



## She's Still Got 'It!'

### Doretta Youngdahl at 99.7

Written by Jean Bartlett, December 21, 2021

*(Note to readers from Jean Bartlett. Doretta Youngdahl left this world on December 23, 2023 at the age of 101.7, full of fun and life until the day she died. Her daughters said, "At last, she will be with her beloved Herbie, and on December 27, 2023, we know they were together in heaven to share their 82nd wedding anniversary." This biography is my 2021 interview with Doretta, as it ran then.)*



(Jean Bartlett photo)

**At home with Doretta Youngdahl, Pacifica, CA, December 14, 2021.**

Center's Monday-Friday congregate lunch; or welcoming friends and family at her home. She keeps up with the news, locally and nationally, and admits she is sick of the pandemic – like everyone. Her two daughters rotate staying with her. At almost 100, Doretta can use the company and enjoys her daughters immensely. The same can also be said about her relationship with her son. "I married the right guy and he married the right girl and that happiness carried right through to the kids!"

Doretta stops to rummage through her purse. "Wait. I have to share with you my life motto before we really get going on my life story." Her purse is bursting with supplies. Her daughter, Lyn, smiles and says, "Mom knows, when we cremate her, her purse is going with her!"

"Come on in, the door is open," a welcoming voice calls to this writer.

Doretta Youngdahl and I need no introduction. We got to know each other back in 2011. I did a profile piece on this longtime Pacifican, then 89 years young, for the *Pacifica Tribune*. What was true about Doretta then is still true. She is interesting, full of humor and fun, and as sharp as a tack.

"I still got 'It,'" the 99.7 year old notes. "The worst thing I have is I have to use a walker. I went from a cane. I need it for balance and my doctor said I gotta use it. So I use it!"

It doesn't stop her from: playing bingo, an absolute favorite; dining with friends at the Pacifica Senior

Everyone bursts into laughter as Doretta continues her search. "I've got it framed in my office but I like to keep it with me. Words to live by!"

The motto is uncovered.

*Life's journey is not to arrive at the grave safely in a well-preserved body, but rather to skid in sideways, totally worn out, shouting "Holy Shit...What a ride!"*

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Sylvia Doretta (Biggerstaff) Youngdahl was born on May 1, 1922 in Lake Preston, South Dakota. The daughter of Elmer and Sylvia (Moltz) Biggerstaff, Doretta grew up in Huron, SD, until she was 6 and then the family moved to Sioux City, Iowa. She is the second of three siblings: Charles Sidney "Sid," Doretta and Mary Louise. Her brother Sid was born in 1920 and her sister Mary, 15 months younger, was born in 1923. Her middle name, Doretta, is the combination of her grandmothers' names: Dora and Etta. It's also the name that stuck as her first.

From Nebraska, her dad was born in August of 1899. Her mom was born in 1902 and she was from De Smet, SD. The couple married in South Dakota in 1918. Doretta's mom was 16.

←Doretta and her brother Sid, 1923, South Dakota.

"My dad grew up on a farm. He was one of six – five brothers, originally, and the youngest was a girl. When their little sister was born, their mom had each brother pick out a name they liked and place it in the hat and my grandmother reached in and pulled out 'Maxine.'

"My dad was in the middle. His eldest brother was Harold. The next brother died from epilepsy quite young. After Dad there were two more brothers and then my Aunt Maxine. The boys did not grow up as quiet little gentlemen. They'd be up on the hay mound in the barn raising hell. The one brother that named Maxine was in jail half the time."

Doretta's mom, Sylvia, was one of four sisters. When Sylvia was little, her father was repairing a corncrib when he fell off a ladder and broke his neck. Doretta's maternal grandmother was then left to make a living for her four girls.

"She became, more or less, a midwife," Doretta said. "She would travel with the old time doctors who went out to deliver the babies on a farm."

Her four daughters all began their education at De Smet's first schoolhouse. This was the same schoolhouse attended by Laura Ingalls and her sister Carrie Ingalls. (Laura Ingalls Wilder would become

famous for her *Little House On The Prairie* book series, and this schoolhouse in De Smet is mentioned in her *Little Town On The Prairie* book.)

"I was delivered by a doctor at a farm," Doretta noted. "Oh, it wasn't our farm. My dad was farming some guy's land in Lake Preston, South Dakota. He was working on the windmill when all of a sudden he heard this noise. So he shouted, 'Where's that damn cat that's making all that noise?' Well, that was me, announcing my arrival!"

