

Velma 101: Biddle nears her 101st birthday, spends a day in Holyoke with friends

Written by Jes-c Brandt



Becca Brandt, at right, shows Velma Biddle her city flag from Girls State. Brandt's Girls State City was named the Biddle Naval Base in honor of Biddle's service in the Navy, and the girls in the city signed a decorated flag to present to Biddle herself.□□

—Enterprise photo

One of Holyoke's three centenarians, Velma Biddle, never got the 100-year birthday bash she deserved. Shortly before her birthday Aug. 8, 2009, she took a fall and has since been rehabilitating in Fort Collins.

Now Biddle is nearing her 101st birthday and is still loving life. Tuesday, July 20 she made a trip to Holyoke, where she was busy catching up with people around town at an impromptu gathering at the Vet's Hall.

In attendance were many friends from the American Legion, as well as Girls State participants Becca Brandt and Catrina Krueger.

Recently returning from Girls State, Brandt brought back a very special gift for Biddle. In 2009 the Girls State directors sought nominations for city names, meant to honor current servicewomen.

Eunice Oltjenbruns wrote a letter telling about Biddle, who was a World War II Navy WAVE. Although she is not a current servicewoman, Oltjenbruns suggested they make an exception for this exceptional woman.

Biddle's nomination was received, and a Girls State city was named "Biddle Naval Base" in her honor. While at the conference Brandt lived in the Biddle Naval Base.

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Part of Girls State was a scheduled time for girls to learn about the woman their city was named for. During that time, the girls in Biddle Naval Base learned about Velma, and Brandt shared that the two of them come from the same town.

Once the girls heard about Brandt's connection to Biddle, they immediately wanted to send their regards. They prepared a belated 100th birthday card and sent it her way. Additionally, the girls voted to send their city's flag to Biddle.

On Biddle's Tuesday visit to Holyoke, Brandt gave the signed and decorated flag to Biddle on behalf of her entire city. A long time supporter of Holyoke youth and Girls and Boys State, Biddle was delighted to receive the flag, and to hear about Brandt and Krueger's experiences at Girls State.

After receiving the flag, Biddle said a few words of thanks. She commented on how the Girls State flag had many similarities to the country's flag. Both red in color, she reflected on the symbolism of sacrifice. "Yes, I am indeed honored and inspired by you, Becca, and this flag from Girls State," she said, remembering the times she saw Old Glory flying while she was in the Navy.

Continuing to address the guests, Biddle quoted Psalm 71:17-18. "Since my youth, O God, you have taught me, and to this day I declare your marvelous deeds. Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, O God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your might to all who are to come."

Biddle encouraged Brandt to keep the Girls State flag, remembering until she is old and gray herself what the flag symbolizes.

With the flag and words exchanged, Biddle and her guests spent some time looking at a couple scrapbooks Oltjenbruns had brought along. One contained records for the girls attending Girls State in the past. This brought up much discussion of Girls State memories.

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The other scrapbook was a compilation of newspaper articles about Biddle herself. A number of features were included, and guests enjoyed discussing some of Biddle's previous accomplishments and their own memories of her throughout the years.

Biddle joined the chat, bringing her own memories to the table: 100 years worth. Reflecting fondly on her many years in Holyoke, Biddle said that even in her time spent living away from here, Holyoke has always been her base.

She first moved to Amherst in 1917: she was only 8 years old. In 1933 she moved to Holyoke, where she began teaching. Since then, she has spent many years in Holyoke.

In the year Biddle has been away since her fall, she's kept up with Holyoke happenings as best as she could, but there was still much to catch up on while she was in town.

Everyone at the gathering had a different relationship with Biddle. Some have been in the Auxiliary with her; others look up to her as a mentor. One guest was even a student in Biddle's class when she was still teaching. The joy was evident on Biddle's face as she heard news of friends who were there and those who were missing.

As Biddle shared the most recent update on her shoulder recovery, everyone had a laugh joking that "Velma had a screw loose," referring to a pin in her shoulder. One guest said with a laugh, Velma is a young woman, and to see her up and about, celebrating life with her friends, anyone would agree with that sentiment.

When asked about life at 100, Biddle said time just keeps passing faster and faster as she gets older. "Velma 101" is her self-proclaimed tagline for the upcoming milestone in her life. It sounds like some sort of class on basket weaving, doesn't it, Biddle said with a chuckle.

By the end of the party everyone was in high spirits. The women parted, making plans to see one another soon, and wishing Velma an early "Happy Birthday."