

# Live to Be One Hundred

*By Jeannette De Wyze*

---

San Diego Reader  
October 14, 2004.

At the start of 1904, the U.S. population included 82 million people. Almost all of them are dead now, but Bert Wilbur, Geneva Chester, Pearl Alsten, and Archie Owen have survived. In 1904, five-year-old Bert Wilbur was living in Philadelphia, where his father had given up a career in medicine to work in the family chocolate factory. Geneva Chester turned two that year in Aitkin, Minnesota -- just a few hundred miles from the Michigan town that was home to Pearl Alsten. Alsten was a newborn in January, as was Archie Owen, who came into the world in Los Angeles, a few months after her father was killed in an accident on the Pacific Electric rail line.

All four then proceeded, for more than 100 years, to dodge the disasters that could have killed them. They never met up with a drunk barreling down the wrong side of a back road; never occupied a seat on an ill-fated airplane; never inhaled a chunk of steak. They avoided breathing in tuberculosis or smallpox or anthrax germs. No homicidal maniac knocked at their doors.

Instead, Alsten, Chester, Owen, and Wilbur each wound up living in San Diego County as members of the exclusive fellowship of local centenarians. According to researcher Beth Jarosz, the San Diego Association of Governments estimated that 519 county residents considered themselves to be 100 or older in 2003. (In 2000, the U.S. Census Bureau counted 5341 centenarians in California -- more than in any other state.) Many centenarians are prostrate with ill health or dementia. But some have retained their mental faculties and are enjoying health that's fair or even better. Wilbur, Chester, Owen, and Alsten belong to this group. They're the ones I talked to while searching for the answer to this question: Is it worth living to 100?

It's a query that would have seemed absurd in 1904. Before the 20th Century, researchers have theorized, only one person on earth lived that long during any hundred-year period. Others have estimated that the odds of living to 100 have risen over the course of human history from one in 20 million to one in 50 (at least for females in long-lived countries).

Today the number of individuals passing that milestone is growing by about 8 percent annually in industrialized nations (compared to a 1 percent growth of the general population). In 1990, the U.S. Census Bureau counted 37,306 centenarians in America. The tally had jumped to 50,454 by 2000, and some observers predict it may approach one million by the year 2050.

I didn't delude myself that I could divine the secret of living to extreme old age by talking to centenarians. That's a task for scientists, and one in which some progress has been made. One of the most active research groups is based in Boston, headed by a geriatrician named Thomas T. Perls. In 1994, he and his colleagues launched "the first North American comprehensive investigation of the world's oldest people." Called the New England Centenarian Study, this project initially included assessment of the mental, physical, and emotional health of centenarians living in eight communities around Boston.

By 1999 the researchers had met with 169 centenarians and administered neuropsychological and personality testing to about 40 percent of them. Perls and his associate, Margery Silver, published a number of their findings in a book aimed at lay readers, *Living to 100*. Among other things, the researchers found that four out of five men who made it to 100 "were in extremely good mental and physical health," whereas the women ranged from those with independence and vigor to others "who were completely dependent and uncommunicative." Women outnumbered men by five and a half to one. Overall, about three-quarters of the subjects "suffered from some level of dementia, but the remaining 25 percent were completely free of significant cognitive disorders."

In the past five years, the study has been expanded to enroll centenarians from throughout the United States and other countries. It now includes some 1500 subjects -- not only the centenarians themselves but also their siblings and children, as well as younger control subjects. From this work, the researchers have come to some conclusions about the things that do and do not appear to make a difference in whether someone reaches extreme old age. "Not all centenarians are alike," the study's website declares. Centenarians vary widely in years of education (none to postgraduate), socioeconomic status (very poor to very rich), religion, ethnicity, and dietary patterns (everything from strict vegetarians to high-fat meat-eaters). But "few centenarians are obese," the website points out, and any substantial smoking history is rare. Preliminary study suggests that "centenarians are better able to handle stress than the majority of people." Among the women, late childbearing has emerged as a common thread. "From our studies, a woman who naturally has a child after the age of 40 has a four times greater chance of living to 100 compared to women who do not." (The researchers think having a baby later in life "may be an indicator that the woman's reproductive system is aging slowly and that the rest of her body is as well.")

