

CALIFORNIA Winnie Heiney Duncan, 80

Homestead days.

It's the annual Tulelake-Butte Valley Fair's Pioneer Day. Homesteaders who settled the Tulelake Basin in the northeastern corner of California after World War II get together to reminisce and keep current. It is there that Winnie recalls the old days.

"It was awesome. It was different," remembers the 80-year-old of her years as a young wife on the homestead. "Just lots to do. But we had fun, too."

Raised in nearby Klamath Falls, Winnie Towne lived with her grandparents, Dewey and Emma Diess. During World War II, because of the shortage of men to work the potato harvest, she was among high school students who volunteered to be bused 30 miles to the Tulelake Basin to pick potatoes. "We put the sacks between our legs and filled them up." She had no idea that growing potatoes would be part of her life.

Her life changed Dec. 19, 1946, when her fiancé, Robert Roy "Bob" Heiney, who served in the Army during the war, had his name pulled out of a pickle jar for a Tulelake-area homestead. It was his 21st birthday.

Ten days later, instead of returning to Southern Oregon College of Education (now Southern Oregon University) to complete studies to become a teacher, she and Bob married and prepared to begin life as potato farmers. They moved onto their 105-acre homestead the following spring. His name had been the 86th and final name for that year's drawing, but he ended up picking 76th when 10 others failed to meet qualifications.

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FROM TOP: ▶Winnie drove potato trucks during the fall harvest. She still owns the family homestead in Tulelake, California. ▶After returning from WWII, Bob won the homestead in a lottery on his 21st birthday in December 1946. He married Winnie 10 days later. ▶Winnie and Bob Heiney at their school reunion, 1990s.

"Since he had farmed in the area—his parents lived here—he knew the quality of the land," Winnie explains of why he selected a homestead just two miles west of his parents, Roy Clarence and Katherine "Kate" Heiney.

"They were a big help because they lived just down the road and because they had machinery that we could use."

Winnie drove a truck during the harvest season and raised their two children, Janice and Richard.

Like other homesteaders, they were given half of a barracks from the vacated Japanese-American Internment Camp at nearby Newell to convert

into a home.

"Before you knew it," she says, "it was a good place to live."

The homestead families played and worked hard. They nicknamed themselves, "*Agricolae Uxorum*," Latin for farmers' wives. The women worked on projects, hosted a series of parties for all seasons and were involved with an array of community groups. They did crafts, including textile painting, leather carving, cake decorat-



ing and jewelry making. While they met, their husbands played poker.

"We couldn't afford to go to town so we created our card games. We had fun. We raised kids. They skated on the frozen canals," she recalls. "When grain harvesttime came, we would all get together at noon and fix the meals for when the men came in from the fields. We shared not only the food, but the equipment."

Winnie downplays the hard times, but they existed. "You always had to be thinking about the pocketbook. In lean years, you had to be careful."

One of her personal highlights was the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles, when she was a judge for the cross-country phase of the three-day horse event. She had learned to ride as a child and, after her marriage, she helped out on her family's and neighbors' homesteads. "We'd help neighbors move cows," she says. Winnie also

coached a school drill team that for several years performed horseback at the Tulelake-Butte Valley Fair. Because of her background and training, she was picked to supervise a series of three hurdles during the Olympics.

Winnie continued riding until last year, when she and her registered thoroughbred, Trail Bender, participated in a century ride, where the horse and rider's combined age is 100. She hasn't been horseback since, saying, "I've hung it up."

Her husband died in July 1998. Three years later, she and her family suffered through the 2001 Klamath Basin water crisis, when irrigation water was shut off to farmers. "There was nothing but weeds that year."

Winnie still owns the original homestead and one the family bought from another homesteader. Both are currently being farmed by Lawrence Bagg. Several years ago, discouraged by the high cost of planting potatoes, they grew spearmint. Now the land is being replanted in alfalfa, partly because alfalfa often yields three or four cuttings a year. The shift stems from lessons learned during the 2001 crisis. If irrigation water is cut off again, the family and Bagg expect they'll have at least one cutting.

Life changed again for Winnie in 2002 when she married Charles Duncan, a farmer in nearby Malin, just north of the California-Oregon border. Like her, he had lost his spouse. Since their marriage, they've been traveling, playing duplicate bridge and enjoying friends and family.

Does she think about homesteading days?

"Yes," she says, referring to the memories made fresh at the pioneer gathering. "Especially days like today." —Lee Juillerat