

PROFILE



MAKING TIME

Stand Still

DORIS REINKE PRESERVES HISTORY FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

BY LISA SCHMELZ

The first thing you should know about Doris Reinke is that she loves history. The second thing you should know about Doris Reinke is that she is history. At 90 years old, this former elementary school teacher and principal is the petite powerhouse behind the Walworth County Historical Society and the local preservation movement. So much of what has been saved, documented, catalogued and archived in this neck of the woods happened only because of this diminutive dynamo.

“My doctor told me to slow down,” she says, “so I gave up the church choir.”

After she shares this, she pauses and smiles. Then her blue eyes twinkle and she breaks into a throaty laugh that makes you realize you are in the presence of someone who really knows how to live life.

On a recent sun-kissed afternoon, Reinke opened up about her life and her love for local history. The setting was her home away from home — The Webster House, an 1857 residence built by Joseph Webster for his pioneering Elkhorn family. Today, thanks to Reinke, the home enjoys a place on the National Register of Historic Places and is toured by hundreds of school children each year. It’s just one of the many jewels in her historical tiara, so to speak.

What motivates her to spend an average of 30 hours a week in the dusty archives of yesteryear?

“We have to realize things are getting lost and we have to preserve some of them,” she says, seated in the meeting room in the back of the Webster House.

All around her is proof of her commitment to those words.



Doris poses with some of her students in 1956.

Old toys, books, maps, furniture and appliances remind that before this time and place, there was another. Beyond the meeting room, the rooms of the Webster House appear much as they did in 1857, and Reinke needs no notes to tell you who once lived here and how they lived. But her knowledge extends far beyond these walls. If you've toured any of the old buildings at the county fairgrounds — like the Bloomington Prairie School for example — you can thank Doris for that. If you've tracked down long-ago ancestors from Walworth County, there's a big chance Doris played a role in that, too, as she's spent years cataloging plot maps and birth and death records. There's even a building named for her — The Doris M. Reinke Resource Center, where documents and artifacts relating to the region's history have found a permanent home.

But shining just as brightly as all these accomplishments is Reinke herself. Born on Thursday, Jan. 12, 1922, at 11:40 p.m., in Shiocton, Wisconsin, Reinke was the only child of Otto, a builder, and Louise (Goehring). Had she been born just 20 minutes later, she would have been a Friday the 13th baby. "I just missed it," she says, a trace of disappointment still in her voice.

Sit down and talk with her for a while and you'll find yourself in the company of an engaging conversationalist, a woman who makes history come alive not just because she loves it but because she's lived it. When she recalls some of the nation's most defining hours, her exactness for details gives no hint to her nearing the century mark.

She remembers where she was on Dec. 7, 1941, the day Pearl Harbor was attacked by the Japanese.

"I was home," she says, "listening to a (Bears) football game and the announcer came on and said what had happened. "I ran downstairs and told my parents."

She remembers what her first year of teaching was like. It was 1943 and WWII was raging.

"I was so scared," she says, of the children, not the Axis Powers. "I stood in back of my desk. My knees were shaking. But I survived. I was following the teaching tradition of my family. My mother was a teacher and I

grew up hearing her stories of rural teaching and I always wanted to teach. Teaching was so much freer then. It was just a freer and easier time to teach."

Like many teachers across the nation, she was called on to help manage the wartime shortage of goods and services. After a full-day of teaching, she'd frequently head to the school's gym as long lines of local citizens snaked their way in.

"The whole nation was a part of the war effort and you had certain days that certain items were available," she says. "We gave out the ration books at school. But we were a little bit miffed. The high school teachers got to pass them out during the daytime and got out of class, but the elementary teachers had to do it at night."

Throughout the war, she found summer work in factories. In Racine, she helped make sonar equipment for submarines and engine parts for aircraft. In Delavan, at Gibbs, a division of Borg, she installed hoses on life rafts. Years later, she met a local serviceman who spent days adrift at sea after his plane crashed.

"I often wondered if one of my life rafts helped him," she says wistfully.

She remembers where she was when the Japanese officially surrendered on Sept. 2, 1945. School hadn't started yet and she was still working at Gibbs in Delavan.

"It was a great celebration," she recalls, "and we all got fired the next day. But it was still a celebration. The bells were ringing and people were dancing in the streets."

Did she miss factory work?

"I missed the people who worked there," she says. "Maybe because it was such a contrast to teaching. I enjoyed working there."

As war time sacrifices gave way to post-war prosperity, she gave up the \$3 per week room she rented and bought a home in Elkhorn, where she still lives today.

"I paid \$7,000 cash for it. The lawyer laughed. He said it was the only contract he'd ever done with just one signature for

By The Numbers, WITH DORIS REINKE

90
YEARS OF AGE

3
NUMBER OF DOCTORS
SHE HAS OUTLIVED.

\$3
AMOUNT SHE PAID
WEEKLY, AT THE START
OF HER TEACHING
CAREER, FOR THE
ROOM SHE RENTED.

\$5
PRICE OF THE WEEKLY
MEAL TICKET SHE PUR-
CHASED HER FIRST
FEW YEARS OF TEACH-
ING. IT PROVIDED HER
WITH THREE MEALS
A DAY AT ELKHORN
RESTAURANTS.