Perhaps the most striking conclusion is one articulated by Perls and Silver in their book: "Far from appearing weak, depressed, and confused, extremely old people often live surprisingly productive lives, learning new forms of artistic expression, and waking up each day with eager anticipation.... Even those who have lost those abilities in their hundreds are reported to have been robust as late as their nineties. Just as impressive as their ages are their attitudes. They have a fighting spirit. They take extraordinary

measures to maintain their physical strength and thinking ability. They refuse to see age as a limitation on their enjoyment of life."

Generalizations and study results are one thing; real-life exemplars are another. I set about hunting for the latter, searching for news articles about local people who had celebrated their 100th birthdays within the past few years. I came up with a list of more than a dozen, but when I started trying to contact them, I had my nose rubbed in the grim realities of the centenarian realm (where the annual mortality rate hovers around 50 percent). Several individuals had died or grown too feeble to receive visitors. Others, like the 103-year-old resident of the Beaumont Village rest home in Sabre Springs, declined to talk to a reporter. But the Beaumont Village receptionist mentioned that Pearl Alsten might be a possibility. Pearl would turn 100 on January 18, 2004, she said.

"She is a goer!" Alsten's daughter, Marilyn Terrian, agreed when I called and said I'd heard that her mother was thriving. Terrian joined us for our meeting, which took place five weeks before Alsten's big birthday.

Both women looked decades younger than their ages, and they had other things in common: well-coiffed silver hair, tasteful jewelry, attractive clothes. Terrian was plump and jolly and effusive, while her mother seemed more birdlike and unobtrusive. She'd been residing in Beaumont Village for just over two years.

Before that, the daughter explained, Alsten had lived in a little house in Sun City, Arizona. She'd been getting along fine there. "I really could have stayed by myself for another year or so," the older woman commented in a mild tone. She still felt competent driving; at 97 she had renewed her license for five more years. But Terrian had fretted that her mother shouldn't be so far from family members, so she persuaded her to move. "If I had left my home in Arizona, I would have cried my eyes out! But not her," Terrian said with admiration. "She just said, 'You have to adapt to new changes.' And she has. She absolutely loves it here. When I drop her off, she says, 'I feel like I'm going home.' "

"Yeah," Alsten concurred. "I got accustomed to it pretty quick. I like it."

I could understand why. Beaumont Village shatters the rest-home stereotypes of bleak corridors, bad smells, and drooling, demented dotards. It might be mistaken for an upscale college dorm, one with snug, inviting lounges. Alsten lives in the "independent living" section, in a cozy one-bedroom apartment equipped with its own kitchen, although she usually eats in the dining hall.

"Mother is very sociable," Terrian explained. But she's not the type to go up and start chatting with a stranger. Terrian is. "When I was moving her in here, this gal started heading for the room across the hall." Terrian introduced the two older women, "and they became very, very close friends." Alsten has since gotten to know many other residents.

The New England Centenarian Study researchers have come to believe that at least part of the secret of reaching 100 is having the right genes. One of the strongest pieces of

evidence is that extreme longevity seems to cluster in certain families. But that hasn't been the case for Alsten. Her father was in his 80s when he died, and her mother didn't live past 68. Her only brother passed away at 82. Her other daughter died at 59. "I have no idea," Alsten responded when I asked why she thought she had lived as long as she had. But her daughter thought several factors exerted an influence.

For one thing, "We come from a family that just gets along great. You know how in some there's a lot of dissension and fighting? Well, we've always had a very calm family. And my kids absolutely adore my mother. So does my husband." Terrian also cited her mother's easygoing disposition.

"I had to be easygoing," Alsten interjected with a tiny smile. "I took care of my totally blind mother-in-law for 25 years. She lived with us."

"She had the patience of a saint, my father always said. 'What your mother did for me most people wouldn't do for their own mother,' " Terrian quoted him, adding, "Her outlook on life is great. Like, if she does get a pain, she says, 'I thank God I didn't get it 20 years ago.' Or she's always saying things could be worse..."

"You don't have to look very long either to see so many that are really bad off," Alsten said.

Terrian pointed out that her mother hadn't escaped firsthand experience with tragedy. One of her grandsons (Terrian's son) was murdered nine years ago while working at a branch of the Price Club. And, "Her first husband burned to death," Terrian disclosed.

"That was terrible to go through," Alsten acknowledged with a nod. "Years back, you laid up your cars in the winter. And he was off working on the car in the garage, and he had a little stove in there to keep warm. And he grabbed a can of gasoline instead of kerosene to light the stove."

"My sister was only four. The neighbors got her out," Terrian added. But Alsten's husband died of his injuries.

