

## Elma Oddstad Mendola ~ Often "first to do," she helped her brother develop Pacifica

Written by Jean Bartlett, November, 2018  
(A Pacifica Historical Society Project)



### MENDOLA, ELMA ODDSTAD (1922-2011)

"When Pacifica was incorporated in 1957, my brother (Andy Oddstad) was very instrumental in the City becoming what it is today," Elma Mendola said. "From where the Adobe Sanchez is in Pacifica, that area is called Linda Mar One and we built and sold houses all the way back to Linda Mar Ten. In the 18 years of our company, Andy built almost 16,000 houses in the Bay Area. We had a subdivision over in Oakland, a subdivision in Vallejo, a subdivision in Pacifica. Oddstad School was named in memory of Andy. In the subdivision business, you always have a land inventory. Projects take a long time and there are so many steps. Even after Andy's death we had quite a few projects to complete."

The above quote was taken from an extensive interview I did with Elma in July of 2007 for her family. The goal was to capture just some of the stories of this totally engaging, 100 percent participant in life. I interviewed her again in early November of 2010 for a feature story in the *Pacifica Tribune*. At that point her health, though not her

spirits, had declined. She was just shy of her 88th birthday.

"I've got 3 hours and 15 minutes of dialysis three times a week," she said in 2010, "and it is so boring. So I decided I would start writing my book. But I need to get cracking. First I have to come up with the gripper so I can pull them in from the beginning."

This biography is a combination of our 2007 and 2010 interviews (including draft notes from both interviews), additional research and also includes some information from a family interview I did with Elma's older sister Pearl in 2007. While Elma never lived in Pacifica, her family name not only gave a local elementary school its moniker, but also names a street in the back of the valley – Oddstad Blvd. Elma and her brother worked together for 18 years and Elma was vice president and director of Oddstad Homes. "The power behind the throne!" she laughed.



Elma Dagmar Oddstad was born on November 13, 1922 in Blaine, Washington. The city's northern boundary is the Canada–U.S. border. In 1920, Blaine's population was not much more than 2,250 and in 1921, a year before Elma's birth, the 67-foot-tall Peace Arch, which straddles the border of Blaine and Canada, was completed. Her mother's name was Stephanie Ingebjorg Maria Stoneson Oddstad and Stephanie was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, but became a U.S. citizen as a little girl when her parents moved the family to Blaine. Elma's mother's parents originally came over to Canada from Iceland. It was the same ship that also carried Elma's father's parents. The two families kept in contact, even after Elma's mom's parents moved to Blaine.

"My father was about 9 when he came to Canada," Elma's sister Pearl said in 2007. "He came over on a ship from Iceland by himself to join his family who were already established in Canada. Up until then, he had been raised by a maiden aunt until his parents could send for him."

Elma's father's name was Andres Fjeldsted Oddstad and he was born in Breiðholt, a suburb of Reykjavík. Elma was her parents' third child. The eldest, her sister Pearl, was born in 1916 in the small town of Rivers Inlet, British Columbia, Canada. Her brother Andres Fjeldsted "Andy" Oddstad, Jr., born in 1918, was also born in Rivers Inlet. Two more siblings followed Elma. Sylvia was born in Blaine in 1924 and the youngest Oddstad, Leona, was born in San Francisco in 1928.

"I was born at 2:00 in the morning by the light of the fireplace, because it was a stormy night and the electricity was out," Elma said. "The Western pronunciation of my middle name, Dagmar, is *DAG-mar*, but the Scandinavian pronunciation is *dagr maer*."

"Dagmar" is of Scandinavian and Old German origin. It means "day's glory." It is a royal name in Denmark.

"I was named for Mischa Elman. He was a very famous Russian-born American violinist. Evidently I had very long fingers and my mother thought, 'Oh, my violinist!'"



"My parents at that time lived in Rivers Inlet, British Columbia. They managed a salmon cannery, year round. But it was only during the summer activity that there was a full community, including a hospital. I was born in November, so Mother had to come down to Blaine where her parents lived. Her parents were 'Thorsteinsson,' but my grandfather changed it to 'Stoneson' because it was easier to pronounce in English.

