



Ethel Ackerson

November 11, 1931 - October 11, 2025

Ethel Adele Ackerson of Fort Collins, Colorado, passed away peacefully on Saturday October 11, 2025, surrounded by her children.

Ethel was born November 11, 1931, in Battle Creek, Michigan, the youngest child of Helen Marjorie and Cyrus John Goodrich. She had three older siblings, Helen, Eleanor (Nonne) and Austin. She related later in her life to her eldest granddaughter that her siblings, along with her parents, were her favorite people growing up. Ethel was a very happy child who felt well loved by her family. Her dad, Papa Cy, nicknamed her “Sparky” because she had a sparky personality and sparkling eyes. She loved listening to her mother, Mama Marge, play the piano and dreamed of being a pianist when she grew up.

Her family would have family council every Sunday evening and called it the “Happy Always Club”. Using Robert’s Rules of Order (parliamentary procedures for conducting meetings that gave every member a chance to participate, voice their opinions and vote in a structured, democratic format), they would take turns sharing anything that was important to them and discuss solutions to any problems/issues. Everyone took turns being the secretary (who would write the meeting minutes in the “Royal Notebook”) and the Chair who would preside over the meeting. Members would have to make motions on a particular order of business and another would have to second it

before coming up for a vote. Sometimes the business at hand would be addressed by making a motion that one of the members should “mind their own business”, which could readily be seconded. The meetings usually began with a prayer and ended with a song. These experiences helped form the basis of her love for civic dialogue and community service.

Ethel grew up during the Great Depression and WWII where her brother and brother-in-law served. Despite the fact that her father was a lawyer, times were challenging. One way to escape the stress during the summer was for her family to go to her uncle’s cottage on Crystal Lake in northwestern Michigan for two weeks. They would canoe, build fires and swim in the lake every day. Ethel and Garry continued this custom starting in the later 1950’s with their own family (often joined by Ethel’s siblings and their families) at Chimney Corners resort on Crystal Lake for a week each summer. This family tradition continues to bring joy, comfort and family cohesiveness to her children, grandchildren and great grandchildren to this day. Her generosity, sense of humor and warm, happy presence created memories we will always cherish. One of the memories that highlights Ethel and her siblings fun-loving, youthful nature was the yearly late-night skinny-dipping adventure out to the raft, where their shouts and exuberant laughter would “waft” throughout the resort’s cottages.

Ethel loved learning and attended the progressive, highly regarded liberal arts college, Oberlin College in Ohio. Oberlin was the first U.S. college to admit women and African Americans on an equal basis with Caucasian men in the 1830’s. Ethel majored in history and met the love of her life and Oberlin classmate, Garry Ackerson, her sophomore year. They spent the remaining years together socializing with numerous other classmates, many of whom became their lifelong friends. Oberlin had an excellent conservatory and Ethel was able to continue to listen to music and watch performances at college which brought her great joy.

Ethel married Garry on September 6th, 1953 after they graduated from Oberlin in Battle Creek, Michigan. Garry joined the Marine Corps and rose to the rank of Captain during his four year commitment and was a carrier qualified pilot and fighter pilot instructor, flying the F9F Panther (and many other aircraft after leaving the Marine Corps until 1980). They traveled extensively before settling in East Grand Rapids, Michigan to raise their children in 1964.

Ethel worked tirelessly for her community and family. She volunteered for many years at: Butterworth Hospital, the Junior League, HeadStart, the Kent County Community Action Program (board member), Senior Neighbors (board member), Kent County United Way (Planning Council and Allocation & Review committee member), Switchboard Inc (drug and alcohol crisis line- board member), East Grand Rapids schools PTA, Grand Forum advisory board and the Women's City Club of Grand Rapids. She also served on the governing board and the Social Action Committee at Fountain Street Church where she attended from 1965-1981 (when she and Garry moved to Canada) and from 1990-2013 (when they returned from Canada until she moved to Colorado).

One of her favorite and most challenging positions was serving on the 30-member Grand Rapids YWCA board beginning in the early 1970's. She subsequently served two-year terms as the Vice President and then President of the Board. She was elected as a national delegate to the YWCA in 1976 and supported the national goals of eliminating racism and empowering women, youth and third world persons. This included advancing equal rights under the law for women, furthering their personal growth and development, and expanding their opportunities for meaningful employment. She loved the challenge of practically applying the national goals at the community level, stating in an interview "the neat thing about the YWCA is that women of all

racial, economic, educational, age and religious backgrounds can come together to better understand themselves and each other and work together on issues that affect them". At that time, the Grand Rapids YWCA was serving almost 15,000 people yearly in its residence, camping and downtown activities.