This happened in upper Michigan, where Alsten grew up. After the accident, a family acquaintance "befriended Mother and helped her, and then they ended up getting married." This man later became the head of the Teamsters union in the Upper Peninsula. With him Alsten conceived Terrian, who recalls that her mother was a storybook housewife. "She always got up early and did all her housework. Then about four o'clock, she'd put a new clean dress on. And of course they wore aprons in those days. She got dinner on. She sat and read the paper. And then she looked nice when my dad came home, and she had time for him at night. She had a little schedule."

Alsten was more than five years older than Arnold, her second husband, but she says she never could hide her age. "He always boasted about it," she says. "He thought he had

everything planned out. He said, 'Okay, you're five years older than I am. Women live longer than men. So we'll probably both go about the same time.' "

Arnold retired at 57, and in 1968, the couple moved to San Diego County, where both daughters had settled. The senior Alstons lived in a trailer park in Santee for 16 years that were golden indeed, Alsten attests. She felt as good then as she had in her 20s. She and her husband traveled throughout the United States and even ventured on one trip into Mexico. For 23 years, they never missed spending their summers in Michigan. "We'd leave about the first of May and come back in October. And we had this little mobile home that was our place there, and we were all with old friends." When I asked Alsten what was her favorite time in her entire life, she cited this period, when she was in her 70s.

She and her husband finally moved to Sun City, attracted by the community and the real estate prices. But in 1991, Arnold died of a brain tumor. He was 82. Instead of following him to the grave, his 87-year-old wife continued on in excellent health, her interest in new experiences intact.

"Even at her age now, you say, 'Hey, Mom, you want to go here?' And she always says, 'I'm game.' "

"I try," the older woman agreed.

"She even flew when she was 98! She flew all by herself to Chicago." Terrian sounded proud of this. The daughter says only in the last year or so has her mother begun to need more reassurance, for example, in church when it's time for Communion. "I always say, 'What will people think! I'm going ahead of my mother!' "

"I used to lead. Now I follow." Alsten smiled. She sounded serene about the change.

They attend St. Michael's Catholic Church in Poway. A shuttle bus takes Alsten there from Beaumont Village. After Mass, Terrian, her husband, Alsten, and some friends go to breakfast, "and then we either take her home for a nap or we bring her to our house." The rest of the week, mother and daughter usually see each other several more times. When Alsten moved back to San Diego County, Terrian made her join the Diamond Gateway, a local social and philanthropic club of which Terrian is a longtime member. They play bunco every Thursday, and the two women also love to shop. "She's so meticulous about her dress," the daughter said. "And she still loves to buy clothes. She'll say, 'Oh, Marilyn, I know I don't need this. But isn't it cute!' " Every three or four weeks, they try to get out to the Barona Indian casino to play the slot machines. "That's her favorite place," according to the daughter. "But you know what she says when she goes in? 'I'm only going to lose. I don't know why I go here. I have so much fun, but I'm only going to lose.' " It's the sole time Alsten's perennial optimism evaporates, the daughter noted.

When they're not together, Alsten keeps busy. She gets the paper every morning and watches the news on TV, though she confessed that current events interest her less and less. She's never been a good sleeper, so she often rises in the middle of the night to play game after game of solitaire. She does this the old-fashioned way, with cards rather than on a computer. That's one late-20th-century invention she never could get the hang of.

"The only thing that frustrates her now is that she's put a little weight on around her tummy," the daughter said. "But the thing is, when she was in Arizona, she worked in her yard. She did her own housework." Physical activity was woven into her daily life in a way that's absent at Beaumont Village. "So the clothes get a little tighter all the time," Alsten lamented.

"She could go upstairs to exercise," Terrian said. "They have an exercise room. But she kind of forgets that."

"And then they have chair exercises. But I forget that."

"It's never really been her top priority." Always slender, Alsten never dieted, according to her daughter.

"I don't eat -- you know -- two or three pieces of pie at one meal or anything," Alsten hastened to interject.

"But she does eat one!" Terrian riposted. In fact, Terrian thinks another factor in her mother's longevity may have been her attitude toward food after her husband died. "She said, 'I find that a lot of people don't eat right when they're alone.' "

Alsten continued, "So I thought, 'Well, I'm not going to do that. I'm going to eat.' "

"At night she always made herself meat and potatoes and a vegetable and salad."

