

HOMETOWN

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A few days before celebrating a milestone most folks will never know, Cay Knapp Smith reflects on something a doctor told her when she was in her 30s.

"I smoked, and my doctor said, 'Quit or die,'" Knapp Smith says. "So I quit."

That was nearly 70 years ago. This week, on Tuesday, Aug. 27, Knapp Smith turned 100.

"I don't know why I've lived so long," she says. "My family all died young. My dad died at 53 and my husband was 55."

Knapp Smith may take after her mother, Winifred (Fike) Knapp. An adventurous woman who left her family in the early 1900s to travel west by herself, Winifred Knapp had three children, survived breast cancer as well as a double mastectomy and lived to see her 75th birthday.

"Her family did not approve, but as soon as she got through college, she went west," Knapp Smith says of her mother. "She took the train to California. That's where she met daddy."

Knapp Smith's father, Claude Knapp, was the son of Henry A. Knapp and grandson of Henry Monroe Knapp, a very early Camas-area settler and four-term territorial legislator present for the signing of the Washington State Constitution.

The stories Knapp Smith tells of her own life and that of her ancestors — many of whom helped develop the Camas and Grass Valley we know today — are rich in local history and peppered with colorful details of the Great Depression, World War II, 1950s San Francisco and 1960s Portland.

Born Aug. 27, 1919, at Vancouver's St. Joseph's Hospital (now PeaceHealth), Knapp Smith spent her childhood in Camas with her parents and two siblings: older brother, Donald, and younger brother, Hugh.

"Hugh and I were mischievous," Knapp Smith says, laughing as she recalls the time Hugh emptied a goose down feathers meant for pillow-making out a second story window just above the spot where their mother and grandmother were sipping tea, looking out over a beautiful rose garden and how the two women initially thought it was snowing. Another time, Hugh, then just a toddler, and a 4-year-old Knapp Smith released the parking brake on their parents car and their mother had to run over and jump inside the slowly rolling vehicle before it crashed.

Childhood was sometimes hard — it was the Great Depression, after all, and her father worked as a home builder, which wasn't exactly a growth industry in the 1930s — but Knapp Smith remembers her parents' generosity.

When men desperate for work and food came into Camas on the train, they often went door to door looking for a way to help out around the home in exchange for a warm meal.

"My mother never turned them away," Knapp Smith says. "She always had enough food. And they wanted to work, so she would have them chop wood."

Despite the hardships, Knapp Smith recalls her childhood fondly and says she and her brothers loved visiting their grandparents, Henry Adelbert Knapp and his wife, Deborah (Woolf) Knapp.

During her high school years at Camas High, Knapp Smith was a popular girl who loved tap-dancing and longed to work in the fashion industry.

After graduating from



Cay Knapp Smith, a Camas native, sits in her bedroom, surrounded by family photos, on Aug. 19, one week before her 100th birthday.

PHOTOS BY KELLY MOYER/POST-RECORD

Turn of the century

As she celebrates her 100th birthday, Camas native Cay Knapp Smith brings history to life

Camas High in 1937, Knapp Smith went to business college in downtown Camas, in a second-story space near the Liberty Theatre. It was there she realized she would never be content to work in an office for the rest of her life.

When World War II broke out, Knapp Smith took a job in the Vancouver shipyards, eventually working as a chauffeur, driving higher-ups from the shipyards throughout Southwest Washington.

Her family had always been big on education — Knapp Smith's grandfather, Henry A. Knapp, started a school near the modern site of the Lacamas Athletic Center, and her grandmother, Deborah Knapp, worked there as a teacher — so Knapp Smith's brothers had high expectations for their higher education prospects. Donald went to Reed College in Portland and returned to work as a chemist for the Crown Zellerbach paper mill in Camas. Hugh went to Whitman College in Walla Walla, Washington, before going into the war as an officer. After the war, Hugh returned to the U.S. and graduated from Harvard University before working as an attorney in Camas until his retirement.

Knapp Smith, meanwhile, had other expectations for her life. With an eye for fashion, she knew she had to go somewhere much bigger than Camas, or even Portland, if she were to realize her dreams.

In 1944, Knapp Smith caught a ride to San Francisco with her friend, Evelyn. As the two women traveled south, Knapp Smith made a plan.

"I made a list and picked three stores where I wanted to work," she says.

One of her top picks? I. Magnin in Union Square. As a Feb. 13, 2019 San Francisco Chronicle story about the famed department store puts it: "When San Francisco department stores were royalty, I. Magnin was king."

Knapp Smith landed an entry-level job in the store's stocking rooms.

