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Emma Johnston, 114; Ohioan Was Oldest Living American

By Claudia Luther, Times Staff Writer



Emma Verona Johnston, who at 114 years and 117 days of age was the oldest living American and the world's second-oldest person, has died.

Johnston, whose life spanned three centuries, died Wednesday in Worthington, a suburb of Columbus, Ohio, said her daughter, Julie Johnson.



"She remembered her father saying to one of her brothers, 'You better be excited about this turn of the century; you'll never see another one,' " Johnson said Thursday of her mother. "That was 1900."

According to the Los Angeles-based Gerontology Research Group, which verifies data for Guinness World Records, Johnston had held the title of oldest living American since May 29, when Ramona Trinidad Inglesias-Jordan, who was 114 years and 272 days old, died.

The eighth child of a country preacher (and Civil War veteran) and his wife, Johnston was born Aug. 6, 1890, in Indianola, Iowa, and graduated from Drake University in 1912. She was a schoolteacher for seven years, teaching Latin, before she married in 1919.

At the age of 112, she could walk up the stairs to her second-floor living quarters and do arithmetic in her head. She sometimes tried to get herself to sleep by counting her 13 grandchildren and 23 great-grandchildren.

Her daughter - one of four of Johnston's children, all of whom are in their 70s and 80s - said that when her mother moved to Ohio to live with her when Johnston was 98, "She was young enough then and vigorous, and she made new friends."

Johnston often filled in as a fourth in her daughter's bridge club. Once, when Johnston was 102 or 103, she bid her partner up to a grand slam - the only one he had ever made.

"She had the cards and she was going to let him know," Johnson said. She said her mother quit playing cards when her

eyesight gave out because "she wasn't going to make mistakes; she had too much pride."

Johnson said that although her mother's weakening eyesight forced her to listen to books on tape instead of read them, she was rarely sick. When she died, and Johnson went to her mother's doctor to get a death certificate, the doctor said Johnston's file "was the thinnest file of anyone we have. She never got a hundred-dollar deductible on her Medicare," Johnson said.

Johnston told the Columbus Dispatch last year that she ate "lots of salt, sugar, cream, desserts, candy - anything in moderation." She said she had never taken a vitamin.

Her sister died at age 105, and other siblings lived into their 90s. Johnson said her mother felt "blessed" never to have lost a child.

Johnson said it was only in the last few weeks that her mother had not been able to get out of bed.

"And she just wanted to so badly," Johnson said. "She couldn't understand. She said, "What's the matter? What's going on?" I said, "Mother, I think you're dying." After a few moments, she said, "Well, I hope I do it well."

With Johnston's death, the title of oldest living American goes to Bettie Wilson, 114, of New Albany, Mississippi., who was born Sept. 13, 1890, according to the Gerontology Research Group, which said Wilson has a 95-year-old son.

The world's oldest person remains Hendrijkevan Andel-Schipper of the Netherlands, who was born June 29, 1890, and is 114.