Alsten admitted to me that she sometimes worried about how long her savings would hold out. Beaumont Village was costing her \$3400 a month. "But I say, 'Mother, don't even stress about it!' " Terrian jumped in. (She had wanted Alsten to live with her but yielded to her mother's desire for independence.) "When it comes to that, we'll work it out."

In the meantime, there were so many positive things to reflect on. Alsten's hearing was excellent, her handwriting strong and lovely. She didn't suffer from the arthritis that often afflicts centenarians. Aside from estrogen and thyroid pills, her only daily medication was a mild antihypertensive she started taking at 99. Of her 7 grandchildren, 12 great-grandchildren, and 7 great-great-grandchildren, several live in Southern California, so she can see them from time to time. "Moving here has been nice," she murmured. "Ending my days with my family around."

\* \* \*

Geneva Chester, at 102, occupies a very different sort of boat. "I'm the last one of my family," she told me. She never had children. Her father was 72 when he died, her mother 75, her husband 80. Her only brother, a lifelong asthmatic, succumbed at 60, while her sister reached the age of 94. By the time of her sister's death in 1998, the two had grown apart. Chester says her sibling always lived in one place, while "I was a gadabout."

It seems symbolic that Chester now lives in a mobile home; over the years, she moved around so much. When she was 15, her father, a retired minister, transplanted his family from Aitkin, Minnesota, to Pomona, California, and then to Los Angeles. Chester graduated from Manual Arts High School in Los Angeles, and over the next 20 years, she became entangled with two scoundrels, one of whom she married. She didn't want to talk to me about these failed romances and froze with embarrassment when she admitted she had lived in sin with one of the men. Later she fled to Hawaii.

"I was working at Pearl Harbor when it was bombed," she informed me. "I worked for Pacific Naval Air Bases." But the Japanese attacked early on a Sunday morning, when Chester was home in Waikiki. A few years later, she had changed jobs and was helping to manage a hotel on Waikiki Beach. She recalls that she bristled whenever sailors made advances. "But a man came in one day. He strolled in with his hat cocked to one side. He stood back. He didn't even touch the counter of the desk. I thought he was pretty nice. So I asked him if he wanted me to put his name on a list to call when I had an opening. Instead of putting his name at the bottom, I put it on top. I called him, and we eventually married. And that was a good marriage. That was a beautiful marriage. We were married 42 years."

Chester has a laugh you might expect to hear from a goofy teenage girl, a soft, high "he-he-he" that she emitted often during our conversation. Slender and short, she's got ivory-colored hair, as lush and full-bodied as glass wool. She says her beloved husband, Les Chester, was four years younger. "But he was gray-haired when I met him. He had beautiful gray hair." He also had an appetite for adventure that matched or exceeded her own.

He had attended the University of Alaska and hankered to return to the territory. "But he always said he would never go back without a wife." After their wedding, Geneva, then in her mid-40s, asked what he was waiting for.

She says he talked to one of his former professors who had a working gold mine and knew of another promising area. Once in Alaska, "We went to the commissioner," Geneva recalled, "and asked him what was available. And he said, 'Well, I've got a cabin on the river that you could have for \$100.' He drew us a map on an envelope and sent us out to the cabin. It was 20 miles from a little village called Eagle." No roads went to the cabin, nor was there much of a trail. "So we walked, and when we got there, my husband asked me, 'What do you think?'"

"Oh," she breathed out, recalling for me the memory. "This is great," she told him. "I loved it from the first.... I loved the wilderness." Once they had settled into the cabin, she learned to catch rabbits with a trapline she set every day, feeding her haul to their malamute dog. "He'd eat a rabbit a day," she recalled. "One time I caught five snow-white rabbits. We had one luxury. Our outhouse had a rabbit-fur seat."

Chester says she and her husband learned to use a boat to travel from Eagle to the cabin via the Yukon River and its tributary, the Seventymile. When the waterways iced over, they followed a 23-mile path less grueling than their maiden route. They lived in the cabin for five years, sampling for gold and developing about 100 mining claims, according to Chester. But she says their money ran out before they could exploit any of them. They then worked for a trading-post company, living both in Alaska and in the Canadian Yukon Territory, before tiring of the long, cold winters. They moved to Samoa, where Les worked on a novel and Geneva managed a tiny hotel. During another period, back in the States, Geneva spent two summers serving as a fire lookout on top of Mt. Landon, while her husband worked all over the Pacific for government contractors, sending his checks back home to her. By the late '50s, Geneva had settled down in Susanville, a town in northeastern California, where she built a house for the two of them. "I drew the plans myself. I hired a contractor and a carpenter. I sent him pictures as we progressed."

