



Helmi M. Kortés-Erkkilá

December 13, 1913 - May 13, 2012

Helmi Kortés-Erkkilá was born December 13, 1913, to Elias and Alma (Haanpaa) Huttunen and passed on May 13, 2012, Mother's Day. Helmi's parents settled in Cowlitz County on 40 wooded acres in the foothills of Woodland, near the confluence of the Lewis and Columbia Rivers. Growing up, Helmi often frequented the Finn Hall, where more than fifty families participated in social and cultural activities. Elias Huttunen was one of two Finns in Woodland who was a citizen; he had also participated in the Hibbing, Minnesota, strike of 1907 and was blacklisted with other miners. Unable to get a job, he became a student at the Work People's College, where he studied English in order to qualify for citizenship, and where he met Alma, a dishwasher at the college. As a daughter of Finnish immigrants, who spoke only Finnish when she entered first grade in Woodland, WA, Helmi graduated from Woodland High School in 1932 with the highest GPA. She married Thomas Burns, and raised two daughters, Lynne and Genevieve; her marriage to Thomas ended in divorce, and she then married Swanda "Squawk" Kortés, who adopted both daughters. Helmi simultaneously managed both a farm and home and also did the bookkeeping for her husband's sawmill and logging operation, then later, his home electrical business. She was an active PTA member. Education was highly valued in the family, and at the age of 44 Helmi went back to school and began history studies at Clark College, graduating in 1960 with honors, and then graduating from Portland State University in 1962 with a BA in history and minors in

English and German. She then taught English and German at Ridgefield High School for twelve years before retiring. After retirement, Helmi traveled extensively internationally with both Squawk Kortez and after his death, with her third husband, John E. Erkkila, whom she married in 1985. Her Finnish heritage was very important to her and, eager to maintain her family connections, Helmi traveled to Finland on several occasions to maintain her Finnish roots, taking several grandchildren with her on these trips. She and John also traveled to many Finn Festivals across the U.S. Helmi loved to swim, and installed an in-ground pool for her children, and later, grandchildren, to enjoy. She swam all through her life, earning a bronze medal in the 50-meter swim for 85-89 year women at the 1998 World Masters Games. Helmi was an active member of the SW Washington Retired Teachers Association, for which she was secretary and historian for eight years, a member of the American Association of Retired Persons, Local 935, to which she was Vice President and a member of the Board of Directors; she also was an active member of the Clark County Democratic Women's Club and belonged to the American Association of University Women, and was Chair of the World Affairs Group for seven years. Helmi was a member of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver since 1981. She wrote many letters to the editor for *The Columbian*, published historical features in *The Reflector*, poems in the *Senior Messenger*, essays on Finns in the *Longview Senior Outlook*, numerous articles in Finnish American newspapers, and edited her collection on Finns in a 1980 Cowlitz County Historical Quarterly, also writing an article on her father in a 1981 Cowlitz County Historical. Helmi published two books, *Relevance of the Kalevala (A Finnish Epic): Comments, Quotes, and Quips* (1994), and, *Before Modern Conveniences: One Finnish Farm Family 1917-1927* (2004) with illustrations by her daughter Lynne Meier. Helmi spoke and lectured at numerous events on the Finnish epic, *The Kalevala*, at Finn Festivals across the country, the Nordic Historic Museum in Seattle, and the Oregon Historical Society, Portland. Helmi's biggest cultural achievement is the Finnish Memorial Park Historical Marker, a monument commemorating

cultural activities of Finnish immigrant settlers located Northeast of Woodland, Washington. Helmi organized and formed a committee, meeting with state personnel in order to meet creation and maintenance standards for cultural monuments, raising nearly \$2, 000 to cover the expense of erecting the marker. This marker played a part in the SW Washington program during the Bicentennial Celebration of 1976, and efforts to celebrate immigrant contributions to the country. The Finn Hall marker is inscribed: In 1916 Finnish immigrants constructed a hall near this site under the name of a literary association (Kirjallisuus Seura), forming a lending library. Although they brought their diet, language, and saunas with them, some old country beliefs were left behind. These people found it necessary to meet where they could study the social customs of their new country. It was a place to challenge and question partisan politics, and reflect on new theological insights. Language classes were held at this center as were other meetings, athletic activities, wedding dances and funerals. It was also a place for a variety of cultural programs. Steaming kettles of coffee and the warmth of dignified waltzes, pulsating polkas and schottisches brought togetherness to these rugged individualists. Life to them was involvement. Helmi was known locally and regionally in the Finnish-American community and beyond as an educator, author, historian, lecturer, writer, and poet. She is survived by her daughter Lynne Meier of Portland, her granddaughters Janet Abram, Beaverton, Krista Reaves, La Center, Sharon West, Bellingham, Susan Albrecht, Seattle, and Sandi Pruitt, Dallas, and her grandsons T.R. Meier, Ridgefield, and Paul Albrecht, Vancouver. She is survived by ten great grandchildren, and eight great-great grandchildren. Many in this large family cite Grandma Helmi as the most influential person in their lives. She is preceded in death by her loving husbands Swanda "Squawk" Kortess and John E. Erkkila, and her daughter, Genevieve Kortess. A public memorial service will be held at 3pm Friday May 18th at The Unitarian Universalist Church, 4505 E 18th St., Vancouver, 98661.

Tribute Wall



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Evergreen Memorial Gardens - July 03, 2025 at 09:57 PM



“ Dear relatives of Helmi!! Im so sorry to hear Helmi passed away!! Otan osaa suruunne !! I had a priviledge to meet her over 50 years ago here in nekoski and still remember. I was a small boy then. If her relatives would like to contact me, Id be delighted to discuss with them. Best Regards from Finland Jari Salakka jari.salakka@gmail.com

Jari Salakka - January 28, 2013 at 12:00 AM