

Mackinac's Magnificent Mayor

Margaret Doud

By Chuck Stokes

Mackinac Island is full of history, from its natural wonders to its sacred Indigenous roots to the forts on its hills. Even the mayor is historic, because Mayor Margaret Doud—whose family's contributions to island life include operating a grocery store and hotels as well as several other mayorships—is the island's first female mayor and the longest currently-serving mayor in the United States.

Margaret M. Doud has spent the majority of her 80 years living on Michigan's tiny Mackinac Island and the picturesque town where she is making American history. Yet, it is not the Mitten State city where she was born.

The year was 1943. Rodgers and Hammerstein's musical *Oklahoma* made its debut on Broadway; President Franklin D. Roosevelt dedicated the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C.; undefeated boxer Sugar Ray Robinson lost his first and only championship fight to "Raging Bull" Jake LaMotta; due to World War II, women made up 65 percent of the American aircraft industry workforce; and on May 29, baby Margaret entered this world at Little Traverse Hospital in Petoskey, Michigan. Her birth was planned to take place on Mackinac Island, but Jeanette Doud, Margaret's mother, had to temporarily leave the island because of emergency complications with her pregnancy.

Jeanette and her infant daughter survived the medical scare and soon returned to their island home at Fort Mackinac, shared with husband and father Robert, then the director of Mackinac Island State Park. The addition of a new baby on the 3.8-square-mile island, tucked away between Michigan's Lower and Upper Peninsulas, was exciting. Margaret would be an only child; yet, the Doud family tree ran deep on the historic island dominated by horses, bicycles, and freshly made fudge. "My dad was born in 1901 on Mackinac," Doud recalls. "My great-grandparents came over in the mid-1840s to '50s from Ireland to escape the potato famine. His name was Stephen Doud. He married on the island, a lady named Bridgett McCann."

Margaret's mother, Mary Jeanette Chamber Doud, was also a descendant of one of Mackinac's early Irish clans. For most of the year, her family lived on the island, but her father worked for the Illinois Central Railroad and, in the offseason, took the family to Chicago, where Jeanette was born on May 16, 1920. "She never liked to say it, but she wasn't born on the island," said Doud.

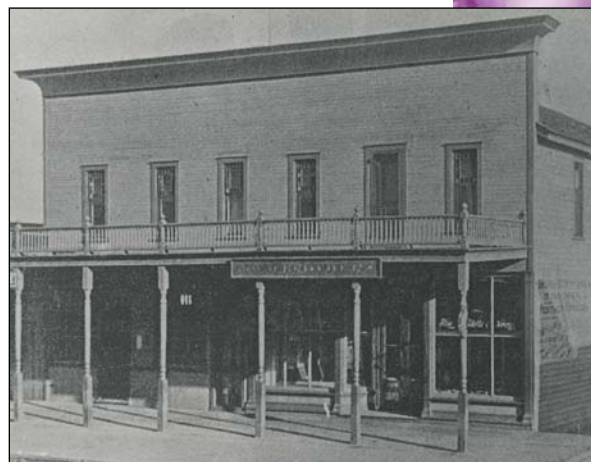
Childhood & Education

In many ways, growing up on Mackinac Island, where flocks of tourists visit six months out of the year, is similar to childhood experiences in other American cities. Doud said they did not have electronic devices but played lots of outdoor games such as baseball, and in the winter, sliding down the snow after dinner was a popular pastime. "We were just so free to do different things. I remember we had big Halloween parties in the community hall. Everyone would dress up in costumes

that were made by our families. It was more old-fashioned."

Since snowmobiles were not allowed on the island until mid-1970, regardless of the weather, Doud and her school friends would walk to the Thomas W. Ferry School on Main Street, now the Richard & Jane Manoogian Art Center. When Doud was a child, there was no high school on the island. Kids could attend from kindergarten through tenth grade. Doud stayed through ninth grade, then enrolled in boarding school at St. Mary's Academy in Monroe, Michigan. "I was pretty young to do that, but I did it," she said. Although a long way from Mackinac, the

Below top: A historic snapshot of Mackinac Island's Main Street, looking southeast. Below bottom: Doud's great uncle, Patrick Doud, built several homes and businesses, including this historic structure. (Photos courtesy of Mackinac State Historic Parks.)





