

Velva M. Walden

Velva Magdalena Diede was born to Christian Diede and Maria Reich Diede, both German-Russian immigrants from the Ukraine, on her parents' farm in Stark County, North Dakota. Four brothers followed her: Oscar, Herman, Ishmael, and Lloyd.

As a child, Velva shared in the farm work, went to school weekdays, attended church all day on Sundays, and socialized with members of her extensive family (she and her four brothers had about 40 Diede first cousins and 35 Reich first cousins). The first language of the family was German, but Velva learned English before starting school from the local teacher who boarded in their home and who later became her beloved Aunt Anna.

At age 12 Velva graduated from the 8th grade of a one-room country school. Her parents agreed if she first learned "women's work" — cooking, sewing etc. — she could continue school. So four years later she began high school in Dickinson, ND, where she boarded with a family. An additional year of Normal School in Dickinson certified Velva to teach elementary school. She had envisioned herself a missionary but decided local teaching could be her mission, and she taught in a one-room school for two years.

Velva then moved to Ellensburg, Washington, where she earned a BA in Education with a minor in Music Ed. She taught elementary school near Kelso, WA, where she met widowed high school teacher Clarence Walden in their church choir. They married December 21, 1940, Velva became mother to Clarence's six-year-old daughter, Edna, and son David was born two years later.

The family moved to California for better teaching jobs, first in Gridley and then to the Pittsburg-Antioch area. Daughter Velma was born in Gridley and son Daniel in Pittsburg. In addition to raising four children to adulthood, Velva taught elementary school for more than 25 years, mostly in Antioch, and was active in local churches. She and Clarence and a few other couples founded the Presbyterian church of Pittsburg, CA. Velva helped maintain rental properties she and Clarence owned and used her acumen at mental arithmetic for tasks like adding up the grades for Clarence's students. Close ties with family and friends were of utmost importance to Velva, and she and her family visited often with her extended Diede and Reich families in nearby Lodi and at least yearly with Clarence and Edna's family in Oregon and Washington.

In 1971, when gradually developing allergies severely restricted her life, Velva and Clarence retired to Coos Bay, Oregon, where they built a house in the country, with son Daniel and son-in-law Paul doing a majority of the work.

Clarence died in 1974, and Velva bought a smaller house in downtown Coos Bay where she lived until 2001. Her activities in this period fitted with her childhood dream to be a missionary. She was active in many church, community service, and other groups which she thought could help the world be a better place. She did hands-on work as well serving in leadership positions, pushing the organizations forward in their missions. For Temporary Help in Emergency House she did quantity cooking once or twice a week for six or seven years. For 15 years she took Help Line calls at home from people who were desperate or otherwise needed help. She led the local Widows Support Group for about five years, training new facilitators. She helped start the local chapter of Habitat for Humanity and helped choose prospective owners for new houses. She was instrumental in starting a multi-city Church Women United group and was Celebrations chair person for eight years, organizing three yearly events including the World Day of Prayer. She was moderator of the Presbyterian Women at her church for six or seven years and treasurer for some years, was on the Board of Presbyterian Women of the Cascades, registrar for several of their annual retreats, and coordinator of mission opportunities.

She was an elder for the First Presbyterian Church of Coos Bay for six years, deacon for three years, worked in the church's youth hostel for 15 years, etc. She was a precinct worker for the Democratic Party for a number of years and participated in marches on Washington. She hosted musicians in her home for the Oregon Coast Music Festival and opened her home on many occasions to people in need, including Clarence's widowed sister-in-law for 14 months. She befriended many other individuals, helping them in direct and personal ways.

This period was astonishingly active and productive for Velva in other ways as well. She bought an RV and crossed the U.S. several times, compiled and published the Diede family genealogy and helped organize a family reunion in North Dakota, traveled individually or with church groups to Asia, Europe, and Mexico, cooked two summers at an Oregon fishing lodge, knitted clothing and afghans for her children and grandchildren, and translated into English a German book on juggling for David. She maintained fitness by riding a stationary bike daily, logging over 50,000 miles on her odometer over the years, and, when Parkinson's Disease made mounting the bike impossible, did aquacise water walking at the Coos Bay Athletic Club.

In late 2000, her Parkinson's disease having progressed, Velva decided she could no longer live alone. She visited a retirement community near Velma in Stockton, made a deposit on an apartment, and put her house up for sale. In March 2001, she moved to O'Connor Woods in Stockton. As her condition deteriorated, Velva moved to the Garden Oaks Assisted Living community within O'Connor Woods and then to the Bayside Landing Assisted Living community. In July 2004, she moved from Stockton to live with David and his wife in East Sandwich, Massachusetts, on Cape Cod, where she resided until her death.

Velva lived the last years of her life with great determination to make the best of them. She enjoyed the new people she met in Stockton and being closer to Velma and her son-in-law Paul, Edna and her family, Velma and Paul's children and their families, and to brothers Oscar and Lloyd and their families. After a decline in late 2002, she rebuilt her strength by riding an exercise machine for 35 minutes a day, seven days a week for the next two-and-one-half years. Unable to attend church any more, she enjoyed having Pastor John McLaughlin and Rev. Combs in Stockton and Pastor Charles Wingard on Cape Cod visit and share Communion with her. Also on Cape Cod she listened on the radio to the weekly church service at Boston University's Marsh Chapel. She enjoyed being read to (particularly Jan Karon's Mitford series). Her memory, always prodigious, remained acute, both long and short term. With assistance she kept in touch with friends and family by phone, email, and letter. She enjoyed eating well seasoned food, often asking for additional mustard, horseradish and vinegar!

Getting people together and sharing food with them remained a pleasure throughout Velva's long life. When family came to visit her in the last year, she roused herself however tired or ill she might be feeling: she would call and ask to be helped out of bed, saying, "I want to be where the people are."