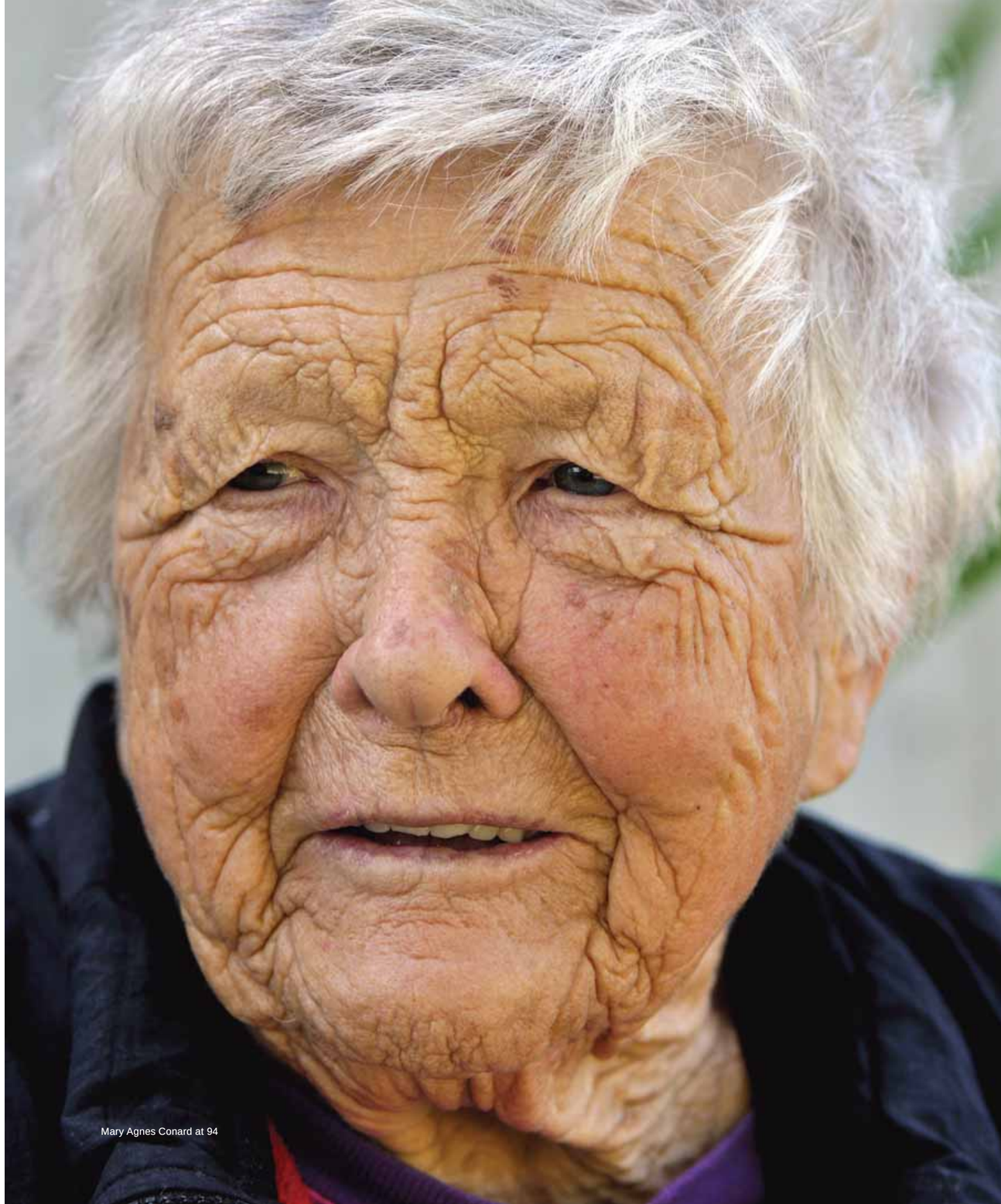
the
life and times
of

Mary Agnes Conard

by Nancy Hiller Photography by Steve Raymer

They grew up together, Mary Agnes Conard and her town. There were only 11,000 souls in Bloomington when Mary Agnes entered the world on the last day of May, 1914. The town was an island of urbanity surrounded by an ocean of farms and forest. Mary Agnes was born on one of those farms just two miles east of town. She is 94 now, living in a trailer tucked between a bean field and a pasture on a quiet country road. For nearly a century she has watched as Bloomington spread across the fields to become the city it is today. Kmart, Sears, and the Showplace Cinema now stand where green and gold fields of alfalfa, oats, and corn once waved in the breeze on the family farm. But Mary Agnes has stayed true to her rural roots.



Mary Agnes Conard at 94

Downtown Square, Bloomington, circa 1914, the year Mary Agnes Conard was born. Traffic was largely pedestrian, and most of the parking spaces were for horse-drawn carts. Adjustable awnings kept storefronts cool and shaded. *Photo courtesy of Monroe County History Center*

Bloomington was hot and dry at the end of May, 1914. A public notice on the front page of the *Daily Telephone* informed city utility customers:

> In order to give immediate relief from the dust, pattrons [sic] will be permitted to sprinkle from 6 until 8 o'clock each evening until oil has been laid on the streets.
>
> Patrons are warned that they MUST NOT use the water on their gardens…. Anyone violating this order will have the service shut off without further notice.
>
> By Order of City Water Works

Most of Bloomington's water came from reservoirs on the west side of town, and members of the local government, appreciating that future development depended on an adequate, clean supply, devoted considerable attention to managing this resource and planning for future growth.

Modern air conditioning would not become available for decades, and summers were long and sultry. Many houses had sleeping porches, which offered shelter with a refreshing breeze. Kahn's Clothing Company downtown advertised "Hot Weather Suggestions" such as straw hats, "cool underwear," and madras shirts.

