

Santa Cruz:
Biography A-M

SENIOR LIVING
PAMPHLET
BRANCH FORTE BR. LIBRARY
230 GAULT ST.
SANTA CRUZ, CA 95062

Stories From Century Club

Local seniors talk about their lives

by Phyllis Levine

MISERY, LONELINESS, and dependency. Is that what it's like to be 100 years old? There are reports of cultures where people of that age are venerated, dancing, working in the fields, and even marrying. I thought I would check into how some people of that age live in Santa Cruz.

Florence Mendoza is 100 years old. When I met her, the first thing she said to me was, "I do not feel old. Inside of me is a young woman who is interested in going on with her life."

Florence was born at home in Santa Cruz in November 1896. She graduated from Santa Cruz High School, and except for a brief period in San Francisco working in the music department at the Emporium, has spent her entire life in Santa Cruz County.

A fond memory of growing up includes taking the horse-car from the Eastside to Pacific Avenue for a

nickel. Another memory dear to her heart is how she read music to a blind man who became a very good pianist.

Florence had five brothers. Their favorite pastime was to run to the beach and dive into the surf. That was not appropriate for a girl, so she did not learn to swim until much later at a pool where the patrons rented bathing suits.

Secret of Long Life

I asked her to what did she attribute her long life, and she replied that she really did not know. Tracing the family back to 1640, none had ever lived this long. I think if one could attribute her long life to anything, it would be her passion for music. She has a great sense of humor, enjoys socializing, never complains, and just lives "on and on."

She did mention that she likes to eat, and she likes sweets the most. Florence says she wants to go on living to at least 110. She might make it since she feels healthy, happy with her situation, hears well, sees well, and feels physically strong. Florence never exercised much, or paid much attention to eating "nutritionally." She did love music. She played organ or piano for almost every church in town when she was younger. She played piano accompaniment professionally for the movies before talkies came

into being. She also has a strong spiritual sense of the flow of life.

What does a 100-year-old do all day at the Santa Cruz Health Care Center? Florence goes to the mid-morning social coffee hour, watches TV, reads, jokes with the staff, and receives visits from her daughter Marilyn.

My next visit was with Hay Robinson. She was 102 years old Feb. 27. Gaspar Barros, activity director at the Health Center (formerly Hillhaven), and staff gave her a birthday party.

Still Going Strong

As I walked into Hay's room, she was reading the *New York Times* large-print edition. On her 100th birthday, she asked for three poetry books by women authors, and a dictionary as gifts. I think she goes on living because she has an abiding interest in the world around her.

Hay and her sister opened a successful ballet school in Denver in their early years. When Hay married a rising attorney, she was told that it would not be good for his career to have a working wife, so she should go home and "have babies." She did, but she has remained a feminist to this day.

Hay resumed her career by becoming a groupie with the Doris Humphrey Ballet dance company, and traveled around the country with the troupe. She feels like she never grew up. Psychologically, she feels 32 years old. She can not understand why she has lived so long, and can not ascribe a purpose to it. She says at times she feels half alive.

From my observation, that does not seem to be the case. Her room faces a sunny patio, and is cheerfully decorated with ballet photographs, pictures of other family members, and dog posters. Her devoted daughter visits her three times a week.

Her mornings are spent in an exercise class, where mild exercise moves the blood from a sitting position to the brain. She spends a lot of time reading. She watches some TV. She also has a good sense of humor, and is a favorite of the staff.

To what does she attribute her long life? She does not know. Not careful eating; she is a junk food lover. It is not faith. Her daughter believes it is because she loved dancing and that gave her purpose.

*A fond memory
of growing up
includes taking
the horse-car
from the
Eastside to
Pacific Avenue
for a nickel.*

"Good Times"
Spring 97