After Les returned home and moved into that house, the two studied real estate and took the licensing exam. "He passed his first exam with flying colors," she told me. "I wasn't as smart as he was. I had to take the test a second time." (She was 60 when she passed.) Both worked in the real estate business until they decided it was time for another change and headed south again. "We didn't know where we were going, really. We were driving two cars, and it was a rainy day, and we were tired, and it was late afternoon when we decided to stop. That was Oceanside. We stayed in a motel down on Hill Street. Then we spent a month on the beach. We finally ended up buying a double-wide trailer in this park." The year was 1973.

Chester says she liked the park when she and her husband first moved in, "But it has deteriorated through the years. We have quite a lot of foreigners in here now." That wasn't obvious on the occasions when I visited Chester. The park's not far from the southern border of Camp Pendleton in a tree-poor part of Oceanside. Its byways are even more bereft of vegetation than the surrounding neighborhood. Most of the trailers are white and surrounded by pebbles, and many bear inexpensive little American flags. I saw few residents of any nationality.

But Chester has made friends over time, and now, it appears, they're helping her to survive. One neighbor picks up granola for her at Trader Joe's. "Different ones buy different things." Four days a week, a volunteer from the Meals on Wheels organization delivers a midday meal to her, "and then they also bring me something to make sandwiches with, for supper." Most helpful has been her next-door neighbor, a kindly soul whom Chester described as her best friend. "He's a married man. His wife is a nice



person, but she isn't neighborly like he is." He helps her get to the grocery store, drives her to doctor's appointments.

Her health's not bad, she told me. "Except for my hip. I have osteoporosis. And the doctor tells me I have sciatica." Small indignities sometimes ambush her. "I went to bed the other night and as usual had a good night's sleep. I woke up in the morning, and I was minus a tooth." She tittered. "I don't know where it is. I guess I must have swallowed it. I didn't find it in the bed."

Her hearing aid helps her hear pretty well, although it started to misbehave at one point when we were talking. Fiddling with it, she muttered that she couldn't see well enough to tell if the battery had fallen out. Her eyes have delivered the biggest betrayal, she confided. The left one has macular degeneration, and she's had cataract surgery on the right, but she still can't see well with it. Now all she can read are the biggest newspaper headlines. "I've got lots of books in the bedroom, all new books that I intended to read when I got old. So I became elderly, and there are the books. I never thought I would be half blind!"

Listening to the radio helps her pass the time. When I first visited her, she was following reports of the Laci Peterson murder case. Also, "I sure appear to spend a lot of time sleeping," she mentioned, sounding surprised. "I just drop right off. Sleep for an hour. I do that two or three times during the day."

"I have a friend," she continued, "who lives in this park -- a lady who doesn't want to live to be 100. She's 80 years old." Why did she feel that way? I wondered. Again Chester gave her distinctive giggle. "Well...if she couldn't see, couldn't hear, couldn't write, she didn't want to live." I wondered if Chester at 80 had wanted to reach 100. "No. No. I had no thought of living to be 100," she said. "I just did."

She never smoked, and she followed the spiritual practices of the Unity organization. "My husband and I had a cocktail every night before dinner," she added. "That was a pleasant time of the day for us, talking over the day."

"I lived a happy life for 42 years with my husband," she continued. "Until he committed suicide. That was sad."

He had had a prostate operation, she explained, "And it wasn't very successful, and he didn't want to be a burden to me. I would gladly have cared for him, but he didn't see it that way. And he always had a gun. Always." Chester says for years he had warned that he might use it, but she never believed him. "I said, 'That takes a lot of courage. I don't think you have it.' " Maybe he took that as a challenge, she reflected. "I wanted to dispose of his gun. But oh," she looked frightened, "he would have been very, very angry with me if I had."

Chester says the end came one day when she was playing cards with friends and they all went out to lunch. Upon her return to her mobile home, "He was lying on the bedroom floor." Was she angry with him for killing himself? "Oh, no," she murmured, then repeated, "Oh, no. I couldn't be angry. That was what he wanted to do."

\* \* \*

I asked all the centenarians if they had any regrets about their lives, and most said they didn't or evaded the question. But Archie Owen admitted to a big one. Not having children was a grave mistake, she told me. She and her husband were first cousins, so they decided not to produce any offspring. "My husband would like to have adopted children, but I said, 'You don't know what you're getting.' My biological training made me too fearful." But if she had gotten "a good one," Owen reflected, "Then I probably wouldn't be in this situation" -- living in a retirement home instead of with family members. "You'd be having your grandchildren visit you and having someone to look after you that you were sure of."

