

Family story features strong woman

By TAD SOOTER
FOR THE KITSAP SUN

Betty Cooper Johnson's memoir opens in the least assum- ing way possible.

"My name is Betty Jane Cooper Johnson," the Bainbridge octogenarian's story begins. "I was born July 23, 1923, in Pelly, Saskatchewan, Canada, to Wesley John Cooper and Cora Frances DeLaittre Cooper. I was the last of nine children."

From that modest introduction a life story unfolds that's at turns ordinary and profound.

"Women of Strength," told by Johnson to her niece, island writer Suzan Huney, follows Johnson from a hardscrabble childhood in Depression-era North Dakota, through the tumultuous years of World War II and down the dusty roads of Bainbridge's agrarian past. Johnson summons bygone eras with a warm voice and generous detail.

"She has a remarkable memory and she's a natural born storyteller," Huney said.

Huney self-published "Women of Strength" last



COURTESY PHOTO | SUZAN HUNEY
Betty Cooper Johnson and her husband Russ pose outside the family home in North Dakota in 1943.

DETAILS

"Women of Strength," the memoir of islander Betty Jane Cooper Johnson, as told to Suzan Huney, is available on Amazon.com. Search for "Suzan Huney."

year to circulate among family members and made it available on Amazon.com in February. The 186-page book is the product of a yearlong collaboration between aunt and niece.

Huney and Johnson met once a week in 2010 over coffee and sandwiches at the oak table in Johnson's home. Huney took notes on her laptop as her aunt's stories flowed. Johnson told of lean years and good times, the joys of raising a family and the heartbreak of losing loved ones. Huney was moved by the fortitude of the women in her aunt's generation. What began as a simple family history project blossomed into a memoir.

"I wanted to get the family story," Huney said. "As we went along it became more and more clear that the material was rich and evocative of the time she grew up in."

Johnson's tale begins in North Dakota, in a one-room house dwarfed by an expanse of brown prairie. Her family was far from rich, but they had a deep well and a sprawling vegetable garden. Johnson grew up pulling weeds and hauling buckets of water.

"Praise God and pick up a hoe," her mother liked to tell her.

The poverty of the Great Depression era gave way to the uncertainty of World War II, when Johnson's husband Russ served in the U.S. Navy. After the war, the Johnsons joined Betty's sister, Alice, and her husband Judd Huney on Bainbridge. The young couples arrived on the island with big dreams and no money.

"They didn't have anything," Huney said. "They

started with nothing."

Judd, Suzan Huney's father, opened a little grocery store in Rolling Bay and later moved it to the Lynwood Center area. Judd's Market and a handful of neighborhood stores served islanders in the days before Town & Country opened in Winslow. The Johnsons sold real estate and tended a small farm with a few cows. Huney can remember riding calfs there after church when she was a girl.

"It was a real different place when the population was just 5,000," Huney said.

Time transformed the island but the Johnson and Huney families stayed and put down roots.

Huney graduated from the University of Washington and worked as a financial manager for the school's Applied Physics Lab until 2009. A few years ago a Field's End writing

workshop inspired her to record the memories of elders in her family. Huney's own parents had already passed so she turned to Johnson, whose strong voice and sharp memory could fill volumes.

"It's great when we can tap into our own family history and learn where we come from in a deeper way," Huney said.

Johnson's memoir has already found a small but adoring audience.

Each summer, the women in Huney and Johnson's family get together for a ladies' retreat. Last July, Huney brought copies of "Women of Strength" to the gathering and set Johnson up at a table for an impromptu book signing. Johnson was ecstatic, Huney said.

"She said 'I never thought I'd be an author,'" Huney said. "She was really pleased with herself, and she should be."



Johnson's memoir, was released on An



BAINBRIDGE FIRE DEPARTMENT COMMISSIONER

The Board of Commissioners of the Bainbridge Island Fire Department is seeking qualified citizens with a desire to serve as Fire Commissioner.

Board Position #3 is currently vacant and will be filled via application. The selected individual will serve as Fire Commissioner until the end of the term. The Bainbridge Island Fire Department must receive a letter of interest no later than [date]. Please send letter to:

Bainbridge Island Fire Department
Attn: Ed Kaufman
8895 Madison Avenue NE
Bainbridge Island, WA 98110 (via mail)
206-842-7695 (via fax)
finance-personnel@bifd.org (via email)

The Board of Commissioners will meet with the applicants at a public meeting. Please visit our website at www.bifd.org for more information about the process. Call at 206-842-7686 with any further questions.