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## Love story: Teenage romance leads to 63 years of marriage

Cindy Hval The Spokesman-Review



Colin Mulvany photo

**Harold and Ruth Clarke met when he was delivering groceries to her house. “I kept him a couple times,” she said. And he got in trouble for being late on his deliveries. They married in 1949. That delivery boy went on to become a Superior Court judge.**

Harold “Pete” Clarke started working at a small South Hill grocery store at age 12. By 16, his duties had expanded to grocery delivery.

One day he dropped off groceries at a house and was instantly smitten by the beautiful girl who answered the door. Her name was Ruth Moline, and Pete made sure her house was always on his route. “I’d go like a bat out of hell and deliver all my boxes,” he recalled. “Somehow I always ended up at her house.”

Ruth didn’t mind. She said, “I kept him there a couple times.” In fact, she kept him a bit too long. “One day the grocery store owner called looking for Pete and they found him at my house.”

Pete grinned. “He suggested I not do that.”

They both attended Lewis and Clark High School, and when Pete graduated he made sure to keep tabs on his younger girlfriend. Although enrolled at Washington State University, he spent most every weekend in Spokane.

“I tore out of Pullman every Friday night to see Ruth,” he said. “I got her in trouble because I went to LC and tapped on the window when she was in class.”

Her teacher didn’t appreciate it, but Ruth said, “I thought it was fine.” She smiled. “He was persistent.”

His persistence paid off. The couple married on Dec. 4, 1949, at the Francis Lester Inn, which later became Patsy Clarke’s.

After the wedding they drove straight to Pullman in a blinding snowstorm so Pete wouldn’t miss any school. He said, “In fact, we got snowed in at the hotel the first few days, but we weren’t complaining.”

They rented a little house, and that summer Ruth gave birth to their daughter, Susan.

Pete graduated from WSU in 1950, and the family returned to Spokane. Life became a blur for Pete. He worked full time for Inland Motor Freight and attended law school at Gonzaga University at night. In addition, the Korean War had begun, and Pete, a second lieutenant in ROTC, knew he’d be called to serve.

His wife wasn’t happy with the news. “I wanted to kill him,” she admitted. “He went overseas!”

Ruth had a difficult year. She’d suffered a miscarriage, and she cared for their daughter as well as her mother, who died of cancer in 1951.

When Pete was sent to Texas for training, he took his family with him. The August trip proved adventuresome for his pregnant wife and toddler daughter.

Another long, hot drive ensued when Pete received his orders to ship out for the Philippines. He delivered his family to Spokane, but his arduous travels had only begun. “It took three weeks just to get to Hawaii,” he said, shaking his head. “I’ll never forget it.”

He wasn’t too concerned about his duties. He said, “The Korean War was winding down when I got there.”

Ruth raised her eyebrows. “That’s not what you told me!” she said.

In November 1952, daughter Anna joined the family. Pete was notified via telegram. He was able to call home at Christmas. “It was a tense conversation, I think,” Ruth said. “But he finally came home.”

Indeed, when he learned he was coming home in 1953, he didn’t tell Ruth. “I didn’t want her to be disappointed if it didn’t work out,” he said. His father picked him up at the bus station and delivered him to his front door. “Ruth was so surprised!”

Pete went back to work for the freight company and resumed his law studies. A son, Harold, completed the family in 1954.

“I hadn’t been home very long when I got a letter from the Air Force Reserves requesting that I be in an active unit,” said Pete. “I wrote and told them I was working eight hours a day and going to law school at night.” He laughed. “A few weeks later they promoted me.”

After graduating from Gonzaga and passing the bar exam, Pete worked part time at a law office and part time with the freight company. Eventually he joined the Hamblen, Gilbert and Brooke law firm where he worked for 11 years.

The family enjoyed camping, and in 1962 Pete bought some property at Hayden Lake in Idaho. He glanced at his wife as he told the story. “She didn’t know what I was doing. I finally had to tell her and she said, ‘You idiot! We’re just barely getting by and you bought lake property!’ ”

However, it turned out to be a wise investment. They camped there every weekend for many years, and Pete eventually built a cabin on the site. They still enjoy time at Hayden, but now their son Harold maintains the property.

In 1974, at the urging of his mentors at the law firm, Pete entered public service and was appointed to the bench. “It’s the best legal job you can ever have,” he said.

Known as “the judge with the velvet gavel,” because of his courteous, soft-spoken manner, Pete relished the interaction with people and the daily docket full of surprises.

He served 21 years as a Superior Court judge. Then he spent several years doing mediation and arbitration work.

Pete enjoyed that, too. “It’s different,” he said. “It’s not sending people to prison – it’s getting people to agree.”

Ruth said, “You did a good job.” She’s compiled stacks of scrapbooks outlining her husband’s career.

When asked what keeps their 63-year marriage thriving, Pete answered, “Who knows?” But glancing at Ruth he added, “She’s warm, loving and helpful.”

His wife replied, “He’s very generous and he always makes the coffee in the morning.”

The couple has had some health issues. Ruth has survived bouts of cancer and an open-heart surgery, and Pete was recently diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease. Sometimes words elude him, but he’s still sharp and physically fit.

Ruth acknowledged changes are in store. She said, “It will get harder, but I’m so glad I’m able to be here for him.”