

Mabel Helgason is Armstrong's youngest 90 year old citizen

by Jo Ashmore

Mabel Helgason is the latest Armstrong resident to join the growing ranks of local citizens who have celebrated their 90th birthday. She reached that milestone on November 7, and her family honored her with an open house for friends and relatives.

Six of her 13 great-grandchildren were unable to be there, but only one granddaughter out of 13 grandchildren couldn't make it. Her four living sons and the widow of the fifth were present, as were grandchildren-in-law and cousins, cousins and more cousins. They came from South Dakota, Kansas, Nebraska, Missouri, Wisconsin and Minnesota, as well as Iowa.

Having lived in Armstrong or Armstrong Grove Township nearly all her life, Mabel, widowed since 1976, has made her home in one of the units at Columbian Heights Manor for about 10 years. Recently, she spent almost three months at Valley Vue Care Center, following hip replacement surgery in Spencer.

She returned to her apartment near the end of October and is "glad to be back home," with a little extra help. She has Lifeline, which includes a box on a shelf--"Every morning and night I pat it and it says, 'Thank you'." If she forgot to acknowledge it or was unable to, it would call her. She also wears a device around her neck with a button to push if she needs help. "It

calls someone in Massachusetts, they call Oliver, then Robert, then a neighbor and then 911 if they can't get anyone," she explained.

Someone from Home Health comes in three times a week to do her laundry, help with a bath, take her blood pressure, make the bed, whatever can be done in an hour. A nurse checks on her every two or three weeks, and family members deliver her noon meal.

"My neighbors are like family," she said. "In nice weather, we sit on the porch. I watch TV, go to church and to circle."

A longtime volunteer at Valley Vue, she also held offices in the women's organization at Nazareth Lutheran Church and was the first female member of the congregation to be named a deacon.

An avid reader since childhood, she still reads magazines and books from the library, especially fiction and biographies.

"I keep busy," she said.

Mabel is another of those residents with deep roots in the community. Her eldest son Oliver and his wife Dorothy live on the Century Farm that was homesteaded by her paternal grandfather, John C. Harrison in 1871. Her paternal grandmother, the former Elizabeth Martin Baker, arrived here with her family in 1875.

Her maternal grandfather, Herbert Moore, a carpenter and mason, arrived somewhat later from Wisconsin, joining other siblings who were here already. He returned to his home area for a time, with the wife he had found in Armstrong, Leota Brooks, to help his mother farm, then came back to Armstrong when there was more work available. Their daughter Amy was born during the time the couple lived in Wisconsin.

Leota was the daughter of Henry Brooks, a Civil War veteran who received his land for his military service and farmed one mile south and a half mile west of the Harrison farm. The Brooks family came to Armstrong Grove from Mitchell County, Iowa.

Mabel's parents, Harry and Amy Melvina Harrison, were living on a rented place northwest of his parents' farm when Mabel was born in 1906. Two years later, Harrison went to Texas on an excursion offered by the railroad and bought bare land, renting another place with buildings so that he could bring his family.

They remained in Texas just 11 months, Mabel said, because "Grandpa Harrison had put his farm up for sale and Dad couldn't see letting it go." An only child, Harry Harrison farmed 50/50 with his father at first, then gradually took over the farm.

Asked if the threatened sale was a ploy to get the family back from Texas, Mabel said thoughtfully, "It could have been." She remembered how her grandfather missed them.

"I was three when we came back, and I can still see my grandmothers sitting on the couch, on each side of me," Mabel recalled. "They were so glad to see me. And I remember that Grandpa went down to the cellar and got some apples for us to eat. He had quite a good orchard."

Mabel lived with her parents in a little house on the farm while her grandparents lived in a larger home nearby, along with another granddaughter, Esther Burt, her father's step-niece who was quite a bit older than Mabel and like an older sister to her.

Esther would marry Ike Watts "who worked for Mr. (Warner) Hoppus across the road. Mr. Hoppus bought the place from Uncle Jeff (Harrison) when he moved to Oregon," Mabel said. The Wattses were parents of Berneille Madison of Ringsted.

"I can remember Mr. Hoppus's 50th birthday--they had a party for him," Mabel recalled, chuckling, "and I thought he had one foot in the grave, he seemed so old. And he lived a good many years after that!"

Glenn Hoppus was her playmate, although he was a little younger. Both had ponies and would often race "if our dads didn't know anything about it. Eventually, the John Thorson family moved near us and then there were girls to play with," she said.

Even though there was a country school a mile west of her home, Mabel never attended it because her grandfather, a school board member, set the Armstrong school district's boundaries to include his farm. She started kindergarten in the town's wooden school building with Mable Miller, a local woman, as her first teacher. She

also recalls a Miss Fletcher and a Miss Hadley, who was "very, very stern, but we all liked her and all learned from her."

