

Last Ranch School Faculty Member Passes Away

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In an irony that A. J. Connell would not have appreciated, the last surviving “master” from the Los Alamos Ranch School was the only woman ever hired to teach there. Connell, the school’s director, was not in favor of women on the Ranch School campus. He had hired only male faculty in the twenty-five-year existence of the school, but in the waning days of 1942 he had to make an exception. Male faculty members were difficult to come by after Pearl Harbor,

and when the school lost its French instructor to the draft late in the fall term, Connell hired Esilda Pepper as his replacement.

Mrs. Pepper passed away at the age of 93 on July 29th of this year in San Diego. The previous August, Master Harry Walen died at age 93 in Exeter, NH. Their deaths have brought to an end the era of 42 fine men and one woman who taught the students of the Los Alamos Ranch School.

Esilda Pepper was the wife of another Los Alamos master, Jerry Pepper, who taught math and outdoor activities. The Peppers and their young son, Jerry Jr., moved to Los Alamos in 1942 when Cecil Wirth had to leave the faculty because of illness. Pepper took over Wirth’s classes, and the family moved into the stone house that had been occupied by the Wirths.



Jerry and Esilda Pepper. (Photo from the Los Alamos Historical Museum Archives)

Jerry had been a baseball star at Fordham University, played minor league ball in the mid 1930s, and taught at Milford Academy in Connecticut before taking the position at the Ranch School.

Esilda Pepper had a bachelor’s degree from Ohio Dominican College and teaching experience, but little did she expect to find herself on the Ranch School staff when she journeyed from Lamy over “corduroy roads,” as she described them, “to a one-lane road built at the end of a promontory.” Fifty years later she remembered the hairpin turns on that one-lane road when she made an oral history tape for the Historical Society on a return visit to Los Alamos. “When we reached the top of the mesa we saw a beautiful campus

with huge log buildings and lovely landscaped grounds,” she recalled. “The house that was assigned to us was made of tufa rock. It had a large living room, six-foot open fireplace, butler’s pantry, small kitchen, and two bedrooms. A furnace that burned wood heated the house. The furnace was tended night and day by the workers hired by the school. We were always comfortable, even in very cold weather.” In describing their home, she added, too, that because they had “the largest living room and a large round dining room table, everyone congregated at our house for a game of poker. Fifty cents was the limit, and if you lost that, you could still stay in the game!”

The Peppers made friends easily in the close-knit community of the Ranch School and became lifelong friends with some. “We became friendly with Mr. and Mrs. Bences Gonzales and their six children,” Esilda mentioned in her interview. “The oldest boys, Raymond and Severo, babysat for us.” And on subsequent yearly trips to New Mexico the Peppers continued to visit with Severo and his family long after.

“The school day began at 7:30 a.m. with an exercise session in front of the Lodge,” she continued. “Then off to classes.” A particularly fond memory was the morning break at 11 a.m., when everyone “met on the portal of the Lodge for conversation, wonderful brownies, and ice cold milk.” She could still see the young men playing touch football and ice skating at Douglas Pond.

Esilda Pepper taught for a total of two weeks as the Ranch School lived its last days, but for the family their months at the Ranch School were remembered as a “calm, unhurried way of life” that came to an end with the condemnation of the school for the Manhattan Project. However, that didn’t spell the end of their time in Los Alamos. Jerry hired on as director of recreation, and Esilda taught school, al-



Master Harry Walen with wife Betty and son Benson. Harry passed away in 2008. (Photo from the Los Alamos Historical Museum Archives)

though they did have to give up their comfortable house to the Oppenheimers and move into a Sundt.

After the war ended, the Peppers returned to Milford, Connecticut. Jerry went back to Milford Academy and became headmaster, and Esilda earned a masters degree in elementary education and taught fifth grade for twenty-five years. In 1983, they retired and moved to San Diego to be near their daughter’s family. Jerry died in 2000, but until that time he and Esilda made many return visits to New Mexico. It never ceased to pull them back, even though they lived here for only three years of their sixty-two-year marriage. It was a time of adventure that left an indelible mark. When Esilda turned 90, she made a trip to Santa Fe to celebrate, and one of her final requests was that in lieu of flowers donations should be made to a mission

in Tohatchi, New Mexico.

Harry Walen came to the Los Alamos Ranch School fresh out of Harvard in 1937 and taught there until the school closed. The memories of those years were so special to him that he was still carrying a memento in his wallet when author Linda Aldrich interviewed him for *Los Alamos: The Ranch School Years* in 2005. Walen died August 22, 2008.

At the Ranch School, Walen taught English. He married Elizabeth Benson and their first son, Harry Benson Walen, was born while they were at Los Alamos. In 1942, he served as deputy sheriff of Sandoval County for a time before accepting a position at Groton School in Massachusetts. He remained there until 1946 when he became an administrator at Newton High in Massachusetts and later at Needham High School. He taught also at the junior college level and worked as directing editor of secondary school English for Ginn & Company.

After leaving Los Alamos, Harry and his

wife had two more sons, seemingly complying with A. J. Connell's "edict" that his masters father only sons! In his long career, Harry Walen earned a masters degree from Harvard, authored or coauthored seven books, numerous monographs, and contributed chapters, articles, and poems to many books, journals, and periodicals. He was an alderman, a colonel in the state militia, sat on boards, chaired committees, and was poet laureate of Rockport, MA, where he and his wife retired in 1978. He was also a life member of the Los Alamos Historical Society. In 2006, the couple moved to New Hampshire to be near their sons. Betty Walen died later that year. The two were married for sixty-seven years.

Previous to the deaths of Esilda and Jerry Pepper and Harry Walen, a few other masters had also lived into the twenty-first century. Bernard Rogers and Charles Todd died in 2002, Charles Shain in 2003, Quentin Hope in 2005, Ransom Lynch and Rogers Scudder in 2006, and Ralph Petrizzi in 2007.