

The little-known history of Flora Isabel Alexander “Drain” Frye

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Woman devotes fruitful, long life to volunteerism. Flora Isabel Alexander Frye

By PATRICK McCUNE Staff Writer

Flora Frye was very lucky back in the Great Depression. She lived in Oklahoma, but her land didn't blow away. "The Dust Bowl missed us because we were in another part of the state" recalled the 83-year-old Yuma volunteer.

But that didn't mean life was exactly easy for her. Born Flora Alexander, she grew up on a farm in Tillman County in southwestern Oklahoma with her parents, two brothers and a sister. "My sister Norma was a leap year baby," Flora said. "She's sweet 16, now."

On the farm, the family grew all their own food as well as cash crops such as wheat, cotton and corn. "I suppose by today's standards, it was pretty rugged," she said. "But we always had our garden, and we always had butter and eggs. During the Depression was when it really got tough".

But by then, Flora was married, had a son and a teaching degree from Oklahoma State. Her husband was a civil engineer for the highway department who made \$90 a month. Flora taught first through eighth grades in a one-room schoolhouse.

"We had a wood-burning stove and no janitor," she recalled. "I had to sweep up, although I'd have the naughty pupils do the chores. About three-fourths of the kids were from the "Holy Roller" church and at noon they'd go outside and play church. They'd get down and roll around in the grass. I had to laugh."

In about 1930, they moved to Elk City, Okla., and throughout the next decade. Flora taught home economics and general studies off and on in county schools and finally high school.

The end of the Depression came with the beginning of World War II, and Flora's husband joined the Army and was sent to the Northwest and Alaska. Arranging for her parents to adopt their son, Bob. Flora also joined the Women's Army Corps in 1943. She went to boot camp at Oglethorpe, Ga., and was assigned to work as a ward orderly, cook, and finally an assistant dietitian at an Army hospital in Indian Town Gap, Pa. "I never left the country, and I wanted to go so bad, but I never made it," she said.

The war ended, and so did the marriage. Flora collected her son and got a job as a family planner with the Farmers Home Administration in Oregon. After two years, the funding ran out on the job and in 1948, Flora applied for and was awarded 160-acre veteran's homestead. "It was 160 acres



of sagebrush, and it was no easy job to clear it and get it ready to plant. That’s probably why I got married to Harry Frye that year.”

They got it cleared and began raising pinto beans, alfalfa, calves and hogs. “We were getting 5 cents a pound for pinto beans, cleaned and ready for the store.” Flora recalled. “In the store, they were getting 29 cents a pound. It was a hard life, and we weren’t making much. I did field work like a man. I’d carry 22-foot irrigation sprinklers, one on each shoulder, until I got arthritis. We finally decided to sell out. That was in 1952.”

They moved north to Washington state, and for two years they worked in a French fry factory called Country Garden. By then, their son was grown up and living in Phoenix and Flora and Harry decided it was time to get out of the cold weather and move to the sunny Southwest. But not wanting the complications that sometimes come with living in the same town with an offspring, they decided to give Yuma a try.

“We came here October 31, 1954, and the town was filled with winter visitors. The only place we found to rent was a little house on 11th Avenue. There was no town above 16th Street.”

Flora and her husband were of retirement age, but she couldn’t just sit at home all day, so she got a job teaching low-income people how to plan good meals from their monthly government allotment of staples, such as rice and beans.

Harry died in 1974, and Flora was on her own, but she kept busy. There were other jobs over the years, both paid and volunteer, with Operation Head Start, the Arizona Western College Displaced Homemakers Program and as the first director of the Senior Nutrition Program which formerly had been called Operation Food and Friends, sponsored by AWC.

She ran for the Yuma City Council and was narrowly defeated twice. She has been nominated for Yuma’s Citizen of the Year and in 1988 was named the state’s Outstanding Senior Citizen by Gov. Rose Mofford.

But if you ask her what her major accomplishment has been in the last 20 years, it was in 1984 when she received her Master of Arts degree in

Stats and Facts

Policial affiliation: Registered Democrat, but always vote for the candidate, not the party.

Favorite Dinner: One that is well-balanced and easy to chew.

Favorite local restaurant: Imperial China
My proudest moment: Receiving my master’s degree from NAU in 1984 at the age of 76.

The dumbest thing I ever did was: the time I told my husband to shut his mouth. He was drunk and wanted to pick a fight.

My greatest accomplishment: When I gave birth to my son. This was the beginning of my wonderful family.

Last book read: The Bible

Favorite off-hours pastime: reading or watching TV or visiting with my good neighbor Betty.

Favorite Music: soft and easy waltz that was popular in the ‘40s and ’50.

Favorite sport: Football

Favorite TV show: “The Golden Girls”
Favorite movie: One with “Will Rogers and his friend Stepin Fetchit”

Pet peeve: The person who sits around and gripes about something and never does anything about it.

Personal hero: President Franklin Roosevelt
If a movie was made of my life, who would play me: Estelle Getty form “Golden Girls”.

If I had one wish, it would be: To be able to help others as long as I live.

If I won \$1 million, I would: Keep my present lifestyle, and put the million in a safe place and start looking for ways to help where it would do the most good, such as educational scholarships, etc.

