

Hard Work and Fizzy Drinks: What It Takes to Live Past 110

They are called supercentenarians, and they have seen it all.



By Sara Ruberg

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Leer en español

One of the oldest men in the world died in August at the age of 111. The man, John Farrington, was born about a year after the Titanic sank.

Mr. Farrington was one of very few people to have lived long enough to see the world evolve for over a century.

And so have a handful of women who have died in recent years.

Kane Tanaka survived two world wars, the 1918 influenza outbreak and two rounds of cancer, but she also outlived all of her children.

Mamie Lang Kirkland’s childhood was scarred by lynchings and the Ku Klux Klan. She grew up to become a door-to-door saleswoman for Avon, dispensing beauty products and life advice.

Hester Ford lived long enough to have 120 great-great-grandchildren.

And this week, Maria Branyas Morera, an American-born Spanish woman who lived through Spain’s civil war and the brutal Franco regime and was believed to be the oldest person in the world, died at 117.

Each of these women was a supercentenarian, a person who has lived past age 110. Here are Times obituaries for them and other supercentenarians who recently died. We hope you find their lives as interesting as we did.

DATE	DESCRIPTION	AMOUNT	OTHER INFO
5/2/30	Ink & Paint	09	Pl. Check 20.50
2/1/32			25.00
2/1/32			30.00
7/29/31			35.00
8/2/32			35.00
9/28/32			100.00
4/17/33	Asst. Supv.	50.00	100.00
4/15/33	Assigned		55.00
2/10/33	Ink & Paint	09	Checker 10.50
12/2/32	Ink & Paint	16	Final Ch. 15.00
4/1/33			10.00
12/2/32			50.00
12/21/32	Special Processes	17	App. Check 53.70

A Disney record from the 1940s detailing some of Ruthie Tompson’s job history at the studio. Disney

Ruthie Tompson (1910-2021)

She worked on Disney animations for more than 40 years and died in her retirement home in California at age 111.

As Ruthie Tompson walked to school each day as a child, she passed the Disney film studio and would peer into its offices. Walt Disney himself saw her and welcomed her inside to watch the animation process.

Years after their first meeting, Mr. Disney invited her to join the studio as an inker and painter. She was later promoted to help edit and perfect the thousands of drawings that made animated features.

Over four decades she worked on nearly every one of Disney’s animated features, from “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs,” released in 1937, to “The Rescuers,” released in 1977.

Read her obituary [here](#).



Louise Levy in 1918, not long before the end of World War I.
via Levy Family

Louise Levy (1910-2023)

She was the oldest known living person in New York State when she died at 112.

Louise Levy lived so long that she became the subject of genetic research, but she believed the secret to a long life had nothing to do with genetics: She credited her low-cholesterol diet, her positive attitude and a daily glass of red wine.

Her age and health, considered relatively good up until her final days, caught the interest of scientists who recruited her in 1988 for a genetic study on her longevity.

The [Institute for Aging Research](#) at the Albert Einstein School of Medicine in the Bronx recruited 700 people, all of them Ashkenazi Jews, to evaluate possible genetic reasons for their unusually long, healthy lives. The research discovered gene mutations within the population that helped protect them against high cholesterol, heart disease, diabetes and Alzheimer's disease and that slowed the impact of aging.

Read her obituary [here](#).



“I left Mississippi a scared little girl of 7 years old,” Ms. Kirkland said in 2016. “Now I’m 107 — and I’m not frightened anymore.”
Andrea Morales for The New York Times

Mamie Kirkland (1908-2020)

A witness to racial violence in her youth, she died at 111 at her home in upstate New York.

Mamie Kirkland survived some of Mississippi’s darkest history. She was 7 in 1915 when she woke up to her father telling the family that a group of white men planned to lynch him and his friend. Her father and his friend slipped out in the night, and then she and the rest of the family fled in the morning.

They left Mississippi but could not escape the racism that threatened their homes and lives. In 1917, in East St. Louis, Ill., Ms. Kirkland watched white men burn down homes and shoot people in a neighborhood where Black residents had recently moved in.

When the family arrived in Alliance, Ohio, years later, members of the Ku Klux Klan went to their home, ready to burn a cross. But an armed white neighbor chased off the aggressors.

When she was 15, Ms. Kirkland married and moved to Buffalo, N.Y., where she sold Avon beauty products. Her son said her work as a saleswoman evolved into door-to-door life coaching.

The stories of her youth inspired the creation of a documentary, as well as the Legacy Museum and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Ala.

Read her obituary [here](#).



Kane Tanaka in 2021. She lived through two world wars and the influenza outbreak of 1918, and endured the coronavirus pandemic. Fukuoka Prefectural Government, via Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Kane Tanaka (1903-2022)

She worked on a military base in Japan to support her family. When she died at 119, she was the world's oldest known person.

Kane Tanaka survived wars, pandemics, cancer treatments and other medical ailments, but she kept a sharp mind and a quick wit until the end of her life.

She outlived many family members, including her husband and children, and worked several jobs to support her family on a military base in Japan until her late 70s. She was known for maintaining her humor despite many hardships in life.

Fizzy drinks and chocolates were close to her heart, and she would request them often in her final moments.

Read her obituary [here](#).



When she died in 2023 at age 118, Sister André was the world's oldest known person. Daniel Cole/Associated Press

Sister André (1904-2023)

She survived two pandemics, and a Covid infection, and died at 118.

Sister André, a Roman Catholic nun, dedicated decades of her life to caring for orphans and others when she was assigned to work in a hospital in Vichy, France.

In her final years, just as she was about to turn 117, she made headlines for surviving a Covid-19 infection.

When she died in 2023, a year after Ms. Tanaka, Sister André was the world's oldest known person.

“Work kept me alive,” she told reporters a year before her death.

Read her obituary [here](#).



Hester Ford in 2016 celebrating her 111th birthday. “She was a reminder of how far we have come as people on this earth,” her great-granddaughter said.

Diedra Laird/The Charlotte Observer, via Associated Press

Hester Ford (1904 or 1905-2021)

She grew up tilling fields and picking cotton on a farm in South Carolina and died at the age of 115 or 116.

Hester Ford was the matriarch of a family tree with hundreds of extended branches. At the time of her death, she was survived by her 12 children, 68 grandchildren, 125 great-grandchildren and at least 120 great-great-grandchildren.

She lived independently until she was 108, when family members moved in after she fell in her bathtub and bruised her ribs.

Her family said her morning routines involved half of a banana and fresh air, but Ms. Ford had no secret for longevity. When asked to share her advice on living a long life, she told a local newspaper, “I just live right, all I know.”

Read her obituary [here](#).



Virginia McLaurin (1909-2022)

Virginia McLaurin in 2016 celebrating Black History Month with the Obamas at the White House.
Official White House Photo by Lawrence Jackson

She caught attention for dancing with the Obamas in the White House in 2016, and she died at 113 by her own records.

When Virginia McLaurin entered a room to greet President Barack Obama and the first lady, Michelle Obama, in 2016 at a Black History Month reception at the White House, she let out a loud “Hi!”

She approached the pair with excitement, dancing in place with each of them, and told them she was “so happy” to have a Black president and first lady in the White House.

Ms. McLaurin was born in South Carolina during the Jim Crow era and grew up walking 10 miles to school in the single pair of shoes she would get each year. Around 1939, she moved to Washington as one of the millions of Black people who moved from the South to Northern, Midwestern and Western states during the Great Migration.

She worked several different jobs and lived a quiet life.

At age 106, when the video of her in the White House was shared online, she suddenly had a platform. She used her newfound fame to encourage Americans to vote.

Read her obituary [here](#).