

JOYCE MUELLER, PORT ORFORD'S CENTENARIAN

by Heidi Foss

If our village were an oyster, Joyce Mueller would be our pearl. As the oldest living resident of Port Orford at age 100.5, she attributes her longevity to being mindful of a positive attitude toward life and the importance of maintaining connections with family, friends, and community. She also recognizes that with longevity come many fascinating stories to share.

Joyce Mueller is an author who has published a memoir and many short stories. Her memoir, *Never Cheat a Holy Man*, tells of her humorous, confusing, sometimes harrowing experiences while living in East Pakistan in the '60s. The book is available on Amazon, Google Kindle, Winter River Books in Bandon, and our Port Orford library.

Born in 1923, the youngest of five siblings, Joyce was raised in Minot, North Dakota. Her father, she said, was her biggest influence in learning to express creativity through writing. As an educator and writer, himself, he encouraged self-expression through writing and music. She recalls how she and her siblings shared stories and pictures at the dinner table. Often after dinner, the family would have music nights and sing-alongs. Joyce says, "All but our mother would sing or play an instrument. She insisted on being the audience for our harmonizing group."

Joyce always wanted to be a nurse. So, after high school and a year of college at the Minot State Teachers College studying pre-nursing, she went to Denver, Colorado to become a nurse at Denver Children's Hospital. This was during the Second World War when nurses were much needed. So, Joyce signed a contract promising to become a war nurse at the completion of her training. The trade-off was that the Government paid for her education. Fortunately for her, the war ended just at the completion of her education and licensing.

So instead of joining military service, she joined "matrimonial service." Joyce and her husband Dorsey raised three sons, who helped their dad complete his studies to become a specialist teacher-trainer. Ford Foundation hired him to start a teaching program in East Pakistan, and the family lived in Dacca and Lahore, West Pakistan for the next six years. Joyce worked part-time as an American Consulate nurse, while learning to manage her household of all-male Muslim employees. She has fascinating tales to relate about the years when Pakistan and India were in conflict. One time she, with some other American friends, were held at gunpoint, accused by Bengali soldiers of being spies. Eventually, most ex-pat American, including Joyce and her son Steve were evacuated to the Philippines for the war's duration.

Despite occasional narrow escapes and frequent exposure to serious tropical diseases, she found the country to be beautiful and the people just like people anywhere in the world – kind, humorous, hard-working, curious, family-oriented, poverty stricken.

After six years in East and West Pakistan, the family returned to the United States and went their separate ways. Joyce later remarried. In 1978, she and husband Ken, a rice scientist, moved to Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands to study rice problems there. After four years, they returned to California and Oregon. They settled into a happy home in Port Orford in 1997. Ken died of cancer in 2001 leaving Joyce a widow, who has spent time writing short stories and working on a memoir about the Solomon Islands.

Despite a serious brain hemorrhage in 2001 and a recent concussion, Joyce has retained a sharp mind and an able body for her one hundred years. Her unstoppable gift for finding joy, gratitude, and love everywhere has been a blessing that she does not take for granted.

Joyce was a part of the Bandon Writers Group until COVID interfered. She says her favorite aspect of writing is doing research and developing her characters.

I hope that you have a chance to hear Joyce read from one of her short stories as she brings her words to life with vocal animation, body language, and a twinkle in her eyes.