

## Thelma Pehrson, WCGS Member Since 1979

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My mother, Thelma Pehrson, died on 1 September 2017, at the age of 99 years, 8 months. Her aunt, Maude Wilkins, was a 1973 charter member of the Warren County Genealogical Society. In 1979, I joined WCGS, and my mother joined a month or two later. Aunt Maude was an enthusiastic promoter for the society, and like her, Mom and I were very interested our family history.

Thelma's roots in Warren County date to the creation of the county. This gave her unique perspective into the history of the county's earliest days and its residents. Thelma grew up in a small nuclear family, but a very large extended family. Family dinners were frequent and well attended. In addition, while she attended Simpson College, she lived with her grandmother, who had frequent family visitors. Thus, Thelma became very familiar with the intertwined connections, the jealousies and sometimes feuding of family members. She also discovered that not all connections quite made sense.

Thelma was a dedicated supporter of the organizations she joined, WCGS was no exception. While she did not hold all offices, she was the long-time corresponding secretary in the days when most researchers corresponded by postal mail. She looked up hundreds of records for people at the court house and the recorder's office.

In 1982 Thelma saw that the Adair County Fair had a section with classified genealogy exhibits open to the public and the exhibits were judged. She suggested this idea to the WCGS board, they liked it. Thus, thanks to my mother, in 1983 the current genealogy booth concept was introduced.

She also was responsible for three of the society's fund-raising projects: 1) the atlas compilation (1847, 1872, 1887, 1897, 1902-1903, 1915, and 1919-1924), 2) the companion index for the compilation, and 3) the every-name information for the 1895 Iowa census for Warren County. The atlas index took hundreds of hours using a magnifying glass and recording the page and section for each name. The 1895 census meant she had a microfilm reader set up in her dining room for many months as she transcribed the information.

Thelma encouraged other members in their research. She knew how to ask questions that would suggest places to check for answers. She very much enjoyed helping people. She was a teacher by profession and this showed in her interactions with others.

She was quiet, and knew how to listen and learn; talking for attention was not part of her personality. She regularly attended society meetings and learned from the many programs presented; she learned techniques for seeking answers to her questions. She also attended some Iowa Genealogical Society conferences and travelled on some genealogy-related trips. She enjoyed the hunt and the thrill of finding! Fortunately, she and I did some travelling together finding some of her answers.

In later years, she became the Librarian for the Warren County Historical Society. She held this position for ten years, from age 80 to age 90. It was a natural fit for her, as she continued to assist others and pursue her own genealogy research.

While Thelma was an ardent supporter of the society, I believe she was overwhelmed with her own family genealogy. There was so much! The more than twenty boxes of information that I inherited were not well organized; magazines, newspapers, and brochures were intermixed with family group sheets, notes and obituary clippings; her photos were no different. She was not computer literate; she even purchased a computer and tried to learn, but she just could not grasp the concepts. Only occasionally did she cite any sources, and she took notes on various sizes of paper with multiple surnames on a sheet. She stored much information in her head, and just couldn't seem to organize it on paper. I think Thelma's situation happens to many people; it is easy to get so involved in society or other worthwhile activities and end up being overwhelmed with or neglecting the personal side.

For the most part I believe she found answers to most of her questions. One time Thelma found a will with the wording, "and my grandson, David Stephens, as he calls himself, a base born child of my daughter Elizabeth Stephens." She did not understand the term "base born" and she couldn't figure out how he fit into the family, as she had never heard of him. Eventually (before the days of Google), she found that he was the illegitimate son of Elizabeth Stephens. Then, on a trip to Oklahoma, we stopped at South Havens, Kansas, where my mother, my husband, and I spent what seemed like hours in 108-degree, August heat, searching for David's grave. We finally found it by reversing direction as we walked through the cemetery.

Another time, Aunt Maude encouraged Mom and me to attend the Ewing family reunion in Maryland, trusting her research of the family connection. We claimed that connection at the reunion, but the organizer was skeptical. Later, another person (not in attendance) communicated with Mom that the connection was impossible because the woman we claimed our relationship to never married and had no children. Well, this mystery is still not totally resolved, because the possible connection in many ways seems very logical. Someday I'll work on this problem.

Mom and I enjoyed discussing family history and her enthusiasm encouraged me to reach heights she didn't even know existed. I will always be thankful for her diligence, if unorganized. I hope to continue learning, researching, sorting, and organizing, so hopefully our heirs will understand and appreciate our rich family history. In the meantime, we are all richer for having had her in our lives.