There was nothing more important to Irene Reidsma than family. Not just her family, mind you, but the families all around her, and their families, too. Irene was a true genealogical genius, who diligently studied those that came before her, and the legacies they left behind, writing and recording these histories in dozens of books, saving them for the generations to come. Today Irene’s own legacy lives on in the family she loved more than anything.

Irene’s story began on a cold winter day in 1921, in the bustling city of Grand Rapids, Michigan. Those were such exciting times in this country, as the Roaring 20s dawned across our culture, bringing with them a woman’s right to vote, and making Prohibition the law of the land. As the calendar changed from 1920 to 1921 that January, Jacob and Adriana (Verhuel) Vander Meulen celebrated the birth of their first child on January 11, a beautiful baby girl they named Irene Bessie.

Irene would be joined by her brother Raymond and little sister Louise in the family’s home in Grand Rapids, where her father worked as a machinist and cabinet maker, and her mother cared for the home and family. When she was a little girl, they packed up and headed west to Holland, where they lived on the southeast side, she would attend the public schools.

Irene was a bright young student, with a natural aptitude for math, and a true gift for the game of chess, at which she was unbeatable. She graduated from Holland High School, and like so many young girls in those days, she found work as a maid at some cottages on Lake Macatawa in Holland. It was her personal life that was about to get more interesting, however.

Irene became a member of the Immanuel Baptist Church when she was 8 years old, a place that meant so much to her. When she was a young woman, she began sitting behind a handsome young man named Russel Reidsma, another charter member. Russ was four years older than Irene, but she was determined to
chase him until she caught him! They began going for walks at Centinial Park, and it didn’t take long for Irene to talk Russ into marrying her!

Russ was involved in a bad car accident prior to their wedding, but eventually recovered, and the happy couple was wedded at the church parsonage by Reverend Berthuis. The newlyweds settled into a home on 15th Street in Holland, between Van Raalte and Harrison, where they would share so many wonderful years together, and start their family, too.

Irene and Russ were blessed with four terrific children, first Vincent Russel in 1940, then Christine Anita in 1942, Lance Christian in 1944, and Molly. Irene rounded out the happy family in 1945.

Russ worked 12-14 hours a day to provide for his family, commuting to Grand Rapids every day for his job at General Motors. Soon he began working two full-time jobs in Holland, Dutch Boy Bakery and Nabisco Rusk on East 8th Street near the fire barn. Irene became a devoted homemaker, and an especially loving mother. She kept a spotless home and ran a tight ship, no question, but she also raised her children the right way, full of respect and faith in the Lord. Every morning she led her kids in their daily devotions, at 7 a.m. sharp. Each of her children prayed, oldest to youngest around a circle. Irene would read a selection of scripture as well. Irene continued to pray for her children long after each one left home to establish their own families. The family didn’t have a water heater in their home for many years, so Irene would warm water on the stove in the basement, carry it upstairs and pour it in the bath tub. The kids then would take their turn with the bath, youngest to oldest.

Irene loved children, and was a “block mother” in her neighborhood, caring for all the kids on the block, and also baking cakes for any new families that arrived. Irene was never afraid to discipline the neighbor kids, either! Irene also taught Vacation Bible School at her church for many years, as well, in addition to her longtime duties as the church librarian.

Irene was a woman who was always busy, especially when it came to her favorite hobby, genealogy. She was passionate about learning people’s histories, and preserving the records of those that came before. She was diligent and thorough, as well, and quickly became a resident expert, and a member of the Holland and Zeeland genealogy clubs. She also had more than two
dozen books published in the State of Michigan Library, on everything from genealogy, to history, cemeteries and family histories. Irene’s books can be found in the Hope College library and many other local libraries, as well. She studied the cemeteries on Beaver Island and Mackinaw Island. And she called the local funeral homes every single day in her later years, checking information on those who had passed.

Sadly, Irene died on Thursday, June 7, 2007, at Holland Hospital, at the age of 86.

She was preceded in death by daughter Christine Reidsma in 1962, and daughter in law Sandy Reidsma 2004.

Irene was a remarkable woman, who led a remarkable life, a life devoted to family, from her own, to those on her block, to those that came before. Irene knew the importance of remembering our families, and the legacies they left behind. Today Irene’s own legacy lives on in the family she loved most of all. She will be greatly missed.

Her family includes: husband of 67 years Russel Reidsma, children son Vincent and Rosemary Reidsma of Holland, MI., son Lance and Lori Reidsma of Holland, daughter Molly Reidsma of Holland, MI.; 7 grand children; 14 great grand children; 1 great great grand daughter; brother Raymond and Bobbie Vander Meulen of Holland, Louise and Jack Wolters of Holland,; in-laws, Donald Reidsma of Detroit, Raymond Reidsma of Holland, June and Edward Barber of Holland, Donna Covington of Holland, several nieces, nephews, and cousins.

Services will be 11 am Monday at Immanuel Baptist Church in Holland. Burial will be in Pilgrim Home Cemetery.

Visiting will be from 3-5 Sunday at The Mulder Chapel Dykstra Life Story Funeral Home 188 west 32nd Street Holland, MI. Memorials may be made to Immanuel Baptist Church Library Fund. Please visit www.lifestorynet.com to share a favorite memory or photo of Irene, or to sign the online guestbook.