"How did my parents meet? My mother was working at the 5 and 10 Cent Store in South Dakota. My dad had inherited some farmland from his grandfather, not too much, but enough for him to buy a Stutz Bearcat. He thought that would impress my mom, but she was unimpressed."

Still she liked something about him because they got married.

"My dad's grandmother, who was the one with all the land, she did not approve of the marriage. She thought my mother was too good for my dad. She sat in her wheelchair, smoking a corn cob pipe and said, 'Well, I don't approve of this marriage, but love will go where it is sent, even if it is in a dog's ass!'"

Doretta howled with laughter, noting, nevertheless, the validity of the story.

Doretta's dad would have a number of jobs. He was an excellent house painter and did that as work could be found. During the Depression, he got a job with the WPA (Works Progress Administration). But the family struggled. In 1928, Doretta's family was invited to live with her mom's sister in Sioux City, Iowa. She had a house. They could have the upstairs.

"My mom's sister had 13 children. She had a husband for a while but she got rid of him, though she eventually remarried. But this arrangement of everyone living under one roof really helped all of us."

Doretta's parents headed out first, with their eldest child, to set things up in Sioux City. Doretta and Mary stayed with their maternal grandmother who was by then running "something like a convalescent home."

"I remember cutting some grandfather's toenails," Doretta stated.

After what seemed like an eternity, but was probably no more than a month or two, Doretta's dad and uncle returned to Huron, SD, to bring the two girls to Sioux City.

"That's a little over 200 miles and we were going to ride the rails. The Bull (a railroad policeman) saw my dad and uncle loading Mary and me into a boxcar. The Bull decided that might be okay for my dad and uncle, but not for us two little girls. So, he went and made room for us in the caboose and that's how my sister and I arrived in Sioux City."

Besides house painting and working for the WPA, her dad found work at a cleaners, and later, would be given the cleaning business. At some point her mom would work as a waitress. But the kids were in school and while "we didn't have enough money to rub two dimes together," they were settled. A few years down the road, Doretta's dad also got a job at a local grocery store, working, it turns out, for the uncle of a boy who would become Doretta's husband. By then Doretta's family had their own place.

"When I went into the store with my dad to get some groceries, Herbie was there working. When I saw him, I said, 'There is the man I am going to marry.' He was 9 months older than me, to the day. How old was I when I saw him at the grocery store? Eleven!"

Who was this "Herbie," the man who won Doretta's heart the moment she laid eyes on him.

Herbert Milo Youngdahl was born in Lake City, Iowa on September 2, 1921. His parents were Verner and Eva Youngdahl. Herb grew up in Lake City. At some point when he was in elementary school, his parents decided that Sioux City was a better place to earn a living and so the family moved. What was it that Doretta liked about him? Doretta ponders for about five seconds. "Everything!"

The age of 11 was a big year for Doretta. Not only did she catch a glimpse of her true love, she also learned that if she saw something in life that was wrong, and she could fix it, that's exactly what she was going to do.

"Our grade school in Sioux City caught fire and everyone was sent to a couple of different schools. At the school I was sent to, it didn't take me long to catch on that there was a 'bully of the playground,' same age as me.

"We got snow pretty thick there and this bully, a girl, would take a hard piece of ice, pack it with snow and hit little kids with it. I watched her do this a couple of times. Finally, I had enough. I walked up to her and I said, 'Stop that! Do you know that hurts those little kids?' And she said, 'Are you going to make me?' She shouldn't have said that. I just beat the living shit out of her. She lost her place on the playground. She wasn't the top bully anymore and kids would say to her, 'Can you whip anybody on this playground?' And she'd say, 'All but one!'

"Now, on that day that I beat up the bully, the doors are open to my dad's cleaning shop and my dad is pressing and he hears these kids talking as they are coming down the street."

"Biggerstaff really got in a fight today!"

"So here comes my brother, Sid. My dad says to him, 'Were you fighting at school today?'

"Not me, Dad. Must have been Mary.'

"Here comes Mary.

"Mary, were you fighting at school today?'

"Not me, Dad!"

"My God, it couldn't have been Doretta.'

"When I came in he said, 'Was you fighting at school today?' And I said, 'Yes I was. She was picking on those little bitty kids and I took care of it!' I did not get in trouble. He kind of snickered. Didn't get in trouble at school either. That girl had been bullying those little kids until we came over from our school and I was not going to put up with it."

