

LIVES LIVED

## 'Make-do' expert Thelma Fayle once cut a mattress in half to give her son a single bed

THELMA FAYLE

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Thelma Fayle.

COURTESY OF FAMILY

**Thelma Fayle:** *Table dancer. Matriarch. Embroiderer. Gumptionista. Born Nov. 17, 1920, in Boston; died Nov. 23, 2020, in Victoria, of extreme age at 100.*

A fun-loving pal dared Thelma Fayle to dance on the table at her birthday. While mischievous octogenarian friends secured her, she climbed up and did a momentary jig. Someone snapped a picture for the lodge newsletter and for the next 20 years, guests to the Sons of Norway hall in Victoria wanted to meet the famous Thelma who “danced on the table at her 80th.” The woman-who-took-the-dare was also a woman who didn’t believe in taking meds, but she still lived a century thanks to cod liver oil, vitamin D and good genes.

Thelma Andreasen-McKenna’s mom died when she was 14. Thelma quit school to look after three younger siblings while also working as a waitress at Murray’s restaurant in Montreal. Well into her 10th decade, Thelma remembered her mother daily and kept her picture by her bedside.

Thelma married Robert Fayle, a talented coppersmith, and they raised six children in Verdun, just outside Montreal. The first son was named after his father. By the time Thelma had her fourth child, her kids coaxed her into naming the new baby after herself, “to be fair.”

Thelma was a “make-do” expert, born with helping hands. When money was tight she cut an old double mattress in half to make a single bed for one of her sons – no easy task given she was under five feet tall. She knit sweaters and blankets and made clothes for her family. She never understood why people went to exercise classes. “Having six kids was exercise enough,” she said. Thelma was known to always wipe the counter on her way out of a public washroom. She figured if everyone wiped up after themselves we would all be better off.

At 65, Thelma moved from Montreal to Victoria to help with her grandchildren. As a widow of 70, she joined the Sons of Norway lodge and the Ukrainian cultural centre. For fundraisers, she made hundreds of Hardanger lace angels and taught others the skill. She met the beautiful Kaare Tandberg at the lodge and their romance blossomed for 18 years. Cowboy dances were a regular and favourite date.

As Thelma got older she didn't slow down. Neither did her wit: At Sunday dinner when her daughter-in-law described the quinoa dish as "an ancient grain," Thelma cracked: "Haven't you got anything fresh?" At 88, she went back to school for University 101 at the University of Victoria. At 98, she danced at her grandson's wedding, and she voted at 99 – "an important responsibility," she reminded everyone.

Like many who lived through the Great Depression, Thelma knew thrift. When family suggested she replace chipped eyeglasses, she balked: "It's not worth it at 95." Still, one of her daughters picked out stylish copper-coloured frames and modelled them, asking her mother, "Don't they look great?" "Well, they are nice on you," Thelma admitted. "I guess I could get them; but when I kick the bucket you make sure you wear them."

Thelma loved her family, looked beyond bumpy roads and always liked to sing. When someone suggested she would get a letter from the Queen for her 100th birthday, she harrumphed: "Big deal." Pomp was never a price she exacted from life.

As memory began to fade, Thelma reread abolitionist Harriet Tubman's biography. Each time, with reverence, she'd say: "That Harriet sure had great gumption."

Gumption, Thelma knew all about that.

*Thelma Fayle is Thelma Fayle's daughter.*

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