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FEATURED

## Prominent local business owner Virginia Merriman dies at 97

She balanced big baby boom family with business, community

By JOHN TILLMAN East Oregonian

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Virginia Merriman, at her Pendleton home beneath one of her paintings, observes the 2020 Pendleton Round-Up on Sept. 19, despite its cancellation.

Kenny Cochrane/Contributed Photo

**PENDLETON** — Longtime Pendleton resident and business owner Virginia Livingston Merriman died Saturday, Nov. 26, in her room at McKay Creek Estates. She was 97.

Merriman was born Feb. 10, 1925, in St. Louis, Missouri, and grew up in southern Idaho during the Great Depression, her son Edward F. Merriman said. Like most people in the area, her family was poor, but a large garden helped keep them fed. Neighbors shared what they had and put everything into a large stew pot heated outdoors by a fire pit.

"Everyone got a share, so no one starved," Merriman said.

As a child, Virginia asked people who could afford newspapers to allow her to redeliver them to poorer neighbors. She felt everyone should be informed and able to look for job prospects.

Edward Roy Merriman lived in nearby Buehl, Idaho. His father had a steady job as a railroad mail handler, so could afford a car. On Friday or Saturday nights, Ed borrowed the car and drove to Rodeo Rendevo dance hall in Twin Falls. Ed and Virginia met and fell in love there, dancing to big band swing music.

Virginia was a senior in Twin Falls High School when she married Ed on Oct. 8, 1942, just 10 months after the Dec. 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor. Ed served in the Pacific as a U.S. Army Air Forces navigator.

Virginia dreamed of being a professional woman after high school graduation. While Ed fought in the war, she worked as a bookkeeper and office manager at Idaho Egg Producers and Corneli Seed Co. in Twin Falls.

**Coming to Pendleton**

After his demobilization, Ed worked in Buehl and Twin Falls as a lumberyard estimator and contractor. He landed a job as plumbing division manager at C. C. Anderson's Department Store in Pendleton in 1949. Even before they moved to Oregon, Virginia had a job lined up with Pendleton Grain Growers.

"She was hired for 'the best job in town' as a PGG bookkeeper," Ed Merriman said.

C. C. Anderson's merged with the Bon Marche in 1955. Ed bought the department store's plumbing business, renaming it Merriman Plumbing and Heating. The shop opened at 230 S.E Court Ave., the present site of Prodigal Son Brewery and Pub.

Virginia advanced to office manager at PGG, while caring for their family, which grew to three sons, Edward Franklin, Charles Randolph and Robert Roy, and three daughters, Kristine Kay, Cynthia Lynn and Kathleen Mae.



As a young couple new to Pendleton in 1952, Ed Merriman, 31, left, and his wife Virginia Merriman, 26, pose with their two oldest children Kristine, 7, and Eddy, 1. Two more sons and two more daughters followed.

Edward Merriman/Contributed Photo

When the Merrimans' sixth child, Robby, was born in 1959, Virginia left PGG to help Ed run the growing plumbing business. The partnership worked. She kept the books, paid bills and handled payroll, while Ed bid jobs and responded to plumbing calls.

Business boomed. The Merrimans bought a new house at 801 N.W. Fifth St., and their first new car, a turquoise and white 1959 station wagon with fins. That year also saw their big vacation to Disneyland, during which trip Virginia was pregnant with Robby.

Business slumped in the mid-1960s, but by the early 1970s, it revived. New homes and businesses sprang up, and growth in the Hermiston and Boardman areas provided opportunities.

"Merriman Plumbing and Heating won contracts to install equipment and piping at the then new Simplot and Lamb Weston potato processing plants," Ed Merriman said.

## **'The town counselor'**

Virginia's mother had her own office at the shop.

"It seemed everyone in town with troubles, or who just needed someone to talk to, found their way to her office," Ed Merriman said. "Dad called her the town counselor and suggested she hang a shingle on the door and charge fees. She loved owning a business and worked tirelessly to help it succeed."

Virginia also was a second mom to children in her neighborhood. Her yard became the local playground, especially on cookie days.