Now before Herb really got a look at Doretta and fell head-over-heels as well, he came over to her house one day to receive some kind of points for all the *Liberty* magazines he sold. Herb was always a hard worker as was Doretta's brother Sid, who also sold *Liberty* magazines, and Sid had some sort of supervisor responsibilities between the two boys.

"I heard Herbie was coming to our house to get these points for his sales. Boy, did I clean that house from top to bottom. But Herbie never even came in. He just stood outside on the porch and talked to my brother. But I was crazy for him!"

There was a third thing that Doretta took to heart when she was 11, and that was – you better pay people a fair wage.

"I remember the farmers went on strike in 1933. But they would come to town and if you showed them you had kids, they would give you milk for free. Then they would dump all the rest of their milk on the street. Now this is during the Depression and there was hardship everywhere.

"The summer of my 11th year was when I went to work, all my vacations, at my grandma and grandpa's farm. One time when Grandpa drove me home, he gave me a \$5 bill and he said to Grandma, "She earned every bit of it."

It was at Woodrow Wilson Jr. High School in Sioux City that together Doretta and Herb discovered each other – and that was it. They were both 12 years old.

When Doretta was 13, her job was to help take care of Aunt Maxine's and Uncle Bob's four little ones—the couple would have four more.

"Those first four were my babies. One time, Aunt Max and Uncle Bob decided to take their parents to see Mount Rushmore and left me in charge of those four babies. My aunt was asked who was taking care of the children while they were gone and my aunt said, 'Doretta.' Well that didn't sit well with the person who asked, who then said, 'That girl is 13 years old and you are trusting her with your children?' My aunt said in response, 'If that girl doesn't have twelve children, it is talent wasted!' I did just fine by them."



Among the many things Doretta liked about Herb was that he was so good with little ones, including her little cousins. He also had a strong work ethic. His parents divorced when he was 13 and he found a job that paid well and he gave every dime to his mom. He worked week nights setting pins in the local bowling alley. That bowling alley was closed on weekends, so he often found weekend work in one of the bigger bowling alleys downtown, sometimes setting 100 lines in a day. But still, during high school, he and his girl would go to the movies. These were episodic westerns. Frequently, Doretta noted with a sigh, her little sister tagged along. The couple often went bowling and then there were the Sunday dances at the local Moose Hall.

←Herb and Doretta, Sioux City, 1939.

"My dad was in charge of running the dances. He had me be the ticket seller so Herbie could get in for free. Herb wouldn't dance. He didn't know how. He would just sit there. But then his dad taught him how to waltz and he really got that down. I remember when he first asked me to dance at the Moose Hall, there was this big overhead club light, and Herbie came and got me and

we waltzed. My God, he was such a good dancer." (Herb would eventually master many, many dances and Doretta's daughter Lyn notes how much she enjoyed watching her parents dance around the kitchen when she was growing up. "They were so smooth.")

In February of 1939, Herb joined the National Guard, specifically Howitzer Company, 133rd Infantry, 34th Division in Sioux City.

"He wanted to help his mother out financially and this was the best way he could think of."

Later in 1939, when his girl was 17, Herb proposed.

"When Herbie decided it was time, he said to his mom, 'Come with me. You are going to help me pick out Doretta's engagement ring.' He paid \$60 for it. His mother said, 'Oh Herbie, are you sure this is the one you are going to get?' 'This is the one that I want for her,' he said. And that's the one he gave me."

Herb's mom liked Doretta from the start. In fact, she thought her son needed Doretta to keep him on the straight and narrow.

"One time I was mad at Herbie and I was dancing with some farmer kid at this pavilion, and all at once I looked up and there stands Herbie. 'What are you doing?' I asked him. 'Well,' he said, 'my buddy was driving my mom's car and we had Ruby Quinn with us, and he didn't look up in time and ran the car right into the back of a piano truck. Now I have to go home and tell Mom we wrecked her car.' 'Well,' I said, 'you gotta do what you gotta do!'

"But Herbie knew exactly what his mom would say when she found out. 'Where was Doretta?' she asked him. And he said, 'She wasn't with us.' And she said, 'Well, why wasn't she?' She was madder than hell then. She thought if I had been there, it would have been alright!"



