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# 'Lady milkman' was entrepreneur

McHugh sold spoons, tomatoes,  
and was mother to 8 kids

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The old photo shows a smiling young woman in striped overalls, a rack of glass milk bottles in one hand, standing next to her partner on the daily milk route.

That partner was Barney, a handsome horse in fine profile. The woman was Doris McHugh, who made news as the "Lady Milkman" at a time when milk was delivered and there were no other words for the person delivering it.

In 1943, soon after new husband, Tom McHugh, shipped out for overseas, McHugh got a job at the Borden dairy here. She learned to harness Barney and hitch him to the wagon, and worked long days on the delivery routes.



McHugh

"I wanted to do a man's job, so I came here," said McHugh, then 28, in a 1944 story in *The Milwaukee Journal*. "I'm a milkman, that's true, but that's only because I have a hunch it'll bring a great big lovable Irishman back here. After that, I'm strictly Mrs. Thomas Benedict McHugh."

She died Monday, eight days after suffering a severe brain aneurysm. She had been having dinner with a friend, Walter Kander, 100, when she suddenly collapsed. McHugh, of West Allis, was 86.

"The attitude she had in that story was the way she lived for the rest of her life," said son-in-law Robb Bessey.

Born Dorothy Vrzal in Milwaukee, she married a local man, but met him in Oregon.

"She went out there to become a WAC, but was told they had hit their quota or something like that," said a daughter, Mary K. Bessey. "So she stayed and worked at the camp ice cream shop."

There she met Tom McHugh, also from Milwaukee's east side. They married in 1943.

"She made her wedding dress," daughter Peggy Schmitt said. "They weren't allowed to have a train on wedding gowns because of rationing for parachute material. It was a long dress that just dragged the floor a little bit at the back of the hem."

Soon the new Mrs. McHugh was wearing overalls and working with Barney. In the winter, she would let the horse make his own way from house to house. McHugh needed to work in the wagon, rotating the milk bottles.

"She had a heater in the back of the wagon to keep the glass bottles from freezing," Schmitt said. "She had to rotate all the bottles, so the milk didn't get too warm or too cold. The horse knew the way, so she could drop the reins."

McHugh worked for two years until her husband returned home. She had her first child when she was nearly 30, then soon had another.



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**Doris McHugh** teamed up with a horse named Barney on her milk route in this 1944 photo.

er. After a few childless years, they were back in the baby business.

"She had eight children," Schmitt said — five born when she was between age 40 and 50.

"She was a Depression-era woman," she said. "She could garden and can and do all those things, take something and turn it into something new, useful, again."

In the 1950s, McHugh invented an easier-to-use wooden spoon, starting the EZ Stir Spoon Co. in their home. Her spoons sold by the gross in local hardware stores.

McHugh worked at other jobs, both entrepreneurial and volunteer.

She was active with Mary Queen of Heaven parish, organizing church events. She became famous for raising hundreds of tomato seedlings to sell at the church rummage sale or just to give away in the community. Every year, too, she saved tomato seeds to start the next year's bumper crop.

"They were the biggest and the best tomatoes," said son Gary McHugh. "They came from 'The Tomato Lady.'"

McHugh also liked being a landlady, running a rooming house and another rental property. More often than not, though, she didn't have the heart to collect rent from down-on-their-luck tenants, sometimes loaning back what rent they did manage to pay, said her children.

Her husband died in 1991, and a son, Jimmy, at 15. In addition to her two daughters, survivors include sons Tom, Gary, Brian, Dave and John; sister Beatrice Sokol; grandchildren, stepchildren and great-grandchildren.

Visitation will be held from 9 a.m. today until the funeral service at 11 a.m., both at Mary Queen of Heaven Church, S. 106th St. and W. Lincoln Ave., in West Allis.