When Garry was promoted in 1981 to President of McDonnell Douglas Canada in Toronto, Ethel happily created new friendships and volunteered at a local hospital. When Garry retired in 1990, Fountain Street Church and their many friends in the area motivated Ethel and Garry to return to Grand Rapids. Ethel loved Fountain Street Church, the congregants, community focus, music, and even the building itself. She sang in the excellent choir there for many years.

Ethel loved family, friends, travel, music, art, theater (taking the family to Shakespearean plays at the annual Stratford Festival in Ontario, Canada) and attending lectures and performing arts at the Chautauqua Institution for arts, education and religion in Chautauqua New York. She also loved playing tennis (until she turned 80) and ping pong (until her late 80's).

When Garry died unexpectedly in 1997 when his car was hit by a person driving recklessly, Ethel dealt with the terrible blow with strength and resolve. The beautiful team that brought life to each other and others and forged two better people through life's challenges, was torn asunder. Despite the intense grief of losing her best friend, confidant and lifelong partner, Ethel forgave the other driver and continued to serve her community and church. She worked to maintain her existing friendships and created some new ones. The vulnerability yet steadfastness she exhibited over the years following this tragedy was another life lesson that was not lost on her children and grandchildren

Ethel loved God and all of His creation- both in nature and in and through people. She never gave up on looking for the good in others, even those she strongly disagreed with. She was a true example of the acceptance, grace, forgiveness and the love of Christ in her relationships with her family, relatives, friends, and co-laborers. Ethel never stopped believing in people's ability to grow, change and work together for the peace, reconciliation, and the edification of humanity as well as easing suffering both locally and globally. Something she wrote in the later 1990's when applying for a governing board position at Fountain Street church was "There has never been a greater need for civility and tolerance and for honoring the holy in every human being. I would like to be a part of this process". Wise words that are so necessary these days.

Her wonderful smile and sense of humor blessed us all throughout her life. She would greet her caregivers and family members with a smile and a "hello dear" or something similar until her final days.

We (her family) would like to thank the amazing staff at MacKenzie Place Fort Collins who served and loved her so well for 12 years. What a gift you gave our family, supporting and honoring our Mom/Grammy and giving her, along with her family and relatives, the love, respect and dignity needed to have a life worth living.

We also would like to thank the Bristol Hospice nurses and caregivers who also supported her for two plus years and helped her transition peacefully to an eternity with Jesus, God, His Spirit and her dearly departed loved ones.

Her first love was her family: her children Elizabeth McIlhenny Ackerson (Alan McIlhenny), Catherine Anne Ackerson-Cerretani (Ralph Cerretani), Charles Edward Ackerson (Elizabeth Rapp Ackerson); and her grandchildren Jennifer Bekken (Joel) and their sons Lander and August; Andreas Schultz (Gabriela)

and their sons Lorenzo and Lucca; Mary Turner, Kate McIlhenny (Nick Kidwell and baby son to come), Aidan McIlhenny (Jade Goe), Alicia Chatterjee; Phillip Ackerson (Cassie Kandyba) and their daughter Violet Ethel; and Laura Phillips (Davis and baby daughter to come).

She was predeceased by her husband Garret G. Ackerson III (1929-1997), her daughter Helen Lydia Ackerson (1955-1963), her siblings Helen (Guerin) Putnam, Eleanor Guilbert, Austin Goodrich, and her parents.

Ethel was a joyful and compassionate daughter, sister, wife, mother, grandmother, great grandmother, leader, advocate and friend.

We will miss her dearly!!

In lieu of flowers, donations may be given to the MacKenzie Place Fort Collins Employee Fund, YWCA or Bristol Hospice (bristolfoundation.org).

Tribute Wall

JG

“ My beloved Aunt "Etsie", (she told me once that I was the only one that called her "Etsie", and she loved the name); was a special force of love and goodness in my life. As cousins, we were blessed with truly great Aunts; Helen, Vesla, Nonne, and Ets. My Uncle Garry and Aunt Etsie were so loving to me, and my memories of their love are countless and kept close to my heart. Condolences to all Ackersons, and to all of us who had the blessing of having Ethel Goodrich Ackerson as family. We will be together again.

Jon G. - November 04, 2025 at 09:13 PM