Herb asked Doretta to marry him at the Moose Hall. They were dancing to their song, "Ramona." Written by Mabel Wayne, music, and L. Wolfe Gilbert, lyrics, in 1928, "Ramona" would be sung by numerous artists throughout the decades and remain a popular tune through the late 1960s. In the Youngdahl household, the song is gold. *"Ramona, I hear the mission bells above / Ramona, they're ringing out our song of love / I press you, caress you / And bless the day you taught me to care / I'll always remember / The rambling rose you wore in your hair..."*

←Doretta Biggerstaff, high school graduation, 1940.

In 1940, Doretta, a member of the Honor Society, graduated from Central High School. By then she was working at the 5 and 10 Cent Store in Sioux City. Her family needed the money. There had been days when she was growing up that she and her siblings had used cardboard to fix their shoes. That was popularly known as "Hoover leather." As for her high school graduation, there was no money for any special outfit. But Mr. Fischer saw to it that she had a beautiful suit.

"Mr. Fischer was from Germany, and he was a part-time tailor. He took a man's suit that had been left at the cleaners for a long time and turned it into something special for me."



**Doretta and Herb, Sioux City, 1941.**

On February 10, 1941, Herb's Company was designated "Anti-Tank" and called to active duty. The Division was sent to Camp Claiborne, Louisiana.

"Herb and I wrote letters while he was at Camp Claiborne and one time I went to see him. I went with his sister. We had to get to Clinton, Iowa and get the train from there to Claiborne."

Then there was the time that Doretta broke up with Herb.

"He was home and I got mad at him. I said, 'I'm not going to marry you but I'm not going to give you the ring back either.' He was going back to Camp Claiborne. Later that day, his sister comes to me and says, 'How about going out with me tonight? C'mon, go with me!'"

Doretta didn't want to go. She had just broken up with Herb but Herb's sister wouldn't take no for an answer. The next thing you know Doretta was at this club.

"I was just sitting in the booth by myself and all of a sudden, Herbie was there. 'Do you want to dance?' he asked. 'Yes.' Then we were dancing. Before I could even say anything else, I called him 'honey' like nothing had happened and that was it. We were on again."

The couple married in South Sioux City, Nebraska, shortly after the United States entered the Second World War. (On the morning of December 7, 1941, Vice Admiral Chuichi Nagumo, Imperial Japanese Navy, executed an attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. On December 8, 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt addressed a joint session of Congress and then by radio, the Nation. War was declared on Japan.) Not long after, Herb's unit was sent to Europe. On January 15, 1942, they arrived in Belfast, Northern Ireland. They were the first U.S. Expeditionary Force to arrive in Europe.

"The Division trained and was part of the island's defense until December 1942," Herb wrote in his book, *The Other Side Of War*, published in 2000. "I was promoted from Rifle Squad Leader to Platoon Sergeant. On Christmas Day, 1942, the Division sailed from Liverpool, England to Oran, North Africa."

"When we married it was just me and Herb, and Herb's best friend Howard. Herb knew his Division would be heading out and he and Howard came and picked me up at the Dime Store and off we went to South Sioux City. The judge's wife stood up for me. I wore a pink, two-piece dress. Herb was in his Army uniform. We didn't have much time together before he shipped out. And when it was time for him to go, he wouldn't let me come down to the train station to see him off. It would be packed with troops. Better to say our goodbyes with just us. I then stayed with my parents."



Later that year, while Herb was still stationed in Belfast, Doretta gave birth to the couple's first child, Dennis.

"Dennis had to wait two and a half years to meet his Daddy."

While her husband was overseas, Doretta joined the War effort at home. She worked for the Air Force Civil Defense as a driver. Located at the Sioux City Army Air Base (AAB), Doretta drove everything from a jeep to a 5-ton truck.

"I got to be a good driver early on," noted the woman who has never gotten so much as a parking ticket in all of her decades behind the wheel.

"At Grandma and Grandpa's farm, it was a mile to the mailbox. Grandpa had a Nash and he'd say, 'Doretta, go get the mail.' He trusted me to drive his car to the mailbox.

"When I went to apply for my first driver's license my dad came with me – until he went home and left me! He told my mother, 'She's too nervous and she'll never pass.' Fifteen minutes later, I bounced in with my driver's license."

Some of Doretta's passengers at the AAB included actor Clark Gable and fighter Joe Lewis. "Both very nice men."

