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Obituary: Frank Beardsley's blended family of 20 kids inspired book, Hollywood movies

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Frank Beardsley, the resourceful and military-disciplined father of 20 whose blended family inspired a book and two Hollywood movies titled "Yours, Mine and Ours," died Tuesday at a Santa Rosa hospital.

Beardsley, who co-raised his family in a great, orderly house in Carmel and retired to the Valley of the Moon in the mid-1980s, was 97.

His third wife, Dorothy Beardsley of Kenwood, was at his bedside when he died at Memorial Hospital. Though his name and story were known by millions, she said, the devoted golfer and Roman Catholic she married in Sonoma County 12 years ago "led a private life."



Frank Beardsley

Frank Beardsley's life became anything but that when, as a 45-year-old widowed father of 10 children, he married Helen North, a widowed mother of 8, in September of 1961. They adopted each other's children and gave birth to two more.

The first movie about their family, made in 1968 and starring Lucille Ball and Henry Fonda, suggested that the Beardsley kids and the North kids initially resisted the marriage.

Mere fiction, said Susie Pope of Napa, whose was 8 when her dad married Helen North.

"In real truth," said Pope, who runs a Napa Valley bed-and-breakfast with her husband, Ken, "all of us kids were so excited about the union of our parents that we actually got them to bump up their wedding date by several months, because we couldn't wait that long."

The wedding produced a Catholic family with 18 children the youngest only a few months old and oldest 15 years. With the births of two new arrivals, there were 12 girls, 8 boys.

Pope, now 60, said proudly, "I was 9th from the top, 10th from the bottom. I like to say I was the most well-adjusted. I certainly didn't get spoiled and I didn't get overlooked."

Home was the big house in Carmel that had been run by Frank Beardsley and his first wife, the former Frances Louise Albrecht. She died in 1960 from a coma brought on by undiagnosed diabetes.

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Suddenly home nearly twice as many people, it had to be made bigger. Susie Pope remembers her dad and new mother setting out have it expanded to eight bedroom, five bathrooms and three living rooms.

Her father wanted to build a master bedroom at the highest point of the house, one with a huge walk-in bathroom and closet. His new wife resisted, saying that with all those children to raise, such a room would be extravagant.

Pope remembers her dad responded that it was because of all those children that the two of them would need a place of their own, a refuge. "None of us children were allowed to go into that room unless we were invited," Pope said.

She remembers her father, a career Navy man, shopping at a base store and purchasing great quantities of on-sale kids' shoes of three types: oxfords for Catholic school, patent-leather dress-ups for church and tennis shoes for weekend play.

"It didn't matter which size" her dad bought, she said. "Someone would grow into them eventually."

When a kid needed a new pair of shoes, Frank Beardsley would take him or her into the master bedroom closet, stacked high with discounted shoes. Daughter Pope recalled, "He'd look at your feet and say, 'You look like a 7.'"

The appropriate box came off the stacks and another Beardsley kid was set for shoes, for a while.

In 1965, Helen North Beardsley wrote a book about her life, the death of her first husband, a Navy pilot, and the adventure of bringing up 20 children. "Who Gets the Drumstick" was published by Random House.

Lucille Ball, the actress best known for her TV show, "I Love Lucy," read the book and loved it. Her Desilu Studios bought the rights to it, and she took a trip to Carmel.

It was a thrill of all the Beardsley kids' lives to meet and get to know the actress, who brought some writers into the house and set them to the task of writing a movie script.

"Yours, Mine and Ours" opened in Monterey. Pope remembered, "We had the premiere dinner at the Pebble Beach Lodge, where Lucy was staying."

All 22 members of the Beardsley clan dined with star that night. "She would throw her head back and cackle in her classic Lucy style and we were all enthralled," Pope said.

Ball also treated the entire family to a VIP, five-day trip to Disneyland. Pope said, "I think she saw the sacrifice that Mom and Dad were making and she wanted to supplement that somehow."

Pope said her family did earn royalties from the book and the movie. The famous Beardsleys also made some bread, literally, from an advertising deal with the former Langendorf Bakery.

The company featured the clan in a TV commercial and put a family photo on the sides of some of its trucks. For a year, Langendorf provided the family with 50 loaves of bread a week.

"And we would eat it up," Pope said.

She said growing up as one of the 20 Beardsley kids was a true gift.

"Against all odds," she said, "these two astounding people fell in love, got married

and raised this amazing family.”

Her father retired from the Navy in 1968, the same year the first movie came out. He and Helen opened a nut and gift shop, then a bakery that expanded to three locations.

In 1973, they sold the stores and Helen returned to her career, nursing. A bit more than a decade later, they retired to Oakmont. Helen died in 2000.

The second “Yours, Mine and Ours,” starring Dennis Quaid and Rene Russo, was released in 2005.

Late in 2000, Frank Beardsley married Dorothy Cushman of Kenwood, whom he'd met at Star of the Valley Church. She, like both of Beardsley's previous wives, had been a nurse.

“He's smart,” daughter Pope said. “They all took care of him.”

Dorothy Beardsley said that sometimes when she and Frank drove from home in Kenwood to a mass at their church in Oakmont, he say, “How many people can go to mass every day and see this valley, these beautiful surroundings?”

In addition to his wife and daughter Pope, Beardsley is survived by children Mike Beardsley, Charles (Rusty) Beardsley, Greg Beardsley, Rosemary Richter, Louise Ingram, Colleen North, Mary Beardsley, Janet North, Nicholas North, Tom North, Ronnie Beardsley, Jean Murphy, Phillip North, Germaine Robison, Gerald North, Teresa Wyble, Joan Beardsley, Joseph Beardsley and Helen Vanucchi, about 60 grandchildren and about 24 great-grandchildren.

A memorial mass will be celebrated at noon Monday, Dec. 17, at Star of the Valley Catholic Church.

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