"I was six weeks old by the time we joined my father back at Rivers Inlet and of course this is in the 1920s, during Prohibition. My mother had me in a basket, like a laundry basket, with all of the baby stuff underneath me. At the border, they were looking for liquor and they asked my mother if she had any bottles and she said, 'Yes.' Well then of course she lifted me up and there were all these baby bottles underneath me – so they let us enter Canada."

In 1924, the family moved from Rivers Inlet to Vancouver, where Elma's paternal grandparents lived. Elma's father, a "very good carpenter" was going to work for his wife's brothers, Henry and Ellis Stoneson, who had moved to San Francisco in 1920 and started building houses. Once Elma's dad was established financially, he would send for his family.

"My parents had spent ten years in British Columbia at the salmon cannery saving their money so my father could go to medical school. He was accepted by the Kansas City Medical Center. In those days the recessions were actually depressions. And the depression at the arrival of the 4th child kind of cancelled those plans. So my father went back to being a carpenter. He was a very good man. In fact, we had the best parents that anybody could ask for and the best uncles too."

In 1927, Stephanie and her four children made the journey from Vancouver to San Francisco by bus.

"In those days, buses didn't sell a seat to a child under six," Elma said. "My mother only had one lap and two little ones. But the other passengers helped her. I remember that. In those days, the bus rear wheels had sort of a shield, so that created seats here and seats there – and so there was some place to call our own. I remember it was a long ride but I'm sure they had overnight stops along the way."

Elma's mom's brothers had a very successful building business.

"Their company, The Stoneson Development Corporation, went on to build close to 25,000 homes in the Bay Area. They were one of the nation's largest home building companies. When they first arrived they built houses on a small scale but business increased during the Depression because of liberal lending policies offered by the Federal Housing Administration. Later they would also benefit a great deal from government funding pledged to create housing during the War.

"In the 1930s, Uncle Henry and Uncle Ellis started work on the Lakeside Development in San Francisco. (Lakeside is a long, narrow neighborhood between 19th Avenue and Junipero Serra Boulevard to the south of Sloat Boulevard.) Essentially, by the time the Depression hit, my uncles were in pretty good circumstances. And when I look back at how young they were; I just marvel. The brothers were ideal partners because one was the dreamer and the other was the put-together man."



"In 1949, my uncles were the ones who broke the ground for Stonestown (now Stonestown Galleria.) At that time, Stonestown featured over 700 apartments next to a major shopping center of some 75 businesses, a medical building, grocery store, and eventually a theater. Stonestown attempted to be a self-contained community within a major city. Right before Stonestown opened Uncle Ellis died. He was only 59. His younger brother, my Uncle Henry, died just a few years later.

"Both my uncles had mansions in the Lakeside District. Uncle Ellis lived at 30 Stonecrest Drive and Uncle Henry was just down the street at 100 Stonecrest Drive. Apparently the City of San Francisco recognizes the brothers for their penchant for sneaking derivatives of 'Stone' into their street names and developments."

Elma's family's first address in San Francisco was 250 Staples in the Sunnyside District. Elma attended Sunnyside School which was about three blocks away.

"Sunnyside School is still in existence. Of course, when we first came it was like an eight-room wooden structure; really old fashioned. Then they built the new one and they had a connector between the new and the old, and then they tore the old building down.

"For 7th, 8th and 9th grades, I went to Aptos Junior High School. One of our famous alumni was Carol Channing. She was in the class ahead of me. Completely different from the lady we know now. She still had that deep voice but she was a very serious school debater. When Carol wrote her autobiography, she mentioned this boy at Aptos (Harry Kullijian) who was her first crush. Apparently a mutual friend re-introduced them later in life and they married in 2003 (70 years after middle school). Talk about romantic!

"My family did okay during the Depression. My uncles were very helpful; they made it possible for my father to have employment. The thing that I remember the most about the Depression was the house that we lived in had two vacant lots between our house and the other house. My father planted: potatoes, carrots, string beans and maybe peas, and we raised rabbits. We were too young to realize that it was to supplement the family. It was really a necessity with five kids. My poor brother was the one who had to kill the rabbits. I wanted to be a doctor and I could hardly wait until he slit them open and I could see the insides. When I look back on that, what a kid I must have been – but my poor brother. I found out years later he agonized over this and there I was, hanging over his shoulder. I was the little brother he never had."