"One day I was driving around the bus with my girlfriend who also drove a bus. We were bored and I was driving a little faster than the bus was supposed to go and down a road that was somewhat off limits. And that's when I nearly ran over Jimmy Stewart! He was coming out of the Officers' Club. But I didn't run him over and he just laughed."

The hardest drives were picking up the pilots who died in training. The pilots at AAB trained on B-24 Liberators and B-17 Flying Fortresses.

"Each pilot who died was placed in a rubber body bag and put in the back of my truck. It was so sad and it was hard. They were burned and once you smell that smell you never forget it. After I brought their remains to where they could be taken care of, I got into a staff car and drove the Chaplain to the pilot's home. I waited while the Chaplain delivered the sad news to the family. And knowing how all that was handled; it made me so upset the way my parents learned about my brother's death."

Sid fought so hard to come into the world and left it far too soon. He was born in 1920 during the fourth wave of the 1918-1920 flu pandemic.

"When my brother was born, he weighed a little over a pound. The doctor just about threw him aside as he said, 'He's dead.' My maternal grandmother, the midwife, was there. She said to the doctor, 'He is not dead. He can't be dead.' She then took my brother and dunked him from cold water to hot water until he



gasped for breath. Then she wrapped him up and put him in a cigar box and put him in the coal stove, a makeshift incubator. Sid grew up to be a big guy and he was the apple of my parents' eyes. You never think you are going to lose someone, even if they are heading off to war."

Sid Biggerstaff served with valor in the U.S. Army Infantry and received a battlefield commission. He was a Second Lieutenant when he was killed at the Battle of Monte Cassino in 1944. A historic hilltop abbey founded in AD 529, the view from Monte Cassino looked out over the entrances to Italy's Liri and Rapido Valleys. The Battle of Monte Cassino was a series of four assaults targeting the Winter Line – a chain of German and Italian military fortifications blocking a way into Rome.

"One of Sid's men got hit and he went out to help him out and he was killed. He was 23. He was married and he had a son.

"Herb heard about Sid's death before we did but he couldn't tell us and the way we heard was awful. The War Department phoned my sister-in-law's house, they didn't go out to tell her personally, and my sister-in-law was out bowling. She was a hotshot bowler. Since the War Department didn't get my sister-in-law on the phone, but did get her mother, they told her mother that Sid was dead. Her mom phoned the bowling alley and then my sister-in-law, who was devastated, phoned my parents from the bowling alley. My mother fainted when she heard the news. My parents went on, as you do, but they did not recover from it."

Meanwhile, Doretta had moved out of her parents' home. She had gotten an allotment and was making more money so it was time for her and her family to have their own place. Her sister Mary decided that she would also move with Doretta. Herb's mom and sister had moved to Ogden, Utah to work in a factory on planes. They knew they would not be moving back and Doretta was given a household of furniture.

Herb and Doretta wrote letters, always hoping the mail would get through.

"All the letters were censored back then, blacked out and cut out. But we'd take anything we could get. We all gathered around the radio to hear Walter Winchell's broadcasts. We worried about what would happen if Hitler was not stopped."

Beginning right after Christmas, 1942, Herb's Division occupied defensive positions along the Mediterranean Sea in Morocco. Then the Division moved eastward to battle Germans and Italians in Tunisia.

"In Tunisia the Division was mauled badly by Rommel but lived to drive the Axis out of Africa," Herb wrote in his book. "The 34th ran staging areas for the Sicilian Campaign and received replacements and equipment lost in the Tunisian Campaign. In September, the 34th followed the 36th (Texas) Division onto Blue Beach, south of Naples, Italy. The 34th kept pressure on the Axis, traveling the length of the boot of Italy and wound up in Austria."

The 34th Iowa National Guard Division would set a record – over 500 days in combat. The Platoon Sergeant served in battles at Fondouk Pass (a mountain pass in North Africa), Kasserine Pass and Hill 609, both part of the Tunisian Campaign. At Hill 609, Herb nearly lost his arm because of an infected wound. Thankfully the relatively new antibiotic, sulfanilamide, worked its magic and saved his arm.

In Italy, Herb and his Division participated in the Battles of: the Volturno River Crossing, San Pietro, Monte Cassino and Anzio Beachhead. At Anzio, Herb ended up in a MASH (Mobile Army Surgical Hospital) with a concussion. He was examined, given a shot of whiskey, and sent back to his outfit.

