

Alma Dalton's 96th birthday!



What a grand birthday it was this past Wednesday. Alma sat in her yard as fire trucks, police cars and dozens of vehicles carrying friends paraded by tooting horns, playing music and dropping off gifts and cards. Alma's birthday was big news in town

See the front-page story below!

First responders, locals surprise with a parade

By **Jim McCarthy**

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Alma Dalton watches as the procession makes its way in front of her home for her 96th birthday in Islamorada on April 22. JIM MCCARTHY/Keys Weekly

Outside her Islamorada residence, Alma Dalton watched the fire rescue trucks, sheriff's vehicles and local friends in their cars pass by during the late afternoon of April 22. Dalton's first responder friends know it's her 96th birthday, and they're bringing the party right outside her doorstep.

"This is one of the best birthdays ever," Dalton

remarked as she sat in the shade with a few family and friends surrounding her, while maintaining their social distance. As cars drove by, they presented cards for Alma's family to grab and bring to her.

"There's nobody in our family who lived that long," the Conch said. "My grandfather was 85. He was the oldest one that I can remember. My daddy was only in his 70s. My brothers and sisters are both younger than me and they're both gone."

Born in Key West on April 22, 1924, Dalton was the oldest child of Bertram and Ida Cothron Pinder. She grew up with her younger sister, Dorrie, and younger brother, Joe, and always adored the water, whether it was swimming or fishing off the dock at the Matecumbe Club.

She ended up spending much of her life in the Keys, besides the two years she went to California with her husband, Jack, and the eight years she lived in DeLand before returning after his passing.

"I guess it's just because I'm used to them (the Keys)," Dalton said about the allure of the islands. "It's so different from what it was when I was growing up now though. It doesn't even compare to what it was when I was growing up."

As granddaughter Corie McGraw-Abel notes, Dalton, or her "Mimi," is tough as nails and still has that old Conch attitude. At a young age, Dalton and her immediate and extended families went face-to-face with one of the most catastrophic Atlantic hurricanes ever to make landfall on record — the Labor Day Hurricane of 1935. After shuttering up their house, the family moved to their Uncle Lester's to wait it out.

Conditions greatly worsened by nightfall and chaos ensued for the family. Dalton, who was all of 11 at the time, recalls the moment the house went to pieces.

"We were going out and we rolled out the back door, and I guess a tornado must have took the house and threw us all out of the water then," she said. "We were fighting and we were in the water for the rest of the night."

"You couldn't even touch the bottom. Even daddy said he tried and he couldn't," Dalton continued. "It was because it was blowing and it was rough. It was a few feet to the ground, it was just so bad."

Dalton said she was with her uncle, who managed to shove her onto some floating trash to stay above water. She then found her sister, but her mother was trapped on debris.

"My sister and I stayed with her until somebody came," she said. "We got under the debris, and kind of helped her out. My mother was one of the worst injured, I think. She had a broken back and crushed her ribs and crushed her collar bone. She was really injured, but she was like 'I'm good.'"

Her family ended up surviving the storm. Today, Dalton's only one of two remaining survivors of the catastrophic event.



Alma Dalton, left, with Laurette Russell. Both survived the Labor Day Hurricane of 1935. Russell passed away in June 2016. CONTRIBUTED

She attended school in Key West through 11th grade before moving to Georgia to live with her aunt for her senior year. And six months after she graduated, she married Jack in December 1942. Jack was stationed with the Coast Guard at Alligator Reef Lighthouse, and the two met during Christmas break in 1941 when Alma dropped off mail for Jack at her great-uncle's house.

"My husband was in the service and I followed him all over the country," she says.

Dalton cleaned houses, then worked for a public gas company in Islamorada for 20 years. She also worked at Trading Post for 15 years making fresh goods.

Today, Dalton is staying safe and sound at home amid the coronavirus pandemic. And while she admits she doesn't get out of the house much anymore, Wednesday's celebration was worth sitting the shade to witness. The process was led by Fire Chief Terry Abel and fire rescuers, followed by Monroe County Sheriff's and locals.

"They (rescuers) know Mimi very well because she has scares, being her age. She just calls them and they come over and check her out and stuff," McGraw-Abel said. "She bakes them Key lime cake and pie."



