

Saddling Up to Aging in Sandy Springs



An Interview with Dorothy Benson ◊ Interviewer: Melissa Swindell and Rhonda Lopathin ◊ Date of Interview: November 30, 2016

For those who were fortunate enough to have experienced it, early Sandy Springs was a fascinating place. The community's proximity to the Chattahoochee River and sprawling farm land allowed residents to indulge in many outdoor activities such as fishing and horseback riding down the road before it became congested

with today's heavy traffic. Especially during the period when Sandy Springs began to boom, new residents helped develop local commerce and establish communal activities that would prosper as the town continued to grow. One resident, Dorothy Benson, emulates the evolution of Sandy Springs, having helped create the town's very own Pony Club and eventually leading the development of

the Fulton county senior citizen centers. Having moved to Sandy Springs after her husband relocated them from Florida, Dorothy dedicated herself to allowing her children and other young Sandy Springers the opportunity to participate in all that the community had to offer.

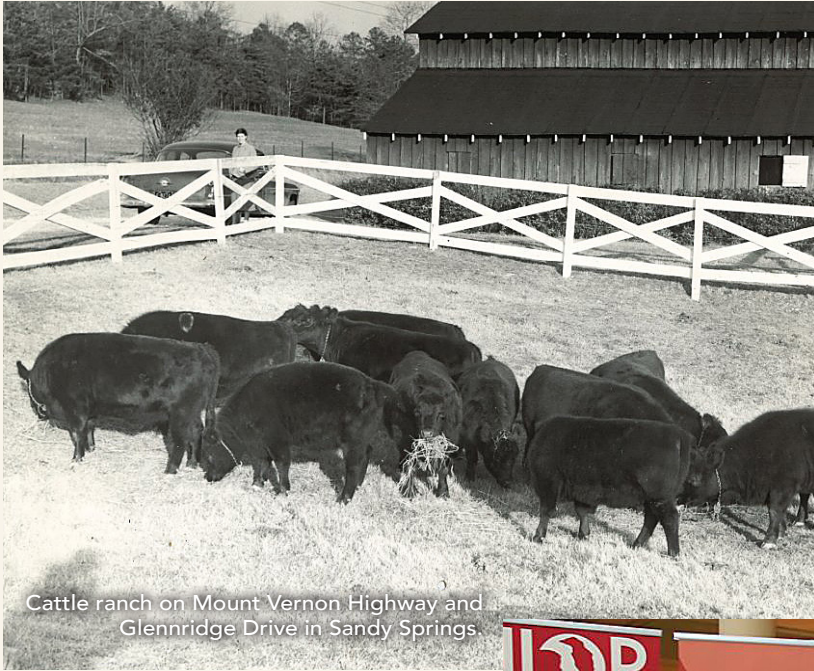
Dorothy C. Benson spent the early portion of her life traveling around the United States with her family. She was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and raised in Miami, Florida. She attended school in Florida throughout her childhood until she was old enough to travel to North Carolina for boarding school.



Horses near Mount Vernon Highway
in Sandy Springs, circa 1940s.

Dorothy met her husband in the 1940s. The newlyweds briefly lived in Oklahoma before her husband's Navy career relocated them to San Diego, where he was part of the Pacific Fleet during World War II. Dorothy held several jobs during the 1940s, including working for the telephone company briefly during

the war. After 1946, Dorothy and her husband moved back to Miami where he began his career in the cattle industry. After her husband was appointed head of the Cattle Association of Atlanta, they relocated to the Atlanta area, settling in Sandy Springs. They had three daughters: Barbara, Linda, and Diana. Dorothy's



Cattle ranch on Mount Vernon Highway and Glennridge Drive in Sandy Springs

husband died at the young age of 45 due to complications from lung cancer. Dorothy remembers, "I still contributed [it] to his time in the service. [He] smoked and, of course, they [the U.S. military] encouraged smoking, you know, when you were in the service. They would give you free cigarettes and things like that. And I mean, we just... that was a nice thing they thought they were doing, giving you these things, you know. And, of course, it just encouraged them to smoke more, and that's what happened. And it ended. Doctor said it was directly because of his smoking."

Dorothy raised all three of her girls in Sandy Springs and was an active participant in the girls' extracurricular activities—especially their riding, training, and caring for horses. She encouraged them to partake in scouts, where Dorothy was a local troop leader. She also motivated them to participate in the Atlanta Pony Club.

