

Arcadia woman

By **DIANE C. GUEAR**

Heights staff writer

A long-time Arcadia resident, Emma Cunningham, will turn 95 on Saturday. With a clear mind and a firm handshake, Emma recently shared memories of her life with the Arcadia Study Club.

"You'd have to go through this (living so long) to know how I feel. I'm just an ordinary person. God has been so good to me. That's why I'm not rich but I've not wanted for anything that I've needed. I've always tried to do the best that I can," said Cunningham.

She was born in Branchville in 1895. "That's just a little one-horse town in the southern part of the state, in Perry county. Just one general store, the post office is in the store and the school house was there," said Cunningham.

She recalled a flood that happened when she was 4 years old and living in southern Illinois. The farm was bordered by the Wabash River.

"The water rose up. It kept getting higher and higher. It got to the barn; it got into the hen house. So my daddy put the horses up on the back porch. I can remember the horse on the porch. The chickens tried to get on the porch, but the little black dog that we had wouldn't let them.

"I can imagine that at that time it was not so unusual to have floods because there were scaffolds built where you could put your animals," she recalled.

When the water rose to the floor of the farmhouse, friends came along in a big rowboat to help them. Removing the animals to safety first, they then



Courtesy photo

Emma Cunningham at age 5.4

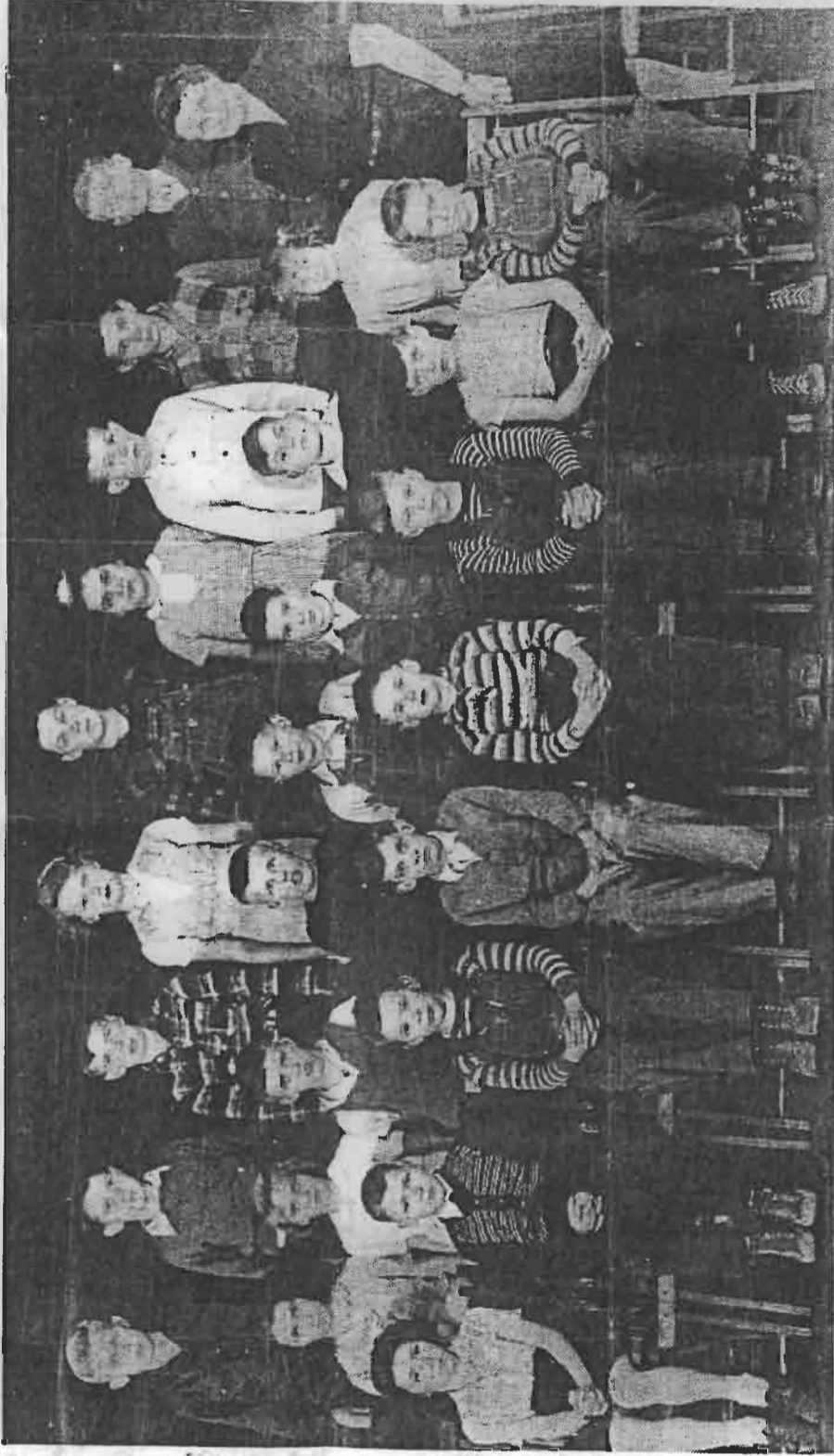


Heights photo by Diane C. Que

Emma Cunningham now.

Arcadia IN mid - January 1990

honored on her 95th birthday



Emma Cunningham, far right, stands with her fifth grade class at Walnut Grove in 1944.

Courtesy photo

returned to save the family. In 1901 she started school. Every day when she returned home from school she would teach her sister all that she had learned that day.

"There I began my first job as teacher," said Cunningham.

"In the spring of 1902, we decided that we had had

enough of Illinois and came back to Branchville," she said. "It's curious that it's always the bad things that we remember."

She spoke of her father's heroic death at the age of 27, while living in Branchville.

"In the fall, daddy's brother, Jefferson Gibson, who was serving in the State House of

Representatives in Indianapolis, died of small pox. The doctors didn't know what it was.

"They let Uncle Jeff's two older children come and be with him and they were there when he died and they brought him home. The two children became sick.

"We lived about five miles

from them. Every morning daddy would go down our hill and he would go up to take care of their stock. Now this one morning he went in to help, for some reason, and he was quarantined. And he took it (small pox), so he died. When the two child-

