

## Reflecting on the life and times of Leona Nelson

*"A multi-faceted, multi-talented ... one-of-a-kind lady"*

By Kelly Kirkpatrick. Staff Writer - April 16, 2020

It has been said that a river cuts through a rock not because of its power, but its persistence.



Leona Nelson very likely would have agreed.

Nelson passed away March 31 at her home in Shawnee at the age of 89, but not before leaving an indelible, one-of-a-kind footprint in her wake.

Perhaps Nelson's swath of influence was so wide, in part, because she wore so many hats during her remarkably active lifetime. First and foremost, Nelson was a wife, a mother to four children and a grandmother to 15 grandkids and great-grandkids.

Since the time she arrived in Park County with her husband, LeRoy "Roy" Nelson, in 1978, Nelson served as the Shawnee Store proprietor, postmaster at the Shawnee Post Office and a landlord to countless tenants in Shawnee.

Moreover, the list of local committees upon which she served, the volunteer efforts in which she participated in, or led, and the seemingly infinite number of causes for which she fearlessly fought, is difficult to fathom and challenging to recount.

Among others, Nelson most notably served on the Republican Central Committee, the Park County Planning Commission and Board of Adjustment, the Upper South Platte Water Conservancy District, and was also on

the Shawnee Water Consumers Association Board of Directors for more than 32 years.

Nelson was also heavily involved in the Bailey Lioness/Lions Club, the Silverset seniors luncheon group, and helped to form the Platte Canyon Area Chamber of Commerce.

Throw in the fact that Nelson is said to have “never met a stranger,” and it is no wonder that news of her recent passing spread quickly and impacted many throughout Park County and beyond.

A legacy of action, advocacy, and often, antagonism

In addition to possessing boundless energy and a seemingly endless enthusiasm for community endeavors, Nelson was a skilled and tireless advocate for ideals in which she believed. She was also, by all accounts, a doggedly persistent and formidable opponent to those in which she didn't.

To a person, those who knew Nelson best insist that they never had to guess where she stood on a given issue. Her stance was generally clear, and her way of expressing it was usually delivered without so much as a hint of ambiguity.

Every person interviewed with regards to the life and times of Nelson also agreed wholeheartedly that she was an incredibly beneficial advocate to have in one's corner, and an intensely loyal friend. They also unanimously agreed that she was not someone they would necessarily want to add to their list of adversaries, if given the choice.

“If you wrote this story to make Leona sound like a saint, then she would probably haunt you,” joked longtime friend Brian Heber.

Nelson's daughter, Marcia “Marci” Peterson McGarvey, explained that her mom truly cherished her well-established reputation as an exceptionally persistent antagonist, or agitator.

“Mom actually got a plaque from the Park County Planning Commission and the Board of Adjustments, as well as the Park County Board of Commissioners, that congratulated her for being the ‘County Agitator of Park County,’ and thanking her for her longtime service,” McGarvey said.

“She got a huge kick out of that. While she was in hospice, she worried about who would take her place as the ‘County Agitator’ and even tried to recruit several of the hospice workers to take up the cause and carry on the tradition.”

Remarkably, many who found themselves in the unenviable position of opposing Nelson on a particularly touchy issue, such as politics, still maintained deep and lasting friendships with her no matter how pronounced their differences might have been.

“Leona was definitely more opinionated than most,” said longtime friend Vincent Tolpo. “She was persistent when she thought she was right, and she didn't give an inch. But at the same time, she was honest and straightforward and she never took philosophical differences personally. As a joke, I would always ask her whom I was supposed to vote for in upcoming elections.

“But the bottom line is that Leona was always trying to do good, and she always showed up when her community needed her. Her legacy to me will always be her willingness to participate in, and contribute to, her community.”

Fairplay resident Dave Loring has very similar recollections of Nelson.

“Leona and I had an adversarial relationship when we first met,” Loring recalled. “But the more I got to know her, the more I liked her. She was willing to change her opinion if you made a convincing argument, and it was never personal with her. She was an independent thinker who always managed to keep things in perspective.

“If Leona liked you, then you knew she liked you. She was very community-minded, and always showed up for community events and meetings ... whether certain people wanted her to or not. In her role as agitator, she really had the ability to get under your skin, but in a respectful way. She did not suffer fools gladly, but once you got past her tough exterior you realized that she was actually a softie. And if Leona became your friend, you had a friend for life.”

Perhaps one of Nelson’s most impactful contributions to her community came as a result of her 32-year tenure on the Board of Directors for the Upper South Platte Water Conservancy District. One of Nelson’s closest friends, Dave Wissel, had served with her on the board for the last 30 years.

“Leona served as treasurer on the board, and she guarded the money like it was hers,” Wissel said. “She also chastised virtually every attorney the district hired for charging too much money. But her vision and perseverance was vital for providing adequate water supplies for the district.

“She was just such a wonderful woman, and she loved Park County. She insisted that politicians and people in power never take the county, or the people of the county, for granted. She was absolutely fearless, would take on anyone and never backed down. She also volunteered for

everything, and encouraged others to do the same. Being involved was personal to Leona.”

### **Power of persuasion**

Regardless of the cause, Nelson had an uncanny knack for drumming up interest and participation in community affairs. Perhaps at no time was her sphere of influence and her ability to prompt action more evident than in 1998, when she made it her personal mission to have all three Park County Commissioners recalled.

Nelson was by no means alone in the process, and she actually joined the recall bandwagon later than some others. But it is indisputable that Nelson’s ability to network and her enthusiasm for obtaining signatures for the recall did the commissioners in question no favors what-so-ever. Predictably, all three commissioners were successfully recalled, much to Nelson’s delight.

“Leona’s strength was her ability to get people to the table,” said Lynda James, who first met Nelson in 1993. “She was a headstrong, straight shooter, and she tirelessly gave of herself to any cause she adopted. She was a welcomed addition to the recall effort, and she also obtained a lot of signatures.

“Leona was not just influential in Shawnee. Her influence was county-wide. When she was on a mission, she was truly on a mission. In her later years she had large email groups and used them as a means of staying connected and involved, and it was a very effective tool. Her legacy was her commitment to volunteering for political and historical causes she believed in.”

Heber, a next-door neighbor to Nelson since 1999, also remembers her as an

exceptionally effective mover and shaker within the community.

“Leona was very proud of her accomplishments within the community, and she was truly concerned about who would take on her role as the county agitator,” Heber said. “And it was probably a warranted concern. She really excelled at facilitating almost any form of community gatherings. If it had to do with the good of the community, Leona was all in. She will be very sorely missed.”

According to Tolpo, Nelson’s no-nonsense approach endeared her to many while drawing the ire of others.

“Leona was nothing if not honest,” Tolpo said. “And her honesty sometimes got her into trouble. The same thing that people liked about her also had the opposite effect at times.”

### **Far more than just an agitator**

While many might remember Nelson for her involvement in political causes, her eclectic mix of interests and talents spanned the gamut from landscaping, history and music, to photography and crocheting. She was also an accomplished prankster.

Leona and Roy became immediate fixtures and central figures in the community of Shawnee upon their arrival. The Nelsons purchased the building that houses the Shawnee Post Office, which remained under Leona’s ownership until the time of her passing.

That location became a popular gathering spot for locals, as well as a group of regular members which became known as the Shawnee Coffee Club, and that trend continued for decades due in large part to the outgoing and socially accepting nature of Leona and Roy.

As Leona became involved in Park County politics, she would readily share her opinions with anyone who came in, calling the Shawnee Store the “HOPU – hotbed of political unrest.”

Roy was also an immensely popular personality. Following his passing in 2007, the Shawnee Community Center proved too small to handle the number of people who came to pay their respects, so the event was moved to the Farmer’s Union building instead.

The buildings next to the Shawnee Store and post office were, and still are, utilized as rental properties, where Leona served as landlord to countless tenants.

“As a landlord, Leona was tough, but fair,” Tolpo recalled. “But she had a huge heart and she helped a whole bunch of people around here. She was a very generous lady.”

Nelson’s generosity and kind heart could be witnessed on many levels, and through many deeds. One such deed was her commitment to the development and personal growth of Dominic Wissel, the adopted son of Dave and Lillian Wissel.

