



100 Years In Oakland

Mabel Smouse

Written by: **Dan Whetzel**
 Photography by: **Lance C. Bell**

daughter of a Baltimore and Ohio Railroad employee and a housewife, Mabel has become one of the town's most beloved and well known residents.

Two sisters and one brother kept Mabel company during the adolescent years that were spent in Oakland. "We played near Kildow's Mill, Davis' Milling Shop, and the fields near the Youghiogheny River. Back then, we found things to do. In the winter we would sled ride down the hill where the Pizza Hut is today. There were very few cars, so we didn't have to worry about running in front of them. Everybody walked where they wanted to go."

Attending Saint Peter's Catholic School and Oakland High School provided Mabel with a formal education. "The Sisters of Mercy taught me in grades six and seven. I later attended high school but had to quit in 1928, after the third year. My mother had divorced, and times were hard. I went to work at the Blue Bird Restaurant when I was 16 years old." Employment opportunities later led Mabel to the Manhattan Hotel dining room, the William James Hotel dining room, the Pickwick Inn, the Green Palm Room, Cornish Manor, Edge O' Lake Restaurant, Allegheny Room Restaurant, Fireside Restaurant, and Pizza Hut.

The centenarian is an eyewitness to local and national events that most folks learn about through studying the past. "I remember when the CCC boys (Civilian Conservation Corps) who worked at Swallow Falls came to town for dances. Many of the local girls met their future husbands because of the nearby CCC camps." Mabel also recalls when the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad offered regular steam engine passenger service to Oakland, thereby creating a busy station. Other memories include family owned businesses that flourished in the downtown district including Sincell's Clothing Store, the H-P (Half-Price) Store, Gortner's Shoe Store, Naylor's Hardware, Offutts, and Shartzter's Meat Market.

The year of 1912 was an interesting time for Americans. Woodrow Wilson received the Democratic Party's nomination for President of the United States while the rival Bull Moose Party supported its energetic leader, Theodore Roosevelt. Republicans re-nominated William Howard Taft, and Eugene Debs became the Socialist Party standard bearer, thereby presenting Americans with a rare four-way contest.

On the local scene, Western Maryland residents concerned themselves with the necessary chores that made up daily living in the early 20th century. Walking was the preferred way to arrive at work, shop in town, and visit friends in nearby neighborhoods. For most folks motorized vehicles would remain a luxury for another decade. Homebuyers could choose from a variety of houses listing at \$1,600; upscale dwellings topped out around \$5,000. Outfitting a family in fine clothing could be accomplished at local merchants that advertised summer dresses for \$1.98 and men's suits for \$2.98.

The town of Oakland experienced a noteworthy event on July 25, 1912, when high winds and heavy rains destroyed several dwellings and demolished smaller wooden structures. The First National Bank, Hinebaugh Building, and Naylor Building were damaged by the storm.

A second noteworthy Oakland event occurred on July 25th when Mabel Shaffer Smouse entered the world. The

Unfortunately, not all memories concerned positive events. Western Maryland did not escape the influence of the Ku Klux Klan during the 1920s. “The KKK used to march through town and burn a cross on Ferguson’s Hill. The members marched through town with hoods over their faces, so I didn’t know who they were. At the time there were a few black families living in Oakland.”

Adolescence and formal schooling behind her, Mabel met and married James Flanigan in 1930. Two children were born to the couple before tragedy struck in 1940. “I was 28 when my first husband died. We had two children at the time.” After moving to a downtown apartment building, tragedy struck a second time when fire completely destroyed the family’s apartment and possessions. “I stayed with my aunt for a few weeks and then found a place to live in Mountain Lake Park. Life hasn’t always been easy.”

Always the optimist, Mabel did not allow the misfortunes to negatively affect her life or personality as she continued to raise her children while being employed. Good fortune returned when Mabel met and later married Ralph Smouse in 1947. The couple built a house in Oakland and remained together until Ralph’s passing in 1981.

Today, Mabel may be seen driving around town or volunteering at the Mary Browning Senior Center in Oakland, a task she has enjoyed for a number of years. The years of service at the senior center were formally recognized in 2001 when Mabel was inducted into the Maryland Association of Community Action Hall of Fame for Volunteerism.

A well-spoken personality, Mabel displays a quiet calm and pleasant persona. That aura has earned Mabel the recognition and respect of residents who go out of their

way to greet her. Let no one confuse the calm demeanor with a sedentary life style. Bob Boal, long time Oakland resident, notes that, “I see her driving downtown all the time and would ride with her.” Bob also comments that, “Mabel is a people person who enjoys being active.”

When asked the typical questions about her health, life, and longevity, Mabel attributes her success to “hard work, being active, and working around people. Being a waitress, I met a lot of people from all over the country and that helped me get along with everyone. We were taught the customer was always right and I always enjoyed my work.”

An interesting feature of Mabel’s life has been her refrain from coffee drinking. “I’ve never had a cup of coffee and have always been a tea drinker.”

Life is not all work for the centenarian who enjoys outdoor activities: “I have a garden every year and feed birds all the time. I still like to walk downtown.” Reading has been a passion for the Oakland resident, but lately, she says, “I can’t seem to find time to read. I have been too busy doing other things.”

Participating in church services and activities has been central to her upbringing and life style. “I don’t know when I last missed a church service, but it has been a long time.” Not surprising, Mabel is the oldest member of the congregation.

To celebrate Mabel’s century mark, family and residents filled the Southern Garrett Rescue Squad Hall on July 25, 2012, for a birthday party. “I knew there was going to be a birthday party but not one that big.” Her brother arrived from out of town and invited guests came from Florida, South Carolina, Georgia, and California. A ceremonial carriage ride through town with her brother on the beautiful day was an appropriate tribute to the lady everyone loves to know.

The 100 year mark has not slowed Mabel’s work habits or dimmed her outlook on life. She continues to visit with her son, Jim Flanigan, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and friends. When visiting the town of Oakland, be sure to look for Mabel, but be quick because her schedule is busy and her time is limited!

Mabel and her brother, Joseph Shaffer, enjoy a carriage ride through Oakland on Mabel’s 100th birthday, July 25, 2012.