In the early summer of 1944, in Northern Italy, the Company Commander informed Herb that he was "no longer stable enough to command his platoon."

"I was fired," Herb wrote. "It seems that I developed battle fatigue and no longer could be trusted with the lives of my soldiers. It was time for me to go to the rear. I left Europe and returned home to Sioux City."

Multi-decorated and honorably discharged, Doretta's husband came home. Doretta hardly recognized him.

"Herbie only weighed 116 pounds when he came home. But he could have whipped anything that walked. Because as (war correspondent) Ernie Pyle said, 'These boys lived like rats.'

"We had a lot of re-acquainting to do when Herbie came back. When we went out on a date and he ordered a drink, he asked me, 'Do you drink now?' 'No,' I told him. 'I still don't.' Then Herb lit a cigarette. 'Do you smoke now?' 'No,' I told him. 'I still don't.' And in all my years, I've never done either. But what Herbie and I knew was that we belonged to each other and nothing that happened during the War could change that."

Herb considered working in the insurance industry but Doretta told him, "The Army discharged an A-1 soldier and the Army is getting A-1 back."

The Army gladly took him and he served stateside as a guard at Roswell POW Internment Camp in Roswell, New Mexico. Opened on November 26, 1942, by the time Herb arrived in Roswell, the Camp housed 4,800 German POWs in three compounds. But this time Herb was not a soldier away from his family. Doretta and Dennis came with him.

When it was nearing the time for Doretta to give birth to the couple's second child, Doretta and Dennis went back to Sioux City.



"Our daughter Lyn was born in Sioux City in 1945, and she was 8 days old before Herb saw her. She and I were still in the hospital at 8 days. Back then, mother and child stayed for 10 days before going home. So there I was, talking to the nurse at the hospital, when suddenly she just up and left, right in the middle of my conversation. I thought, 'Well that's rude!' But as it turns out she had seen a soldier, my soldier, coming down the hallway and she had run to get Lyn so Herbie could see us both. That was a wonderful moment."

The family returned to Roswell. When the War ended, Herb continued his security work for the Army. The family would not be separated again until the Korean War.

Herb's Army duty would move the family to: Albuquerque, New Mexico; Galveston, Texas; and San Antonio, TX, where his GI Bill would buy the family their first home. Their daughter Elena was born in San Antonio in 1949.

"Elena was born with congenital glaucoma and she lost all of her sight at age 7, when we were stationed in San Francisco's Presidio. It was due to a case of the chickenpox.

"Elena is a crackerjack and she told us she didn't mind. She said prior to that, her eyesight was too good for the 'blind' community and not good enough for the 'seeing' community. Now she fit in."

From 1953 to 1954, Herb served in Korea with the 2nd Infantry Division and Doretta and the kids went back to Sioux City. In 1954, the family moved to San Francisco's Presidio. They remained there until 1958, when Herb took his final U.S. Army transfer to Germany. He retired on September 1, 1961, as Captain Company Commander, Headquarters Company, 1st of the 19th Infantry, 24th Division, Augsburg, Germany.

In San Antonio, Doretta began a lifelong commitment to giving. At Brooke Army Medical Center, the hospital volunteer sat with children when they came out of surgery. At the Presidio, visually impaired special schooling was provided for Elena, which was such a blessing and also provided Doretta with more time to volunteer. She served four years as a Girl Scout leader at the Presidio and also spent many hours providing assistance to less fortunate military families during the holidays.

"Herb started a baseball team for the kids on the base and I served as the league's secretary. Herbie and I had fun."



**Dennis, Doretta, Elena and Lyn, Sioux City, Iowa, 1953.**

When the family moved to Augsburg, Germany, Doretta homeschooled Elena. Then when they were transferred to Frankfurt, the couple placed Elena at a school which offered a wonderful program for the visually impaired.

"I was proficient at Braille but I would not say I mastered it." Doretta let go of another guffaw. "I went to school to learn it and my teacher, who was blind, was correcting my homework and all of a sudden she said, 'Oh! Doretta, did you mean to say, 'Walt Shitman?' Ha! Ha! make that 'S' a 'W.' It's the difference between one dot!"

When the family first came back to the United States, after Germany, they stayed briefly with Herb's aunt and uncle in Storm Lake, Iowa.

"Before we got there, I said to Herb, 'Are you sure your aunt and uncle will welcome us?' And he said, 'They'll be tickled pink!'

