Hed: The Reva Divas

By Jeff Say

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In the past 107 years there have been two World Wars, the Great Depression, social unrest and 19 Presidents.

Laura Hoffman has seen them all.

On Saturday, the Reva resident celebrated her birthday with someone who can remember almost all of those same events - her sister Dolly Berry.

Laura, who will be 107, danced as she walked into the Reva Fire Hall arm-in-arm with her younger sister Dolly, who just turned 105.

The two centenarians celebrated their birthdays in front of more than 300 family and friends - hugging family members and greeting well-wishers with a loving and still firm grip.

When Hoffman was born on March 26, 1912, William Taft was President, World War I was still two years away and the first television airing was 15 years away.

Sitting at the table reserved for the “Reva Divas,” Laura smiled, clapped and danced as her family surrounded her - posing for photos and stories with their grandma, great grandma and even great-great grandma.

What’s the secret to her and her sister’s long life?

“God is my secret, he’s the only one that keeps me here,” Laura said. “God could have done took me a long time ago.”

Her life was a typical one of African-Americans of that day and age. She was born on a farm in rural Culpeper County to Burnett and Sallie Shanks Booten, She was the third youngest of 10 children, her younger sister Dolly was born March 7, 2014. Dolly moved to New York to live with an aunt when she was 13, but later purchased a home in Culpeper County and splits her time between the two states.

According to a column written in 2012 - when Laura met President Barack Obama - by her longtime friend Zann Nelson, Hoffman and her siblings were “raised in a community populated by tenant farmers like her father though most of the others were white. Her memories are [filled](http://www.dailyprogress.com/content/tncms/live/) with tales of the neighborhood children all coming to Aunt Sallie’s house to play, eat and sleep over if need be.”

“Colored men and women were not addressed as Mr. or Mrs., but my mother was known to the white children as Aunt Sallie, it was their way of respecting her,” Hoffman said.

She dreamed of an advanced education, but unfortunately her father became ill with heart trouble and she turned to a life of domestic work. She moved to Washington, D.C. for two years to experience the big city life but moved back to Culpeper to marry Jesse Hoffman. The couple raised five children together before Jesse passed away in 2000, at the age of 94.

Nelson, a local historian, isn’t sure that there have ever been two siblings 107 and 105 before.

“I think it’s unprecedented,” Nelson said. “There are a few people who have reached 107 and a few older than that, but two siblings? Think about it, they’re combined ages are 212 years. It’s stunning to think about what they have experienced in that time.”

Laura’s daughter Liz said her mother is still sharp and full of spunk.

“I don’t wish for that age,” Liz said laughing. “No money in the world could get me to wish for that. “She’s sharp enough that she can still fool you.”

Dolly is just as sharp, though partially blind. Her daughter Joan Montgomery attributes her mother and aunts long life to their lifestyle.

“They lived clean lives,” Montgomery said. “They believed in nature, they believe in the teas that came from the Earth. If someone got sick, they knew how to get the bark and help heal them.”

“They eat from the garden, they are garden people,” Liz said.

Their family has grown - Liz looked around the room and estimated that the family now numbers close to 400.

“It’s a large family,” Liz said. “This is five generations.”

Despite having some many kin, the Hoffman family is tight.

“I give that to grandma Sallie,” Liz said. “That bond they have, that sealed it. They taught family values. My grandmother was one awesome person.”

Sallie Booten passed away when she was 87. Her daughters have long outlasted that remarkable age.

“I’m going to be gone and they’re still going to be here,” Liz said with a laugh.

“They’re strong women,” Montgomery said. “They have the sanity of their minds.”

What is the legacy that Laura and her sister will be remembered for?

“Laura’s legacy is a vision of what life lived with all kinds of obstacles can be,” Nelson said.