

Happiness at One Hundred and Five

By Sophie Braccini



Lottie Doering's family, front row, from left: Sydney Peirce (great-granddaughter), Lottie Doering, Mallory Peirce (granddaughter); back row: Jim Peirce (grandson-in-law), Cade Peirce (great-grandson), Dick Wilcox (son-in-law), and Scott Peirce (great-grandson). Photos Sue Severson

Sitting in her bedroom without any back support, Lottie Doering looks like a normal senior – certainly not someone 105 years old. Vivacious, with a smiling face and shiny white hair, Doering has the plump cheeks of a healthy retiree and the smile of a fulfilled great-great-grandmother. All of her family was with her for Christmas, in her son-in-law's Moraga home, gathered around the woman who is the family's sunshine.

Doering came from Germany in 1928 at age 22. She was born the same year as Josephine Baker and John D. Rockefeller. The day she was born, Nov. 9, President Roosevelt was the first sitting president to make an official trip outside the country to inspect progress on the Panama Canal. Being over a century old does not seem to frazzle the charming lady; her only sorrows are having lost her husband in 1973 and her 82-year-old daughter last year.

Doering was the eldest of a family of four children, and her father was an engineer in Kaiser Wilhelm II's Germany. Her family joined the Mormon church when she was just a little girl. In the 1920s there were three congregations in Chemnitz, where Lottie grew up, with more than 600 members. "I grew up with my church," she says, "and stayed with it all my life." When she decided to immigrate to the United States, she was the first one of her family to do so. Two of her three sisters followed.

She met her husband through her church. He was German as well, had been a missionary in her hometown, and it was quite by chance that she met him again in the States. He was also an engineer, and they lived in different areas of the United States but never once returned to Germany.

Doering had one daughter, Hazel, who passed away from staphylococcus contracted during a hospital stay last year. Her daughter had three children and today Doering has 11 great-grandchildren, as well as two great-great-grandchildren.

"I know why my grandmother is as young and energetic today," says one of her granddaughters who came to visit for Christmas. "It's because she never stopped cleaning the house

and kept herself busy from dawn to dusk." The family has countless stories of Grandma Lottie moving all the furniture out of a house onto the lawn to do some very thorough cleaning. "You could eat off the floor where she lived," she adds. Her granddaughter does not think that this trait has rubbed off that much on the subsequent generations, although she acknowledges having bouts of cleaning frenzies.

For the great-grandchildren's generation, Grandma Lottie is a source of stories. Sydney Pierce, who lives in Lafayette with her parents, loves to spend time with Doering. One of her favorite stories takes place in a hospital where Doering took her first American job as a cleaning lady, an assignment she accepted until she learned English – she didn't know one word when she immigrated.

"There were nice men who were doing construction work in the building," Doering says. "I was interacting with them and learning my first words of English, by hearing and repeating." She would see the men greeting each other joyously slapping their backs and exchanging a few words. She liked these workers and their friendship and decided to imitate them, so one day as she met a friendly doctor in a corridor, she slapped him in the back saying, "How are you? You son of a b—"

"He just laughed," remembers Doering.

In the early 1990s, Doering decided to move from Utah and come live with her daughter. "She had a valid Utah driver's license at the time," remembers Dick Wilcox, Doering's son-in-law, "but she decided to give up driving." She continued to be quite active, being involved with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Moraga where she made new friends.

"I met her in the church," says Orinda Vice Mayor Sue Severson. "She was quite regular there until a few years ago." Severson worked with Doering to put together a family history book as part of a class she taught at the church.

"I was happy to see her this year when she came with her family to the

holiday party we held," says Severson. "She is so charming and outgoing; I think she must be the oldest Lamorinda resident."

Wilcox, who takes care of Doering in his home, says that while Doering's short-term memory has deteriorated quite a bit, his mother-in-law is in very good physical health. She still walks, goes up and down the stairs in the home, holding onto the rail, and "she wrings her washcloth so tight that there is not a drop of water left," he says.

Wilcox, at 81, plans to continue to take care of Doering by himself for as long as he can. "She is family and that is what you do," he says, "you take care of family."

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