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STAN'S LOOKOUT: Remembering Helen Stout, the 'world's oldest teen-ager'



By STAN STAPP

HELEN STOUT'S seven-line obituary in the Seattle Times was brief, but to the point. It described Helen (also known as Heleri) as a "long-time Seattle resident, dancer, painter, poet, clown. Adventurer in wide-flung places. Taster at life's table." She is survived by her two sons, Peter and David.

Helen was a long-time friend of ours, Dorothy first becoming acquainted with her when they were neighbors on 28th Avenue NE. In addition, they shared other common interests: folk dancing, hiking, the Mountaineers, and were members of University Unitarian Church.

Helen died Feb. 26, age 88. Her husband, John Stout, had died 11 years earlier, Feb. 25, 1988, age 76. They had married late in life, having met through the Mountaineers. Dorothy stood up with Helen when they wed. After the wedding their friends moved to the Wilsonian and we danced the night away.

John was a Boeing machinist, one who had led a vigorous life of hiking, climbing, backpacking, and marathon running, living in a boarding house when they first met. When they were wed it was said: "John married Helen because her house had a LARGE basement."

The first time around, Helen's husband had been a preacher: Aron Gilmartin, pastor of University Unitarian Church.

From time to time, Dorothy and I camped with the Stouts; or joined them on Mountaineer hikes. And, occasionally, we ran into them while walking around Green Lake. We'd first come across John, passing us on the run, conditioning himself for a forthcoming marathon (usually twice around the lake). Next we'd come across Helen walking towards us. And then John again.

ONE TIME while camping together on Orcas Island we climbed Mt. Constitution (no big deal, you can

motor to the top) and became separated - the girls ahead of us and John and I in the rear. Lost on little ol' Mt. Constitution? Has anyone ever been lost there before? When we finally found each other an argument broke out over which sex possesses the most Common Sense.

I'm afraid the men lost that argument - which must have hit John the hardest, for although I'd climbed a few mountains in my day, they were nothing compared to his lifetime record of conquering 102 peaks.

John, who was 5 feet 2 inches and weighed but 125 pounds, entered 22 marathons and five "ultra-marathons" after the age of 70. Quite often Helen started with him, sometimes finishing a couple of hours later than John. Still, though, she might be first in her age bracket - possibly because there were no other entrants in her age bracket.

John's longest trek was in the "HikaNation" as they called it, clear across the United States, 4,289 miles in 411 days. He was 69, going on 70, the oldest hiker to complete the journey. Helen drove across the country to meet him on the final leg.

HELEN LOVED TO DANCE and was quite active in Festival Folkdancers, a group formed by a number of us in the early '60s. She also danced with the Mountaineers, and others. One time she and John participated in a performance at the Green Lake Bathhouse Theatre, which required them to act, sing and dance.

After John died, Helen began feeling it was time to move into another phase of her life. And that is when she adopted the name Heleri - taken from the misspelling of her name on a piece of mail.

When her 80th birthday (May 6, 1990) was approaching, Heleri thought it would be nice to celebrate with a Maypole dance. Now it just so happened that a fellow folk dancer, Alice Nugent, HAD a Maypole. So she rounded up a bunch of us folk dancers to celebrate Heleri's 80th. To accommodate the crowd (her own yard was not large enough), we had to borrow her next-door neighbor's front yard. It was a nice spring day.

While Carl Nugent and others were setting up the Maypole, I pinned a button on Heleri, which Dorothy had found earlier. It read: "World's Oldest Teen-ager."

Then the dance was taught, with Alice shouting out instructions on how to do it: "Weave over and under," etc. Clutching green and white ribbons, we made a dry run or two, and then we danced around the pole to taped music. Not only did we have fun, so did the neighbors, too.

SEVERAL DAYS LATER, after taking a computer class at North Seattle Community College, Heleri stopped by our house for a visit. She was still wearing that button!

Heleri soon became involved with several dance workshops, and joined a professional dance troupe which put on three shows in Boston.

Several years ago she joined Crone, an organization for older women, "to help them obtain power, passion, and purpose."

As a result, she wrote a poem entitled: "On Being A Witch," of which the first few lines go: "Not the kind that comes out on Halloween, nor the kind that women worship - the female God before Deity became a HE. I am the witch who is an old woman with a mind of her own. I have lived long enough to break the rules; to go where I want to go. I am relieved of need for fashionable conventional dress."

Dorothy and I last visited with Heleri several months ago at the church (where her memorial service was later held) to view her recently painted watercolors. She was still gung-ho - at the age of 88.

Heleri once was asked: "What age was your best?" "The age that I am now," she replied. "This is the best year of my life."

Eleven years ago, after Helen scattered John's ashes, she wrote: "Remembering other visits to this secret place I have chosen - I am not crying, I, too, would like to be resting forever in this grove."

Stan Stapp is the retired publisher of the old Outlook, a family-owned community newspaper that covered North Seattle for several decades until its sale in the mid-'70s. He and his wife Dorothy now reside in the Wedgwood neighborhood.

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