Margaret Doud standing in front of the newly purchased ambulance for the island in 1975. (Photo courtesy of St. Ignace News/The Town Crier.)



Doud taught kindergarten for four years on Mackinac Island before taking over the Windermere Hotel in 1975. (Photo courtesy of St. Ignace News/The Town Crier.)

young student had family support nearby: “My mother’s brother lived in Dearborn, so I could visit him some weekends.” Doud graduated from St. Mary’s in 1961.

Her next stop was Central Michigan University (CMU). She recalls fondly, “I really enjoyed Central and had a lot of fun there. I still have friends that I went to school with that come back to see me.” Coming from a small island, CMU in the 1960s “was a great size to adapt to back then.” After graduating from college, Doud returned to the island to work one winter in the library at Mackinac College. She taught third grade in Petoskey for two years, then returned to the island to teach kindergarten for four years. Doud reflects, “At that time, my dad had a heart attack, and I had to make a decision whether to run his hotel or do whatever. And so I took over the hotel in 1975.”

Entrepreneur & Politician

The hotel to which Doud referred is the beautiful and historic Windermere Hotel at 7498 Main Street on Mackinac Island. It is

the iconic, bright yellow structure with a white picket fence that sits proudly across from the Windermere Point shoreline. It was designed by Richard Rickman of Peoria, Illinois, and built in 1887—the same year as the majestic Grand Hotel—as a summer cottage by bankers Charles and Clifford Anthony.

In 1904, Patrick Doud, Margaret’s great-uncle, purchased the building and converted it into a resort hotel. Patrick was the perfect person for the job, for according to the *St. Ignace Enterprise* newspaper, “Patrick Doud, Mackinac Island’s principal contractor, has erected more cottages and public buildings on the island than any other.” His resume included the Michigan Governor’s Summer Residence and The Inn at Stonecliffe, two jewels of the Great Lakes. The accomplished carpenter and construction business owner was also a keen entrepreneur. Along with his father, James, he started Doud’s Market, which still operates today as “the oldest family-owned grocery store in America.”

Patrick passed away on May 20, 1951, at age 89. Around 1945, Margaret’s parents, Robert and Jeannette, became the owners of Windermere. When Robert passed, mother and daughter ran the hotel together for many years until Jeannette died in 2015 at age 95. Margaret continues to own and manage the Windermere today. On any given day, you can find her working and greeting guests behind her hotel reception desk with her faithful shelter rescue beagle, Reg, resting by her side.

In 1974, Doud was appointed to the Mackinac City Council to fill the term of Dennis Brodeur, owner of the popular Mustang Lounge, the motto for which is “Hang at the Stang.” Brodeur had resigned his seat.

The next year, then-Mayor Clem Gunn approached Doud about running for his office. “I said, ‘No, I’m not going to,’” recalled Doud. “Number one, I’m a woman. Number two, I don’t have the experience. Number three, I don’t think I can be elected. Period!” Gunn kept asking Doud and eventually wore her down: “So, I decided to run for mayor, and I ran against Otto Emmons, who had been mayor before [from 1971 to 1973]. And it was quite a contested election. I won, and the rest is history.”

History indeed! On April 1, 1975, Doud was elected Mackinac Island’s first female chief executive officer, and she has not stopped running since. Today, she has the historic distinction of being the longest currently serving mayor in the United States. She moved up to first place on March 30, 2023, one day after Lake George, New York, village Mayor Robert Blais officially retired. He took the reins of his Adirondack Mountains town almost four years before Doud became mayor of Mackinac Island. Surprisingly, Blais and Doud have never met, nor has she ever visited his city.

What makes Doud’s victories so unique is that to keep her title, she must run for reelection every single year under the rules of the Mackinac Island City Charter, established on June 8, 1899, by the Michigan Legislature. Yet, she has never desired to push for longer mayoral terms: “We have a very unique charter, and that is what our city is run by, and we don’t want to touch that charter. And that’s why we don’t change it.” Doud admits that her job would probably be easier if she did not have to run every year, but she also acknowledges that after 48 years in office, she does not have to politic much these days.