If I had another job, I would like to be: I am very happy with what I am doing: helping people.

vocational education from Northern Arizona University. I'd always wanted to get it since the '30s," she said. "It took three years, but I did it. I knew my son and his wife would be at the graduation ceremony in Flagstaff, but I had no idea the grandkids and great grandkids would be there, too. There was a big crowd, and as I walked across the stage to receive my degree, I heard a voice yell out, 'Yea, Grandma! YOU DID IT!' When I turned my head to look, there stood my entire family holding a big banner saying, 'CONGRATULATIONS GRANDMA.' Everybody clapped."

And what does Flora attribute her long life to? "I stay active, and I walk. The secret is to stay out of that rocking chair and away from that idiot box. I fully plan to live to be 100 years of age, and I know I'll make it."

The Yuma Daily Sun, June 24, 1988, by Lenora Werley

Flora Frye Picked 'outstanding senior'

Governor's award surprises, delights local advocate



Flora Frye has received many honors in her lifetime, but Flora said being named Arizona Outstanding Senior Citizen is the best yet.

Frye said it came as a big surprise when Gov. Rose Mofford announce the honor at the two-day Senior Summit she attended recently in Phoenix. The meeting was sponsored by the Arizona Council for Senior Citizens

I don't know who sent my name in or anything," she said of the award also granted to Albert J. Ong of Phoenix.

Frye was attending the meeting as a member of the Governor's Council on Aging. She is also Chairman of

the Yuma County Counsel in Aging, which oversees all the county's nutritional programs for the elderly.

"I have been involved in the senior citizens program for many years, and when the nutrition program first started, I was director of it," she said.

Frye has long been an advocate for the elderly, and said she understands their problems. Many of her notable accomplishments have come later in life.

For example, though she received a bachelor's degree in 1931 from Oklahoma State University, it was only after she reached age 76 that she earned her master's degree from Northern Arizona University.

She has been a substitute teacher in the Yuma area and serve as director of the Migrant Opportunity Child Development Center and the Yuma and Somerton Head Start programs.

One of her current projects is to locate all those in Yuma County who are 95 years and older. Frye wants to keep track of them and plans on holding an annual reception.

"I guess I was chosen for this honor because of my activities working with all phases of the senior program," Frye said. "I am quite active with the Legislature concerning senior problems.

"I do a good job writing to people like Sen. DeConcini, especially when he votes the way I want him to... or when he doesn't."

In 1990 Flora Frye was awarded the Hon Kachina Volunteer Award, presented by Channel 12 Who care.

About Hon Kachina Volunteer Awards



Presented in Phoenix, Arizona annually since 1977, the Hon Kachina Volunteer Awards program is designed to both recognize the achievement of outstanding Arizona volunteers and to increase public awareness about volunteerism. The awards are presented by the Hon Kachina Council. The Hon – or healing – Kachina Volunteer Awards program was originally conceived and presented by the Hon Kachina Council to honor people making significant volunteer contributions

to the healthcare field. This program is an extension of the rich heritage of volunteerism provided by St. Luke's Medical Center in Phoenix for nearly 100 years. In 1980, the scope of the program was expanded to include volunteer efforts in all community service areas. That same year, a local television station joined the Hon Kachina Council as a co-sponsor. Since 1996 St. Luke's Health Initiatives has generously underwritten the administrative costs associated with the coordination of this year-long project. Beginning in 1990, proceeds generated from the event were donated to a deserving non-profit volunteer-based organization. This year the proceeds generated from this event will fund increasing the awareness of volunteerism in Arizona.

She was also the director of the Somerton Child Development Center "Headstart"

Director of Operation Food and Friends, aka "Meals on Wheels".

Chairwoman of the Yuma County Counsel on Aging

The Yuma Daily Sun has almost 184 articles that mention Flora Frye's volunteer activities. But most do not disclose her legislative contributions.

My inspiration: I remember my grandmother, Flora Frye, testifying in front of the Arizona legislature to get funding for a new project she was starting in Yuma to help displaced homemaker”. It was the spring before I started law school, and she invited me to join her at the Arizona Legislature. I had no idea why she was there but thought it might be interesting, only to be more surprised when she got up to testify. This woman, who had been a farmer for 50 years, seemed right at home amidst all the males in suits (don’t recall seeing any woman except the secretaries). End of story – she got her funding. Later that day, the Speaker of the House whispered to me “if Flora Frye wants something, just give it to her because she will get it anyway”. That was almost 45 years ago, and I remember it today. What cemented my commitment to using the law to help others was my father’s words when I announced acceptance to law school – “no lady can be a good lawyer”. That was surprising, especially given that he was my grandmother’s only child. To this day, I don’t know if he was serious, but his words were so shocking and contrary to my grandmother’s encouragement that they set my goal to follow grandmother’s path so that her legacy will live on. Fast forward to the present: Self-Help Center, ACBC, CLS/VLP, teaching, and helping those who could not help themselves. Pro bono clients are told about my grandmother and that my fees – of lack thereof – are her gift to them.

I can only hope that Grandmother is smiling because her legacy has lived beyond her years on this earth.

