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# In my lifetime



Louise Nelson of Knoxville, 93, said she lives by a set of optimistic phrases hung in her kitchen.



Louise Nelson, 6, left, is with her sister Marie in 1926.

## 93-year-old recalls herding cattle, pageants, love of golf

By Rebecca D. Williams  
Special to the News Sentinel

**O**n a wall in Louise Nelson's kitchen hangs a list of optimistic phrases like "laugh loud," and "play hard."

"I live by this right here, this is me," said Nelson, 93, of Knoxville, pointing to the sign.

And she has a point. If you don't find Nelson laughing out loud with friends at Fountain City United Methodist Church, you might find her "playing hard" on the golf course at Beaver Ridge Country Club.

"I love my church, and I love my golf," Nelson said.

She has participated several times in the Tennessee Senior Olympics, won a sportsmanship award at her club, and even got a hole-in-one once. "Golf is a game of integrity, and that's important to me," she said. "You have to be honest, and it disciplines you. Plus I'm outdoors in the fresh air, and I'm active."

Nelson spent her childhood largely outdoors on farms. She was the elder of two daughters born to Bennie and Eva Bury, born in rural Illinois on May 31, 1920. Their rented farmhouse had no electricity or plumbing. "We had an outhouse, and you used the Sears Roebuck catalogue, you tore out the sheets," she said.

She was often the new farm girl in the town school,

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**Link:** Louise Nelson discusses on video the Fraterville Mine disaster of 1902, in which her grandfather and six members of his family died.

See NELSON, 8D

## Q & A WITH LOUISE NELSON

### How has society changed in your lifetime?

"(Growing up,) we all sat down at the table together every night for supper, with no TVs to get our attention. We talked about what we had done during the day, and we had our prayer. That is, sadly, missing now."

### What technology has been most significant to you?

"The cell phone. My sister lives in Illinois and for years we couldn't afford long distance. Now everyday we call at 5 p.m."

### What historical event has been most significant to you?

World War II. "We don't give enough credit to our soldiers, who fought and died for us. I fly my flag every day. We were taught to love our country."

SPECIAL TO THE NEWS SENTINEL



## NELSON from 1D

since her dad moved them six times in eight years to various farms in Illinois and Colorado, until he bought his own near Hoopeston, Ill. "He had no sons, so we helped him with farm chores.



**Louise Nelson** competes in the Tennessee State Seniors Golf Tournament in Cleveland, Tenn., in 1986.

We gathered corn and watered the chickens," she said.

At 13, Louise became a cowgirl, herding cattle on a horse. "There was a drought, so I would sit in the saddle and get the cows to new pastures. The farmers gave me maybe,

50 cents."

Off the saddle, she sang cowgirl songs with a boy who taught her to play guitar. "He and I entertained until I was a sophomore in high school," she said. "I sang every Memorial Day at the chapel at the cemetery."

She remembers the Great Depression of the 1930s. "It was not a bad

so close. We were always with family, on my father's side."

Nelson graduated from Hoopeston High School in 1938, did a year at business college, and then took a job as a bookkeeper. Without her knowing it, Nelson's bosses entered her in the local Miss Hoopeston pageant, in the fall of 1941. She competed in a \$5 gown and her Sunday best, and she won. "I would have never even entered if they hadn't done it for me," she said.

As the fourth Miss Hoopeston ever (the pageant has now completed 76 years), Nelson served as a hostess at the National Sweetcorn Festival in Chicago, sold war bonds with Miss Indiana, and appeared at Wrigley Field with Tommy Bartlett, a radio personality at the time.

She married her high school sweetheart, Robert "Bob" Nelson, in March 1942. Just a few months later he was drafted into the U.S. Army field artillery during World War II.

Louise followed Bob to several training camps, driving with another couple to Fort Ord., Calif.

"We stopped at the Grand Canyon and spent the night in a cheap hotel. During the night, somebody tried to take the tires off the car! They were stealing them because of the tire rationing," Nelson remembered with a laugh.

Bob Nelson contracted pneumonia at Fort Ord., and worked several desk jobs the rest of the war. His unit shipped out without him. "We later heard that all of Bob's group were killed," she said sadly.

After the war, the Nelsons settled in Norris (he worked with TVA) and had two sons. She was a scout leader and

active church volunteer, and took up golf in 1960. Today she has six great-grandchildren and has already bought the older ones golf clubs.

The Nelsons moved to Fountain City in 1965. Bob Nelson died in 2003.

"He was a kind and gentle person, very intelligent," said Louise Nelson of her late husband. "He was a great mentor to our children, and to me. He mentored me and took me through this whole life, which has been beautiful."

Throughout her life, Nelson said her mother's side of the family was a bit of a

mystery to her. Her mother's father, David Dezern, was one of more than 200 coal miners who died in the 1902 mine explosion in Fraterville, Tenn.

He, his four brothers and two brothers-in-law all perished. "The whole family was gone," said Nelson.


In 2000, Nelson contacted the Coal Creek Watershed Foundation, a nonprofit that researched the mine disaster. She attended the 100th anniversary of the explosion last year. "They've given me my grandpa and my family back. I can't say enough

about them," she said.

Knowing what can happen in an instant, Nelson said she cherishes life all the more. She still golfs twice a week, plays bridge on Wednesdays, dresses sharp every day, and loves to decorate for dinner parties.

"I'm ready to go whenever, but I'm enjoying life while I'm here!" she said. "I'm going to live while I'm alive."

"In my lifetime" is a monthly profile of East Tennesseans ages 70 and older. Make a suggestion for the series at [community@knoxnews.com](mailto:community@knoxnews.com).



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