



**Nelson, Eleanor L.**

MADISON - On Friday morning, August 9, 2002, the joyous spirit of Eleanor Lombard Nelson leaped from the grip of immobility and Parkinson's disease and danced to infinity. She was 95. "Darby" enjoyed a long career as a modern dancer, a choreographer, and a teacher of dance, as well as a teacher of women's physical education and special education. She was born Eleanor Perrin Henderson on June 5, 1907, in Stoughton, Mass., to Edward Prescott Henderson and Jane Whitley Henderson. Orphaned with her brother Edwin and sister Marion in 1915, she was adopted by the Reverend Frank Alanson Lombard and his wife Alice and taken to Japan with Edwin in 1919. She lived in Kyoto, where

her father taught at Doshisha University, and attended high school at the Canadian Academy in Kobe. A freckle-faced girl with bright red hair, she fascinated Japanese children. While in Japan she witnessed the great earthquake of 1923, climbed to the summit of Mount Fuji on August 1, 1925, studied piano and voice, and saw Martha Graham dance in Tokyo, an event that shaped her career. She returned to the United States in 1926 and attended her beloved Oberlin College, graduating in 1930. She first visited Madison in 1929, when she spent a summer studying kinesiology and dance at the University of Wisconsin. She did graduate study at Wellesley College and Columbia University Teachers College, earning her master's degree in physical education in 1936. While in New York, she studied modern dance and choreography at Jacob's Pillow with Jose Limon, Charles Wideman and Doris Humphrey and taught exercise classes to women at the Bronx YWCA. A

pioneer in women's physical education at a time when little was offered, she fought to build a program at Fuhrman University in South Carolina, where the only activity permitted females was horseback riding. She left Fuhrman for Central Michigan University in Mount Pleasant, where she found allies and built a successful program. Dance was central to it, and for one of her dance dramas, she recruited players from the university football team. She met Malcolm R. McCrea, a reporter for the Saginaw News, in Mount Pleasant and they were married in 1939. They moved to Saginaw where they had two sons, Ronald, born in 1943, and Robert, born in 1945. She opened the Neighborhood Dance Studio in their home and taught children ballet, tap and ballroom dancing. She also taught at the Saginaw YWCA. In the 1950's, she began to teach high school girls' physical education, first at Saint Mary's and Saint Andrew's High Schools, then at Arthur Hill High School, a large public school. There she taught girls' swimming and field sports and formed the Aqualites, a

synchronized swimming group. She also created a liturgical modern dance group for teenage girls at the First Congregational Church. The barefoot performances of the Rhythmic Choir raised eyebrows among the old guard, but attracted enough interest among young people that a second group was formed. At age 60, Darby retired from teaching physical education and was certified as a teacher of special education. She taught that in Saginaw schools for several more years, bringing her knowledge of nutrition and physical coordination, as well as her compassionate spirit, to bear in her work, often bringing clothing and breakfasts for her children. She married the Reverend Anthony Nelson in 1974, and they spent 16 years together, summering in Michigan and wintering in Bradenton, Fla., until his death in 1990 at age 90. Diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, Eleanor moved to Madison in 1993 to be near family. She lived at the Methodist Retirement Center, where she made many friends and celebrated her 90th birthday in 1997. Six weeks later she broke

1997. Six weeks later she broke her hip and moved to the ManorCare Nursing and Rehabilitation Center, now Oak Park, where she died peacefully on a beautiful summer morning. Darby had a full life, and although she loved the arts, travel, reading and music, she lived for her family and was their most loyal and stalwart protector and defender. She was unfailingly generous with her modest resources, helping to support one son and his family through extended layoffs and another through a nearly three-year newspaper strike and subsequent periods of unemployment. She had an independent mind and a feisty spirit that would not be put down. She traveled and made new friends until she could no longer. She loved living and sharing to the very end, and even then managed a smile and a laugh when

she saw that her family was at her bedside. Eleanor is survived by her sons Ron, of Madison, and Bob, of Saginaw, and their wives, Elaine DeSmidt and Christine McCrea; by two grandchildren, Jason McCrea and his wife Andrea McCrea, of Janesville, Wis., and Jennifer McCrea of University City, Mo.; and great-grandchildren Autumn, Kayla, Kyle and Alex, of Janesville. She is also survived by Benjamin DeSmidt and Debbie Hecht of New York City; and by the Nelson children, Alvin, of Ann Arbor, Mich., and his wife Nancy, Joan Neil, of Deerfield Ill., and her husband Herbert; and Charles, of San Jose, Calif. She is also survived by a sister-in-law, Beth Lombard of Carmel, Calif. She was predeceased by her brother Edwin Lombard and sister Marion Morse. At Eleanor's request, there will be no service or memorials. Interment will be at a later date in Florida. The family wishes to thank Jean Bachuber and the staff of the Arcadia Unit at Oak Park for their wonderful, tender care of our dear mother.

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Nelson Adeline H. Beck

## **Wisconsin State Journal**

Madison, WI

Sunday, August 11, 2002

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