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Damaris Reynolds

Volunteer takes history to heart

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BY JESSE SOMA
STAFF WRITER

CORVALLIS — History has always been appealing to Damaris

Reynolds, so it's no surprise she got involved in the Benton County Historical Society when she moved to the area in the mid-1970s.

In fact, Benton County was named for her great-great-grandfather, Sen. Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri, whose promotion of free-land laws led to the settling of Oregon.

She dived head-first into Benton County genealogy — including that of her own family — and history soon after she arrived here.

It was "something to be interested in," she said matter-of-factly.

About 100 people gathered June 22 to honor Reynolds at the Benton County Historical Museum in Philomath, where she has spent thousands of hours volunteering. Many of her friends and family attended, including some from throughout the United States. Five of her eight great-grandchildren were there as well.

"Where else would you have a 90th birthday but a historical museum?" Reynolds asked while taking a break from greeting the many smiling

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faces who came to say hello.

Daughter Gretchen Morris, standing with her mother in front of the gathered crowd, said people often tell her how wonderful her mom is.

"I tell people 'thank you' for that because I tend to take her for granted," she said.

"I just decided her 90th was noteworthy," said daughter Alice Sigmund, the younger of the two children by about five years.

History became Reynolds' passion, and it is woven into the fabric of her life.

Born June 25, 1913, she lived the first 13 years of her life in China, where her father was a member of the U.S. diplomatic service. The family moved to Washington, D.C., where Reynolds graduated from high school. She attended Mills College in Oakland, Calif., and spent a year and a half there before marrying Lincoln Reynolds. The couple moved to China, where he was a consul for five years.

They later moved to Florida, where Gretchen was born, and then to New York. Lincoln was temporarily assigned to Seattle

during World War II. Damaris went to Washington, D.C., to live with her parents during that time. The couple's second daughter, Alice, was born there. Later, the family moved to California.

Reynolds and her husband moved to Oregon to be closer to Gretchen and her husband, John. Besides, Reynolds said, California had "too many people and there was too much smog."

Her family history soon became an active hobby.

"I was very lucky because both my maternal and paternal grandfathers had compiled genealogies of our direct line," she said. "It was a good way to get started."

She has been an active member of the Daughters of the American Revolution and the Benton County Genealogical Society. One project she was involved with included helping copy records of local churches and providing typescript copies for several repositories, including the museum.

She also was part of a group of Genealogical Society members that surveyed the county's cemeteries and published the results. The multi-volume survey and the newly published index assist people doing research on local families.



Damaris Reynolds' daughters Alice Sigmund of Portland, left, and Gretchen Morris of Corvallis, right, help her celebrate her 90th birthday at the Benton County Historical Museum.

In addition, she has helped organize occasional workshops for beginning genealogists, spoken to elementary students and given other presentations about the value of studying family history.

"Genealogy is a wonderful hobby because you can do so much of it at home," said Reynolds, who still drives herself wherever she needs to go. "It's fun doing any kind of research. It's exciting."

Friends, relatives and colleagues had nothing but praise for Reynolds, who has stayed

active in community activities despite her advancing years. "She's pretty amazing," said son-in-law John. "She's very sharp and keeps up on current affairs."

Bill Lewis, executive director of the Benton County Historical Society, met Reynolds when she began working for the society more than a decade ago. Her volunteer hours have been invaluable, he said.

"She's been a really good friend. It's been nice," Lewis said. "It's people like her who make organizations like this exist and make it work."

TIFFANY BROWN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHY









