

## Overton Funeral Home

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### Ramona Mariam McKee

( March 18, 1929 - September 26, 2020 )

Ramona McKee passed away on Saturday, September 26, 2020 at Scottish Rite Park in Des Moines, Iowa. She was 91 years old. Celebration of life services will be held at a later date.

Ramona Mariam Swenson was born in rural Story County, Iowa on March 18, 1929. Until going to college, she lived on farms outside Roland, Iowa, with her parents and three brothers. She played basketball for Roland and sang in the choir. While she was a teenager, the high school held a contest for a new team nickname and Ramona submitted the winning entry – the Roland Rockets. This name was then associated with the great high school and Iowa State University athlete, Gary Thompson, who has been known as the Roland Rocket for the past 60 years. Ramona said she won the school's yearbook as a prize.

To get a better educational experience, Ramona left her hometown of Roland and finished high school at Waldorf Academy in Forest City. She was a good student and she wanted and sought after her education. She attended Waldorf Junior College, then St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, where she received her bachelor's degree. She passed on her love of education to her three sons.

After St. Olaf, she applied for and received a Fulbright Scholarship and studied in Norway for a year. Ramona remained lifelong friends with her host family from Oslo. She had some great stories about her experience there - including taking a midsummer trip, with a friend, to the far north of Norway where the country crosses over the top of Sweden and Finland to touch what was then the Soviet Union. Two college girls, taking trains, hitch-hiking, walking all the way to the Soviet Union. When they got there, no one was around for miles, so one at a time, they crossed the border and took each other's picture by big signs that said something like "Warning, this is the Soviet Union!" and "You are prohibited from entry!" When she got back to Oslo, she heard that what she did was a crazy stunt. People had disappeared up in that area for straying too close to the border.

She also talked about getting to Norway and back - she took ships not airplanes. One trip was on the SS United States, which was the world's fastest ocean liner and almost new then. She also described a rough passage from England to Norway when all passengers were seasick.

Her degree was in Home Economics. Back in Iowa, she worked for the Iowa State Extension Service as the county home economist, first in Scott County, then Greene County. She married Robert McKee in 1954, whom she met in Jefferson, Iowa, while working there and left her career to raise her family – three boys: Murray, Scott, and Stuart. Ramona

followed Bob's banking career and established homes in Jefferson, Clarion, Adel, Des Moines, and Waverly.

She was an excellent cook and loved experimenting with food and trying new things. She prepared food from all over Europe (German, Italian, Scandinavian, Great British, Spanish, French, etc.), Africa, the Middle East, China, Philippines, Mexico, South America and so on. She and Bob would have dinner parties and she would try new recipes, and without ever having made them, she would modify them to something she thought would be better.

When Amana appliances first came out with consumer microwaves in the late 1960s, the Amana Radarange, they hired Ramona to go around the state and give demonstrations on how to cook with a microwave. She developed her own recipes and made them in front of audiences. We remember going to see her onstage at the Clarion movie theater. Part of her fee was the microwave oven - so, we had one of the earliest consumer microwaves. Hmm, wonder if she still has those mimeographed copies of her recipes in her things.

While living in Clarion, she judged 4H projects at county fairs around northern Iowa. Then she spent the entire state fair judging the 4H demonstrations every day. While there, she lived on the grounds of the fair in the cement building that was then the 4H dorm and now is the Cultural Center at the top of the hill on the east side of the fair ground.

She liked to take the family and go visit her parents on the farm where they were living and later in Roland after they retired. Sometimes it was just a visit with her parents, but often it involved friends, extended family, and neighbors and almost always a meal. Her mother was also an excellent cook and made homemade bread so one of the highlights of any trip to see her parents was bringing home a fresh loaf of "Grandma" bread.

Ramona loved to travel. With her husband and children, driving trips across the country were made each year. While trips to New York City, Washington DC, Massachusetts, and the Pacific Northwest were made – the favorite destination was the Rocky Mountains. A special long trip to Europe was made in 1972 to visit Belgrade to see a beloved foreign exchange student, who had lived with the family the prior year, and to visit her host family in Oslo from 20 years earlier.

Later with family and friends, she would visit Portugal, Spain, Norway, and take a rented barge across England's canals. As always, she would be up for a trip to the mountains.

Ramona was devoted to her work for the Presbyterian Church. She worked on expanding women's rights and authority through the church for many years. Like so many people, she started at a grass roots level - in the "women's" group of her local church, then a multi-church group, then the state, then the region, and eventually the national church body. After her boys left for college and adult lives, she worked extensively for the church.

She represented the Presbyterian church at international ecumenical meetings in Kenya and South Korea. She served on the national executive council for the church - a group equivalent to a board of directors. This council advised the church between its formal annual meetings. She would talk about her meetings in the "God Box," an office building in New York City along the Hudson River on Riverside Drive that held the national offices of several church organizations.

She served as the executive director of the north central Iowa presbytery in Fort Dodge, then was asked to run the Synod of the Rocky Mountains (Synods are multi-state administrative bodies over the presbyteries). So, she moved to Denver for several years. She had a beautiful condo in Denver in a great location (in Larimer Square downtown, right on the pedestrian mall). This was a great place to visit and spend time: watch the sunset over the mountains, go to restaurants along the mall, or wander around the stores in "Lower Denver" only a few blocks away.

She made herself into a person with real power and authority in the church at a time when not many women were in similar positions. The people we meet who knew Ramona through her work in the church speak about her with great respect.

Ramona retained ties to Waldorf College / University and eventually served on the school's Alumni Board in the 1990s.

She retired after her work in Denver and moved back to Des Moines about 25 years ago and has lived locally since then. Well, except for a few years spent as a "House Mom" in the dormitories at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee. She worked this job with a sister-in-law who lived locally, and it sounded like they had a great time doing this.

She dearly loved her grandchildren and loved hearing the stories they told about their own lives – especially if they could talk in person over an excellent meal together.

In her last years, she struggled with some dementia and a variety of illnesses including breast cancer which was treated to remission. She recently contracted lymphoma which took her life.

Although we are sad to lose you, we are glad you can put down your burden and accept the rest and peace you deserve.

She is survived by her sons, Murray (Elizabeth) McKee, Scott (Kate) McKee, Stuart McKee; grandchildren, Matthew, Heather, Adam, Alex, James; brother, Eldon Swenson; and many nieces, nephews, and other family. She is preceded in death by her parents, Hallie and Elsie Swenson and her brothers Hallie Swenson Jr. and Robert Swenson.

Memorial contributions may be made to Waldorf University in her name: Waldorf Lutheran College Foundation, 106 South 6<sup>th</sup> Street, Forest City, IA 50436.