

LIVES LIVED

# No matter where life took her, Dorothy DeWit was always at home in the mountains

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Dorothy Helen Upham Parsons DeWit.

COURTESY OF THE FAMILY

Dorothy Helen Upham Parsons DeWit: Physiotherapist. Artist. Mountaineer. Mother. Born July 1, 1924, in Fitchburg, Mass.; died May 20, 2019, in Vancouver, of sepsis; aged 94.

Mother would say to her misbehaving children: “You will behave or I will take steps which will astonish you!” No one dared to discover what those steps might be. But it was always apparent that she was capable of great strides, personally and professionally.

Dee Upham grew up in Fitchburg, Mass., where her family had lived for more than 200 years. She studied at the University of Michigan and then trained in physiotherapy at Stanford, where she attended to a basketball injury on the ankle of Ken Parsons, a Second World War veteran who was studying geology. He would become our father.

In their first seven years of marriage, Dee and Ken had five children, moved six times and immigrated to Canada when Ken was recruited to the booming Alberta oil patch.

Early family holidays were camping trips, with seven in the tent, eight if Aunt Nita was visiting. The '55 Chrysler wagon was loaded: our parents, the dog, and a flat of eggs took up the front seat, while the kids – Linnea, Eric, Andrea, Barbara and Brock – squished in the next row. In the back was a Rubik's Cube of tent, camp stove, air mattresses, army surplus sleeping bags, groceries, lanterns, dishes, and five small cardboard boxes, one allotted to each of us, for two weeks away.

Dee had shown talent as a painter from a young age. While raising her family, she studied art at what is now known as ACAD, taught workshops in adult education and exhibited her work. She became a founder of the Centennial Art Gallery and the Calgary Artists' Society, and painted landscapes for friends, family, and, by official commission, the Lieutenant-Governor of Alberta. Dee also studied flute and would one day play for her grandchildren as they fell asleep.

At 41, Dee requalified as a physiotherapist and, after working in a hospital, established her own practice in Calgary. Suddenly widowed a few years later, she added money management and financial planning to her skill set, and saw all her children through multiple university degrees.

Dee loved mountains. In the 1970s she climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro and hiked the Dolomites, and was an avid member of the Rocky Mountain Ramblers. She met her kindred spirit and second husband Rein DeWit in the club. They married in 1978 and enjoyed many travel adventures, including cycling trips in Asia and Europe.

Dee and Rein retired to a hobby farm in Saanich on Vancouver Island, where visiting grandchildren loved to pick blackberries, collect eggs and feed the pigs, Yin and Yang. After many happy years, they moved to Victoria, near Government House where they were volunteer gardeners.

Our mother was not always a patient person, particularly behind the wheel of a car. She would drive fiercely and issued harsh judgments on other drivers, especially those who slowed her down. While Dee accepted with grace the many trials of growing old, she never lost her resentment at losing her driver's licence.

Dee's and Rein's happy marriage lasted 39 years until they went into care separately. Her last two years were not easy, but her strong New England character saw her through. Her family would take her to the shore for the view, but Dee would turn her back on the ocean to gaze at her beloved mountains. Dee was always modest, honest and resolute. She remained gracious, appreciative, good-humoured and loving to the end.

She did astonish us.

Linnea McCaskill is Dee's daughter.

To submit a Lives Lived: [lives@globeandmail.com](mailto:lives@globeandmail.com)

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