"Now that rang true to me because there was a big difference between Herb's immediate family and my family. My family was not affectionate but Herb's family just loved you up. When you came over, they loved you up, and if you stepped out of the room, when you came back in they loved you up all over again. I loved that! I felt so welcome from the start with Herb's family.



"Well, we get to Herb's relatives' house in Storm Lake, and there is no one home. But we were able to let ourselves in. I decided, after our long trip, I'd give the kids a bath – get everybody cleaned up before we met Herb's aunt and uncle. But first, I discovered, I had to move the mama cat and all her little babies out of the bathtub, which I did, keeping everyone cozy. While I am giving the kids a bath, Herb's cousin comes in. Now this cousin has never met Herb, heard about him, but never met him. Well she is speed dialing her parents. 'Come right home. There are strangers in our house!' It all worked out and we stayed, not too long. We decided we liked the San Francisco area and we were going to buy a home there, using that GI Bill once again!"

←Doretta and the Commander, Germany, 1959.

When the Youngdahl family had lived in the Presidio, they had seen Pacifica. This was before Pacifica incorporated in 1957 and Doretta wasn't impressed with what little she saw.

"My sister Mary was living in San Francisco and she introduced us to this beach area, in Pacifica, where she had spent time digging for Emperor Norton's supposed hidden treasure."

Joshua Abraham Norton, 1818-1880, a commodities trader, successful real estate speculator and resident of San Francisco, California, proclaimed himself "Norton I, Emperor of the United States" in 1859. He then became so famous for his proclamations—which included demanding a bridge crossing between San Francisco and Oakland—that currency was issued in his honor at his favorite San Francisco establishments. When he died, 10,000 people lined the streets of San Francisco to bid him farewell. In 1953, a new *San Francisco Chronicle* editor, Scott Newhall, with a sense of humor and a bit of a P.T. Barnum streak (and a desire to bring in more subscribers), hid a golden medallion in a wooden treasure chest somewhere in the Bay Area which was engraved with the words "Emperor Norton Buried Treasure." The finder of the medallion would receive \$1,000. Clues were presented in the now hot selling *Chronicle* for two weeks. It was found, the \$1,000 was paid and the finder was not Doretta's sister. Still, Mary found something very likeable about what would become Pacifica and introduced her sister to it.

When the family returned to the Bay Area in 1961, they stayed briefly with Mary in San Francisco before finding a home in Pacifica.

"Oh, we liked Pacifica then. In fact, we loved it and I still do. It had built up a little and really become a city of possibilities. We found our house in Linda Mar for \$19,300 and we stayed." Doretta still lives in that same house.

Once they arrived in the Bay Area, Herb went back to school. At San Francisco State University, Herb earned a Bachelor of Arts in Social Science and a Master's degree in Education of Exceptional Children, and Credentials in General Social Science, the Physically Handicapped, and Education of the Visually Impaired. He taught in the San Francisco Unified School District for 15 years before retiring.

Doretta worked as a receptionist for the San Francisco Housing Authority to put her husband through college.

"When I applied for work with the San Francisco Housing Authority, they asked me about my previous employment. I told them 'truck driver' and they told me that was exactly what they needed!" Doretta lets go of a hearty laugh. "Of course, I never worked as a truck driver for the Housing Authority, but I did stay for seven years until Herbie finished school."



**Proof of Doretta's employment as a driver with the Air Force Civil Defense during WWII.**

Originally, once Herb started teaching, Doretta's plan was to stop working and devote her time to volunteerism. But when the SFUSD found out she was proficient in Braille, they asked her if she could transcribe homework and tests into Braille at several high schools: Polytechnic High School until it closed in 1973; and then at McAteer High School where Doretta worked until she retired in 1977.

"Following retirement, Herbie and I really got going!"

Doretta became a founding member of the Bingo Program at the Pacifica Senior Center. Through money raised, the program was able to provide the purchase of a van for seniors, as well as tables and seating at the Center, among other things. Together, Doretta and Herb began the SASH (shopping assisting seniors homebound) program. They also ran a Vision Support Group, which was active with Tri Visual Services, a nonprofit, Sacramento-based organization formed by their daughter Elena to support individuals with eye diseases, blindness and vision impairments. Doretta drew the original nonprofit papers for Tri Visual Services and helped her daughter establish a yearly "Dog-A-Thon" program which helped the visually impaired. Elena noted her mom was instrumental in starting the worldwide "Beep Baseball Team" in 1976. BBT is an "adaptive version of America's favorite pastime for the blind, low-vision and legally blind." Now a national organization, it is very much still going.