"You had to wear a girle and a dress — black or navy — with long sleeves or three-quarter sleeves,"



Cay Knapp Smith (left) and her niece-in-law, Rosemary Knapp, look through family photo albums inside a sitting room at Cascade Inn, the Vancouver senior living facility where Knapp Smith lives. Knapp Smith, who turned 100 on Aug. 27, has family roots in the Camas area that date back to the days before Washington was considered a state.



Rosemary Knapp holds a photo from the 1920s of Cay Knapp Smith (far left), her brothers, Hugh (third from left) and Donald (second from right) and their cousins.

she says. "And customers weren't allowed on the floor. A greeter would meet them at the elevator and escort them to love-seats placed all around. Then the sales girls would show them (the clothes and accessories)."

On the weekends, the women working in the stock rooms had a chance to try their chops on the sales floor.

The sales floor "modeling" jobs were coveted. In fact, Broadway star Carol Channing once worked as an I. Magnin model. Knapp Smith knew she needed to jump from the stockroom to the sales floor, and one weekend she got her chance.

"There was a doctor from Sacramento who was shopping for his daughter. She was 16 and played cello, so they needed ballgowns for her," Knapp Smith says, smiling at the memory. "I probably showed them everything in the stock room. I was

thrilled to death."

The following Saturday, the doctor returned and asked for Knapp Smith by name. This time, he had brought his wife and another couple. One of the women wanted to see a very special — and very expensive — item: the sequined theater cloak I. Magnin had advertised in Vogue magazine.

"I showed it to them. The woman put it on and it fit her perfectly. Then I had to tell them it cost \$450," Knapp Smith says. "They says, 'We'll take it.' And then I had to tell them the sequins would melt ... but the woman says, 'I don't care,' and she took it."

The next day, Knapp Smith was called to the high-end department store's main office to speak with the man who ran the San Francisco flagship. He asked her what she wanted to do with her career.

"I says, 'I want to be a merchandise buyer for women's fashion,'" Knapp

Smith recalled.

Soon, Knapp Smith was training under fashion executive Russell Carpenter Jr., learning about the latest fashions in Paris and New York City as a merchandise buyer.

Her fashion career would span decades, eventually landing Knapp Smith a position on Seventeen Magazine's fashion buyers board and a women's fashion buying position for Charles F. Berg Company's high-end fashion shop in downtown Portland.

In between her jobs in San Francisco and Portland, however, Knapp Smith would meet her Army major husband, Linton "Smitty" Smith, marry, travel to U.S. Army bases in Germany, give birth to her daughter, Judy, and move back to Camas with her new family.

In Camas, Knapp Smith became a homemaker and raised Judy, who graduated from Camas High in 1975, while her husband, Smitty, worked selling insurance. When Smitty died in his 50s, and Knapp Smith found herself widowed with a teenage daughter and no job, she didn't know what to do. Her brother, Hugh, she says, was her salvation and the person who prompted her to get back to the career she loved.

After landing a position at Charles F. Berg, Knapp Smith had the chance to travel to New York City for a buyers' training seminar. At the conclusion of

the week, a young singer, who was just starting out, entertained the fashion buyers at their Waldorf Astoria hotel with a show.

"Her name was Liza Manelli," Knapp Smith says with a sly smile. "And she was wonderful."

Knapp Smith worked into her 60s, and even came out of her retirement a few times to work as a fashion consultant for the Charles F. Berg Company.

When it comes to fashion, Knapp Smith says she longs for the styles of the 1940s and '50s, when people really knew how to dress up.

"I'm not happy with the way young people are dressing now," Knapp Smith says. "They don't pay enough attention to quality."

If she could give fashion advice to younger generations, Knapp Smith says she would want younger people to understand the importance of buying a few quality, well-fitting pieces of clothing over many low-quality, ill-fitting items. And then, she says, she would tell them to take better care of their quality clothes.

Times were hard during the Depression, but our mother always took us to a dressmaker, Mrs. Goot in Washougal, in the fall and we'd have a skirt made for us. I loved plaid wool ... and we always took care of our things," Knapp Smith says.

Her other piece of advice? Cherish your family.

Today, Knapp Smith is surrounded by family — in the dozens of framed photos she keeps in her room at Fairway Village — as well as literally, when her daughter, Judy, who lives in Portland, comes for her weekly visit and when Knapp Smith's nephew, Roger (Hugh's son), and his family, wife, Rosemary, and sons, Andy and Elliot, come to visit.

Rosemary Knapp says she never tires of hearing Knapp Smith's stories.

"Her stories are so fascinating. And she's a stylish lady. I've hopefully picked up a few things along the way," Rosemary Knapp says of Knapp Smith. "I've known Cay for 46 years and every time we talk I learn something new."

To see more photos from Knapp Smith's life, visit camaspostrecord.com.