

Helena Gervais McCullough--Obituary for Wed., Feb. 8, 2006 (Compiled by her son-in-law, Robert W. Trezevant)

Helena Gervais McCullough, age 96, a life-long resident of Oak Park, passed away at her family home on Monday, Feb. 6. She was born in Rockford, IL, on Sept. 13, 1909, the youngest child of Samuel Valentine Saxby of Seven Oaks, Kent, England, and Jane Weyburn of Rockford.

She moved to Oak Park at two months of age with her mother and two older brothers to live in the home of her aunt and uncle, Blanche Weyburn Kerr and Robert Kerr. The Weyburn and Kerr families were both Unitarian-Universalists, so Helena grew up going to services at Unity Temple. She attended Beye School and graduated from Oak Park-River Forest High School in 1927.

Helena attended Rockford College for two years and then returned to Oak Park to attend the Moser School of Business in Chicago. For a few years she worked at Sears, Roebuck and Company and at Oak Park Trust and Savings Bank.

Helena Saxby married Paul Trapier Gervais of Oak Park in 1935. They were married at Unity Temple, after which she became a member of Grace Episcopal Church in 1936, remaining an active member for the rest of her life. Paul Gervais had also attended Beye School and had graduated from Oak Park-River Forest High School in 1920. After completing his engineering degree at Cornell University in 1924 and spending a year studying literature and humanities at Oxford University in England, he worked in his father's manufacturing business in Chicago and later became a management consultant. The couple shared season tickets to the Goodman Theater since its opening in 1927 and full season tickets to the Chicago Symphony Orchestra beginning in 1932 and kept by Helena for more than 70 years. Paul Gervais died unexpectedly in 1963.

After her husband's death Helena worked as a part-time office assistant to Bob Rice, the minister at Unity Temple. In that capacity she gave spontaneous tours of the building to many curious tourists. In 1972-3 Helena, with Elsie Jacobsen and others, put together the first architectural tour of Frank Lloyd Wright buildings in Oak Park, including Unity Temple. [The date is incorrect. It should be 1969. See "HSGM & Frank Lloyd Wright."] This was the first of the annual tours that became Wright Plus, and Helena was a life member of the Frank Lloyd Wright Home & Studio Foundation. She and her friend Marion Herzog hosted Lloyd Wright at Helena's home during one of his early visits to Oak Park to consult on the preservation and restoration of the Temple. She joined with Marion Herzog as a founding member of the Unity Temple Restoration Foundation in 1974.

That same year Helena Gervais married Hiram McCullough of Williamsport, PA, a widower whom she had met many years earlier during her time at Sears. He had graduated from Princeton in 1927 and

worked in the lumber business. They were married at Grace Episcopal Church in Oak Park, lived for several years in Williamsport, and returned to live in Oak Park, where Hiram McCullough died in 1982.

Helena Gervais McCullough was an avid traveler. With her original family she took several extensive trips in the United States and made a 70-day excursion throughout Europe in 1958. She later visited the Caribbean, Spain/Morocco, and England, and she toured in Asia, South America, and the Holy Land, with several more extended times in Europe with family members.

Helena was always active in community organizations. She and Paul were staunch Democrats before being a Democrat was socially acceptable in Oak Park. In the 1940s they joined the Lowell literary group (founded by Blanche and Robert Kerr in 1897), and in the 1950s they joined the River Forest Tennis Club (where Robert Kerr had been an early president). At Grace Episcopal Church she served for many years on the alter guild and was involved with such groups as the Building Committee, Aging and Ageless Radicals, and Integrity. Helena was a long-time member of the Nineteenth Century Women's Club. She served three two-year terms on its board. She was chair of both the music and social science committees, served as press person, and for one year chaired the scholarship committee. She also served on the board of the Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest and was program chair for one year. In her later years she was a member of the Oak Park Country Club. In the midst of all family, church, social, and cultural commitments Helena managed to play bridge at least once a week into her nineties.

Helena Saxby Gervais McCullough and her extended family, because of Helena's deep roots and myriad activities in Oak Park, are among the subjects of the digital video ethnographic study of Oak Park being done by former Oak Parker Jay Ruby, recently retired professor of visual anthropology at Temple University.

Helena McCullough is survived by her sons Paul (Glynne) Gervais of Oak Park and John (Jane) Gervais of Seven Valleys, PA, and her son-in-law Bob Trezevant of Oak Park. She was predeceased by her daughter Katherine Gervais Trezevant. She also leaves 7 grandchildren and 5 great-grandchildren, as well as the families of John McCullough and Anne McCullough Pettit. Her family appreciates her faithful caregivers Mona, Nahid, Sayjai, and Dana and the thoughtful staff from Heartland Hospice Services.

In lieu of flowers, the family requests that donations in her memory be made to Grace Episcopal Church, 924 Lake St., Oak Park, IL 60302.

A memorial service will be held on Saturday, Feb. 11, at Grace Episcopal Church, at 11 a.m. with a church reception to follow.