Around this time many Pony Clubs began popping up throughout the United States, beginning in 1954. The focus of the clubs was to foster sportsmanship, leadership, and horsemanship by teaching proper horse care and riding techniques for young children. The United States Pony Clubs, Inc. was based on a similar British model that began as early as 1929. Dorothy was one of the first to start a Pony Club in Sandy Springs, where she taught several generations of children to care for and ride horses. Dorothy recalls, "And we had about eight acres out there and a barn and a riding ring, and the Pony Club would meet at my place every...every week, every Sunday afternoon, and then we got up teams and things, and they have ratings in Pony Club that start from D-ratings, and they go

up through A-ratings, and the A-rating is a top rating, and that would be when you get almost to where you're at the Olympic rider stage."

Dorothy pioneered the Sandy Springs Pony Club on eight acres she owned on Peachtree Dunwoody Road. The club would routinely meet at the barn she had built behind her house, and the members would ride around the area. Dorothy recalls, "[The] house over there on Glenridge, we would ride by there, through the woods. They had all woods out there, and The Glenns had a shooting range up on the hill, which is no longer a hill...It's been removed, and big buildings have been put up there, but we used to ride all up through there. They gave us permission, and they had several small lakes on the property, and they gave us permission to swim our horses in them. So we would swim our horses, and what we would do is come over there and take the saddles off and just leave the bridles



Dorothy Benson with Georgia State Representative Chuck Martin.

on. Take them so we wouldn't get the saddles wet by swimming them with the saddles on, but we used to pretend that we had fox hunts through there." Dorothy lived in Sandy Springs for almost forty years before moving to Alpharetta, where she bought a small farm and continued teaching children horsemanship through the Pony Club.

Dorothy remained an active member of the Pony Club until after her daughters finished school and moved throughout the state. Once her daughters were grown, Dorothy noticed a growing problem within the aging Sandy Springs community—the lack of social activities and gathering sites for senior citizens. Consequently, Dorothy began her crusade almost forty years ago to ensure that the children she taught through the Pony Club would have a place in which to remain active once they reached her age and became

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senior residents of Sandy Springs.

Sandy Springs, with its beautiful landscapes and active residents, has grown into a rich and vibrant community over the past century and continues to be a destination for new residents and tourists. What many people may not realize, however, is that more than 30 percent of Sandy Springs's population is over the age of 45 and as much as 10 percent of its residents are over the age of 65. One resident, Dorothy Benson, was concerned that as area residents aged, their abilities to take part in some of the more robust activities in Sandy Springs dwindled. This left many area citizens without anything to do outside their homes. After raising her children and teaching area children through the Pony Club and scouts, Dorothy turned her sights towards ensuring that every citizen in the community—especially those over the age of 55—would be offered vibrant and interesting activities appropriate for their golden years.

Many people have seen the name "Benson" on the senior center located in Sandy Springs, but not many know that it is named after Dorothy, who worked for decades to have it built. Once her three daughters were grown, Dorothy noticed that as an active senior, there were limited activities for her to participate in. This observation led her to the Fulton County Council on Aging and its mission to ensure that active seniors were welcomed and included in the Sandy Springs community.

Dorothy began working with Fulton County nearly forty years ago to ensure that dynamic Sandy Springs seniors such as herself would have somewhere to go and stay active. Dorothy joined the Fulton County Commission on Aging after she and several other community members, including Diane Williamson and Father H.J.C. Bowden, recognized the need for a senior center in the community. The Sandy Springs senior community was growing, and Dorothy thought, "They was figuring out that there was really nothing in Fulton County for seniors. And there should be some sort of centers other than these basements and churches. That's all there was. Nobody wanted to go to them, and they were only allowed to use them when something with the church wasn't being used. And so they started what they called the Fulton County Council on Aging and I joined that." The Fulton County Council on Aging promoted social services for both children and seniors. The goal was to ensure that youth at risk as well as seniors ages 55 and above would be made aware of and have access to services. For seniors, this included services that would help promote their longevity and independence in their later years. The council approached Fulton County Commissioner Michael Hightower with the charge that he needed to do something for seniors across the Atlanta community—and he did. Hightower instructed the council to research senior centers throughout the country. Several different committees were formed within the council as seniors, caretakers, and government officials joined together to research how to best create and maintain a community center in Sandy Springs. Dorothy recalls, "One of us was to look into housing. One was to look into our nutrition. One was to look into transportation."

