

BORN IN 1918

By Bob Batz, Jr.

Doris Bauer Riethmiller came into a tumultuous world in 1918.

She beat the odds while so many then were falling victim to the influenza pandemic, which killed 675,000 Americans and some 50 million others around the world that year alone. That's more than were killed—about 16 million—in all four years of World War I.

Life expectancy for women born in 1918 was about 42 years. As of this December, Mrs. Riethmiller was 99-plus and still going strong. She now lives in Lighthouse Pointe Village at Chapel Harbor, a pretty retirement community in O'Hara on the Allegheny River and close to where she's lived all her full and fun life.



February 1940.

Doris with her mother,
August 1918.

All photos in possession of Doris
Riethmiller and used by permission.



"I'm a relic," she said with a mischievous grin, sitting on the couch of her apartment and recounting her summer birthday party. It was organized by her daughter Roberta "Bobby" Egelston, who invited guests, including former students, who knew her over those many years.

"I was so surprised when some of them walked in," Mrs. Riethmiller said. "I had a ball!"

It's a ball to talk with her about her life, which she remembers in vivid detail, down to the numbers of the streetcars she used to ride.

Doris Catherine Bauer was born July 28, 1918, at home on Mintwood Street, which runs between Penn and Liberty Avenues in Lawrenceville. She was recorded as "Female Bauer." Her father and mother lived with her mother's parents. Those grandparents were recent German immigrants, as were her father's parents. As Doris puts it, "I'm German on all eight sides!"

Her father was an airbrake inspector for the Pennsylvania Railroad, and he walked to work on the tracks and yards from 33rd Street along the Allegheny River down to Union Station. Her mother was a "Pullman girl," one of the women who cleaned railroad passenger cars.

Her mother worked, she explained, because she previously had been married at age 18, had a daughter and got divorced. "My dad liked the way she walked — her shoes nice and straight," she said, with another smile. "They were married for 63 years."

Because he was a married man, Doris' dad wasn't supposed to be drafted in WWI, but he was anyway, because someone else "pulled some strings" to get out of going. He was in France serving with a U.S. Army railway unit when his daughter was born. The family still has a copy of the photo of baby Doris with her mother, who mailed it to him, but the ship carrying that letter was sunk, and so he didn't see his daughter until he returned later in 1919.

In a photo taken when she was about three, wearing a dress and button boots, Doris looks sturdy, like a force to be reckoned with, but she knows that she did get the flu. "According to



◀ Doris with her dad, May 1919.



Doris about 1921. ➤



First grade, 1924.



First Holy Communion, 1925.

family history, I almost died.” She credits her beloved Grandpap, her grandfather on her mother’s side, with saving her and being her playmate and otherwise looking out for her as she grew up.

In one of the memories she has written down, she recalled, “I was the apple of my Grandpap Heimann’s eye, and I knew it because he always folded the evening papers and bundled them so he could ‘sell’ them to the rag man. And I felt very wealthy when he gave me the quarter or 30 cents he got.

“Thinking about the rag man reminds me of how exciting it would be when he came down the street in a rickety old wagon drawn by a decrepit-looking sway backed horse and shouting, ‘Any rags, old bottles, or papers today.’ And the ladies would run out and stop him. He would come in and gather up any items they had bundled for him and give them a few pennies in return. There was also a ‘Strawberry Man’ who came around in the spring. He also drove a horse and wagon and Grandma Heimann was one of his regular customers because she made the best strawberry jam I have ever eaten.”

By the time Doris was five, her parents and she moved to live with her Grandpap Bauer in the country. (Her step-sister, who was 13, stayed in Lawrenceville so she wouldn’t have to change schools.) The Bauers ran Darlington Dairy, which they’d started on Herron Hill. When part of the city built up, they moved to a farm on Kittanning Pike in O’Hara Township. While herding the cows over the Allegheny River on the wooden 62nd Street Bridge, Doris’ grandfather had fallen through a rotted plank and broken his hip. That’s why he walked with a limp.

His wife met a tragic end when, seeking to calm a cough one dark night, she accidentally swallowed acid and burned a hole in her throat.

So Doris’ family moved in to help care for him. By this time, he had just one old cow, Molly, and an old horse named Charlie. The

farmhouse had no electricity, no running water — “We pumped every drop of water we had” — and only an outhouse, which her grandfather, who spoke little English, called the beck house, his Bohemian twist on back house.

She laughs recounting him removing his dentures and muttering about how the food should be as soft outside as inside as they gathered for dinner with her father’s sister’s family, who also lived in the house. They ate simple meat and potatoes, with some old-country dishes such as pickled cucumbers, or Senfgurken, from the vegetables that he still grew and sold from his truck down in Sharpsburg. “They were big on pies.”

