



# AT HOME IN GEOGRAPHY



Photo by John Cross

Professor Emerita Mary Dooley.

"I'd be delighted if these books turned out to be popular, but that's not the point of writing them."

Five generations of family makes for a full attic. That's where Mary Dooley came across a box of letters chronicling her family's move from Vermont to Michigan. And it was in 1965 in that box that Dooley found just the dissertation topic she needed, one that would keep her close to home so she could care for her young children.

Dooley, then a doctoral student at Michigan State, wrote a dissertation documenting the geographical challenge of converting government-purchased wilderness into farmland during the early 1800s. She also covered the struggles of life on the frontier, living with shortages and often relying on bartering for necessities.

Once she decided to pursue a teaching career, Dooley's then-department chair made a phone call to Mankato State College and found that not only was there an opening in geography, but they were specifically targeting female applicants. Dooley recalls, "they always had a woman in the department, and the one who was here was about to retire." So in 1966, she joined the faculty at Mankato State College and began teaching on the lower campus.

The years to come brought political unrest and budget challenges. She served under several different presidents and even tried her hand in administration, as assistant vice president for Academic Affairs.

Since retiring in 1990, Dooley has remained connected to the University and to the very land of Blue Earth County.

In 1996, she helped start MSU for Seniors, an organization that offers classes to people over fifty-five. Areas of interest and study include history, the arts, philosophy, science and finance. Members share knowledge and experience and even take trips to the Twin Cities for arts performances and tours.

She remains connected to the land through the Blue Earth County Planning Commission and the Board of Adjustments, where she's witness to the evolving needs and uses of land in southern Minnesota.

Retirement has returned Dooley to her Mankato roots. Her apartment in Old Main Village, the Old Main of Mankato State College's lower campus, overlooks the sloping valley of Old Town Mankato. The afternoon sun warms a chilly fall afternoon and, when she looks out these windows, she can recall her early days teaching. It's not hard for her to imagine, because her apartment is exactly the same room where her teaching career began. This is a fact she shares with pride and amusement.

Retirement has also returned her to her familial roots and her original dissertation. Recently, she audited a graduate class with Professor of English Susanne Bunkers with the intent of documenting her life growing up on the farm, largely at the request of her children and grandchildren.

"I got into this class with students, largely in their twenties, who had no idea what I was talking about," she says. She enlightened students with descriptions of

cultivating corn to accommodate a horse-pulled cultivator and the taste of milk fresh from the barn.

Dooley's book, *Life on the Farm*, begins with her great-grandparents, who built the house in which she grew up. It chronicles her father's life on the farm and coming-of-age during World War II. Though her father "took every course Michigan Agricultural College offered in agriculture and veterinary sciences," she says, he still struggled with the decision to take over the family farm. The book spans the history of an American farm family through two world wars and the Great Depression.

Dooley plans to publish her book through Minnesota Heritage Publishing.

But she has more history in reserve. In all, she has five books in various states of readiness for publication. Among those is another story taken from letters found in the family attic. The letters are from a relative who served as a medical missionary in Hawaii. Her daughter, a typographer in Minneapolis, is contributing to the cause by preparing the text for press.

"I'd be delighted if these books turned out to be popular, but that's not the point of writing them," she says. For Dooley, who has a life-long connection to the natural sciences, the point seems to be geography and the land. ♪

Ronda Redmond is a freelance writer in Mankato. TODAY is pleased to welcome her as a contributor.