The Wissels and Nelsons were very close, allowing for the bond between Leona and Dominic to grow strong during his childhood years and beyond. Dominic suffered from severe Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, and was challenged to participate in activities typical of a child his age.

“If you knew my mom, you also probably knew Dominic because he was constantly with her wherever she went,” McGarvey said.

It was discovered, over time, that Dominic had a passion for music. That passion was only strengthened due to his

relationship to Leona, who taught him to play the piano with stunning proficiency.

“I was always in awe of the love and patience that Leona had with Dominic, her adopted grandson, and the bond the two of them developed,” said longtime friend, Barbara Behl. “It was honestly a beautiful thing to see.”

Nelson was also a top-notch arborist, and testament to that can still be seen in the immaculate flower gardens and landscaping that springs up every summer around the post office.

Leona loved her flowers and gardens,” James said.

Nelson had a band on wheels, complete with a harmonica, spoons, a drum and a washboard. She broke the contraption out at community gatherings and performed unapologetically when ever the mood struck her. She also sent videos of her musical performances to friends via email during her time in hospice.

“Leona was fun-loving and used to facilitate parties and neighborhood get-togethers,” Heber recalled. “She would whoop it up and get the party going, especially on holidays.”

In her later years Nelson dove headlong into crocheting and knitting. She created, in mass quantities, baby cowboy booties, scarfs and mittens, as well as afghans and wall hangings which she sold quite successfully each year at the Park County Fair. The baby booties, designed with a distinctly western flair, were immensely popular.

“There are still baby cowboy booties laying all around the house,” her daughter Marci said with a chuckle.

Kit Loring’s first meeting with Nelson occurred at what was once the Chocolate Moose on Front Street in Fairplay. Apparently, on that particular day, Nelson was in the mood for a prank.

“I was sitting at a table with friends and Leona tapped me on the shoulder and pointed under the table at a twenty dollar bill on the floor,” Loring said. “I looked down at it but didn’t pick it up immediately. Leona tapped me on the shoulder again and said, ‘pick it up.’ So I reached down and almost had my hand on it when it when it got yanked up by an invisible string and went right into Leona’s hands. That was my first experience with Leona.”

Many unsuspecting people also fell prey to Leona’s whoopee cushion, which she strategically placed in popular lounging areas around the post office and store.

“Even though she lived to be almost 90, age was never really a factor for Leona,” Dave Loring said. “She had a wonderfully youthful mind and spirit.”

Those who spent considerable time around Nelson knew her as much more than just a catalyst for community involvement. Instead, they remember her for her youthful spirit, her creative mind and her multitude of talents and interests.

“Leona was a one-of-a-kind lady,” said James. “She was multi-faceted, multi-talented, creative, generous, kind and outspoken. I’ve missed her so much already. She was like an aunt to me.”

A fitting end to a remarkable journey

While Nelson was in hospice, daughter Marci spearheaded an effort to have a large group of family and friends over for one last social gathering in honor of Nelson’s 89th birthday.

“Mom thought it would just be family, but a bunch of her friends also came over,” McGarvey said. “Mom had a blast visiting with everyone, and it was just a really great day. About forty people showed up.”

Also while in hospice, Nelson received a Hall of Fame designation and plaque from the Upper South Platte Water Conservancy District for 32 years of service.

Even while fighting the final stages of colon cancer, emails still flew out daily from Nelson’s hospice bed and hordes of friends dropped by on a regular basis. Typical of Nelson, she was always happy to see them and never shunned the opportunity to socialize and to discuss current events.

On her best days, she probably even offered them a spoonful or more of good-natured agitation, as only Leona could do.

### **Memorial service**

Nelson was a native of Tribune, Kansas, and was the second-youngest of nine siblings. She is survived by her two youngest children: Marcia Peterson McGarvey and Michael Peterson, and preceded in death by her daughter Jeanne Louise Peterson Manning and son Larry Joe Peterson and her eight brothers and sisters.

A memorial service is being planned and will be held sometime this coming summer. In lieu of flowers, Leona wanted donations to be made in her name to the Mountain Peace Shelter in Bailey. Donations can be sent to PeaceWorks, P.O. Box 836, Bailey CO 80421-0836.