Not long after Herb became a very active member of Pacifica American Legion Post 238 and Pacifica VFW Post 10245, Doretta became a member of Post 238 Auxiliary. Over the years she has been an elected officer multiple times, including as President for three years. She is still a member. Right beside Herb, and along with their kids, Doretta used a saw and hammer to help with all the construction needed for Pacifica's Moose Lodge, when it moved from its old location to its current location on Bradford Way. And in between all the volunteer work, Doretta and Herb could often be found dancing at Nick's Seafood Restaurant Lounge in Pacifica's Rockaway neighborhood.

"Nick Gust and I were buddies," Doretta recalled with a smile. "He was only a few months older than me but he always said, 'Hi youngster!' every time he saw me. When Herb and I were working on the Moose Lodge, Nick stopped by and shouted, 'Hey youngster, get some new glass for those windows!' And he handed Herb a check for \$1,000. We got those windows."

Doretta also spent many years collecting clothing, toys and household goods for the residents at battered women's shelters. She additionally made it her business to provide anywhere from 50 to 100 Easter baskets annually for the children housed in those shelters. In addition, she helped provide school supplies and special treats for 14 disadvantaged children in Lake County, ages 6 months to 19 years.

Through a Christian children's charity fund, Doretta and Herb supported a young Taiwanese child until she was able to support herself. That little girl grew up to be a wife and mother and remained in contact with Doretta for years.

The volunteer list runs much longer, but suffice it to say when Herb died in July of 2002, the California State Assembly and the Pacifica City Council adjourned their respective meetings in his honor.

"We were married for 60 and a half years and oh boy, did I marry the right guy. We were friends forever.

"All those years I was married to Herb, I was happy to go anywhere he was. There was only one time I had to put my foot down. It was in our retirement years."

Both Doretta and Herb grew up knowing the Missouri River.

"Alongside the Missouri River, you can stand on War Eagle's grave in Sioux City, Iowa and see three states: Iowa, Nebraska and South Dakota," Doretta reflected.

"Now the Missouri River in our neck of the woods, it runs right on tornado alley and the camp ground that was my husband's favorite, was just across the bridge. We'd take our little trailer and park on that campground where that God damn tornado alley came down and so many times I was so frightened. I did it anyways. I would do anything that Herbie asked. I did it many times and one time the weather people said, 'A storm is coming.' And I said, 'You know what Herbie, you can sit in your little trailer on the Missouri River, but this old girl is going to the Marina Inn, get a room, register and get some sleep!' He went with me but not happily!

"We did so much traveling when we retired and not just by trailer. Because of Herb's military career we were members of Space-A Travel."

Space-A Travel is "a means by which members of United States Uniformed Services (United States Military, reservists and retirees, United States Department of Defense civilian personnel under certain circumstances), and these groups' family members, are permitted to travel on aircraft under the jurisdiction of the United States Department of Defense when excess capability allows."

Author: Jean Bartlett ([www.bartlettbiographies.com](http://www.bartlettbiographies.com))

**She's Still Got 'It!' Doretta Youngdahl at 99.7**

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"We signed up with Travis Air Force Base Space-A Travel and we saw the world. We went to so many wonderful places: Greece, Spain, England, Italy, Germany, France, Israel, Hawaii and the list goes on. If Herb wanted to go, we went. We had the time of our lives."

Doretta admits it's been a pretty good life to date.

"Now that I am of a certain age, I like to tell my children, 'If things don't go my way, I think I'll just die!'

But the mother of three, grandmother of six and great grandmother of five adds on a slightly more somber note. "I am not afraid to die. I know I am going to join Herb. He is in the ocean. That's where we placed his ashes. That's what he wanted. I am going in there as well and once I am in there, I'll be shouting, 'Herb, hurry, hurry, because I am not a strong swimmer!'"



Jean Bartlett is a longtime Bay Area features writer: Pacifica Tribune, Oakland Tribune, San Jose Mercury, San Mateo Times, Portraits & Roots, Marin Independent Journal, Twin City Times, Ross Valley Reporter, Peninsula Progress, Coastal Connections, Contra Costa County Times, Bay Area Business Woman and Catholic San Francisco. She is also a former Hallmark Card writer, a produced playwright and a published author.

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