

Cleo Higley

January 17, 1920 - March 30, 2013



Cleo's Life Story

Cleo Higley was an unforgettable woman. Everyone who knew her had a story to tell: dumping out her husband's whiskey and replacing it with iced tea, making popcorn balls for Halloween, twisting the dogs' ears, shooting squirrels off the bird feeder with a shotgun, shopping trips and unforgettable meals - the list is endless.

The common thread running through everyone's memories of Cleo, however, can be summarized in one word: family. Family was everything to Cleo, and she devoted her life to caring for those she loved. She had a way of making her home comfortable to everyone, and people always felt welcome; she was the heart of her extended family, and loved ones far and near gathered under her roof every year for holidays. A pillar of strength, a compassionate listener, and always willing to lend a helping hand, Cleo offered her love and support to family and friends in countless ways; she will be forever missed by all those whose lives she touched.

In the United States, the 1920s were an effervescent decade of economic prosperity and changing social values, including new rights for women, the popularization of radio, and increasing consumerism. Cleo was born at the dawn of this historic decade, on January 17, 1920, and shared her birth year with the introduction of the 19th amendment (women's right to vote), the start of prohibition, and the invention of the parachute.

Cleo's proud parents, Elmer and Alta (Helms) Coe, had made their home in Altona, Michigan, and later moved to Big Rapids. Elmer supported his family as an automotive mechanic, while Alta raised the children and worked as a nurse. Cleo grew up in a large, close-knit family, with four siblings: Leone, Eleanor, Virginia, and Vernon. Separated by ten years, Cleo was like a second mother to her youngest sibling, Vernon. "Sister Rat" and "Brother rat," as they called each other, were close their entire lives, and Vernon lived with Cleo's family for many years.

Like many youngsters, once Cleo started school, she discovered that her favorite part of the school day was recess. She was known for always getting other





people to spell words for her - she disliked spelling herself, but always wanted her writing to look right! Cleo was generally a good student, but she did get in trouble once for eating her lunch during school hours.

On December 25, 1935, Cleo eloped with the man who would be the love of her life - Lyle Higley. The young couple moved in with Lyle's parents, where Cleo would care for her father-in-law after he suffered a stroke. Cleo and Lyle's family soon began to grow, and over the years they were blessed with three daughters: Joy Dawn, Charlene Mabel, and Virginia Lynn ("Ginger"). Cleo was a devoted mother, and in addition to raising her own children, she also helped raise a nephew and even some grandchildren (after her son-in-law Loren passed away in 1968). Later, when her parents were older and began to experience health problems, Cleo took them into her home as well.

Cleo's home was her kingdom, and she was an immaculate housekeeper. Her kitchen floor really was clean enough to eat off - she always got down on her hands and knees to scrub, "because that is how you get the floor the cleanest." She was also a wonderful cook, and famed for her delicious pies. In fact, when the threshing crews worked on the Higley farm and came up to the house for dinner, many would request permission to eat their pie first, before the equally delicious main meal! Cleo was a wonderful host, warm and welcoming, and seldom seen without a ready smile on her face.

A true farm wife, Cleo loved being in the great outdoors. From gardening and canning to hunting and fishing, Cleo could do it all. She had a running battle with the squirrels that stole her bird feed, and her kitchen windowsill was reputed to have a notch where her gun barrel rested as she took aim at the pesky thieves. Cleo also loved huckleberries, and spent many happy hours at the sheep ranch picking berries with her husband and parents.

Cleo was a homemaker and farm wife until the age of 35, at which point she added nurse's aide to her list of accomplishments. Despite the fact that Cleo's only training was on-the-job, she was very competent, and a favorite of the doctors - everybody called her "mom." Cleo worked as an operating room technician at Mecosta County Medical Center for 27 years, where her own daughter Joy would eventually become the head OR nurse. As a retirement gift, all the physicians Cleo had worked with over the years chipped in to present Cleo with a Canon 35 mm camera, which she used to capture many beautiful pictures of flowers, wildlife, and family members.





After retiring in 1982, Cleo and Lyle enjoyed wintering in Florida every year. Cleo was thrilled to get away from the "BRRRR COLD!" She loved having her family visit her in Florida, and always took the grandkids on duck walks, where they fed the ducks with bread crusts.

Sadly, Cleo's beloved husband Lyle passed away in September of 1987, leaving Cleo a widow after 52 years of marriage. Although this was a difficult time for Cleo, she drew great comfort and support from her family members. Ginger began driving her mother to Florida every winter, and the trip became more elaborate each year. They made many shopping stops at outlet malls along the way - by the time they reached Florida, the car would be chock full! Back home in Michigan, Cleo loved going to church with her grandchildren, especially her "church buddy" Cindy.

Strong and hard-working, compassionate and kind, Cleo was a devoted wife, a loving mother and grandmother, and a loyal friend. She will be deeply missed and lovingly remembered by her many friends and family members.

Mrs. Cleo B. Higley went to be with her Lord on March 30, 2013, at the age of 93. Cleo's family includes her daughters, Charlene (Lawrence) Morningstar of Big Rapids and Ginger (Frank) Wilhelm of Portage; 13 grandchildren; 25 great-grandchildren; 5 great-great-grandchildren; and her brother, Vernon (Delores) Coe of Rodney. She was preceded in death by her parents; her husband, Lyle; her daughter, Joy Lake; her great-grandson, Nicholas; her son-in-law, Loren; her sisters, Leone Louck, Virginia Stevens and Eleanor Oleson; and her brother-in-law, Dale Louck.

Funeral services for Cleo will be held at 11 a.m. on Thursday, April 4, at the Mohnke Funeral Home in Big Rapids, with Pastor Kevin Barker officiating. Visitation will be on Wednesday from 4 to 7 p.m. and on Thursday from 10 a.m. until the time of the service. Pallbearers will be Larry Morningstar, Scott Morningstar, Todd Morningstar, Mark Morningstar, Leonard Gray and Frank Wilhelm. Interment will be at Pine Plains Cemetery. Memorial Contributions may be made to Big Rapids First Baptist Church. Please visit Cleo's personal memory page at www.lifestorynet.com, where you can learn more about her life, share a favorite memory or photo, and sign the online guestbook.



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