When we talked, Owen, who turned 100 on January 16, was living in Las Villas de Carlsbad, another spiffy eldercare facility. She wasn't complaining about the service. "They take very good care of you," she informed me. "Like right now, I have a little cold, and they'll look after it. Of course, you pay quite a lot." She was rattled by the bad luck that had befallen her a few weeks before, when she had stumbled and broken a bone in her left forearm. The mishap had necessitated her moving from her pleasant second-story balcony apartment to the assisted-living section of the compound.

Arriving at her room there, I felt as if I were in a hospital. The room contained two institutional beds around which curtains could be pulled for privacy. A wall-mounted television was aimed somewhere at the space between the two. Owen was sitting in a wheelchair, slumped forward a bit. Her fluffy, snow-white hair ringed a face covered with so many age spots it looked tan. Something about the passivity of her posture made me fear she wouldn't have much to say. But I was wrong. When she trained her deep-set blue eyes on me, they were probing and intelligent.

This is how she described her father's death in the waning months of 1903. "He was a motorman on the Pacific Electric, and in those days, they ran a line out from Glendale, and at that junction there, one car goes off to Pasadena and the others go on. Then coming back, they stop at the junction." Owen said her father was in a hurry to return home to her mother, so he got out to help the brakeman, who didn't know what he was doing. "And [my father] got killed. He was in the hospital for a while, but he never made it out. He shouldn't have done what he did. I don't think she was ever compensated."

A month or two later, Owen's mother delivered her into the world and named her Archie after her father, Archibald. "Mother was small but mighty, as my sister used to say," Owen reminisced. "She was a very beautiful, really small woman, but she never, never, never married again. So we had to make a living. And she went to Los Angeles and

became a masseuse. In Alhambra, she had a ladies' masseuse parlor. That's where we grew up."

By the time Owen was 11, she was working every summer in an Alhambra felt factory. She was also a good student and eventually won admission to the University of Southern California at a time (the early 1920s) when few young women strolled the campus. Owen's mother had yearned to be a medical doctor and projected that ambition upon her daughter. "So I was a pre-medic until I'd cut up everything but a cadaver," Owen said. At that prospect, she quailed. Instead, she wound up getting a teaching credential, then worked, first in a San Gabriel elementary school, then at Manual Arts High School. "I taught biology and physiology."

"Really, I didn't particularly care about teaching," Owen confided to me. Later, after she'd earned a master's degree, she became supervisor of science education for the Los Angeles city schools, and this job she did enjoy. "I had a secretary," she boasted.

Her memory of the secretary seemed solid and immediate, but a fog appeared to have enshrouded other chunks of Owen's personal history. She couldn't tell me when she had married her cousin, though she guessed it might have been soon after World War II. She knew they'd traveled together -- the period she identified as the best time of her life. But she struggled unsuccessfully to remember any of the houses she and he had occupied. I thought of all the days and nights they must have spent in those houses, the time and money and effort they probably devoted to them, and I marveled that it all could recede so far out of grasp, like the memory of people you knew in elementary school. Owen did dredge up this recollection: "We bought land in Julian to raise horses. See, he was raised on a horse farm in Kansas, so he wanted to retire and raise horses. We bought land up there, and we were planning on doing that when he died. I tried living up there, but it didn't work, so I sold it and moved into apartments."

Owen told me that at some point she helped take care of her father's oldest brother. "He was an old bachelor, but he had considerable funds, and I inherited them. Now I'm spending them," she said with a flash of droll humor. "I couldn't live here like this on a teacher's retirement." In the wake of her fall, she seemed resigned to never again living in her own apartment.

Before I took my leave, I asked whether Owen had any religious faith. "I would say I'm a normal person," she replied. She and her mother had attended services every Sunday in their local Methodist church, but as an adult, Owen slacked off. "Now I doubt I would go to church," she said. She didn't seem wistful. "I just say a prayer."

\* \* \*

By the time I talked to Bert Wilbur, I was feeling that I'd already answered my initial question. If you could have the good health enjoyed by Alsten or if you could match

Chester's pluck, it seemed reaching the 100-year mark wouldn't be half bad. Bert Wilbur erased any remaining doubts.

