

Helen Renner: 'She was a wonderful woman'

KEITH WHITCOMB JR., Staff Writer

Posted: 11/20/2008 03:04:18 AM EST

Click photo to enlarge



Thursday, November 20

POWNAL — Librarian, reporter, town clerk, the late Helen Renner wore many hats and was well-known by most residents of Pownal and elsewhere over many decades.

Renner, 93, died on Saturday following a long illness.

"If you stop and drink from a well, you should stop and thank the person that dug the well," said Jim Winchester, owner of Winchester's Store. "The Renners dug a lot of wells."

Among those "wells" is the Solomon Wright Library. With a degree in arts and library science from Syracuse University, Helen Renner worked as the Pownal library's director when it was in the basement of a church. She was instrumental in promoting the move from the basement to the current brick library building on Main Street.

Edna Winslow, the library's assistant director, said it was Helen Renner who hired her in 1988. "I've still get tears in my eyes," Winslow said. "She was a wonderful woman. I loved her."

Helen (Thompson) Renner, a Williamstown, Mass., native who lived in Pownal as a child, graduated from Williamstown High School in 1933 and from college in 1937. She worked as a post office clerk after she and her husband, George Renner, settled in Pownal in the late 1940s.

She would later serve two terms as Pownal town clerk and later helped her successors during their transition periods. She also was active with numerous local organizations as a volunteer.

Town Clerk Karen Burrington said she has fond memories of Renner, both when helping her work as a town clerk and when Renner was the Pownal correspondent for the North Adams Transcript.

"Helen used to tease me, because I'm considered a flatlander," Burrington, who moved to Vermont from New York, said. She married Joel Burrington, a Pownal native, in 1980 and now has been clerk for 20 years.

After they were married, Burrington wondered if her flatlander status had changed. "I said to Helen, 'I married a Burrington, does that make me a Vermonter?'"

Renner's reply was quick. "Nope. You'll always be the girl from the city that married the Burrington boy."

Winchester said he first met Renner when she would deliver mail to the Green Mountain Race Track, where he was the race starter.

He said that after the track closed, developers had their eye on it. He said that because Renner loved Pownal — as well as horses and dogs — and did a large amount of volunteer work for the town, her approval was generally first sought as a litmus test for how good any project would be for the town.

He said Renner could be skeptical of people at first, but would warm up if she felt their interest was for the good of Pownal.

One of the last things Renner was involved in was giving with her husband a parcel of land to the Pownal Rescue Squad for a new headquarters facility. The two-acre parcel with the new facility on Route 7 sits nearly across from the Renner home.

"She was instrumental in getting the new building across the road going," George Renner said. He said his wife was involved in many things, including the launch of the Pownal Historical Society, serving as its first president.

She also raised collies and kept horses, in addition to her gardening.

"I couldn't keep up with her," Renner said. "She was just gung-ho for the town, doing everything she could."

Helen Renner didn't seek praise and wasn't flashy, Winchester said.

She did, however, receive recognition for her work. In 2000, she was awarded a certificate of appreciation from the Vermont Secretary of State, recognizing her for her service to Pownal, which included being a member of the Pownal Fire Protective Association Auxiliary and president of the Vermont State Firefighters Auxiliary.

"She was our godmother in every sense of the way," said Amy McLenithan, one of Renner's goddaughters. "She was our godmother, but she was also our mother."

Contact Keith Whitcomb at kwhitcomb@benningtonbanner.com