Dorothy was charged with researching senior centers to better understand the variety of activities, nutritional assistance, and social services frequently offered to seniors. She wrote to senior centers throughout the United States to gather information. Dorothy discovered that the "Cadillac" of senior centers was based in Baltimore, Maryland. "[They] invited us to just come and see what they had, so we said, 'We'd love to go.' So we rented a bus and all, and forty of us got on the bus ...and [we] rode to Baltimore and visited the center. They had several centers as a matter of fact. They had one in downtown Baltimore and one in the county," recalls Dorothy. That center would become the base model for Fulton

County's senior centers. Dorothy and the committee took note of the Baltimore center's cafeteria, gym and woodworking shop. As Dorothy remembers, the center also offered lawyers visits to assist Baltimore area's seniors with any legal matters they may have had. Dorothy and her counterparts returned to Fulton County to consolidate the information they had collected before presenting their plans to County Manager John Stanford. According to Dorothy, he had just one question: "Well, how much does it cost to run one of these things for a month, or a year, or whatever?" It seems now that's the one thing we didn't ask." After more research and several phone calls, the first Fulton County community center—the Bowden Center—was under way in East Point.

Fulton County awarded several grants to Dorothy and the group as well as paid for their education to learn how to run a non-profit organization.

Dorothy eventually became chairman of the board and began preparing for the grand opening of their first senior center, in East Point. The group purchased an old church and renovated the building to accommodate the new senior center. Dorothy and Jim Paine—who followed Dorothy

as chairman—prepared for Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich to visit Atlanta and speak at the grand opening celebration. Dorothy recalls:

"[When] we're getting ready to have our grand opening after the building was to be finished, we asked Newt Gingrich if he would come and be our guest speaker for the program. He was Speaker of the House at that time. So, we notified Fulton County that he was gonna be our speaker for the grand opening. And, we got a letter back from this particular person that worked down there saying, well, she was sorry but we couldn't have Newt Gingrich. We would have to write him and un-invite him, tell him he could come but he couldn't speak. Now, can you imagine us writing the Speaker of the House of the United States, third in line for president, 'You may come but you can't speak?!' And, of course, Jim wrote back and told her, 'Well, he was going to be our speaker so, just plan on that.' So, at this time, I was going over to the North Point Mall every morning and walking, and it was my habit to stop by the center...to see how they were doing. And this one morning, I came by and everybody was standing out on the parking lot. The seniors and workers...everybody. And I said, 'What are you doing

out here in the parking lot?' They said, 'Well, when we got here, soandso from Fulton County had changed all the locks on the doors because we had asked Newt Gingrich to speak.'"

Dorothy would not stand for it. She called Fulton County Commission Chairman Mitch Skandalakis, who then called the woman at Fulton County. They had the locks changed back within 15 minutes. The workers continued their renovations, and Newt Gingrich spoke at the grand opening of the senior center.

The county has since built four centers, each named after a significant participant in the process of getting the centers underway. The first center was built in East Point and was named after Father Bowden, who was instrumental in guiding the vision

of the centers from the start. Father Bowden was in his 90s by the time they broke ground on the project and passed away before the center opened. The land for that initial center had been donated, so they only had to build the structure for the center. The second center was named after Emma Darnell's mother, and the third was named after Dorothy due to her significant involvement in bringing the center to fruition. The fourth center

is downtown and named after Helen Mills, a longtime advocate of the community. The county had plans for a fifth center but unfortunately ran out of funds before that final project had begun.

Today, Dorothy is perhaps best known for the popular senior community center that bears her name—the Dorothy C. Benson Senior Multipurpose Complex. The senior community continues to enjoy the work of Dorothy and the Fulton County Commission on Aging. According to Dorothy, the complex still hosts its annual Golden Games—or Senior Olympics—when local residents gather to partake in field games prior to the actual Olympics. The Dorothy C. Benson Senior Complex and the other senior centers in Fulton County continue to be thriving institutions that support the physical, mental, and spiritual health of all senior citizens in the community. The complex boasts planned activities in education, hobbies, health and wellness, swimming, recreation and more. In fact, the center has become so popular that the front desk staff has to periodically check user I.D. cards to make sure those residents coming in are over 55 years old! The center was designed for energetic, active seniors and at 95, Dorothy still drives over to the center from Alpharetta to engage in some of its daily activities—including her favorite \$2 hot breakfast—that she worked so hard to secure. ♦