Still, Doud’s tenure as mayor has not always been smooth sailing. At first, her breaking the glass ceiling was tested: “My first year in office was very tough. I was elected in April [1975], and we usually have an appointment meeting the first Monday in May. I had a person I wanted to be chief of police, and other people decided they didn’t want him.” Doud could not get a confirmation vote from the city council. So, she asked her father, who served as mayor of Mackinac Island from 1939-1940, for his advice. He told her that when her grandfather was mayor, he wanted a certain person appointed and the council had bucked him too. Robert Doud remembered how his father once outsmarted the council: “He appointed the person he wanted day-by-day [which is allowed under the city charter] until he was confirmed.”

With a hearty chuckle, Margaret Doud said, “And that’s exactly what I did until I got my police chief confirmed” by the six-member council. “In the early days, I think they were suspicious of a woman running

the town. But they got used to me, and right now, I have a very good council. We don’t always agree, but that’s what politics is all about.” Doud likes the art of compromise. “If you bull your way through, you’re not going to accomplish anything.”

There would be even more challenges for Mayor Doud to tackle. One was the city’s seven-year fight with the ferry boat lines. The island government charged a percentage of their revenue to dock on the island. “They tried to challenge us and say that we couldn’t, and that went to the Michigan Supreme Court, and we prevailed, based on our 1899 charter.” On December 22, 1982, the state’s high court decided, “After full consideration of the record, briefs, and argument of the parties, we are not persuaded of any error in the disposition of this matter by the Court of Appeals.”

The other political nightmare took place in July 2000. It was the height of the summer tourist season, and the same week as the always-popular Chicago Yacht Club Race to Mackinac. Five of the seven underwater power cables from the mainland to the island failed, leaving Mackinac in a complete electricity blackout for three days. Curfews were enacted, businesses scrambled, and practically every living soul on the island was impacted. “I had 35 meetings in one week to get the situation under control. We had no streetlights, no fire alarm system, we had nothing, and we were scared to death of a fire. It was a challenge, a real challenge.”

Protecting Mackinac Island’s Charm

As an octogenarian political and business leader, Doud believes her greatest accomplishment and





self-imposed assignment is keeping Mackinac Island's unique Victorian lifestyle intact as it balances modern-day tourist demands and community needs. Since July 6, 1898, motorized vehicles have been banned from the roadways on the island. It is a throwback in time that attracts visitors from around the world and protects the roughly 600 horses that call the island home. "I've preached over the years I've been mayor that we cannot lose the ambiance of Mackinac," Doud said emphatically. "The horse culture is certainly part of that uniqueness."

Nevertheless, Doud is a realist. She knows that tourism and development have driven her island's economy for centuries. "So, we do have corporate America on the island, and we have to control it the best we can. My motto is this: there is the right way, the wrong way, and the Mackinac way. And we do the Mackinac way!"

A few other issues that Doud is passionate about are education, the environment, and women in

leadership. "I don't ever want the island to become a caretaker society. That's why it's so important our school continues. If we don't have a school, we will lose our medical center and our churches. Families won't stay here. [Education] is really the root of a good community," she said.

Since at least the 1800s, female leaders in business, education, and civic affairs have played a prominent role in shaping the history of Mackinac Island. Books such as Melissa Croghan's *Great Women of Mackinac, 1800-1950* have been written about it. Doud takes pride in knowing she is part of a long line of trailblazers and that there are many women in leadership roles on Mackinac Island.

Now in the national spotlight as the country's longest-serving active mayor, Doud shows little sign of slowing down soon. About retirement, she said, "Oh, you know what Kenny Rogers says, 'I know when to hold them, and I know when to fold them.' When the time is right, I will step on, but I still have some projects I'd like to see completed." With a determined smile on her face, she added, "I just hope that Mackinac never loses its magical charm and that people appreciate the beauty and the history and the uniqueness of this island." 🍁

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Mayor Doud on the steps of the Windermere Hotel. She took over running the hotel from her father in 1975 and continues to own and manage it today. (Photo courtesy of Chuck Stokes.)



Doud behind the reception desk of the Windermere Hotel. (Photo courtesy of Chuck Stokes.)