

# Teaching and Learning at 101

By Pat Spanjer



Emma Smith

Emma is surprised she has lived so long. A slim, graceful woman who adeptly maneuvers around her Spokane apartment with the assistance of a wheeled walker – and surprising agility – shrugs her small shoulders when asked to speculate about her longevity.

“I think being active has been the answer to it. I’ve always been active. I manage to keep awfully busy, somehow.”

Emma married Merion Smith in 1925 and while raising their son and daughter in Clarks Fork, Idaho, took up substitute teaching. Later, nearing her 60th year, when most are thinking about retiring, Emma decided it was time to take summer classes at Eastern to obtain her official teaching certificate, which she earned in 1963.

Emma has witnessed America’s automobile and road-building revolution, the invention of plastic, World War I through Vietnam, 12 U.S. presidents, the discovery of penicillin and the polio vaccine and so much more, including space travel. And she shared it all through the years with her fifth- and sixth-grade pupils.

In 1969, a student asked if she thought they’d ever put a man on the moon. She answered, “Of course they will,” and the very next day, they did. It’s a distinctive teacher’s memory that lives on as if it happened yesterday.

But, this centenarian doesn’t live in the past. She’s in the market for a new computer now – her old one is too slow – as it’s so much easier to keep in touch with loved ones by e-mail. Emma’s husband, their children and all but one of her nine siblings are deceased, but she takes joy in hearing from her grandchildren, great-grandchildren, great-great-grandchildren, nieces, nephews and her many friends.

She also likes to stay current with politics. The solid Democrat comes from a family of mostly Republicans.

“My father was very much a Republican,” Emma said, adding in a whisper and with a chuckle, “and I think my mother was a Democrat but my father didn’t know it.”

She served on several election boards over the years and cast her ballot in every election since she was old enough to vote. “That’s a privilege we all have and people should vote,” she said adamantly.

Bill Clinton’s thick 957-page book *My Life* sits on the coffee table in Emma’s living room, with a bookmark holding the place where the reading left off. An avid reader, Emma finds her eyes tire more easily, so a friend comes in regularly to read to her.

That’s not such a bad accommodation to make after all these years for a woman who started out early, and in a shoe box, and who maintains that “I’ve lived in the most amazing time and seen and done more things than anyone could have done in any other period in history.”

**H**orses’ hooves plodded along the southern Idaho dirt road, pulling the wagon that was taking the family west. The father’s new job with the U.S. Immigration Service awaited at the end of the 600-mile journey from Boise to Port Townsend on Washington’s coast.

Perhaps it was excitement or stress of the trip that caused the mother to go into premature labor.

It was Oct. 27, 1904, when their travel plans briefly came to a halt for the birth of a tiny girl, Emma. Not knowing if the 3-pound baby would live or die, her parents wrapped her in cotton batting, tucked her into her father’s shoebox and put her in an oven to keep her warm.

At a time when pneumonia, influenza and tuberculosis reduced the average American’s life expectancy to just 47, Emma Wilson miraculously survived her early arrival. That’s not all. Today she is enjoying a happy, healthy, active life at age 101.