"In the old school, you came in, and right ahead were a whole bunch of steps that went up. The superintendent (Bradley) stood at the top, so we didn't dare run. You had to be circumspect. He was very stern.

"I never was above the first floor in that building," Mabel said. The high school and upper grades met on the second floor.

When the old school was torn down to make way for the present elementary building, Mabel's class met in the old city jail, right under the water tower. "I was just sure that tank was going to tip over," she laughed. She was in fifth grade with about 20 in her class.

"I thought when we moved into the new school that I'd be lost all the time!" she said. Her room was in the southwest corner on the second floor. "Last winter I helped with the BABES Program in the room in the southeast corner," she noted.

During the first year in the "new school" her class was studying hygiene, she remembers, and the teacher was stressing the importance of regular bathing. "One boy said, 'I can't take baths in the winter. There's ice over the creek.' I thought of that when I was at Valley View, looking out toward Doug Nutt's house" and the creek, she said.

Originally, sixth, seventh and eighth grades comprised the junior high in her day, Mabel recalled, with eighth grade later being moved into the high school.

There was much commentary from townspeople over the new school, she noted, with critics saying indignantly, "They've got rooms over there they never even finished." She laughed, "But in a year or two they had to finish them" because of increased enrollment.

Kids didn't have a lot of clothes when she was in school--most parents couldn't afford them. "I wore one dress to school all one year, with different cuffs and collars," she said. "One set was embroidered. Things were cleaned at home. Girls always wore dresses

to school, and we always wore long underwear to keep warm in the winter. We'd turn up the legs when we got to school.

"Women always wore dresses, too. Mother wore one pair of Dad's overalls to do chores because she had to go over the fence to take care of the hogs." A neighbor woman saw her and was horrified to see a woman in pants, Mabel recalled.

"If it was stormy, we took it for granted that there was no school," but if the roads were just snow-covered, "the dads went ahead of the school bus and cleaned the roads. My folks drove the first bus," she said, "when I was in kindergarten and first grade. Then in second grade, the Thorsons did, when their kids were ready for high school.

"The bus my father used was long, with side curtains. He took soapstones and irons, heated in the oven at night, and blankets. When he got to town, he would put them in Grandma Moore's oven," so they would be warm for the return trip.

"Country kids would come to town after eighth grade and board all over town," Mabel said. She mentioned Sammy and Bertha Larsen, Leah Kesler, Helen Lund "who stayed with Mother Helgason until she passed away" and Bill Beck.

Among her own classmates were Polly Helgason, Roy Dunn, Marvin Heinrich and Rosie Danielsen.

"Polly and I were always close friends," she said, "and Mother Helgason was so good to me. My parents didn't get to go to things (in town) because they didn't drive the horse and buggy at night, so I stayed at Helgasons often." She also recalls staying overnight with her Grandmother Moore after school activities.

Polly's brother, Lorenzo Helgason, "was in the grade ahead of us. I always knew him, and he always talked to us. I used to see Lorenzo coming to school, and here'd be a whole bunch of little kids following him," Mabel said. "He liked children."

Were they high school sweethearts? "Oh, no," she said, "Charlie Harris always brought me home from play practice."

She said doesn't remember exactly when she and Lorenzo began dating; but one Christmas when she came home from nursing school to surprise her parents, "Lorenzo came to the train and got me. My folks didn't know I was coming--but my father took me to the train, going back home!"

She had graduated from high school in 1925 and started three years of training at Iowa Methodist in Des Moines that fall. "My mother spent the summer making my uniforms," she noted. "For the first three months we wore blue chambray, then we got cuffs and then wore blue and white striped

uniforms with bibs and collars. We got our caps at the end of the first year. The second year we got one band on the cap and the third year, two bands. When we graduated, we had one wide band. They don't even have caps now, and I think it's a shame," she said.

Trainees went straight through for three years, she noted, "with maybe two weeks off in the summer and a few extra days if you were on night duty."

After graduation in 1928, she returned to Armstrong waiting to take her boards that October.

She had already begun working for Dr. George West, assisting with tonsillectomies and appendectomies, by the time she and Lorenzo were married in June 1929.

"Working for Dr. West was fun," she said. She noted that for her recent birthday she had received a letter from Lyle Saxton, asking if she remembered his appendectomy.

"They were all done on the dining room table," she noted, "but we might put a blanket on it."

"I can remember when Clair Clark was a little boy. Dr. Bailey from Ceylon called (for her help as a private duty nurse), and a neighbor, Mrs. Clark, came to get me with two little boys in the back seat!

"I did in-home nursing with a sick woman in the country. All at once, all the dogs began to howl and bark--and that was when she died. I had to help the undertaker embalm her, so I've done a little bit of everything!"

For many years after they were married, Mabel and Lorenzo lived on the highway to Iowa Lake, the first place north of the Vern Strongs, although the house has since been torn down. They stayed there until 1945, then moved to the Harrison home place.