The *Evening World* featured stories on caring for spring pigs and avoiding grub in the sheep flock. Its "Latest Local News" column noted that "Miss Lillie Cox, of Hendricksville, is visiting Mrs. Denver Sparks on east Twelfth Street." In campus news, Eugene V. Debs was scheduled to deliver a public lecture in the Men's Gymnasium on June 1; tickets were 25 cents—a salty price at the time.

It was on the last day of that May that Lizzie and Clarence Latimer welcomed their first child into the world. Lizzie (née Smith) had herself been born in a farmhouse just a mile farther east and had family ties to Bloomington's founding; her great-grandparents, John and Ann Henry Moore, had emigrated from Ireland and moved here in 1818, the year of the city's establishment. Her husband's local roots ran almost as deep. Samuel Latimer, Clarence's grandfather, had come to Indiana with his Irish-born father and settled in Monroe County around 1838. Clarence was born in 1884 on the same family farm where his new daughter, Mary Agnes, first opened her eyes.

The world she saw was quite unlike the one we know today. Although Bloomington had officially existed for 96 years, the city only stretched eastward from today's Rose Hill Cemetery to about the location of Hawthorne Avenue and northward from Grimes Lane to 13th Street. A few of the roads were paved with brick; some, outside the business district, were "macadamized," according to the 1913 Sanborn Fire Insurance map. The rest were dirt—muddy when it rained, and a baneful source of dust in dry spells—hence the notice about sprinkling. The dust was undoubtedly made thicker by the activities of approximately 18 stone mills and quarries, in addition to the Showers furniture factory, all of which were in or close to town.

Mary Agnes Latimer, who would eventually have three siblings, grew up in what was then the country. Her family's 111-acre farm stretched from East 3rd Street to Moore's Pike. Her father raised Holsteins, with a herd averaging 15 head, as well as alfalfa, oats, and corn. There were no diesel-fueled tractors or combine harvesters then, so plowing and cutting were done with horse-drawn equipment. As a child, Mary Agnes could scarcely wait to take her turn. "The day I got to work four horses I thought I was in heaven," she recalls.

