

Woman nears century of viewing life with humor

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — George Burns regularly jokes that he will be performing well beyond his 100th birthday.

But the 96-year-old comedian will be beaten to the century mark by another person who's quick with a joke.

Clara Dalitz will celebrate 100 years on earth May 4.

The longtime parishioner at St. Mary's Church, Rochester, is noted for more than just her jokes, however.

"She is an 'Artist of Life,'" declared Sister Loretta Poole, SSJ, who met Dalitz in the mid 1980s while serving as a pastoral assistant at St. Mary's, 15 St. Mary's Place. "Everything interests her, everything delights her, even the smallest thing. It's almost a mystical quality; she just takes things in."

Dalitz, who now lives at the Blossom Health Care Center, 989 Blossom Road, smiled at Sister Poole's description. "I don't know, it just comes natural," she remarked.

A life-long Rochester resident, Dalitz moved into the health center only after falling in 1990 — at age 98 — and suffering her second broken hip. Until that time, she had lived independently in an apartment, and was a regular fixture at St. Mary's for Mass and on day trips organized for parishioners. She often took the bus to church, and sometimes even walked.

Dalitz joined St. Mary's later in life. She was born into St. Michael's Parish, and graduated from the parish school's eighth grade.

Just 12 days after celebrating her 14th birthday she went to work for Vogt Corporation, Dalitz recalled.

Dalitz remained with Vogt for "51 years and 7 months," she noted. During her early days with the company, she made casket trimmings and material for carriages. In later years, when the company shifted to plastics, she made roofing strips for automobiles.

When she began working for the company, Dalitz made "\$4.50 a week — not quite 10 cents an hour —" while working 48-hour weeks. At age 16, she began working 54-hour weeks.

The hours were long and the pay low by contemporary standards, but Dalitz said Vogt was a fun place to work.

"A lot of us would sit at one table, and we'd talk all day," she said, adding with a laugh, "The floor lady said, 'The more Clara talks, the faster she works.'"



Babette G. Augustin/Photo editor

Clara Dalitz (right), a longtime parishioner at St. Mary's Church, Rochester, will celebrate her 100th birthday May 4. Pictured with her are second-cousins Eleanor Coene (left) and Doris Gasser.

Dalitz lived at home with her parents until they died, then she moved into apartments on her own.

During her working years, Dalitz had little time for activities outside of her job and going to church, she acknowledged. But when she retired, she began to travel.

"I like to travel," Dalitz said, noting that she took advantage of bus tours. "I went to the Smokey Mountains. I went to Florida about four different times."

In addition, she reported, "I was 84 when I went on my first plane ride. I went to Disneyland in California."

At St. Mary's meanwhile, she began to take advantage of day trips throughout Rochester and even to the Finger Lakes region. She also played bingo at the parish, and attended parish picnics.

It was during this time that Dalitz

met Mary and John Depew. The couple lived in an apartment upstairs from her for 25 years, becoming close friends with her.

"She's remarkable," Mary Depew said. "She's an extremely independent lady."

Depew recalled that Dalitz only began to slow down after suffering the second broken hip. The first break took place in the early 1980s.

"The doctor said, 'You'll be lucky if you ever walk downtown again,'" Depew recalled. But after recovering from the break, she did walk downtown, stopping at the store where Depew worked. "She said, 'I showed 'em,'" Depew remembered.

Dalitz attributed her longevity and health in part to her constant walking.

"I used to like to walk," she said. "I walked every place I could that wasn't too far."

While the second fall stopped her walking and placed her in the home, it also placed her in touch with family. Dalitz's only sister had died in 1908, but she had cousins, and the children — and grandchildren — of those cousins now visit her.

Dalitz also receives regular visits from the Depews and friends from St. Mary's.

Despite the problems posed by the broken hips, Dalitz has kept her sense of humor and her lively interest in life, Depew said.

Indeed, Dalitz said she expects to be around for a while.

"I think I'll be here until Judgment Day," Dalitz said. "They'll have to take me behind the barn and shoot me."

Maybe then George Burns will have a chance to catch up.

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