30
HOURS A WEEK SHE
AVERAGES WORKING
AT THE WALWORTH
COUNTY HISTORICAL
SOCIETY.

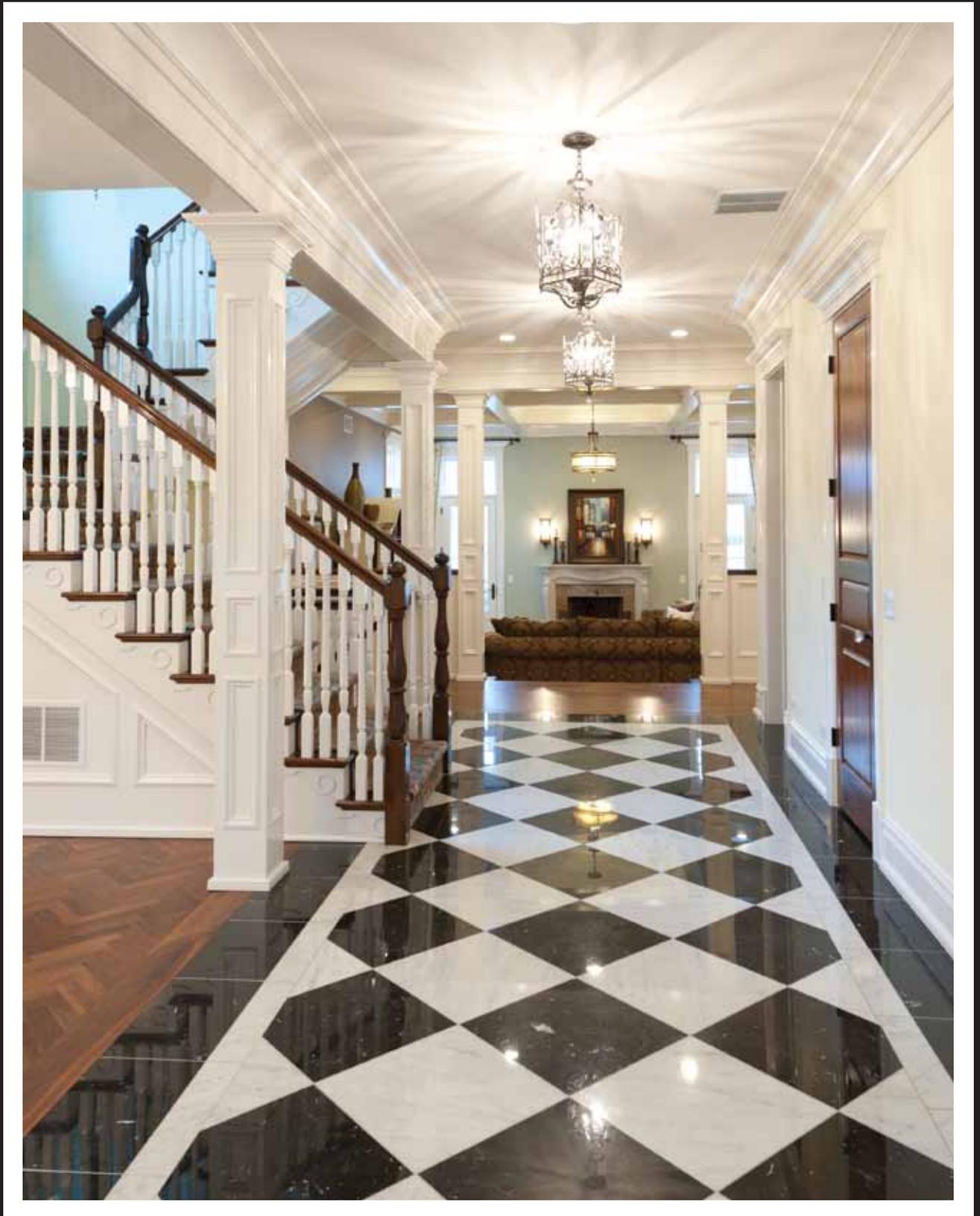
41
YEARS SHE TAUGHT
KINDERGARTEN AND
SECOND GRADE IN
ELKHORN

\$7,000

CASH PRICE SHE PAID
FOR HER ELKHORN
HOME IN 1953, WHERE
SHE STILL LIVES TODAY.

65,000

NUMBER OF MILES ON
HER 1995 BUICK
STATION WAGON.
YES, SHE STILL DRIVES.



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each party. I was a spinster and the seller was a bachelor," she says.

Reinke never would marry, but her life continued to expand. She'd return to UW-Milwaukee, where she'd gone to Teachers College, and obtain her masters degree. Throughout the '70s and '80s, her love affair with history would deepen through her work with local civic groups, including the Elkhorn History Club and a national sorority. At Sugar Creek Lutheran Church, where she still worships today, she'd serve on the church council.

Why didn't she just fade into the sunset when she retired from teaching in 1984?

"I didn't retire to sit in a rocking chair or watch TV," she says. "I had a bucket list of things I wanted to do and I like history and I like to write."

Shortly after retiring, she started publishing her history columns in *The Elkhorn Independent*, which she dubbed "Webster Notes." In 2004, her 82nd year on the planet, she published *Elkhorn*, as part of the Arcadia

Publishing Images of America series.

Her bucket list isn't all pegged to history. A month or so after walking out of her classroom at Elkhorn's West Side Elementary School for the last time, she returned to the school and grabbed a kite she'd seen stored in a back room.

"I always wanted to fly a kite. I'd never done it before. So I did it. I flew it for a couple of hours in the field behind the school," she says. "Then when I was done, I went inside and put it back. I had done that."

What's still left on her list of things to do?

"Oh, lots of things," she says, waving her hand through the air. "I love to travel, but it's getting harder and harder to find people my age who like to travel. But I'm going to the Field of Dreams in August. I've always wanted to go there and I just watched the movie. If you build it, they will come."

Yes, they will. And Doris Reinke will preserve it for generations we haven't met yet. ▲



Secret to a long life

Doris Reinke has been told by the three doctors she's outlived that she should have no problem making it to her hundredth birthday. What's her secret?

"I drink a lot of coffee, black. I love chocolate. And I'm so happy they said chocolate and coffee are good for you after all. Well, I could have told them that."

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