"Every kid on Northwest Fifth Street knew which door to knock on to get a warm smile and a fresh baked cookie," Ed Merriman said.

On summer nights, the Merrimans loaded up their daughters and sons and as many neighbor children as would fit in their Chevy station wagon to head to the drive-in theater, with popcorn, drinks and snacks.



The Merrimans of Pendleton pose for a photo during the Christmas holidays in 1972. From left, are Cindy, Ed, Randy, Virginia, Eddy, Kathy, Kristy and Rob, seated.

Edward Merriman/Contributed Photo

## Division of labor

Virginia started a Beta Sigma Phi chapter in Twin Falls and helped establish the nonacademic sorority in Pendleton in the 1950s and '60s. She volunteered as a Cub Scout den mother and Sunday school teacher at First Christian Church. She cooked her famous Southern fried chicken for church pot luck dinners and picnics with family and friends.

Virginia balanced her career and big baby boom family.

"Before the phrase 'women's liberation' was heard much around Pendleton, Mom was doing it all," Ed Merriman said.

Virginia ran the office and did bookwork at the plumbing shop until her children got home from school. Then she came home to help her oldest daughter Kristy watch the younger children.

Virginia usually brought the plumbing bookwork home and spread it out on the kitchen table. Evenings she cleared off the bookwork, cooked and served dinner to her big family, did the dishes with her daughters, watched a TV show with Ed, put the children to bed, then got out her sewing machine and made dresses for the girls until midnight or 2 a.m.

When her children were young, Ed preferred dividing chores up with the girls doing dishes and folding laundry, while the boys mowed the lawn and cleaned out the garage, but by the time they were in high school, Virginia had the boys taking turns washing dishes and folding clothes, while the girls mowed the lawn or cleaned the garage. Virginia created her version of a liberated household.

## **Pursuing the art of painting**

In the 1980s, after graduation from high school, Rob went to work at the plumbing shop. Virginia and Ed led and coached him on how to do plumbing and run a business. In the 1990s Ed and Virginia changed the company name to Rob Merriman Plumbing, but they continued to operate the business as a team, with Rob still learning until shortly before Ed died of cancer in August 2001. Virginia, then 75, finally retired to pursue a lifelong passion for painting. She gifted her artwork to family members.



Virginia Merriman, 57, left, and her husband, Ed Merriman, 61, of Pendleton, pose for a photo in 1982.

Edward Merriman/Contributed Photo

Virginia continued driving short routes to the beauty parlor and the bank until age 95. She enjoyed living at home until 96, when she moved into McKay Creek Estates. There she made many friends, including Roberta Townsend, who at 98 regularly encouraged Virginia to join her for meals and companionship in the cafeteria.

"Always a counselor and a kick in the pants, as some of her retirement center pals recently recalled, Mom spent the last 22 years of her life watching over her grown children, grandchildren and great grandchildren," Ed Merriman said. "She opened the door more than once to those facing tough times, and always listened with an open mind and an open heart to anyone with a problem. She often joked that she must have done a good job as a mother because none of her kids killed anyone or went to prison. But truly Virginia just wanted everyone to be the best and most honest people they could possibly be."

Virginia is survived by her brother Robert Livingston, children Kristine Reedy, Edward and Charles Randolph Merriman, Cynthia Miller, Robert Merriman and their spouses, with 16 grandchildren and more than 20 great-grandchildren.

Virginia was preceded in death by her husband, Edward Roy Merriman, their youngest daughter, Kathleen Mae Quisenberry, brothers Woodrow and Drexel, her sister Irene Nash, her husband Eugene and children Ron Nash and Carolyn Birrer, as well as her parents Norma Mae and Guy Livingston.



Burns Mortuary of Pendleton is handling services and is scheduled to be open for viewing of Virginia from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Thursday, Dec. 1. The family plans a summertime graveside service and celebration of life, time and date to be announced later.

#### MORE INFORMATION



**Kathleen Mae (Merriman) Quisenberry**

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News reporter

I'm a general news reporter, covering features, business and government stories. I reported from Afghanistan for the East Oregonian in 2005.