Wilbur, who turned 105 last April, looked like any ordinary guy in his early 80s. I caught up with him in the tidy RV he's lived in for more than 30 years. Wilbur and his wife bought it in 1973, when they sold their house on Beryl Street in Pacific Beach. In that RV, they visited every one of the lower 48 states and three Canadian provinces. They set off for Alaska in it too, "but my brother got sick, and we couldn't complete the trip." Besides, Wilbur had already lived in Alaska. He was born there.

"Father's mother was a staunch New England Presbyterian and active in the church in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania," he explained. A schoolteacher, Wilbur's grandmother also ran a women's Bible class. Somehow her group became interested in an Indian training school in Sitka. "She went up and looked the place over." When she returned, her reports fired Wilbur's father's imagination.

"My father at that time was in practice as a medical doctor, assisting a Philadelphia surgeon." But he took a leave of absence from this work and with his Bryn Mawr College-educated young wife. "They took the transcontinental train to Seattle and went by boat from Seattle to Sitka." Sometime in the early 1890s, they arrived at the Indian school. "There was a little hospital with probably three or four beds."

Wilbur thinks his parents enjoyed the interlude that followed. His father mingled with the Indians and enjoyed hunting with the school's first graduate. But the Presbyterian Home Mission Board in Philadelphia took a dim view of such fraternization, Wilbur told me. "They wanted souls tallied in the books, you know." Tensions between the church board and the young physician mounted, and when Bert's grandfather asked his son to help with the family chocolate-making business, the son was ready to bring his wife and newborn baby (Bert) home.

The family was back in Philadelphia by 1900, and Wilbur's father found that the surgeon for whom he had once worked had taken on a new assistant, while the chocolate business was thriving. "So he gave up medicine," Wilbur recalled. "Never went back to it." Although the Wilbur family sold the business decades later, Wilbur's chocolates are still produced today, Bert informed me. Someone had just sent him a box, and he insisted I taste one of the chocolate "buds" (a precursor to Hershey's more famous Kisses). The morsel that melted in my mouth had a wonderful creamy texture.

Graduated from Haverford College in 1921, Wilbur assumed he would follow into the family business, but first he embarked on a bold adventure. "Father had a 1917 Ford roadster, and he consented to my taking it for a trip out West. So a couple of my college mates and I drove from Philadelphia out to Portland, Oregon." They ran out of paved roads in Saint Louis, "And it was dirt roads from then on." The westbound journey took them 55 days.

Wilbur's eyes beamed with happiness when he recalled that journey. He and his buddies built a box in the back of the car to store their clothing and food and other supplies. Only a canvas top and the windshield protected them from the elements. They switched drivers every hour. Most powerful was Wilbur's reaction to the landscape he passed through. "I fell in love with the open country," he told me. In Oregon he spent time with an uncle and his family on their apple orchard, "then I persuaded Uncle George he ought to buy the car." Wilbur returned to Philadelphia by rail and boat and settled down at the family enterprise, but "I hated being in the city," he said. Being the boss's son also felt humiliating. "Everybody kowtows to you, and you don't stand on your own merits. They eventually made me treasurer of the company, and I knew nothing at all about that. I felt I wasn't getting any development because I really wasn't qualified for the job."

His salvation came in the form of a visit from a distant cousin who was trying to raise money to open a dude ranch in New Mexico and offered Wilbur a job on it. "Oh, boy! That was just like somebody had taken the roof off! I was so anxious to quit the cobblestones of Philadelphia and get out West again! The job I was offered was garbageman. Really!"

At certain times when we talked, Wilbur would squeeze his eyes shut, as if trying to press a memory into order in his mind. He did this when he recalled his first evening at the dude ranch. "They decided to put me on a horse, so they got the safest old cow pony they had. Roger was his name, and they got me on his back and got the stirrups adjusted to my legs. Roger was a real old horse, but anyway, he was able to carry me. They were walking me around the corral, and I didn't know a thing about it, except I was sitting on a saddle. I had the reins in my hand. But then the horse moved, and I sort of lost my balance and just naturally clamped my heels on his sides. Well, that was the cowboy signal to go! So he leaped off and took me down past the ranch house, down the road to the gate! I could barely hang on." Someone finally stopped the animal before Wilbur fell off. "That was my first evening at the ranch."