The house with the rabbits was located at 318 Joost Avenue in San Francisco. The family moved there when Elma was about 9 and stayed there through Elma's high school years.

"My mother didn't get her violinist when she named me Elma, but she did get a cellist. I started the cello when I was in junior high school and played through high school, so steadily for six years. I was just fascinated with its mellow tones and I would have given anything to have had a contralto mellow singing voice – but instead I got a coloratura. It was not my favorite. It was too high. And the mellow cello with a coloratura, I can tell you, is no longer mellow!"

Elma went to Balboa High School and was a member of: the Honor Society, and the Quill and Scroll, an international high school journalism honor society. She also served for several years as the editor of the Gideon, her high school's yearbook.



1939. Elma, junior year, Balboa HS.



1940. Members of the Quill and Scroll, Elma, bottom row, third from left.

In 1942, Elma moved with her family to Dewey Blvd., near San Francisco's Forest Hill Station.

"I went to junior college. The college had just opened and it was called San Francisco Junior College. Now it is San Francisco City College. I was pre-med in the fall of 1940 until I found out that the only hospital that was training women doctors was in Philadelphia. I looked at the facts. I was going to have to go to a city where I knew no one and work my way through college. So I became very practical and changed to business. It was a big decision but I had already known at that time that my brother would probably go into the building business. I graduated from high school in 1940 and my brother graduated from Cal Berkeley in 1941 as a civil engineer. His graduate thesis was a study of low-cost housing in California and to complete his thesis, he took a government job in Southern California in pre-fab housing. Andy sent his notes home and I typed his thesis. We didn't have duplicators but we had to have four copies of his thesis which meant I had to work with four carbon copies. Now the really hard part was that I really wanted each copy to be perfect. So if I made a mistake I had to erase 4 copies. No strikeouts! I was the one that ended up taking Andy's paper to the professor because Andy was down south. Andy passed.

"As for me, in the fall of 1940 I was pre-med and by the spring I was business and in the summer of 1941, I got a job with Firemen's Fund in San Francisco. In the fall, I was back again in school."

Elma had narrowed her business degree to accounting and secretarial. "I was a very fast typist which was quite a skill in those days."

When the War broke out in December of 1941, Elma put in a job application with NBC. At that point in time they were located in the 111 Sutter Building.

"Because of the War, there was an anticipation of what might be needed. So Andy worked for the government installing water towers in the middle of the desert. I don't know the specifics, but basically he designed and supervised the construction of these towers. In September of 1942, Andy married the love of his life, Clara. In March of 1943, he went into the Navy.

"Andy had entered the Navy as a sailor because he was foreign born. Even though he was educated here, he could not be an officer. Because of his service in the South Pacific he was given what was known as a field commission. So he came back and went to officer's training. He started out in the Seabees, but then was trained in underwater demolition, which became the Seals."

The name 'Seabee' is a backronym of the pronunciation of the abbreviation CB. CB stands for Construction Battalions.

"Andy and his team blew up underwater obstacles. It was very scary because all that they really had were their fins and their air tanks."

Andy was a member of the first underwater demolition team. He was a 'frogman' and went on over 20 landings. He cleared mines in occupied waters so the Marines could land. He was written up in the Francis Fane classic: "The Naked Warriors, The Story of the U.S. Navy's Frogmen." His daughter, author Sandy Nathan, wrote in her "Shelf Life" blog: "He saw combat duty in Okinawa, winning a raft of medals, including the Bronze Star Medal, a Presidential Unit Citation, and the Pacific Theater Ribbon with five battle stars."

"Lieutenant Oddstad got out of the Navy in January of 1946," Elma said. "Officially he started in the home building business 30 days after his separation from the Navy. He laid his first foundation on February 6."

Elma worked for NBC from January of 1942 until October 30, 1946, and during that time she became San Francisco's first female broadcast engineer.

