

Remembering Helen

By John Carpenter
Gazette Staff

This is a story that I anticipated that I might some day write, but certainly never looked forward to writing it. If you look on page five of this week's issue, or have been on the streets of Columbus Junction this week, you already know that Helen Aringdale has passed away. This is not just the passing of a long-time citizen, but it represents the passing of an institution, the passing of a community asset, and the passing of an era.

I've been thinking the last couple of days about what to write. I suppose I could take the well-worn path of listing her accomplishments: In 1997 she was inducted into the Iowa Newspaper Association's 50-year member Club. In 1998 she was named Columbus Day Distinguished Citizen. In 2002 she published the book, "Do You Remember," which included nearly eight hundred slides of Columbus Junction and the surrounding area that she had collected over the years. In 2006 Helen was voted Iowa's Outstanding Older Worker, and represented the state in Washington, D.C.

These are awards and recognitions that Helen received. But a life shouldn't be measured by what was received, it should be measured by what was given. And in Helen's own way, she gave a lot to our community. As I mentioned in the first paragraph, Helen is the end of an era. What I was referring to was the era where a job wasn't thought of as just a job, it was a mission. Helen took her job with the newspaper very seriously. She was proud of having a role in distributing the community happenings, and preserving the area's history in the newspaper files. I doubt Helen ever concerned herself with the salary she was paid. Every week when a new issue hit the streets, Helen felt compensated. And just think about it, Helen was a part of every issue of the Gazette from February of 1944 to the present. That is a sense of dedication that is rare. There are people who still look upon their jobs in this way, and there will be others to come, but they will be rare.

Helen really loved her community, and gave to all of us through her memories. She was the town's historian, and relished that role. She looked forward to events where she could relate our past, and was overjoyed when the museum was established in town. I know that she spent countless hours of volunteer time there. She took a special interest when young people would ask her questions about our community's or the newspaper's past. Helen indicated in a feature story written about her career in 2004 that one of the highlights she recalled was a special open house the Gazette held commemorating its 110th Anniversary. We hauled up old newspaper equipment, and Helen spent hours explaining each piece and its use in the printing business.

Helen gave of her time to people. She would walk to Colonial Manor and spend afternoons visiting with the residents. Nearly everyone I have talked to were a recipient of Helen's birthday cards. All written in that small handwriting style of hers. If she learned of a birthday, it went into her notebook and a card was soon coming. She loved to hear of the lives of former residents. If someone stopped in the office, Helen would quiz them on the happenings in the lives of their relatives who had moved away. There were very few funerals or visitations in town that Helen missed. She felt it was important to help console others in their time of loss.

And Helen gave to her Church. She served many roles in the Church over her lifetime, and faithfully attended services when the weather or her health allowed. She was a devout Christian, and considered her Faith the center of her life.

But enough of this, Helen always said that she never liked any fuss made over her (however, I think that she secretly enjoyed it.) As we all



know, Helen was an interesting person. She had her own ways, her own ideas, and her own thoughts, and these never changed. She was the same person sixty-six years ago when she began her walk downtown to start her newspaper career, and she was the same person when her career ended last week. I came to know Helen pretty well over the past fourteen years, so my best way to describe her is to relate some memories that I have.

For example, I recall when Donna and I took Helen to Des Moines to be inducted into the newspaper 50-year club. When we reached the Marriott Hotel, there was an escalator taking us to the second story. I jumped on the escalator and began riding up. However, when I reached the top I looked back, and Helen was still standing at the bottom. I went back down and told her that we needed to go up. It then became obvious to me that Helen didn't know what to do. I told her to just step on and it would take her up. Helen reluctantly got on, but when she reached the top she said to me, "There isn't any of these on Second Street, and I hope they never put one there."

On that same trip we parked in the parking garage adjacent to the hotel. After the event, as can be sometimes the case, we went to the wrong floor of the garage. It took us a little while finding the car. Helen never forgot that. Years later, whenever I was going somewhere, she always reminded me of the time I lost the car. She even told others that they needed to be careful when they went with me because of my tendency to lose cars. I never could convince Helen that this was an isolated case.