The family milked the cows by hand and sold their products to Johnson's Creamery (in the building at 400 W. 7th St. that now houses the Chamber of Commerce). Mr. Latimer stopped there in his Model A Ford before delivering the children to the one-room Finley School on South High Street for lessons. In all but the worst weather, they walked the mile and a half back home.

Like most country residents, the Latimers grew their own vegetables and had a flock of chickens. Mary Agnes recalls the urgency and excitement of staying up late to pick beans before an early autumn frost. Spring storms, too, brought trouble; her mother would run outside to scoop up baby chicks in her apron, bring them into the kitchen, and set them in the wood-fired oven to keep warm. The family's meat came from the occasional cow that proved a disappointing milker. Remembering her school days, Mary Agnes says, "I lived on a farm all my life and we butchered, so I brought roast beef sandwiches for my lunches. I wished I could eat ham bologna like the other kids."

For dry goods such as sugar, salt, and coffee, the family went to town. "We did most of our trading at the A&P store," she recalls. "In those days you could take a basket of eggs…and exchange them for your groceries." The Latimers were not affected by the city's water restrictions in 1914; being in the country, they stored rainwater in a cistern and watered their cattle from springs on the farm.

Farmers relied on each other in those days, at times

The world she saw was quite unlike the one we know today.

The Latimer children, circa 1924: Mary Agnes (holding baby sister Margaret) with sister Frieda and brother Hubert.

Above, top:
In the Bloomington High School *Gothic* of 1931, Mary Agnes Latimer appears on the same page as her classmate, Ross Lockridge, Jr., author of the bestseller *Raintree County*, who later committed suicide (see *Bloom*, Oct./Nov. 2007).

Above, bottom:
By the time her senior picture was taken for Indiana University's 1935 *Arbutus*, Mary Agnes had married Burl Conard. *Both yearbook images courtesy of Monroe County History Center*

"The day I got to work four horses I thought I was in heaven."

Thirty years ago, Mary Agnes planted the three maple trees that shade her family's cattle at their farm west of Bloomington.

developing bonds to rival those of family. "We trusted everybody," Mary Agnes says. She remembers raking hay all afternoon for her neighbors, the Beards and the Conders, then helping load the rectangular bales onto wagons—hard physical work on the hottest days of summer. At threshing time the neighborhood men would work outdoors while "women got together, peeled potatoes, and put them in a five-gallon milk can" to cook for lunch. Homegrown beans and corn were other highlights at these gatherings of farming neighbors. "We fed twelve [men], washed the dishes, then fed another bunch," Mary Agnes remembers. "When it was time for silo filling we'd have to wash the dishes two times," so large was the crowd.

In 1922, when this spirited little girl turned 8, her family got a telephone and indoor plumbing—a luxury after the outhouse and the hand pump at the kitchen sink. There were changes at school, as well: a second classroom was added, which came in handy for social events. After chores, spelling bees were a popular pastime for people of all ages. "You wouldn't believe how packed the school got for those things," Mary Agnes recalls.

Mary Agnes went on to become a scholar. At Bloomington High School, where novelist Ross Lockridge, Jr. (author of *Raintree County*, see *Bloom*, Oct./Nov. 2007) was one of her classmates, she was elected to the National Honor Society. At Indiana University she majored in Latin, and she spent her career teaching Latin, English, and math at several area high schools. Family friend Richard Beard, for whose parents Mary Agnes had raked hay, calls her "a true lady" who started her mornings with a 5 o'clock milking before heading off to teach. After a full day at school she spent the evening, too, in farm work. "She did everything," Beard says, "drove a tractor, worked the garden with a hoe….Any piece of farm equipment she could pretty well run."

While still a student, Mary Agnes married Burl Conard, who worked for the university as a plumber. They first lived in a house on Clark Street east of campus and later moved to a farm off East Third Street.