"When I went to work for NBC, the War brought many changes to San Francisco and of course all over. Rationing was on. Food and gas were rationed as were nylons. They made the parachutes out of the nylons. Women used to draw a seam on the back of their leg. There were scrap metal drives, and the occasional blackout and midnight curfew. But the time for me was very exciting.

"I was hired originally as a secretary and my boss's office was on the top floor of 111 Sutter, where the studios were. At that time, can you imagine, it was the second tallest building in San Francisco. Standard Oil was the tallest building. Now, these buildings are miniatures. (NBC Bay Area also moved to San Jose.) Then we moved over to the new NBC building at Taylor and O'Farrell.

"During the War, they had what they called the apprentice program because all the young ones were going to the War. You see, I was 19 when the War started, so my age group was really depleted. When they started that program, the engineers kept saying, 'Elma, we can train you. Tell George you want to be an apprentice.' Now this is an apprentice job to be a studio engineer, the one that handles setting up the microphones and monitoring the sound and playing the records. So I told my boss I wanted to be an apprentice and he said, 'I'll think about it.' One little known fact was if you were in an essential industry, you were frozen to your job. We were considered essential because we were the liaison between the Fourth Interceptor Command (which covered the areas between Fresno and Redding) and the radio which would notify the population of what to do. They still have the emergency broadcast system and it was established in World War II.

"Now, in regards to being frozen to your job; if you quit, you had to be out of the labor market for 90 days. So it really made you think twice about quitting. So I decided I had better save my money in case I had to take a 90 day vacation, unpaid. You see I was the secretary to the Chief Engineer for NBC and the engineers in our department were encouraging me to apply because they could train me. I wanted that job if I had to quit to get it. I saved my money and approached George again because he was, I suppose, still thinking about it.

"So I said, 'You know you are going to lose a secretary, one way or the other. I'll be an apprentice or I'll quit!' When I look back on it I realize, I was a little gutsy!

"It ended up that George had gathered so many extra jobs that were created by the War. They had been assigned to other people, but they would get screwed up and then George would say, 'Well, I'll take it.' Then George would turn it over to me. We were a good team. We handled all of the identification, all of the finger printing, anything extra as well as the forms needed to keep the men from being drafted. There was a lot of extra work. What happened when I was no longer George's secretary is that they split George's job. George became the assistant general manager taking all of these extra things in with him and they appointed one of the other guys to be the Chief Engineer and they got a new secretary for him. So, they also split my job into two.

"The thing was that George had never had a secretary before and I had never worked as a secretary before, so I figured, well gosh, I just have to do all this work. I ended up working probably about six to ten hours of overtime a week and since I was salaried, I was unable to charge them the overtime. But I did find the work interesting. George went on to become the General Manager at Channel 2 when it first started. We got along very well but it was Mr. Greaves and Miss Oddstad until I became an apprentice; then I was Elma and he was George."

Elma was the only woman that NBC nationally trained as a broadcast engineer. She was a pioneer. Her work included being a part of the United Nations Conference in San Francisco.

The United Nations Conference opened on April 25, 1945, several weeks after President Franklin D. Roosevelt died. It concluded with the signing of the United Nations Charter on June 26. Sponsored by the United States, the United Kingdom, the USSR and China, forty-two nations accepted the sponsors' invitation to the Conference, and more than 3,500 conference delegates and staff members assembled in San Francisco. All invited nations had entered into a state of war against one or more of the Axis powers and had adhered to the Declaration by the United Nations of January 1, 1942.

"As a broadcast engineer, my hours were early. I had to get to work by 3:45 in the morning because we had the shortwave broadcast direct from the South Pacific that we patched through San Francisco to New York. So, New York had it with their morning news and we had to monitor it while it went through San Francisco. Then I was off at 4:15 a.m. until my next program at 6 a.m. My work day ended at 12:15 p.m.

"With Andy back home, I was helping him with his new business. So instead of sleeping between 4:15 and 5:30 a.m., I would sit and type. All the applications for the FHA financing of the construction had to be typed, and then you had to submit various other specifications.

