Muriel Elizabeth (Betty) Palecek

August 18, 1921 to December 1, 2012

Betty was born Aug. 18, 1921, in Boston, Mass., to Joseph A. and Grace A. (Burbank) Haslam. She graduated in 1938 from Cambridge High and Latin School, Cambridge, Mass., and in 1942 from Worcester (Massachusetts) State Teachers College with a bachelor of science in education degree.

Betty married Marvin A. Palecek in Troy, N.Y., Thanksgiving Day, Nov. 26, 1942. He had been drafted into the Army in 1941, and he served with the 45th Infantry Division (Thunderbirds) in the European Theater of World War II from 1943 to 1945. He was sent home on rotation in the spring of 1945 because he had earned seven battle stars and the Silver Star. Fortunately, the war in Europe ended before he had to return. Both Betty and Marvin were dedicated to learning and teaching. From 1942 to 1945, Betty taught high school in Windsor, Vt., North Fond du Lac, Wis., and Topaz, Utah. Topaz was an internment center for Japanese-Americans during the war. Betty loved her students, and they loved her in return. She provided them warmth, learning and dignity in a dark time of their lives.

After the war, Marvin and Betty settled in Oshkosh, Wis. (He grew up on a nearby farm.) Marvin worked for the Oshkosh Fire Department, but he was seeking a way to serve the Lord directly. Marvin and Betty moved themselves and their two little girls to Minneapolis so he could attend Northwestern Bible College on the G.I. Bill. He graduated with highest honors in 1953 and earned a Master of Arts Degree at the University of Minnesota the next year. By then, they had added two little boys to their growing family.

Life was very hard at times. Perhaps the hardest thing of all was that their first child, Anne, was born with spina bifida. Anne was severely handicapped, both mentally and physically. Betty had to reluctantly hand her care over in 1953 to the Faribault (Minn.) State Hospital, where she lived until her death in 1990. The family moved to northwestern Wisconsin in 1954, where Betty and Marvin taught high school for 10 years in Spring Valley, Luck and Chetek. They moved back to Minnesota in 1964 (by then they had six children), where Marvin began a 21-year career at Winona State University. He retired as chairman of the history department. Betty was an English instructor at College of St. Theresa from 1965 to 1980. For the last few years as CST struggled, Betty also taught part-time at Winona State.

After the last of their children were born, Betty and Marvin continued their educations. First, Betty earned a master of science in education degree from Macalester College in 1966, then Marvin earned a Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota in 1969. The family spent several summers in the Twin Cities during this process, and Marvin also commuted from Winona to Minneapolis one evening per week for two years. After Marvin finished his Ph.D., he and Betty began traveling extensively, first with their children and eventually with just each other. They visited all 50 states, much of Canada and parts of Europe. They visited many national parks, a
few of them again and again. Marvin and Betty retired jointly in 1985 and moved to Clermont, Fla., two years later. They lived there until Marvin went home to the Lord in August 2001, two days before Betty’s 80th birthday. Her children then moved her back to Winona, where she lived in Watkins Manor assisted living from January 2002 to February 2009 and then in the Lake Winona Manor nursing home until her death Saturday, Dec. 1, 2012. Betty was a natural thespian and drama instructor. Not only did she coach high school theater, but after retiring, she led the senior community where she lived in putting on several shows. Even in assisted living in Winona, she put on several shows, including the memorable “Someone Kidnapped the Easter Bunny,” which featured her cat Felix as the bloodhound. She also took it upon herself in 2004 to compile short bios of all the residents at Watkins Manor, because even though they were old and infirm, they were all people with meaningful life stories. Even at Lake Winona Manor, she collaborated with the activities director to put on a few of her shows.

Betty loved poetry. You could pick up nearly any poem and start reading it out loud and she would take it up from you and finish it. Poetry touched her more than it does most others. She recently said, “I would feel the way Coleridge must have felt. I would feel mutuality with him. Trying to find the right words, the right feelings. I could feel him trying to be clever when the poem would reach out and ask to be understood. I have walked by Longfellow’s house. I saw the actual statues and places. I felt an affinity.” Betty was an artist, as are several of her grandchildren. She enjoyed cartooning and had several of her cartoons published in the Orlando and Winona newspapers. Betty carried the memory of Marvin with her for all the years that she survived him. Though his ashes were interred far away in Florida, she purchased a memorial brick for him in Veterans’ Memorial Park in Winona. Betty’s remains will be buried in Winona. They were married for almost 59 years and are now joined in eternity. Preceded in death by husband, Marvin; and daughter, Anne. Survived by children, Lois (Roger) White, Glen (Denise), Lowell (Ann), Lynette and James (Jennifer); nine grandchildren, 11 great-grandchildren; sister, Edith Jacqueline (Jackie) Haslam; and many other relatives and friends.

Services will be at 11 a.m. Friday at Calvary Baptist Church, 676 West Sarnia St., Winona. Visitation will be 9:30 to 11 a.m. at the church.