Another time Helen called me late one Saturday night and said that she wasn't feeling well, and needed to go to the hospital. So we went to the emergency room at the University Hospital. Now if you've never been in the emergency room in Iowa City on a Saturday night, you need to stop by sometime. It was packed, and I think Helen and I were the only sober ones in the place. I think that

every drunk in town was dropped off there. After a while I turned to Helen and said, "You know, Helen, we might have to fight our way out of here." Helen just looked at me and said, "Maybe you'll have to, but I'm planning on staying here."

It was a ritual on Fridays at the Gazette to get Helen's groceries. I would take Helen down to the grocery store, leave the car there so she knew where it was, and then go back to the Gazette. After fifteen minutes I would walk back down to the store and help Helen carry out her groceries and take her home. One day there was a light rain when I took her to the store. By the time I got back to the Gazette I was pretty wet. Fifteen minutes later I slogged back down to the store, and loaded Helen's groceries. By then I was really wet. As we started home I knew that there was no way I could convince her to get her house key out. I knew that I would have to stand on her sidewalk, in the rain, while she fumbled around in her purse for her key. So on the way home Helen said, "Our new pastor (it was before Jim Braden came) doesn't like your column very well." So I said, "I'm sure a lot of people don't like it, but I hope you defended me." Well Helen, in her honest way, said, "I told him that I didn't like it much either, but I have to read it because it's my job to proofread it." I started to laugh so hard that I almost ran into the wall on Second Street. If somebody didn't know Helen, they would have thrown her out of their car. But I thought her honest answer was hilarious.

Things will be different at the Gazette. A sixty-six year legacy has come to an end, and I will truly miss Helen. I always found her honesty to be refreshing, and although she never hesitated to offer her criticisms, they were not meant to be degrading or mean. I think that she was always on an endeavor of trying to improve my character (probably an impossible undertaking). Whenever I would finish a story and give it to Helen to proofread, she would say, "Well,

that's not the way Mr. Shearer would have written it."

Helen, I enjoyed working with you, and I will always appreciate the things you taught me about the newspaper business. You were my friend, and I will never forget your friendship. And especially, I will continue your quest of teaching the world that an apostrophe is only to be used in the word "its" when it is used in place of "it is." An apostrophe is never used in "its" when it is possessive. Good-bye Helen, and I know that you are in a happy place. I'm proud to have worked with you.

(P. S. Over the past couple of years I have received a number of requests for Helen's book, "Do You Remember." I have told those people that the book has been sold out for some time, but I would let them know when we might do a new printing. A few months ago I approached Helen on this subject, with the idea of using the proceeds to help pay for a couple of winter months for her in Colonial Manor. I assured her that she could return to her home, but the winter was dangerous, and she should spend it in the Manor. This caused quite a bit of arguments with her, but I was hopeful that I could persuade her. Well now, Helen can't argue with me, so we are going to do a new printing. The printer still has the original files, so a reprint is possible. Our plan is to use any proceeds from the book to establish a scholarship at the school in Helen's name for any deserving student that will be pursuing a career in journalism or communications. The Gazette would really like to establish some type of legacy for Helen, and this appears to be a very good way to do so. Depending upon the sales, it is hoped that the scholarship will last for a number of years.

So, if you don't have a copy of Helen's book, or would like an additional copy, let us know. The price will be the same as the original, \$25, and all proceeds will be directed to the scholarship.)

Briefly -

Be a part of the Backyard Bird Count

The Columbus Junction Community Development Center invites you to participate in The Great Backyard Count (GBBC). This is an annual four-day event that engages bird watchers of all ages in counting birds to create a real-time snapshot of where the birds are across the continent. The GBBC count will take place February 18 to 21. Anyone can participate, from beginning bird watchers to experts. It takes as little as 15 minutes on one day, or you can count for as long as you like each day of the event. The Community Development Center will collect Columbus area tallies through Friday, February 15 and will publish the results in the following week's newsletter. Drop them off at City Hall or email cdc@columbusjunctioniowa.org. It's free, fun, and easy—and it helps the birds. Let's have a Columbus GBBC! See www.birdsource.org/gbbc/ to begin preparing.

