

Nelson family: Carrie Lee Nelson dies at 98

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Carrie Lee Nelson, widow of U.S. Senator Gaylord Nelson (D-WI), died Monday, March 15, at her home in Kensington, MD of congestive pulmonary disease. She was 98.

Carrie Lee Dotson was born into poverty in Appalachia's Cumberland Mountains on Jan. 29, 1923 in Wise, Virginia, the ninth of 10 children, of which eight survived beyond infancy. Her "hometown" was Pound, Virginia, but her family lived in the hills, in Dotson Holler, "so poor we didn't have an outhouse," and wore clothes made of flour sacks, she said.

Her father died when she was three, leaving her mother unable to support the impoverished family and keep it together. Carrie Lee's father had been a thirty-third degree Mason, and at age seven Carrie Lee went, with a younger brother, to a Masonic children's home in Richmond, where two other brothers already were, and became a ward of the Masons of Virginia.

She graduated from nursing school at the Medical College of Virginia in Richmond in 1945, and enlisted in the Army nurse corps for the duration of World War II.

While stationed at Indiantown Gap, Pa. she met Gaylord Nelson, also an Army lieutenant, her future husband of 57 years. They dated for several weeks, but he shipped out for the West Coast and the Pacific, and they did not even exchange addresses, expecting never to meet again.

But in the fall of 1945 they were reunited on Okinawa, and by the time Gaylord Nelson left for the U.S. in 1946 they had an understanding. Upon her discharge, she moved to Madison, Wis., where Nelson was practicing law, and she worked as a

nurse. On Nov. 15, 1947 they were married. Their story is one of those told in Tom Brokaw's book, "The Greatest Generation."

Gaylord Nelson was elected to the State Senate in 1948, as Wisconsin's governor in 1958, and as a U.S. Senator in 1962. Carrie Lee, who was not interested in politics when she met him, became a political wife on her own terms and carved out a role that suited her. "Set your own precedents," she recalled Nelson telling her. "There are no rules." She was charming, irreverent, outrageous, profane at times, and often hilarious "Gaylord never ever criticized me, never once said you cannot talk that way or behave that way," she said after his 32 years in elective office. She was, one friend said, "the mortar that holds that family together."

In Washington, as in Madison, Carrie Lee's Southern charm, hospitality and knack for putting together informal, lively dinner parties with an eclectic cast of characters made them an institution. Guests included politicians of both parties, journalists, lobbyists, diplomats, Capitol staffers and others who could hold their own in the conversations that frequently ended in heated debates. The Nelsons hosted several hundred such gatherings during their time in Washington.

In both Wisconsin and Washington, Carrie Lee cared for the needy, volunteering her nursing skills in Madison at Central Colony for the developmentally disabled and in Maryland with hospice care.

Senator Nelson, a noted environmentalist who founded Earth Day and ended his career as counselor at the Wilderness Society, died in 2005.

She is survived by two sons, Gaylord A. Jr., known as Happy, of Dane, Wis.; and Jeffrey of Kensington, Md; a daughter, Tia, of Madison, Wis.; and four grandchildren: Kiva, Jason, Benjamin and Julia.

A memorial service will be held at a later date. She will be buried next to her husband of 57 years in Clear Lake, Wis. The family suggests that in lieu of flowers, donations can be made in her memory to your local homeless shelter or food bank, or any non-profit providing services to the needy.