

# Senior Stars: Ruth Mae Bell

By Jeri Cropp

## Part 1

Ruth Maxine Bell, known to her family as Maxine, was born on November 7<sup>th</sup> 1924 in a hospital on the Yakima Indian Reservation in Toppenish Washington. She was born to Max and Ruth Doris Kehrer, the eldest of six children and named after both her father and mother. Ruth was the only child of the Kehrer's born in a hospital.

Maxine's father, Max Mathias Kehrer, was of German descent but was born in Southern Russia in 1880 after Katherine the Great opened the gate to immigration and the Kehrer's relocated. Amazingly, in 1904 the Kehrer family homesteaded in Plaines, WA where Ruth's mother's parents drowned in a boating accident while hauling feed to their cattle who were marooned on an island near Finley during the Columbia River flooding of 1932.

Max met Ruth's mother, Ruth Doris Leader, who was born in 1900 in Toledo, OH and they married in 1923. They made their home in Brownstown, WA. Ruth's father worked the farm while her mother cared for their five children – three boys and two girls. One sister died when she was only three days old. In 1932, when Ruth's sister Mary was born, her mother died in childbirth. Ruth's mother's sister was due to have a baby very soon so she took Mary to care for along with her own. Ruth's father's sister took little George when he was 18 months old. Ruth's father cared for the rest of the brood for two more years while working the farm from sunrise to sunset. It is of importance to remember that 1934 was in the depth of the Great Depression. Many families were forced from their homes by unemployment and the Dust Bowl in the Midwest. There was no welfare or assistance except for the severely disabled. Maximum subsistence allotment was 80 cents a week less than \$50 a year and few families qualified. Unemployment went from under 500,000 to over 4 million in less than four months eventually exceeding 9 million. The Midwest could no longer farm after losing most of their topsoil and homes that were destroyed. Farm produce hit all-time lows and what banks existed foreclosed on thousands of farms and ranches. People moved west in search of jobs and land. People lived in riverbeds, culverts and homes constructed of cardboard. These homes were called Hooverville or Hoover Valley (in

Central Park, NY). Major changes were needed and the Republicans were voted out of office for their lack of responsiveness to the poor and the unemployed. Franklin D Roosevelt was elected and started pouring money into government projects to employ America's working class. He also started Social Security for the elderly, disabled and children. It was all part of the New Deal that Roosevelt proposed to Congress. At one time it was estimated that over 40% of children and seniors suffered from malnutrition and suffered untreated illnesses and in some areas it was over 90% like in Detroit, the Midwest and mining towns.

So because of the hardship of being able to raise a family properly, Ruth's father decided to find homes for his five children. In 1934 he placed an ad in the Yakima Daily Republic Newspaper offering his eldest daughter and son up for adoption. William Smith, an employee of the newspaper, read the ad and responded to Ruth's father about wanting a child. Ruth was taken to the Smith home, at the age of eight years old, and left there to live out her childhood. The Smith family only wanted one child, a girl, so Ruth's brothers went to live with her father's sister and grandparents.

It was quite a shock to Ruth to discover that she had a new home and new parents after losing her mother and her brothers and little sister. Ruth never knew exactly why this had happened because she never saw her father again until 1961. She tried to make the best of her new situation and loved her adopted father, "Daddy Smith" very much. He was a caring father and helped Ruth adjust which took away some of the pain of losing her family. Ruth's new adopted mother, Florence Wheeler Smith, did not allow any visitation from her birth family and turned Max away when he tried to visit. Ruth also was not allowed to participate in any school sports or functions. Ruth's new mother changed her name from Ruth Maxine Kehrer to Ruth Mae Smith. She was to only to be called "Ruth" now instead of Maxine. Florence and Ruth attended the Church of Nazarene. Her adopted father "Daddy Smith" was a musician and played the trumpet in the Eagles Band and at one time played in the John Phillips Sousa Orchestra. John Phillips Sousa conducted the Marine Corp Band for many years. Ruth was allowed to play her adopted father's trumpet in the school

band. She later handed this instrument down to her daughter Marilynn. Ruth graduated from Yakima High School in June of 1942.

Ruth met her husband, Dale G. Bell in Yakima, where he was stationed for training, in the US Army Air Corp. They were later united in marriage on October 11<sup>th</sup> 1942 in the Church of the



Nazarene. Dale was a professional ballroom dancer when they met and he taught Ruth to dance. They performed in several competitions and danced for enjoyment. That all changed after the war. From Yakima they moved to a base in Great Falls, MT. It was from this home, in 1943, that Dale was deployed to the European Theater in Anzio, Italy. Ruth went to Hanford, CA to live with her husband's parents during his tour of duty. While living in Hanford, Dale and Ruth's first child was born, Marilynn Ruth in 1944. Ruth's eldest brother, Max, was killed in Iwo Jima. Before he deployed, George was told that the man he thought was his father was really his uncle and his uncle Max was his real father. Meanwhile, in Italy, Dale was injured when a vehicle he was riding in was shelled. He came home in August of 1945, disabled, as the war was winding down and was lucky to have survived. Their son, Dale Glenn Bell, was born in 1947. Ruth was able to vote in 1945 and not only wanted to vote but served on the election board. She was a Republican for many reasons back then but is a Democrat now.

The Bell family moved to Panorama City, CA. There Dale worked in electroplating and later got jobs at the

Herald Examiner Newspaper and finally Lockheed from which he retired. Dale was plagued with problems from his war injuries most of his adult life suffering frequent bouts of weakness in his leg and unable to walk for weeks at a time. The Veterans Administration granted Dale Bell disability payments of \$10 a month for his service connected disabilities.

In 1959, Ruth's neighbor, Mona, in collaboration with her daughter, Marilynn, arranged for Ruth to be featured on the "It Could Be You" TV Show. They flew the family members to Hollywood from Washington. Unbeknownst to Ruth, her daughter and Mona took her to lunch and the show. Ruth had mentioned that she wished she could go home to Washington State for Thanksgiving. It was not an accident that it was shortly before the Thanksgiving Holiday in 1959 that Ruth, her neighbor and daughter went to lunch and the "It Could Be You" Show. When they entered the theater everyone was told that there was a number under their seat. If your number was called you were to come up on the stage. **Well, Ruth's number was called**, she was so surprised as she went up on the stage and stood in front of the curtain with Bill Leyden. When the curtain was raised there was a huge picture on a movie screen of her brother Max, who had died in Iwo Jima. Ruth was pretty speechless as she looked at the stage table set for Thanksgiving dinner. One by one her brothers and sister came onto the stage. Ruth had not seen her family since 1934 when she was eight years old. Of course they did not really have dinner on TV in Hollywood but all went to Ruth's house and had a nice family Thanksgiving. Ruth recalls how excited and shocked she was and didn't even notice that Frankie Lane had his arm around her in the green room. And of course, Ruth's husband Dale and her two children, along with neighbors were in the audience cheering. Ruth was a cashier at Smiley's Market at this time, and her boss remembers that Ruth was in a shocked daze for three weeks after her memorable Hollywood family reunion adventure. Ruth had not seen her family in 29 years and didn't locate her father until 1961. When she did finally find him he was living in Burns, OR and came to stay with her in California several times.

*Part 2 of this article will be published in our January 8, 2013 issue.*

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