Breakfast Buffet in Ainsworth

Ainsworth Community Center Opera House will hold their first breakfast buffet of 2011 on Saturday, February 5th. We will be open from 7 a.m. to 9 a.m. Cost is \$7 a person, children 10 and under are free with an adult. Our menu includes biscuits and gravy, link sausage, breakfast casseroles, ham, scrambled eggs, hash browns, fresh fruit, rolls, and more. This is a fundraiser for the Opera House. Hope to see you there!

City Council meets tonight

The City of Columbus Junction will hold a regular Council meeting today, Wednesday, January 26, 2011, at 5:30 p.m., in the New Civic Center/City Hall.

Etude Club to meet

The Etude Club will meet on Tuesday, February 1, 2011, at 7 p.m., at Colonial Estates.

PEO to meet

The next meeting of PEO Chapter CX will be held at the home of Judy Sievers on Monday, Feb. 7th at 7:00 pm and co-hosted by Emily Bell. Mallory Smith, Executive Director, and Tri-Rivers Conservation Foundation will give the program. All members are encouraged to attend.

Pancake Supper at Pleasant Grove

Pleasant Grove Community Church is having their annual Sausage and Pancake supper on Wednesday evening, Feb 2nd, from 4:30-7:00 p.m. Please bring friends and family for an evening of good food and fellowship. Free Will Offering. In the event of foul weather, call 319-480-4706 for information or cancellation.

School to hold Blood Drive

The Mississippi Valley Regional Blood Center announces that Columbus Community High School will hold a blood drive on Tuesday, February 1, 2011, from 7 a.m. to 12 Noon at the High School Gym. To donate, call Larry Abrams at 319-728-2231 x 3334. Walk-ins welcome. Donors who last gave blood on or before December 7, 2010 are eligible. Blood donation is a safe, simple procedure that only takes about an hour. Donors must be at least 16 years old, in good health, and weigh at least 110 pounds. A blood donor card or other photo I.D. is required to donate. 16-year-old donors must present a signed parental consent form, available from the Blood Center or for download from www.bloodcenter.org. Controlled high blood pressure and diabetics are acceptable.

Update from the Superintendent High School is off low achieving list

Very good news came to Columbus High School two weeks ago. We are off 'the list'.

As background, the Iowa Department of Education has created a group of schools that are considered 'persistently low achieving school' (PLAS). Scores on the Iowa Test of Educational Development (ITED) are used over a three-year period to determine the lowest 5% academic achieving schools in the state of Iowa. The three-year collection of data occurs at the 11th grade level. Last year, Columbus High School made the PLAS list.

We know that we have many great kids who achieve at high levels. Our FFA Soil Judging Team made up of three juniors and one senior, qualified for the national competition in May in the state of Oklahoma. Marina Ramirez was chosen as the national 'Herbert Hoover Uncommon Student' this past fall and given a generous scholarship to use in college. Marina is the latest in a long line of Columbus students who have won this award. It was alarming and deflating to be placed on this state list.

In early January, I received a letter from the Iowa Department of Education that the scores of last year's junior class (this year's seniors) did well enough that the high school has been removed from the PLA list. We have a strong senior class and their higher achievement on the battery of tests had us raise 26 places. It was great news.

This year, many efforts are underway to improve the scores of the junior class. The goal is to stay off the list and move our ranking higher. High School teachers are using a teaching philosophy and techniques of Sheltered Instruction, students are having less failing grades, and the Wildcats First group is building relationships with the students in an effort to have the students know that we want them to be successful on these tests and in life. Many staff, community members, parents, and the juniors themselves believe that they will improve our high school scores.

With the success of the senior class when they were juniors, this year's junior class has been challenged to beat the scores the seniors did last year. Our hope is to achieve so well that we move far away from consideration of being on the list. If you know a junior, please encourage them to try their best on the tests coming in early March. If you know a senior, please take time and congratulate them for helping move Columbus High School to a better place.

In other news, Columbus has had its first snow day of the winter. At this time a year ago, we were at five.

Finally, the school board approved a program for our high school students called the 'Silver Cord' program. This program recognizes the volunteerism of individuals, and during the graduation ceremony of their senior year, those students who have earned the Silver Cord wear it proudly as someone who gave back to their community. The board, HS staff and I believe it's a great program.