"Andy and his business partner, Chris Finson (also an Icelander), were working out of Chris's home on Arch Street in San Francisco. Once they were able to rent a place for their business – a loft in the Baldwin and Howell Office on Ocean Avenue – I started to work for Andy. But in the summer of 1946, I was still working at the radio station. I went to Golden Gate University and studied real estate at night. I got my real estate broker's license. In those days, you didn't have to be a sales person for three years if you got 75% on the test. And you know, it was the same test that the broker and the sales person took. The sales person minimum was 70 and the broker minimum was 75 – and I thought, well, I've taken this course if I can't pass 75%, why did I even bother? I got an 86."

And at the age of 23, Elma became a broker.

"I would get the first issue of the San Francisco afternoon papers when I was going out to lunch, since I was off work at 12:15. Well I read this ad from Cappa Realty of 52 lots available in Daly City. I read it and I thought, 'Well, I'll stop by and see Mr. Cappa.' I didn't have a car then. So I went there on the bus. Mr. Cappa was in the Mission District.

"I presented myself as a real estate broker, representing my brother and his partner, who were builders. I told Mr. Cappa all about how my brother had gotten out of the Navy in January and laid his first foundation on February 6th. He was sold! I had already been to the lots and Mr. Cappa told me he would hold the property for me until after I had brought Andy and his partner out to see it and they made their decision.

"That afternoon every builder in San Francisco sent a representative: 52 lots in one location was really something. So, Mr. Cappa was a big step forward in our career!

"Andy and Chris were just drooling over it but they didn't quite know how they could do it. Well, I thought, let's ask Uncle Henry (Stoneson). So, Uncle Henry put a deal together and it was primarily that he and Uncle Ellis would guarantee our loans. The sale of the houses on the 52 lots in Daly City, were the foundation for our subdivision in South San Francisco, and that was over 400 houses.

"In addition, Mr. Callan (Thomas J. Callan), a hog farmer, had individual lots in Daly City – now these were not those 52 lots. Mr. Callan used to buy lots at tax sales and we committed to 30 lots from Mr.

Callan. So we did lot hopping. We bought the lot and my brother would sell the house during construction. This really ignited the business."

At the end of 1946, NBC terminated Elma's job. With the men back from the War, a number of women were let go in numerous industries that had not hired women before. Elma knew and the union knew her job was terminated because she was a woman. She was not yet working full-time for Andy, but collected unemployment until she began to work for Andy "in earnest" in March of 1947.

"I was still living at home, so nothing was disastrous here. When I first started at NBC, I started at \$75 a month. When I left, I was making \$315 a month which is what engineers made and was a fairly good salary at that time."

Andy and Chris's subdivision business boomed. In 1949, Andy discovered "Pacifica." Before Pacifica incorporated in 1957, it was nine small communities: Fairmont, Westview, Pacific Manor, Sharp Park, Fairway Park, Vallemar, Rockaway Beach, Linda Mar and Pedro Point.

"The first house we built was in Linda Mar One, behind the Sanchez Adobe. We built a lot of houses in Linda Mar. Houses were \$8,000 to \$10,000 and that was a 3 bedroom/1 bath. We started with a few ownership-type houses, which are beginner homes. It is amazing how long they have lasted. My father used to bring my mother out for a drive and they would come down to that area of Linda Mar because the weather was beautiful.

"We had a sales office in Pacifica, in what is now the Linda Mar Shopping Center. But Andy and I were in our Redwood City office. We built that office. I was still in my twenties and having the time of my life. Though I admit the boys were staying away from me. I was doing pretty well financially and I think that scared them off."

The company started out as Homes by Sterling and then it became F. O. & R. (Finson, Oddstad and Robinson). Then they bought out Robinson and changed the name to: Finson and Oddstad and then Andy bought out Finson and the company became Oddstad Homes. Sterling Terrace and Sterling Manor in South San Francisco, Linda Mar in Pacifica, Rollingwood in San Bruno, Farm Hill Estates in Redwood City – these are a few of the subdivisions built by Andy Oddstad. At its peak, Oddstad Homes was one of the largest residential builders in the United States. In Pacifica, Andy donated the land for Oddstad Park, which is the home of the Pacifica Spindrift Players and the Spindrift School of Performing Arts.

