

# Too Much of the Old East Side Has Not Changed, Elizabeth Flynn Finds

By VIRGINIA GARDNER

ELIZABETH GURLEY FLYNN looked up from the scrap books which now were spread around her on sofa, chairs and table, books containing clippings and mementoes of a life probably as full of turbulent activity, fights, speeches, arrests, acclaim, and certainly gusto, as that of anyone alive.

She had found the clippings which she was searching for, to illustrate her answer to a question now forgotten by the interviewer, by this time lost among mimeographed and printed notices of meetings Gurley Flynn was to address.

"Unemployment Hits Textile!", Sept. 20, '38, a poster from Philadelphia began.

"Vote Communist" (St. Louis, March 30, 1941).

"For a Second Front Now" (Flint, Mich.).

"... Fighter for Irish Independence ... greatest woman labor leader of all times." (Aug. 24, 1940 for meeting, Marine Cooks & Stewards hall San Francisco.)

And so they went.

MISS FLYNN'S voice brought us back to her living room on the East Side with its plants and its family photographs, its indifferent assortment of worn but comfortable furniture, its books, all newly arranged since her return from prison, and the October sunlight streaming through her windows.

"But the best thing about the past is that it's gone," she said. "We're living now in the present and in the future."

That, she said, was the thing that made her so angry on her various journeyings around her 24th District, particularly in the Lower East Side.

"I look around and what do I see? Of course there's some new housing—but it's only a drop in the bucket. I see a lot of the same houses the same firetraps, the same hallways with big ratholes, the same bedding sunning in windows because the roaches are still there, that I saw in 1906 on the East Side."

It was in 1906 that 16-year-old Miss Flynn joined the then new Industrial Workers of the World and made her first street corner speech. Her speeches on the Lower East Side from then to now are so numerous that stretched end to end they might reach to Sputnik.

OUT OF PRISON only a few months Gurley Flynn plunged into an active campaign for City Council representing her own 24th district. She was released from the Federal prison for women at Alderson, W. Va., last May. While there she made good use of her time—to get a perspective, to lose some 75 pounds and to look back and sense a continuity of her life, simply as always and as if it were someone's else.

"I see my life all as a whole. And I'm itching to get at my next book. All kinds of ex-Communists are writing all kinds of trash. I think we could do with a book written about Communism by someone who still is living it and still believing in it."

She was wearing a blue dress made for her before she left Alderson by the Puerto Rican Nationalist women who work in the garment shop there. With it she wore a heavy gold locket on a chain which caught the sunlight as she fingered it idly with her small slender hands.

I asked about the locket and she showed it to me. Of Butte gold, it showed a crossed pick and shovel against a background of a prospector's cabin, and on the back an inscription, "Presented by Butte Miners Local No. 1 Western Federation of Miners, to Eliza-



ELIZABETH GURLEY FLYNN

beth Gurley Flynn June 13, 1909."

BUT TODAY Miss Flynn wanted to talk about other experiences than her early years, year immortalized by Joe Hill in the song, "The Rebel Girl."

"For some reason people who interview me or write about me too often stress the years before I went into the Communist Party," said Miss Flynn. "But for 21 years I've been a Communist."

"Why is that do you think?" she was asked. "Is it because you embody the native American roots of the movement—our association with Debs, Haywood and others?"

"Well, I certainly do that" she laughed. "But I get a little tired of the implication that once I went into the Communist Party, this was a break with my past activities."

"There was no break. It was a continuation. I kept on going back to the miners, and the steelworkers, and talking about the same things I had talked of before—poverty, discrimination, working conditions."

"WHAT DO YOU think makes certain people regard your going into the party as some cleavage or break with your past?" she was asked.

"I think without always being aware of it they are people who have fallen for the lies of the capitalist press that the Communist Party is an outgrowth of the Soviet Union" she said. "To me the party is a product of conditions in the United States. It grew out of the left wing movements, the IWW, the Socialist party, to both of which I belonged. It is indignant to our country. It really carried on the worthwhile features of those two movements, in such things as building the CIO, for instance."

