

LIVES LIVED

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ELSIE MARY THEOBALD

*Daughter, sister, schoolteacher.
Born June 15, 1910, in Toronto.
Died of old age May 16
in Montreal, aged 96.*

Elsie Theobald was the last of her family. Her parents emigrated from England in the early years of the last century; their infant son died shortly after their arrival. Elsie was Canadian-born, as was her sister Alice, five years younger. Neither sister married.

Work with the railway took the family to Quebec City. Elsie and Alice were bright girls, brought up to be both ladylike and independent, and with a strong sense of duty. At 19, Elsie was teaching in Levis, Que.

Their father died of pneumonia on Alice's 21st birthday. From then until her death in 1955, their mother lived with Elsie in Aylmer, Que. Their lives were centred on school and church: Hundreds of "bazaar novelties" flew from Elsie's needles and onto church sale tables. She taught in Hull, read *Heidi* to her Grade 6 classes, and sometimes spent the weekend in bed, felled by one of her migraines.

She read Dickens almost as faithfully as the Bible. She worried that she had got too good a bargain out of her life membership in the Faversham Society, and in recent years sent cheques to cover postage. She was punctilious in such matters: Her horror of debt was part of her independence.

Although she eventually moved to Montreal to be near her sister, it was on her own terms, in her own apartment.

When Alice became infirm, Elsie wore herself out in her care, taking the bus everywhere to do the shopping and banking for two. When the sisters moved into a nursing home, Elsie whispered to my mother, with evident relief: "No more shopping."

Still she fretted over Alice, and when Alice died two years ago, we thought she might follow. But she surprised us - for the first time since she was 5, she was free of responsibility.

Her expectations were few. She enjoyed her newspaper, especially the crossword puzzle and the business pages. She went to bingo and trivia games, and won every round. They put a limit on the number of prizes she could claim. It wasn't quite fair to the others, she admitted, because "they don't have all their marbles."

She had strong opinions, and she was known to take umbrage when someone crossed her over, say, church sale arrangements. She was used to her own way.

I am not sure that she would have been pleased to be written about in a newspaper. When they summoned me to her bedside, she greeted me by name and asked if I'd had my supper. Then she gave me instructions about one or two treasures, and told me she wanted to die. After that night, she said almost nothing more. Except a day or two before she died, as I was reading evensong to her, faintly, but steadily, her voice joined in the Lord's Prayer.

» Susan Drain is Elsie's first cousin once removed.