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LOCAL

Lansing's Irene Dunham, the oldest surviving student of Bath bombing, is now Michigan's oldest resident

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DEWITT TOWNSHIP - Supercentenarian Irene Dunham is a living witness to more than a century of history.

In December, Dunham, of Lansing, celebrated her 113th birthday.

Last week she became Michigan's oldest living resident, the sixth oldest resident in the U.S. and the 22nd oldest living person in the world, according to records from the Gerontology Research Group, a group of researchers that verifies and tracks supercentenarians.

It isn't her only distinction of note.

Dunham has lived through the Great Depression, both World Wars and now, two pandemics. She is also the oldest surviving student of the Bath Consolidated School before it was bombed in 1927 in the deadliest act of school violence in America.

Until last summer, Dunham lived in the Lansing home where she raised her family and resided for more than eight decades.

The oldest of eight children, she a resident at Gunnisonville Meadows Senior Assisted Living in DeWitt Township now, where she walks with the assistance of a walker, reads the newspaper every day and looks out over a small garden from a window in her room.

Dunham's resilience still surprises people, her son Bruce Dunham, 75, said.

"She's amazing really," he said.

Surviving over a century of history

Dunham assumes the place of the state's oldest living resident following the death of Battle Creek's Ellen Goodwill, who died March 2 at the age of 114.

Dunham has been on the Gerontology Research Group's list of validated supercentenarians for several years now.

Bruce Dunham submitted her birth certificate, marriage license and other documentation to the group.

Tuesday morning, from her room at Gunnisonville Meadows, Irene Dunham said she's looking forward to warmer weather and sitting outside this spring.

"It's starting to get a little bit warmer so I'll go out there pretty soon," she said over the phone. "I'm looking forward to that."

His mother is still sharp, Bruce Dunham said.

During a recent phone conversation with her, Bruce Dunham told his mother he planned to come visit the next day "if the good Lord's willing and the creek don't rise."

"Well, the creek can't rise because it's frozen solid," she replied.

She's also a survivor. Irene Dunham, then Irene Babcock, grew up on a 141-acre family farm located about four miles from Bath with her parents and eight younger siblings. Her father grew rye and corn.

During the influenza pandemic of 1918, she fell ill but recovered.

Then in 1927, at age 19, a sore throat kept Irene Dunham home from classes at Bath Consolidated School the day Andrew Kehoe bombed it.

The 1,000 pounds of dynamite Kehoe planted in the basement of the building on May 18, 1927, killed 38 classmates and six adults. Dozens of others were injured, including Irene Dunham's brother.

The graduation ceremony for the class of 1927 didn't happen that year. Irene Dunham got her diploma 50 years later when Bath High School's 1977 graduating class invited the 1927 senior class to their ceremony.

Later in life, when Irene Dunham got colon cancer, doctors believed it would kill her but it didn't.

Her last surviving brother, George Babcock, a World War II veteran, is 101.

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'It has been a long life'

Recently, Irene Dunham received the COVID-19 vaccine, Bruce Dunham said.

Hard work and staying active always kept her going, he said, and she expected the same of her children.

"When I was a kid growing up I had to stay away from home because if I was home she'd put me to work," he said.

"You just have to keep on going, you know?" Irene Dunham told the State Journal in 2017. "And do what you can do. That's all I can do."

Moving is still important, Irene Dunham said Tuesday.

"It has been a long life," she said. "I just get up, move around and I guess that's about it. I wish I could do more right now but I'm getting pretty old."

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