How long will Mary Agnes continue to live amid the fields? She is, after all, 94.

The cozy home has pristine agricultural views on all sides.

The Great Depression, among the pivotal events of the 20th century, barely cast a shadow on the Latimer household's radar. "We had our own milk, our own eggs, and our own meat," says Mary Agnes, who still lived with her parents on their family farm at that time, "so I'm not sure I really knew there was a depression until I read about it as history." Nor did World War II cause much of a ripple in her day-to-day life. By then she was a full-time teacher and mother who worked her family's farm before and after school, and what she remembers most clearly is the wartime shortage of women's hosiery.

"On Monday morning, the kids would tell stories about standing in line Saturday to buy their mothers hose at the Kresge 5&10 on College Avenue," she says, adding that one day she herself was forced to teach bare-legged—a genuine social embarrassment at the time—having been too busy working to replenish her own supply of stockings. (Chiseled into the limestone over the entrance to Talbot's clothing store on the downtown Square, the name "KRESGE" is still visible today.)

During the 1940s, one of the most popular Saturday evening pastimes for Bloomingtonians was simply "walking around the Square until you met someone you knew. You'd talk to them. Then you'd move on and talk to somebody else. Actually," she muses, "I don't think the war affected the young people. They didn't sense that there were problems in the world."

In the early 1960s Mary Agnes and Burl moved to a farm west of town, near the end of a gravel road that runs along Richland Creek. Their son, Dale, and his wife, Connie Darlene, had purchased the property for its unbroken agricultural acreage; even 50 years ago, Monroe County's supply of arable land was dwindling, and farmers sometimes had to spread their work over fields that could be miles apart.

Mary Agnes and Burl lived in a farmhouse built around the turn of the century. After Burl died in 1970, Mary Agnes moved into a new mobile home, where she lives today. Dale has followed in his grandparents' footsteps, raising Angus cattle and row crops about a mile up the road.

Mary Agnes' trailer faces a rolling meadow where cattle graze. Sitting on her front stoop, her hair cropped in a no-nonsense style, her face a landscape of lines, she welcomes the sleek black cattle to the same sheltered spot each late afternoon. They amble over, kneeling and then lying in the grass beneath three tall maples that Mary Agnes planted more than 30 years ago. "They bring me their flies," she says with wry affection. The massive bull rests his head on a cow's conveniently placed hindquarters and swishes his tail, a vision of utter contentment. Another cow licks her sister's forehead, clearly comforting them both. It's a scene as pastoral as any artist ever painted.

How long will Mary Agnes continue to live amid the fields? She is, after all, 94. "I may get to the place where it's not safe," she acknowledges, "because I could fall. Not because I'm afraid."

How does she come by such fearlessness? Some would argue that it's easier to feel secure when you've been brought up understanding how things work and are able to see processes through from start to finish—growing the fruit you eventually pick and make into jam for your own breakfast, knowing how to repair the engine of the tractor with which you mow the hay to feed your cattle. Early in life, Mary Agnes mastered a host of practical skills; long before memorizing her first Latin verb, she learned from her parents how to sew and bake, raise vegetables, milk a cow, and care for chickens. She grew up in a culture that encouraged self-reliance.

The culture of Bloomington has evolved over the years so that today most city dwellers can't milk a cow—or conjugate a Latin verb. But for Mary Agnes Conard, life has always been tied to agriculture. The previous year, she had chided the owners of the field across the road for allowing it to grow up in weeds that "got so tall, they ruined my view." For more than 40 years the view across the road has been one of farmland: orderly rows of crops extending to the creek, with the tangled, dark-green backdrop of woods beyond. Field. Forest. Sky. Now that's a proper country view. ✲

Some information for this story came from Echoes From One-Room Schools, Monroe County, Indiana (*Monroe County Retired Teachers, 2006, published by AuthorHouse*) *and* Monroe County, Indiana Family Heritage (1984), *courtesy of the Monroe County History Center.*