REMEMBERING

Erna Nelson

August 20, 1920 - May 27, 2015

Passed away peacefully in her sleep, Erna Nelson, lately of Fort Langley, long time resident of Chilliwack, BC, Canada, on May 27, 2015. She was aged 94 at the time of her death caused by complications of aging.

Born on August 20, 1920 in Bukowerwalt, Poland, at the age of nine months, Erna along with her mother Wanda, father Carl, and older sister Hilda, was on her way to Canada, travelling on her own papers because permission to immigrate had been given to the family before her birth.

The family travelled to Herbert, Saskatchewan to join an uncle. While her father started work in the uncle’s butcher shop, Erna grew and was soon waiting at the front gate to greet a teacher on her way to school. She would often say that she just could not wait for the time she would get to go to school, too.

Hard working and determined even then, Erna did very well at school, skipping ahead a grade on two occasions. She and another girl were often competing for top marks while staying the best of friends.

Living in the dry south of Saskatchewan during these years of drought and economic depression would not have been easy, however the Firus Family always had enough food. Erna told how her mother would feed the hungry young men who rode the rails into town travelling across Canada looking for work. Wanda knew all too well about hard times.

Graduating two years early, meant that Erna had finished grade school before her sixteenth birthday and could not be admitted to normal school to qualify as a teacher herself until she was 18. So for two years, she lived with her married older sister, Hilda, and took on light housekeeping work until she could pursue the dream begun at the garden gate so many years before.

Erna taught for several years after normal school, all in one room, multi-grade rural schoolhouses on the Prairie. Often the school day began early with her building a fire in the potbellied stove that heated the school. In one case, the poor farmers of the district could not afford to pay her whole salary for the year until sometime after

she had moved on to another school.

Her proudest accomplishment during her time teaching was that she only ever used the strap to discipline a student once. After that, she always used what she called “psychology,” probably largely learned at home with her three brothers, even when she discovered a dead gopher in her drawer one morning.

Erna was also very proud that during the summer vacations she finished the university level courses that were required to gain a permanent professional teaching certificate. Later as a newly married woman, she would occasionally work as a substitute teacher, but by that time, she was moving forward in other fields.

At the start of World War II, Erna wanted to contribute to the war effort, and worked as a welder assembling Bren guns until the factory ran out of raw material. Soon after she received a call from her brother Art who was called up to serve and wanted her to come home and take over as the editor and publisher of the Herbert Herald, a weekly newspaper that he owned with the family and had been running.

Together with her two younger brothers, Bob and Eric, they put out papers, printed posters, business cards, and other printing jobs. When she attended a weekly newspaper publishers’ convention in Toronto and discovered she was the first Canadian female editor, her unique situation hit home. She was interviewed by telephone, by Claire Wallace of the CBC, who was broadcasting about women doing men’s work during the war.

After the war, on July 19, 1946, Erna married the handsome young airframe mechanic of #10 Repair Depot, Lyall Nelson, whom she had met when visiting her sister Elsie in Calgary during Easter vacation in 1945. Together, Erna and Lyall moved to Chilliwack, where Lyall’s parents Esther and Harry were living, having left their own too dry farm in Saskatchewan for much greener pastures.

Erna worked at several jobs, including the Chilliwack Progress, the local weekly newspaper, before starting, in her “spare” time, to build together with Lyall their first house on Fourth Avenue. They moved from the garage to the house proper when the Fraser threatened to flood in 1948 to gain a couple of feet of altitude, and three years later started on another house on Princess Avenue. They put both houses up for sale, then moved into the Princess house, starting both a business, Lyall Nelson Homes, and a family there.

Working under the National Building Code to get CMHC mortgages, Erna taught herself to draw blueprints and design houses that would pass the multiple building inspections required under that program. In 1960, she would qualify as a Lighting Consultant which ensured that her own family would also grow up in a Medallion home, like all the Nelson houses, designed by her.

Erna and Lyall loved family and friend gatherings, often hosting at home and at their Cultus Lake cottage, where swimming was always mandatory. Travel was a lifelong passion and early on they often took their two children, Don and Jan, along whether it was camping, road trips to visit her brother Bob and his family in L.A., or plane hopping in Mexico. Fishing was another husband and wife activity and right up to her last days, Erna would remember fishing in the “Salt Chuck” with her Lyall, and how it was often she who brought home the biggest fish.

An enthusiastic and competitive golfer, in her senior years Erna often remembered places by their golf courses when motoring about the Valley.

Erna was an active member and board member of the Chilliwack United Church during her years in that city, and contributed her organizing skills and drive to many committees typically involved with maintaining or renovating the church buildings.

In 1990, Lyall suffered a debilitating stroke. Erna devoted herself to his care during the remaining years of his life. During this time Jan's twin boys Graham and Nelson were born and they truly became her most precious highlight. She lost her driver's license during this time because of failing sight, and eventually moved into care closer to her children in the Langley area. Here she continued to enjoy many family gatherings and set a tradition around her annual birthday party.

Erna's passing was swift and peaceful. She is survived by her son, Don Nelson and his wife Linda Muttitt, her daughter Janice and her husband Gordon Talbot and their sons, Nelson and Graham. She was predeceased by her husband, Lyall, and her siblings Hilda, Arthur, Elsie, Eric, and Robert.

A memorial will be held for Erna at Chilliwack United Church on June 27, 2015 at 2:30 PM. In lieu of flowers, donations to either Plan Canada or the Nature Conservancy of Canada would be appreciated.