Doris started out walking more than a mile down Kittanning Pike to a four-room school, as her father did to catch a streetcar to his job. Later, in 1928 or ’29, she only had to walk across the road after Kerr School was built there.

Noting that the old farm property is still there and vacant, she said, “I never felt comfortable in that house.” Especially after the night she saw something spooky outside and her father nonchalantly told her it was his mother’s ghost.

That side of the family also never approved of Doris’ mother, whom she remembers often reading the Bible and reminding herself to love her enemies. Even her mother started to appreciate how pretty it was in the country in the spring.

For high school, Doris walked a mile-and-a-half to Sharpsburg and hopped a streetcar to Aspinwall. She’d walk to her aunt’s house for lunch with her cousins, then after school, ride the streetcar back to Sharpsburg and walk the mile-and-a-half uphill to home.

“You never thought anything of it,” said Ms. Riethmiller, who never felt like she wanted for anything. Her father’s job was “very low pay but steady.” During the Depression, he kept working seven days a week and they were able to help other relatives with rent and groceries,



◀ Doris at Seitz
School, 1927.



Kerr School Class in Room 7 with Principal Mr. Kelso, 1930.

in addition to buying a house of their own in Aspinwall. "In those days, people looked out for each other."

In high school, Doris took care of herself, walking door-to-door from one end of Sharpsburg to the other, selling and collecting subscriptions to *The Volume Library* encyclopedias to other immigrant families. With that money, and a scholarship, she was able to go to the University of Pittsburgh. "I knew I would have to work." Ever since she'd been given a blackboard and gave lessons to her paper dolls in the kitchen of the farmhouse, she'd wanted to be a teacher. So she majored in Latin and English.

Her commute involved three streetcars

each way: "Take the 94 to Morningside, transfer to the 96, transfer again at Negley to one of the 70s."

She graduated in 1940. Alas, Latin was fading from school curriculums and she was unable to get a teaching job. She worked in the children's department at Kaufmann's department store and then in the directory department of Bell Telephone, downtown.

She was dating a boy, Bob Riethmiller, whom she'd met on Mount Troy when she went with her cousin so the cousin could check him out as a prospective prom date. Doris already had one — "One of the hunks on the football team." Bob was doing his night school homework and Doris pointed out a mistake

he'd made. "It must have impressed him," she said, because a few days later he called. "He wanted to know if I would go out with him. And that was it."

When they got married in 1941, they did so in Greensburg, Westmoreland County, so there would be no marriage license on record in Allegheny County. Married women weren't allowed to work: "That's how it was way back in the dark ages."

In the twists that history takes, her husband was off to World War II, in the Pacific, when their first child, William, was born in 1943. To let his wife know where he was without tipping off the mail censors, he'd write the name of the place under the stamp.

He came home in 1945, daughter Roberta was born in 1946, and the family built and moved to a house on Kittanning Pike, not even a half mile from the old Bauer farm and Kerr School.

Mrs. Riethmiller tells great stories about how, in 1955, she was roped into serving temporarily as the school secretary and then social studies teacher and eventually got the job she always wanted — an English teacher. “I LOVED it,” she said. She moved from Kerr to what had been Aspinwall High School and later to Dorseyville Middle School and retired from the Fox Chapel Area School District in 1981.

This past summer, she was interviewed by the district because Kerr Elementary, the district’s oldest school, was deemed structurally and programmatically inadequate and is going to be torn down after a new school is built there beginning in 2018. She reminisced about having gone there as well as taught there, and she pointed out her old office, but understood that the school needs to be replaced.

District communications coordinator Bonnie Berzonski called it a privilege to listen to her. “There are very few people who are able to give us insight into a time so long ago.”

To this day, Mrs. Riethmiller runs into some of the many students she taught.

She remembers and retells their seventh- and eighth-grade jokes, such as, “Do you know how to stop a charging elephant?


“Take away his credit cards.”

She had a great life with Bob, volunteering with him at the Veterans Affairs hospital in Aspinwall (where her dad had been treated after WWI) until he died in 2013. They were active, too, at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church. The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* wrote a story about how she stayed in touch with

friends she made at Pitt, meeting a group of fellow 1940 graduates downtown once a month — “before Facebook was even thought of,” quipped her daughter — for more than 50 years. They called themselves “the girls” and were as close as sisters. She’s the only one left. What she misses most is not being able to invite them to events.

But Mrs. Riethmiller is good at making new friends, too. She gives some credit for her longevity to her belief in a higher power,

higher than her Grandpap, who looks out for her, too.

She also credits having a sense of humor. Looking back over her 99-plus years, she said, “I’ll tell you, if you didn’t laugh, you’d cry.” She laughed. 

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