And we don't borrow tools anymore. She has quite a lot of things including a band saw." She keeps her collection in a tool shed that, it goes without saying, she built. Her equipment hangs neatly labeled on pegs along the walls; tidy painted tin cans lining shelves near her workbench hold smaller accessories.

Flo Butler, a small woman who has been bustling around in the brisk autumn morning since 6 o'clock, wears worn bluejeans, thick socks and sneakers, and a turtleneck sweater under a tattered navy sweatshirt. She has short-cropped hair and the calm



HANDY MA'AM:
Florence Butler lays stones for a deck around a pool which she framed, painted and tiled herself.

— Journal-Bulletin Photo by MARY MURPHY

demeanor of someone who believes her achievements are no big deal.

"I think the reason I do so many things is the fact that I was brought up on a farm and had parents who were handy. My projects have sort of grown; I started out with something small, then the next thing was bigger. The only thing I always wanted to do that I won't be doing at this late stage is to build an entire house for us by myself."

For his part, John Butler is his wife's primary cheerleader,

lavishing praise and marveling at his good fortune. "I try to make myself useful," he says. "When she's working, I can see what she'll need next, so I hand her things. I hold the boards. Basically, I'm the helper."

He's improved a lot since they were first married, says Florence Butler.

"He's not *really* as useless as he pretends to be," she says, with a twinkle. "And, besides, I'd have married him anyhow."