"Towards the end of 1956, there was quite a recession," Elma said. "But the year started out great. We built almost 1,600 houses. We had 75 people working in our office in Redwood City. But in November of '56, we had to lay off 25 people. That was hard. By the end of December we had to lay off another 25. In one month really, we went from 75 to 25. That is when I started working 70 and 80 hour weeks. It was a tricky time but we survived. It was about four months before we could rehire."

Andy was considered a real innovator in the building business. He used a new type of prefabricated concrete for floors and walls with reinforcing steel already built into them.

In between working, Elma continued her lifelong interest in politics.

"When I was growing up, I had a master plan for myself which included, along with becoming a doctor, politics. My father had always discussed politics with me and I was very politically aware when I was in my teens. So I had it all figured out. By the time I was 40, I would be married, my children would be out of school and I could run for office!"



Elma – who married in her 40s, bought her own home in her 30s and also bought herself a T-bird convertible when she was 35 – made it clear that the path her life actually took suited her just fine.

"In 1952 Adlai Stevenson was running (for president) against Eisenhower. I went to a fundraiser rally at the Cow Palace and I became very interested in politics. You know, Stevenson should have won but of course he was up against Eisenhower, the War hero. In 1956 Stevenson ran again but you don't change horses in the middle of the stream.

"In 1952, Senator Estes Kefauver from Tennessee opposed Stevenson, who was Governor of Illinois in the primary. It was quite a stirring race to the finish and it really created a movement to start Democratic clubs in 1952. I had gone to a few of the meetings. In 1956, I went to a meeting and they were discussing distributions of funds that had been raised between the State Senate and the State Assembly candidates – and the results were essentially that they were splitting up \$35.00. And I thought: 'Boy, if they don't think big, they'll never do big!' My uncle was the one who taught me that. He told me: 'You have to think big so that when you are half way there, you'll know that you are half way there.'

"I guess I had gone to this meeting and they asked for any fundraising ideas to be presented at the next meeting. Well I got this idea for a fundraiser and the title was: 'Four for Stevenson' and it was a countywide plan. You see, this was the thing I had done for my brother, paper flow, you know planning on how to get information. The idea ended up being 13 or 14 pages long on the whole campaign of fundraising and information. I presented it. I had the whole thing from each level and the whole code as to how to figure out how to work from the voter's registration. So you would have people at different levels who would have a party and they would invite four neighbors and they would discuss politics and collect money – and it just went up until everything was turned into headquarters.

"Well I had all of the paperwork and I presented it at the next meeting and of course everybody was just absolutely floored. I told them it had only taken me 12 hours and they acted as if I had worked for weeks. The idea was really too big to put into operation, but it opened the door that someone could come up with a better plan instead of fighting over \$35.00! The next thing I knew there was a vacancy on the Central Committee which was the elected committee. So here I am appointed to the County Central Committee. Then I go from the Central Committee to the State Conference and then I go to the Convention in Chicago in 1956 as a standby delegate from the County. By 1958, I'm established!

"In 1958, I ran for Congress. Start at the top! That's my motto! I ran against J. Arthur Younger and he was an incumbent who had run and won in 52, 54 and 56. We had cross-filing back then, so he registered as a candidate in the primaries of both parties and won both primaries, so there was no general election run-off. But I survived the primary and so there was a run-off. On a side note, when I ran there were 15 women in Congress." (Elma was the first woman to run for Congress from San Mateo County.)

In a September 1958 article in *The Monitor*, candidate Oddstad makes it clear she is not afraid to take a stance.

### **San Mateo Candidate Opposes '16'**

Elma D. Oddstad, Democratic nominee for Congress from San Mateo County, has come out strong against Proposition 16 on the Nov. 4 ballot, the measure that would remove tax exemptions for private schools.

"As a strong supporter of public schools and an advocate of federal financial aid to them, I feel it is also in the public interest to cherish our private institutions of learning," Miss Oddstad declared.

"Such schools are logically included in our system of tax exemptions. I join the Democratic Party and its leaders in condemning this ill-advised measure, which would retard education. I am interested in going forward in this field, not backward.

"On a dollars-and-costs basis, Proposition 16 is sheer economic folly. The affected schools included 390 that are Protestant-related, 643 Catholic-related, and 43 nonsectarian and Jewish.

