Anna Benjamin celebrates 100 years of life well lived

By Annette Tait

By all accounts, Anna Benjamin has lived a full life as a wife, mother, musician, oral historian, part-time newspaper reporter, and an active member of her community and her state.

She was born Anna Wilhemina Stark, on the family farm six miles east of Center, arriving during a December snowstorm. The winter was so rough that year, her father wasn’t able to get to Bismarck until March to record her birth.

As her children were growing up, Anna would tell them of her life on the farm, sometimes sharing a story Oliver County children know well – the story of Hazel Miner.

"Mom said their family dog was the one that actually located the upset sled, with the children underneath, with the blanket on top of Hazel," recalled her daughter, Noreen Sampson, noting that where the Miner children were found was right below her mother’s house on the coulee. "They brought Hazel to the house. Mom had a little wax doll and said Hazel was the color of that wax doll."

A bright and curious child, Anna attended Center Consolidated School, where she skipped several grades.

She had a very keen curiosity about things, loved to travel and learn about other people and their home towns," Sampson said. "She loved her home town of Center and the little house where she lived along the creek."

Anna’s curiosity continued into her adult life, long after she met and married Jesse Benjamin, and the two began to raise their family. That family would come to include four children: Marra, Noreen, Bill, and Lee.

"She was incredibly curious, about everything," recalls Bill. "I remember during our Star Route Mail Carrier convention trips how curious she was about how people lived in other parts of the country and how they organized their communities."

Jesse was president of the Star Route Mail Carriers Association of North Dakota, and would go to the national convention each year as a delegate. The Benjamin would make a family trip of it, adding extra days on each end to see the sights and learn about their destination.

"She was so interested in other places, but she loved Center," said Noreen, adding that Anna would champion her hometown to the people they met.

"She is very much like her father – no one was ever a stranger to my Grandpa Stark. And very respectful – she is very respectful of people and their differences."

Noreen, Bill, and Lee all shared memories of the activity in the Benjamin household, which Noreen jokingly referred to as "grand central station."

"Mom almost always had someone at the house for the holidays," Bill said. "She was sensitive when people didn’t have a place to go – kids were gone or whatever reason – and she would invite them to our house."

"We always had a little extra in our potato kettle on the stove, we always had a big enough roast, we always had enough salad made in case someone dropped in," Noreen added. "Everyone came to Jesse and Anna’s."

"Not only was the Benjamin household a center of activity, Anna herself was deeply immersed in the community she loved."

"When I think of my mother over the years I have known her, I’m impressed with how active she was in the community of Center," Lee said, noting among Anna’s activities her involvement in St. Paul Lutheran Church, playing in the community band, helping the Golden Age Club get West River Transit bus service started in Center, a stint as a reporter when Center had two newspapers, and her staunch support of the Democratic party at the local, state, and national levels. "Not only did she love her family deeply, she also loved this small town she lived in for 90-plus years. She also suggested that her children become active in the community."

In her day, Anna was a talented clarinet and piano player, passing her musical talents on to her family. Lee is a member of the Sand Cotton Wood, plays by note and by ear Bill’s son, Ford, has his grandmother’s old upright piano; and granddaughter Carly, Lee’s daughter, plays violin and guitar.

"We all sing," said Noreen said with a chuckle, recalling the family Christmas tradition.

When the family came home after the church service, Anna would sit down at the piano and play, "every Christmas song she could think of by heart," and the family had to sing along. It wasn’t until then that she was finished that gifts could be opened.

"It was a nice tradition that we look back on," Noreen said. "Had we lived closer together, we probably wouldn’t have sung in a group. She had a deep interest in music and, probably a little bit of talent here and there."

A loving grandmother, Anna is equally as dedicated to her grandchildren and great-grandchildren as she is her own children.

"She was thrilled with her grandchildren. They all love her, she’s so warm and caring," Noreen said, sharing memories of her grandmother laughing with her children, and later with her grandchildren.

"Back when jars were metal, she’d grease one of the lids with shortening and let us make our own biscuits. We all remember that."

"She is so creative and such a family person. She taught us how to be good people in the world, and we were – we all strive for that."

Over the years, Anna has enjoyed the good times with her family, and persevered through the sad times. She outlived her beloved husband, Jesse, by many years, and lost her oldest daughter, Marra, after a lengthy illness, as well her daughter-in-law, Lee’s wife, Claudia, to cancer. But Anna rejoices in time spent with her remaining children and their families, including six great-grandchildren and three great-great-grandchildren.

About a year ago, Anna made the move to Missouri Slope Lutheran Home, Bismarck, as she was no longer being able to live independently. Her family helped her celebrate her milestone birthday there, gathering from near and far. Marra’s husband, Joe Knue, came from San Antonio, Texas; Noreen and her husband, Chuck, traveled from Medical Lake, near Spokane, Wash., and Bill and his wife, Cindy, came from Pretoria, South Africa, where Bill works for U.S. Aid. Anna’s youngest son, Lee, still lives in Center, where he recently retired as County Treasurer. Her seven grandchildren were also able to join her to commemorate the day.

"She thoroughly enjoyed her 100th birthday party, receiving everyone and thanking them profusely," Noreen said. "Her family, in turn, wishes to thank her for her continuing guidance, her faith in us, and for teaching us the importance of contributing in a positive way to the world."