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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

88-YEAR-OLD COLLEGE GRADUATE BECOMES A LOCAL CELEBRITY

CHARLESTON -- Eighty-eight-year-old Daisy Rittgers of Shelbyville is causing quite a stir in Shelby County.

News of Daisy's graduation from Eastern Illinois University on Aug. 4 has inspired city fathers to post a banner below the town's welcome sign that says "Home of Daisy Rittgers." That puts her right up there with one of Eastern's most famous alumnus, Illinois Gov. Jim Edgar, who is named on Charleston's welcome sign.

Daisy, who is returning to Eastern next Sunday to receive her diploma after first setting foot on campus nearly 70 years ago, is believed to be the oldest graduate in Eastern's history. She will join more than 300 graduates participating in Eastern's 2 p.m. summer commencement ceremony in Lantz Gymnasium.

"I think I'll feel just like the other graduates when I walk across the stage; that this is just the beginning of the rest of my life," Daisy said during a recent phone interview from her Shelbyville home.

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Daisy will be earning a Board of Governors Bachelor of Arts (BOG/BA) degree from Eastern's School of Adult and Continuing Education. The BOG/BA program is designed for adult non-traditional students with extensive work experience that is applied toward their degree completion.

The soon-to-be newest member of Eastern's network of more than 68,000 alumni said she had really never given much thought to completing the degree she started 69 years ago until her niece, Sandy Storm, who received bachelor's and master's degrees from Eastern in 1970 and 1991, respectively, planted the idea.

"This is something I wanted to see my aunt through on. With a teaching career that spanned more than 50 years and the extensive coursework she took over the years, I thought Aunt 'Peg' had to be pretty close to earning a degree," Sandy said.

Daisy, who will be graduating with the 120 credit hours required and then some, said, "I am proud to say that I have taken care of some unfinished business. Completing my degree not only gives me personal satisfaction, but hopefully it will be an incentive to my grandnieces and grandnephews to finish college," she said.

As Daisy's graduation gift, Sandy is bringing together more than 100 of her friends and family -- at last count -- to recognize her achievement.

Reflecting on the past, Daisy said that Eastern gave her something that made her life important. "Eastern is a symbol of education. It's what my life has become -- guiding young people's lives."

"I suppose I always wanted to be a teacher. We used to play school on rainy

days. It was the beginning of the Depression and teaching was the nearest thing I could get into that I could make a living at," she recalled.

She recollected having to borrow \$175 to enroll in what was then Eastern Illinois State Teachers College in the fall of 1927. "That was a lot money for our family. My mother baked homemade bread and cookies and put dollars and quarters in with them to help make ends meet. For extra money, I worked evenings at the Charleston Public Library, which was two blocks from my three-room apartment near campus."

Her fondest memories of Eastern are the chapel services led by Eastern's first president, Livingston C. Lord. "Dr. Lord was a perfectionist and a very religious man. He did have a sense of humor, though. In chapel, he would always ask students for their requests. They'd shout out the name of a particular song that would make quartet member Burl Ives blush. Dr. Lord knew it was a joke on Burl, but I didn't. I also remember a lecture Dr. Lord gave in chapel, scolding the women in Pemberton Hall for breaking a rocking chair."

Daisy spoke affectionately of Ives, even though she said he was more interested in girls than school. "Burl, with his athletic build, drew the girls' attention. He was not very focused on school. As my lab partner, he was lazy about getting his bookwork done and would borrow mine to get caught up."

With her keen memory, Daisy called off the names of her favorite teachers: Ernest Stover, zoology; Zea Zinn, English; Florence McAfee, physical education; and

Emma Rinehardt, psychology.

"The student body was a very serious group. They didn't think too highly of anyone who missed chapel. Well, I missed two chapel services: one because I had a headache, and the other because I went to the county courthouse to take a teacher's exam. I was frightened like a rabbit," Daisy quipped.

To this day, Daisy still has the green beanie she wore as a freshman at Eastern. She's retired her other common school attire -- black pleated bloomers and a white blouse.

Daisy left Eastern in 1928 after completing a one-year teaching certificate. She began her teaching career in a one-room schoolhouse in Mount Taber, south of Shelbyville. About half of her 45 students were Amish, with five sets of twins among them. "I taught all eight grades and had to do the janitorial work too," she said.

She continued to teach in one-room schools in and around Shelby County until Shelbyville Unit 4 was formed. She taught in Shelbyville schools for 23 years before retiring in 1972. She continued to substitute teach until she was 75-years-old.

Over the years, she has completed numerous college courses which have applied toward her degree from Eastern.

Even though Daisy retired from teaching 16 years ago, she hasn't given it up altogether. She teaches Sunday school class at Clarksburg United Methodist Church. She also dabbles in oil painting and writes award-winning poetry. She has written a special poem for her graduation.

She said she hopes to find time to attend Eastern alumni events and other university activities.