"They enroll nearly 350,000 pupils a year at an annual saving to California taxpayers of \$118 million, 50 times the taxes they would pay.

"I have been advised that taking a stand on this controversial question will cost me votes. And while I would prefer to be judged on the basis of my program of legislative action for Congress, I believe the voters are entitled to know where I stand on this and other issues."

"During a campaign, you have public appearances and one of the public appearances was to attend candidate night at the League of Women Voters," Elma said in 2007. "I was never really a public speaker, so I really surprised myself how I survived. Younger's campaign manager would give people in his entourage a question to ask the other candidate, which was me, and it was a question that was meant to embarrass.

"I was on a kind-of raised platform and I could see this supposed unbiased member of the audience reading from a card. And she asked me, 'Where exactly do you stand on ADA.' Well, I answered, 'What do you mean by ADA?' Now this is 1958 and the McCarthy Hearings and the blacklisting in Hollywood and all that were in full swing. ADA meant Americans for Democratic Action which was a quote 'pinko' organization. So it was meant to embarrass me in that if I admitted where I stood on Americans for Democratic Action, it would have been reported that I had Communist leanings. So again, I said, 'What do you mean by ADA?' And she said, 'Well, you know what I mean.' And I said, 'No, not really. If I were a teacher, that would be an acronym for Average Daily Attendance.' Well the whole audience laughed and I didn't have to answer the question, but I knew what she was driving at.

"The next question that was granted was, 'I see by your résumé that you've never been the president of any association. How do you expect to find your way in Washington?'

"My answer was, 'I don't intend to be the Speaker at the first session and I am sure that I can learn the ropes.' Well the audience laughed again and this young man, well young to me now, but he was older than I then, he came up to me afterwards and said: 'Young lady, I have never voted for a Democrat before but you are getting my vote. The way you handled yourself in that question and answer period was really something.'

"The candidate in 1956 was a political science professor from CSM, a very learned man and during the question and answer period, he fell apart. I'm sure my opponent expected the same. So then I was the invited candidate to the Steel Workers Union who met in South San Francisco. The door to the assembly room was right off of the stairs, so there was no anteroom to wait in. When I opened the door I'm facing the audience and the table, where the officers were, had their backs to me. So the guys all started whistling! Here's this chick! I think they thought a man was coming. They had the E-L right in my name but they probably thought I was an Elmer or an Elmo.

"Leo Ryan (then a South San Francisco Councilmember) was running for Assembly at the same time and was also on the trail. Tom Lantos (then a professor of economics at San Francisco State University who also served in senior advisory roles to members of the U.S. Senate) helped mentor me through my

campaign. We had weekly dinners at his home followed by a tutoring session. He was 30 years old then and very intelligent.

"For the primary I raised about \$6,000 from my relatives and from the other builders. My opponent raised \$40,000 because he expected to knock me out in the primaries. I survived the primary and so there was a run-off. In the end I came in second."

Democrat Elma received 41.2% of the vote. Republican Younger received 58.8% of the vote. Younger served in Congress until his death from leukemia in 1967.

The *Santa Cruz Sentinel* wrote up the election results as follows, on Nov. 5, 1958:

Miss Elma Dagmar Oddstad lost to GOP incumbent J. Arthur Younger in the 9th District.

The 5-foot, 2-inch blonde had concentrated her San Mateo County campaigning on door-to-door visits, coffee klatches and forum meetings.

On January 22, 1964, Andres Fjeldsted "Andy" Oddstad, Jr. died.

"He was heading to a conference in Fresno," Elma said. "There was this doctor, I think from Northwestern University in Chicago, and he had a theory with regard to physical fitness of young executives. You see, Andy was only 45. When Andy first started in business he put on weight. When this little girl referred to him as, 'that fat man over there,' Andy decided he had better start taking care of himself. So at age 40, Andy was the State wrestling champion. He got his health and he got his physique back which was why he was invited to be a part of this medical test because he was a young, physically fit executive."