They had five sons: John Oliver, Harry, Robert, Howard and David. Howard passed away four years ago.

"Lorenzo always farmed except when he was a cow tester in Arizona for two years," from 1960-62, Mabel said. They returned to Iowa because "we were both home-sick and missed the kids. David stayed here to finish high school."

They enjoyed their years living on the Lake Road. "We were always a close group," Mabel said. "We played cards and took the kids with us. There were no babysitters. We played New Year's Day and then every two weeks until field work started." Their group included the Vern Strongs, Ervin Sabins, Eastmans, Frisbies, Hinzes, Keslers, Walt Meihe, Sandts and Alfred Petersons.

"I belonged to the Lake Road Club for many years, but I quit in the last year," she said.

Mabel worked for Dr. Roy

Turner for about six months in 1952 and then in 1958 began working as a nurse for Dr. C.V. Lindholm, a post she held until 1976 or '77. "After Lorenzo died, I worked a little while, but it didn't seem as fun," she said.

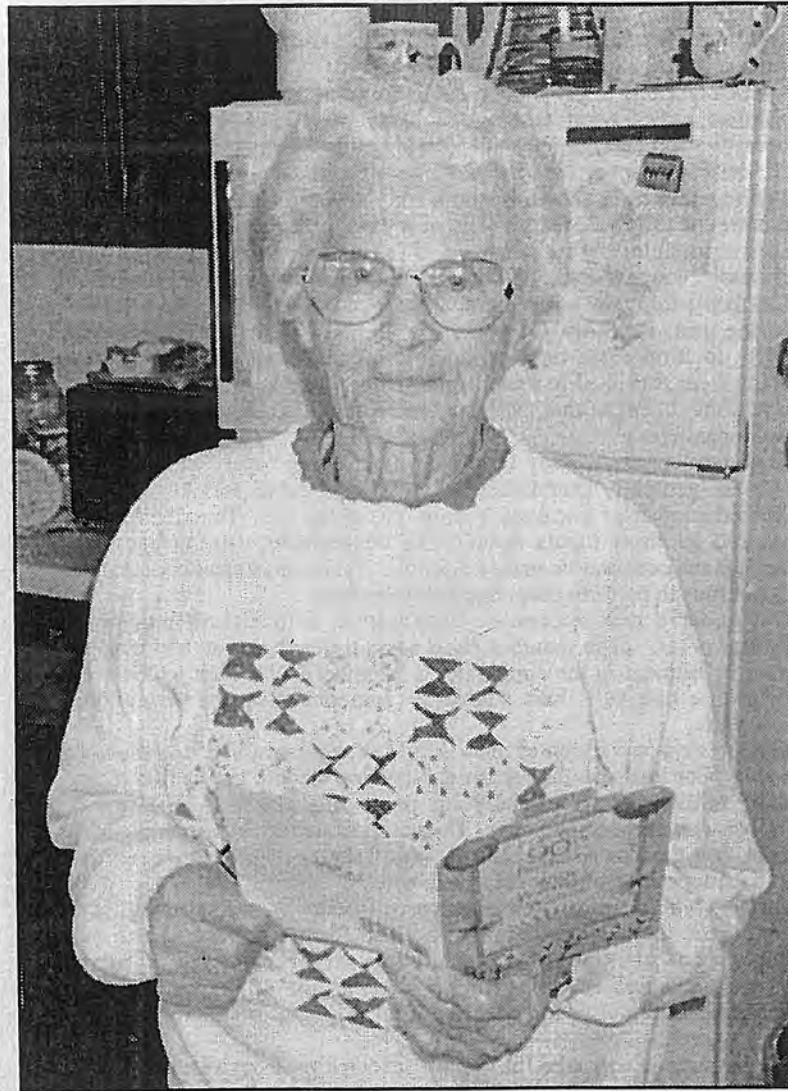
The couple had moved into Armstrong in 1974, trading houses with Oliver and Dorothy.

Would she do anything differently if she were young again? "Oh, I don't know," Mabel said. "I know I would be a nurse again."

She was inspired by a nurse from Algona who was sent by Dr. West to stay with her grandmother Harrison after she had had cancer surgery at home. "And I always liked Dr. West," she said.

Another source of inspiration was W.A. Ortmeyer, she said, recalling that he became superintendent in the middle of a school year. "Dad Helgason was president of the school board when he was hired," she said, "and he was still superintendent when the boys were in school. Lorenzo and I found out that when he put his hand over his mouth, he was keeping a laugh back."

"I enjoy living in Armstrong," Mabel said. Whenever she is asked if she knows someone who lives or has lived in Armstrong, she quickly responds, "Of course I know them. I've lived here all my life!"



Mabel Helgason takes pleasure in reading one of the cards she has received, congratulating her on her recent 90th birthday.