In the years that followed, he learned to ride "well enough to go 21 miles up to our mountain camp." His main duties involved repairing whatever was broken, along with building new things. The Philadelphia family who provided the main funding for the venture treated him like a family member, and Wilbur reveled in the outdoor life. But after eight years, when he was in his mid-30s, he decided it was time to strike off on his own. "I couldn't see myself running the outfit, and the outfit probably would not have supported another family."

He wound up in San Diego, taking a job at Kelly Ford on Fourth Avenue and Beech Street downtown, where a brand-new roadster could be had for \$720. Unfortunately, "I never was a salesman," Wilbur admitted. "I don't know how many cars I sold. Maybe a half dozen." So he summoned up the bookkeeping experience he had acquired over the years and got a job in Convair's accounting department. He remained there until his retirement in 1965.

Looking back, Wilbur reflected that he had "more or less drifted from one thing to another. I never had a career plan or anything." He sounded a little disappointed in himself. "I mostly did what I had to do. If one job played out, I had to find another to work again." The need for a steady income grew more acute in 1938 when Wilbur married a Los Angeles girl, 12 years his junior, whom he'd met through one of his early automobile customers. "She'd gone to college. She set up the first laboratory in Scripps Hospital." Together the two had five children, born between 1942 and 1951.

Wilbur's wife died in 1992 after a brief struggle with brain cancer, but all five children continue to live in and around San Diego, and Wilbur praised their efforts to "keep me fed and watered." For more than a dozen years, his little Silver Strand RV had been sitting up on blocks next to the Sabre Springs home belonging to one of his sons. That son and his wife look after Wilbur, but his other son and Wilbur's three daughters also help out. Sometimes they take him on outings or to Sunday services at La Jolla Presbyterian, where Wilbur has been a member for more than 65 years. Each reads to him when he or she comes to visit; a shelf inside the motor home holds the books they're working on. Recent ones have included a biography of Charles Lindbergh, Andy Rooney's war memoir, a couple of books by former president Jimmy Carter. Wilbur's own eyes tire quickly these days, so he's switched to listening to books on tape. Last year someone gave him David McCullough's biography of John Adams. "That was a wonderful presentation, well told and well read," he enthused. Whenever possible, he tries to watch The News Hour with Jim Lehrer at seven every weeknight on public television.

He says he doesn't worry much about current events or the state of the world. "You can't do anything about it." But he admitted that extreme old age has not yet enabled him to shake free of worry altogether. He sometimes frets about the well-being of his loved ones. "Several members of my family have taken an interest in rock climbing, and I do worry about them.... And we all worry about traffic, I guess. I don't bite my fingernails about it, though. By my stage of life, with all the nice things that have happened to me, I have a great faith in a higher being that directs our lives. I put my worries over in that corner."

When I asked Wilbur what age he would choose as his favorite, he laughed. "Well, really, I'm lucky!" he declared. "I've enjoyed all my ages. Life has been awfully good to me. To begin with, I was born into a loving family. I always had plenty to eat and loving care. Their focus, their goal, was to raise healthy children and give us adequate vacation time. Then when I went to the ranch, the Sharps were really like a family, very congenial and helpful and appreciative. So that was like living at home -- like a large family." Later, in business, he met people who went out of their way to help him. When his sons joined the Scouts, that exposed him to more teamwork and good fellowship. And about ten years ago, he connected with yet another network of people he cherishes.

"My wife kind of got me started as a volunteer at school," Wilbur explained. Two days a week, someone transports him the two short blocks to Morning Creek Elementary

School. "The teachers in two classes send selected students to read to me and stuff. I think really they send me their choice students. I certainly like them all."

Wilbur told me how he marveled at some of the poise and conscientiousness he sees. "There's almost always one little girl, just nine or ten, in every class, who you can just see as a mother. She's aware of everything that goes on in the room. She knows what needs to be done." Sometimes the children surprise him. He mentioned how one little girl gave him a ball of colored tinfoil this past Christmas. "And in that ball of tinfoil was a little ball of newspaper. And in that newspaper, she had wrapped up a little piece of amethyst." She'd once asked Wilbur if he liked rocks, and he'd said he did. "So that was her Christmas present to me." He looked overwhelmed by her generosity.

Did he feel wise? I wondered, and Wilbur said he didn't. "I feel like I've acquired experience." More than anything, he felt lucky. Somehow he'd managed to avoid living through "any tough times." His life had been filled with kindness and love. Wilbur sounded like a man who had appreciated that blessing every day for more than 100 years.

-- Jeannette De Wyze

To return to list of stories, [click here](#).