Andy was instrumental in promoting wrestling as a sport in California. A member of the Olympic Club in San Francisco, he represented the Club in the National Amateur Wrestling Competition (NAWC). Elma managed the NAWC at the Olympic Club in 1962 and their competition was televised nationally. Wrestling teams came from all over the country and one team came from as far as Japan. Elma was one of the few women ever invited into the inner sanctum of the Olympic Club.

"I can remember when my girlfriend's father died," Elma recalled in 2007. "My father told me, the critical age for men is between 50 and 54. Well twenty years later, men were dying in their 40s from not taking care of themselves. This doctor, who was probably writing a new book, was going to interview Andy and run him through his particular series of physical tests.

"Andy must have been on Highway 99 and it was a depressed highway and the overpass was at street level – in other words there was no place to go. The other driver came down an exit off the freeway, except he was using it as an entrance. So the driver was on the wrong side of the highway and there was no shoulder for Andy to escape to and Andy was hit, head on. The other driver died immediately but Andy was pinned in the car. You see Andy was so strong that with the seatbelt, his legs didn't break, he had dislocated hips. But the dislocated hips were in contrary to the damage to the rest of him. Evidently he was able to put his arm up because this part of his face was all crushed. But the dislocated hips created the clotting and the damage in his face, created blood. What he died of actually was a shower of clots which ended up in his lungs. He never regained consciousness and he died four days later. He was able to live those four days only because he was such a strong man.

"Daddy had passed away 9 years before Andy died but Mother died about a year and a half after Andy's death. It was too much for her, for all of us – very, very tragic.

"My uncles were the ideal business partnership and I always thought of Andy and me as a kind of partnership. He told me what he wanted, and I would make it happen. The secret of our success was we never had merchandise on the shelf. Andy's philosophy was, 'If we owned a grocery store we could eat off the shelves. If we get a completed house on the shelf; it will eat us. 'You've got to sell it.'

"I had a recording system which kept a finger on the pulse. We also sent a weekly report to our main lender which was the Republic Bank of Texas – so they knew that their money was in good hands. We never got into trouble.

"One of the secrets of my brother's success was he kept a telephone log every time he had a conversation. So after Andy died, no one could ever say, Andy promised me this or Andy promised me that because we had his log and we knew exactly what Andy said when he talked to you. He looked out to the future and he was very self-disciplined."

Elma met the love of her life around Christmas of 1965, not long after her mom died. She married Tony Mendola in November of 1966.

"When Tony and I met, Tony thought I was the telephone operator. He would never have asked me out if he thought I owned the business.

"My mother would have liked him. I think my father would have really liked Tony as well, because Tony was a man's man. I think when Tony was in his 20s he was probably too macho to take out a girl who had more education. Now in his 40s, he wouldn't have taken out a woman that had business success. You know, macho men are that way. But we had a wonderful relationship. We met at just the right time for both of us.

"It's getting along and enjoying each other's company that is really important. Tony and I could laugh together and that was so wonderful. We were married for 27 years until his death in 1993."

Elma quit the company she and her brother had dedicated so many years to, not long after she and Tony married. Because she liked working – although she did not need to work out of financial necessity – she dusted off her secretarial skills and signed up with a Temp Agency. She immediately landed a part-time job and shortly thereafter became the full-time office manager for two companies.

She did eventually retire and she and Tony traveled a great deal, which included a trip to France on June 6, 1984 to join in the 40th Anniversary of D-Day. A World War II veteran, Tony was among those who served that fateful day in Normandy.

Elma Dagmar Oddstad Mendola passed away peacefully in her sleep on January 4, 2011.

"When I look back on my life, I realize that I was one of the first female nerds!" Elma said in 2007. "I loved school and the fact that I didn't have any boyfriends didn't matter.

"I don't think I've ever yearned for anything. I just went along. I'll always be happy. I suppose my philosophy on life is 'roll with the punches.'"



Jean Bartlett photo

**Elma Oddstad Mendola at home in San Mateo, July, 2007.**



Jean Bartlett is a longtime Bay Area features writer: Pacifica Tribune, Oakland Tribune, San Jose Mercury, Marin Independent Journal, Twin City Times, Ross Valley Reporter, Peninsula Progress, Coastal Connections, Bay Area Business Woman and Catholic San Francisco. She is a former Hallmark Card writer, a produced playwright and a published author.