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Living history

At 105, George Knoles demonstrates an enduring intellectual curiosity

by Rebecca Wallace / photos Veronica Weber

At the time of the 2010 census, Palo Alto had 17 residents who were at least 100 years old.

It's hard to know what the number is today. But it's probably safe to say that if you are one of those people, you're a bit of a local celebrity.

All the ladies in the elevator at Channing House know George Knoles. At the mention of his name, they beam.

"Our 105-year-old!" one of them cries.

There are just a few people living in this senior community who are 100 or close to it. An administrator laughs when I ask her if anyone is older than Knoles.

Knoles' grandson Dan Nitzan has told me that his grandfather, clear of head but frail, has a wealth of stories to share.

"Ask him about Armistice Day," he urged.

In a room with three hospital beds, Knoles sits in a chair near the window. He has a blanket over his knees and shearling slippers on his feet.

Knoles no longer hears well, as one might expect from a centenarian. Visitors have to speak very loudly and slowly and often repeat themselves.

But Knoles is delightful: friendly and articulate and funny, with a memory that is often impressive. This is a man who made his career from the past. He was a history professor at Stanford University for decades, rising to chairman of the department. Much of his life is now our history.

Knoles neither sums up his entire existence in an hour, nor offers great insight into every event of the 20th century. He wants to talk about the things that have been important to him. Family. Teaching. Travel. What it was like to first notice his wife. How it felt to spend summers in Japan.

Once he warms up, Knoles tells story after story. He gives something with each one: a personal tie to the past. In a small way, we find ourselves understanding the last century a little more than we did before.

George Harmon Knoles was born in 1907. When you hear that, you can't help but start calculating in your head. He was alive when the Titanic went down, 5 years old. He was 11 when World War I ended. He remembers the Second World War and Korea and Vietnam.

He was born in Los Angeles, which he still pronounces with a hard "g," because that's how you said it then. When he was a young teenager, his family moved to San Jose, where his father became chancellor of University of the Pacific. It was then called College of the Pacific and located in San Jose.

In his room at Channing House, Knoles talks about his father first. It's a good place to start.

Tully Cleon Knoles, who had been a history professor at the University of Southern California, became

president of College of the Pacific in 1919 and supervised its move to Stockton. He served for 27 years as the college's president and 13 as chancellor. Today there's a K-8 school named after him in Stockton, where the school newsletter praises him for "longevity as well as quality in presidential leadership." Pacific was the first four-year college in the Central Valley.

George Knoles was one of eight siblings, and his parents promised to educate all eight up through their master's degrees.

"All my brothers and sisters became educators," he says with pride. That included Tully Jr., who taught at Palo Alto High School.

"It's an interesting name," I say.

"My grandfather was born in the Midwest," Knoles says. "Tully was an ancient Roman name."

In those days, he notes, you studied the Greeks and Romans a lot in the Midwest.

Knoles earned a bachelor's degree and a master's at Pacific, and then headed to Stanford to work toward his doctorate in history. Palo Alto had another appeal: Amandalee Barker, a Paly graduate whom he'd met when they were both Pacific students.

Knoles grins, and his eyes crinkle.

"She was a freshman and I was a high and mighty junior. ... Juniors always like to look over the new crop."

The two were married in Stanford's Memorial Church in 1930.

On the wall across from Knoles' bed, next to a "105" birthday card drawn in a child's hand, is a photo of Amandalee, gray-haired, wearing sunglasses. She was another teacher in this big family of educators, teaching at Jordan Middle School in Palo Alto, and briefly serving as principal of Peninsula School in Menlo Park.

In the 1950s, like so many women, she put her own career aside to support her husband, Knoles says. She went with him when he taught overseas, and she socialized with the faculty on campus. She was president of the Stanford Faculty Women's Club and active in the Stanford Historical Society and other organizations.

In the photo on the wall, Amandalee stands in front of the Palo Alto Co-Op, of which she was one of the founding members.

She died in 2004, in Channing House, at the age of 96.

"We were married for 74 years," George Knoles says quietly. "I'm just sorry we didn't make it to 75."

As with so many other Americans, George Knoles' strongest memories of World War II begin with a Sunday dinner. The family was living in Colorado, where Knoles was teaching at the University of Northern Colorado after earning his doctorate. The announcement came over the radio: Pearl Harbor had been attacked.

"It was very shocking," Knoles says. For the first time, his voice rises. "How would the Japanese, or anyone else, *dare* to do that?"

Soon, people started getting drafted.

"Even my age," Knoles says. He was 34. He enlisted in the U.S. naval reserve and served as a lieutenant on a cargo ship.

"A big gun on the bow and a smaller gun on the back. Eight anti-aircraft guns," he says with swift recall. "I

boarded the ship in Alameda, and we went across to San Francisco. Then we were ordered out into the southwest Pacific."

Knoles spent some time in Australia during the war and smiles as an anecdote comes back to him.

Another soldier had been out walking one day in the port city of Cairns.