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Courtesy photo

Emma and Floyd Cunningham shortly after their wedding June 11, 1917.

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ren died, the county was in a frenzy when they found out it was small pox."

Shortly after her father's death the family moved to her grandfather's in Tobensport. She recalls how when they would go to town, the music from the riverboat's callope would attract them to the show.

"It cost thirty-five cents and you could see the show, a stage show. It was a very, very good show," said Cunningham.

Money to attend the show was raised by picking strawberries for five cents a gallon.

Cunningham's teaching career continued on through her life. After graduating from high school in 1913, she attended a six-week teacher training course in Terre Haute.

Cunningham spoke of her first official teaching job: "My two brothers went to school with me. This is good because in those days I had to make my own fire, sweep the floors and clean everything. We had to be a janitor besides a teacher.

"I was 18 at the time and I had all five grades. When you got to fifth grade you were ready to take your exam and you got your diploma."

In 1917, Emma married Floyd Cunningham, also a teacher. After renting their farm, they moved to Detroit where she was hired by Pinkerton Detective Service.

"I was put to work at the telephone exchange. They hired a lot of young girls. I was to see that they didn't get into trouble. One day one of the girls asked me to go to Cana-

da with her. She filled the car with whiskey. This was during Prohibition. Of course I had to report that. The next time I saw her she was working at a ten-cent store."

After having their first daughter, Jean, in 1922 they returned to the farm in ^{Berry County} Cambridge City. They purchased their first car to make the return trip. The Ford touring car with snap down curtains cost \$533.

"In those days when you wanted to follow the roads, they were not numbered, but had different colored circles on the poles. So you had to watch for the circles," said Cunningham.

In 1925 both Emma and Floyd began teaching in the area. Floyd continued to teach math at Walnut Grove for 35 years when he retired and then died in 1962. Emma taught until her second daughter, Patricia, was born in 1933.

In 1927 they purchased a home in Arcadia where Emma still resides with her daughter Jean James.

Returning to teaching in 1944, she taught fifth grade at Atlanta for a year and a half and then continued teaching at Walnut Grove until 1955.

Emma is still active at the Arcadia Christian Church and Hamilton County Senior Citizens. She regularly knits, crochets and gardens. She has served on the local election board and still does.

She insists that "it's not a very exciting life."

Emma died in 1998.