"In many ways it went ahead of them. For instance, in the matter of Negro rights. Of course they were recognized as a goal of Socialism in the earlier movements, but the practical struggle for full rights for the Negro people did not develop until after World War I. Negroes were not in mass industry in any large numbers until after World War I."

It was in 1919, she said, that William Z. Foster, leader in steel organizing and not yet in the Communist Party, pioneered in making the organization of Negro workers a matter of urgency.

LONG BEFORE she herself became a Communist, said Gurley Flynn, she worked closely with Communists—for example, in the period after the Palmer raids, in the defense of deportation cases that followed, and in the Sacco and Vanzetti case, as well as in the Passaic textile strike of 1926.

"I used to be called a 'non-party Bolshevik,'" she recalled with a smile.

When she did go into the party,

she said, it was not because of what was happening abroad, but because she admired what the party had done here, especially organizing the unemployed and fighting for the rights of Negroes, as in the Scottsboro and Angelo Herndon cases.

RECALLING HOW she worked with Jack Reed, "Mother" Ella Reeve Bloor, James Larkin, Foster, Charles Ruthenberg and other party leaders—after the party came into existence—she said she probably would have joined the party in 1926 or 1927 if she had not become ill. A physical breakdown in 1927, caused by exhaustion and a heart attack which followed septic poisoning from an infected tooth, incapacitated Miss Flynn until 1936. It was in that year that she joined the Communist Party.

"Spurring me on was the speech on the united front against fascism by George Dimitroff, the great Bulgarian leader tried in Leipzig for the framed-up Reichstag fire, who won his acquittal by his own defense. Actually, I'd been working in a united front with Communists in all my defense work, so I saw no reason I couldn't keep on doing so as a Communist. And I have."

SHE PAUSED, as is her way of breaking any long discussion by little excursions, and began rearranging an assortment of little photos of blooming cactus on the mantel, making enthusiastic talk of their coloring. Another time, she had interrupted herself to go fetch her cat. At another, she went to summon her sister Kathy to enjoy with her some forgotten clipping she found in one of her well-organized scrapbooks.

"And what if you hadn't gone into the Communist Party?" I asked after she settled down again in her chair by the window.

She thought a second or two, then answered: "I honestly don't know where else I could have gone to express the things I have gone for in my life except in the Communist Party."

A member of the national committee since 1938, Miss Flynn was re-elected at the Communist convention Feb. 9-12 last, while she was in Alderson, and on her return was elected to the national executive committee.

She is by now a veteran campaigner for Communists on the ballot—Mother Bloor in Pennsylvania in 1938, Pete Cacchione in 1939, in 1941, when he was elected, and 1943 and '45 when he was re-elected, for Ben Davis when he was elected in 1943, as well as after Proportional Representation was ended for the purpose of stopping the Communists, when both Cacchione and Davis were defeated for the Council. And in 1942 Miss Flynn herself polled 50,000 votes for Congress.

And having got on the ballot while she was under sentence and awaiting appeal in the height of the McCarthyite scourge in 1954, as a Congressional candidate in the Bronx, Miss Flynn gladly accepted her own East Side's bid to run as a Peoples' Rights candidate for City Council after her return from Alderson.

Her idea of giving leadership in the party at this time is to speak out on issues.

One thing she finds distressing above all in this period is a tendency on the part of sundry persons she meets to deliver lectures on purely hypothetical questions, she said. She had another beef, to.

"Of course I believe in the right to criticize but it burns me up when I hear someone say we can do without the Daily Worker unless it's run to suit them. That

(Continued on Page 11)

# INTERVIEW

(Continued from Page 12)

I can't stand. I said recently, to such a one that if he'd been locked in prison for 28 months and/unable to see a Daily Worker, he would know what it would be like NOT to have our paper."

Then, with a dazzling smile, Miss Flynn turned to the subject of Sputnik. "You' know," she said, "it's a wonderful thing to think that Socialism has survived for 40 years—think of it, the Soviet Union is four decades old. And how few people are mentioning the 40th anniversary. But I think it's wonderful that they're celebrating it by sending up a little fireworks—a little moon."