

Marion Bertsch Gray Lathrop

Born: April 25, 1914

Death: January 10, 2009

Marion Bertsch was born in Grand Rapids, MI, as well as her mother and grandmother. Her grandmother had a familiar maiden name of “Coit” and was married to Oscar Wilmarth. Marion was the oldest of four siblings.

In 1935, Marion graduated with her undergraduate degree in Medical Social Work from University of Michigan. “I went right to work the day after graduation at the glorious sum of \$90 a month,” recalled Marion. However, she soon moved to Arizona to be with her brother John, who was attending a boys’ school there, and got a job for Pima County Welfare Bureau for \$50 a month. At that time, she was doing medical social work with Mexicans and Native Americans, “rounding up the kiddies who were crippled and having them receive care under Social Security, which [had been] just put into effect. . . . This was the first roundup of [those] kids,” said Marion.

To do her job better, Marion started taking night courses in “Indian” and Spanish, “so she could go out and talk to [her clients] in their little huts,” She remembered. “The whole atmosphere was defensive as we would be too probably. There was questioning and not understanding. It is hard when you are not fluent with the language.” To help recruit others to the program, Marion also began teaching medical social work courses at the University of Arizona.

When John moved back home, Marion decided to get her master’s degree at New York School of Social Work. However, 6 months before completion, she ran out of money. Because of the Great Depression, her family was strapped for cash and could not help her out, so Marion came back home, went back to work, met her first husband, Fred Gray, MD, married and became pregnant. By the time Fred enlisted in WWII, they had two sons, Freddy and David. Alone and “so busy,” Marion found no time to finish her graduate degree. The couple had two more children, Priscilla and William.

Upon returning from New York in 1939, Marion had started working at Butterworth Hospital, where she was the only medical social worker in the clinic. “When I first went to Butterworth and talked to the doctors at a staff meeting, I had to explain what medical social work was. That was 50 years ago. . . . That was a new field,” recalled Marion. At the time of this interview, the Butterworth Medical Social Worker Department had grown to having a director, two assistants, and twenty-two social workers.

Among her first “breakaways” into the community were “making hats” for the YWCA and volunteering at the Butterworth Mental Health Clinic, where she helped people who had been dismissed from the Kalamazoo mental facility. “I did not leave my family until Bill was in Kindergarten—about four years old,” said Marion.

Before that time, however, while they were living in their first house, Marion recalled, her husband had her “farming” on an extra lot. “I put up about 300 quarts of stuff a year . . . like his mother had done,” said Marion. “He planted the seeds, and I cultivated and picked, and I was really busy. I was trying to be the kind of wife that he wanted.” But when they moved to the house that they built on Bonnell, Marion announced, “No more of this [farming] because I just am not a farmer’s wife.”

After her initial ventures into the community, Marion volunteered at the Association for the Blind and Sight Conversation, “which is what we called it then.” She served on that board for 8 years, including a term as president. “I really thoroughly enjoyed it . . .,” Marion remembered. Her other community work included the board of the Community Chest, in which she was the chairperson of the “future needs” committee and the First Methodist Church. She was the fourth generation to attend that church and, according to Marion, worked “hard . . . in different capacities” such as the pianist for Sunday school and other departments. She also started a liturgical choir. “I was a pioneer there although there was one other liturgical choir . . . at South Congregational Church,” said Marion. “I felt a need to interest high school girls in their church . . . something that they didn’t consider boring, and they really took to it.”

However, when the family moved to Fountain Street Church, Marion offered to start a liturgical choir there, but the board “would have none of it. . . . They didn’t want women in nightgowns parading around Fountain Street,” she said. While on the board, Marion offered her services—medical social work, care-giving, relating to people who were hurting—but she “wasn’t taken up on it. I was very disappointed,” she recalled.

Her disappointment was twofold. First, Marion had taken “modern dance and exercise for 30 years for [her] own self and to keep ahead of the crowd” and had attended conferences on liturgical performance. Second, her husband was “really opposed to [her church work] . . . because [she] did it Sundays . . . the day he was home. . . . Things sort of converged, and I stopped . . .,” Marion concluded.

Nevertheless, her volunteer work at the Women’s City Club (WCC) was much more enjoyable. She was on the board for 6 years; then she became president. “I just loved it. I could have gone on a long time in that job,” she said. “I felt that the [WCC] filled a wonderful empty spot for lots of women, and they were intelligent.” About that experience, Marion said, “. . . it developed me from being a shy young thing. I got so I enjoyed it and made friends . . ., and they have been wonderful to me now in my lonely . . . adjustment to senior citizenship The [WCC] still reveres older people and lots of organizations do not”

Because of her many activities and friends in the community, Marion was asked to be on the Mayor’s Cultural Committee. She then became a member of the Arts Council and served as the dance chairperson for the annual Arts Festival. She was also on a special committee for Cultural Excellence and a board member of the Grand Rapids Symphony.

During the time Marion was serving as the “artistic assistant” for the Grand Rapids Symphony, her husband Fred was dying from heart disease and diabetes complications. So while she was Fred’s primary care-giver, Marion also acted as hostess for the many artists who performed with

the symphony, arranging 50 receptions and housing for them. Moreover, she made speeches around the community to encourage interest in the city's orchestral group.

The same year her first husband died, Marion's first-born son David fell off his roof and broke his neck, becoming paralyzed from the chest down. At the time of that tragic accident, he was married and had three children. Marion supported David and his family emotionally and financially. According to her, David said, "It was Dad's optimism and my determination that . . . helped him a lot." Marion also attributed "a very strong Minnesota wife" to David's recovery. During the year that her son was at the Mayo Clinic, Marion went every 2 months to "help and . . . take the kiddies and help to entertain them."

At the time of this interview, Marion had retired from the Fountain Street Church board. She was no longer as active in the community, only doing book reports at various places. She no longer played tennis, but she continued to swim twice a week. "I'm just trying to do the best I can and bring pleasure and joy when I can," she said. "Well, I feel my active days are over. After all, I'm 75 years old, and I've done things that brought me lots of joy. I don't have my kids here, and I miss them, but I can help through these other things . . ."

After the death of her first husband, Marion remarried Henry Lathrop. After 4 years of marriage, Henry had a stroke, and Marion found herself in the care-giver role for 2 years before his death.

Marion Lathrop's obituary:

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