"He stumbled and fell. A woman kicked him, thinking he was drunk. He wasn't," Knoles says, chuckling. "They got married and are living here." Here at Channing House. It's a small world.

After the war, Knoles returned to Stanford, where he was promoted through the teaching ranks of the history department. His main concentration was American history, with publications including "The Presidential Campaign and Election of 1892" and "The Crisis of the Union, 1860-1861."

His interests also turned to Europe.

"After World War I, there had been a lot of pressure in the country to educate young people about the culture from which they came, mostly Western Europe," he says. Knoles worked with fellow professor Rixford Snyder to compile the textbook "Readings in Western Civilization." It became required reading for Stanford students.

(Interestingly, Snyder was also a centenarian. He died in 2009 at 100.)

With the '60s came major change, and sometimes turbulence, on college campuses. Protestors burned down Stanford's ROTC building and occupied others. Knoles remembers when chemist Kenneth Pitzer "served a brief, turbulent tenure as Stanford president during the late 1960s," as a university press release later described it.

"He didn't last long. My view of why is clear," Knoles says. "He was in the new Faculty Club, in the president's dining room, and a serpentine group of marchers came in." He traces a snaking line on a table. "They chanted: 'We want Pitzer! We want Pitzer!'" Knoles says he thinks the protestors were seeking higher African-American enrollment. The president, he recalls, fled out the back door.

Knoles has fonder memories of Richard Lyman, the next Stanford president.

"He was willing to face up to crowds of that sort. I've always thought that he saved Stanford from a worse-off evil," he says. "He would talk to people, set up meetings. Anyone would come."

Lyman now lives across the hall from Knoles in Channing House.

Knoles continued teaching at Stanford, eventually becoming department chair before his retirement in 1972. Why did he stay?

"I kept getting promoted," he says with a smile. When asked why teaching was important to him, he says, "Maybe it's because my father was a teacher."

I remember that I've brought along a Palo Alto history book and ask him about what the city was like in past decades. He flips through a few pages.

"Sticky Wilson's. I remember that," he says of a University Avenue restaurant pictured in 1925. A woman behind the counter wears her hair in a spunky bob.

Knoles recalls the Stanford Theatre and a few other places but doesn't seem interested in talking about the city. He lived mostly on campus, he says.

A photo of University Avenue in the late 1930s looks like something out of a movie, showing cars with their jumbo round fenders and the men in neat hats. Knoles merely says, "It looked very much like that."

A copy of the late historian David Halberstam's "The Fifties" sits on his bed, half-read. Knoles lived through

the decade. Was it ever strange for him as a history professor to experience world-changing events, knowing he might teach about them?

Again, Knoles is matter-of-fact. "I didn't think I was part of history. I was just living."

All these years, Knoles' family has become more rooted in Palo Alto. Eight members of the family, over four generations, graduated from Palo Alto High.

George Knoles' mother, Emily Walline Knoles, was one of the first residents of Channing House when it opened in 1961. George has lived there for 27 years.

Meanwhile, Knoles and his family were also making international connections. He taught in France and Great Britain and traveled more after retirement.

Picking up a magazine, Knoles comes upon a postcard of a Japanese woodblock print. After an hour-long interview, I wonder if we should leave, but Knoles is inspired by his find and begins to talk about his many trips to Japan. It's clear that these have been highlights in his life.

"After World War II and prior to it, relationships between Japanese and American scholars were cut off. We had a Japanese professor in our department who got sent to an internment camp," Knoles says, adding drily, "which he didn't like very much."

After the war, other Stanford colleagues decided to start a program to reestablish relations between scholars. Five educators, including Knoles, went to Japan to teach American history. He made friends and ended up traveling to Japan over five years with his wife and sometimes one of their daughters.

Knoles' face glows at the memory. The program began only five years after the end of the war, and yet, he says: "I did not ever experience any kind of opposition, a 'you defeated us in war' kind of thing. Always kindness."

Amandalee was especially good at communicating without Japanese, he recalls, chuckling. She would go into a butcher shop and point to her body to show the cut of meat she wanted.

"We enjoyed those summers. They were full of beautiful memories. Never, never, never any unkindness of any kind, which surprised me. I would have thought after that terrible war ..." he says, trailing off.

The warmth in his voice is a strong contrast to the outrage he expressed over Pearl Harbor. There's a vast difference between the actions of a government and the lives of its regular people.

For many years after the program, Knoles' friends from Japan visited, even coming to see him at Channing House.

"All of those people, as far as I know, are gone. That's one of the penalties of growing old."

These days, Knoles spends much of his time reading and talking to visitors. He doesn't go downstairs anymore. Still, he avidly reads about the great world outside, in newspapers and books. Perhaps this is part of the secret to longevity: an ongoing intellectual curiosity, a desire to keep finding out what's happening.

When a nurse brings in his mail, Knoles spots a magazine and says happily, "The New Yorker." He never misses an issue.

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