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Sarah Wilson Garrett

Maine's only national spelling champion

TOPSHAM — Sarah Wilson Garrett, 76, Maine's only national spelling bee champion who was an Internal Revenue Service lawyer for many years, died here Wednesday.

Mrs. Garrett was a 12-year-old student at Hancock School in Gray when she traveled to Washington in 1934

PASSAGES

Each day the newspaper selects one obituary and seeks to learn more about the life of a person who has lived and worked in Maine. We look for a person who has made a mark on the community or the person's family and circle of friends in small but lasting ways.

to compete with the other regional champions. She won the first prize, then \$500, as the national champion. She had been state champion and national runnerup the year before, when she lost when she misspelled 'perspicuity.'

Returning to Maine by train, she was greeted by a crowd at Portland's former Union Station, and escorted to City Hall for a formal welcome. She also dined with Maine's two senators and three congressmen while in Washington.

Her remarkable spelling ability came from hard work, said her brother, Earl E. Wilson Jr. of Gray. "She was always real bright. She used to sit in the living room with my mother and go back and forth through the dictionary for hours at a time. My mother would throw out words for her to spell."

Mrs. Garrett had a photographic memory, said Jason Wilson, her nephew.

Her son, Crombie J.D. Garrett, agreed, but, he said, "she was careful not to show it off."

"She had it, it was undeniable," said her son. She often quoted from memory things that would take me an hour to memorize. Her intelligence was pretty formidable."

"I've always had a love affair with the dictionary," she told a Press Herald reporter in a 1993 interview. "Sometimes I don't think kids read as much as they used to."

Mrs. Garrett was chief counsel to the commissioner of the U.S. Internal Revenue Service, and for many years she sat on a board that decided whether large companies qualified for tax breaks. She retired in 1986 as head of the exempt organizations branch of the IRS.

She lived in the Washington, D.C., area for the 30 years that she worked for the IRS, and vacationed in Maine frequently to visit with her many relatives. She returned to live in Maine last December.

Mrs. Garrett was an enthusiastic Girl Scout, attaining honors as a Golden Eaglet.

She was a member of the Connecticut, D.C. and Maryland bars and the American Bar Association.

Mrs. Garrett was an avid reader who loved animals, crossword puzzles and was active in the community as a volunteer. She was a longtime communicant of St. Anne's Church in Annapolis.

Born in Rockland, a daughter of Earle Farnsworth and Lucy Jacobs Wilson, she graduated in 1938 from the former Pennell Institute in Gray. She graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1941 from University of Vermont and in 1944 from Yale Law School.

She practiced law for a short while in New Haven, Conn., before joining the IRS.

In 1944, she married Crombie J.D. Garrett, also a lawyer.

Surviving are her husband of 54 years, her son, Crombie J.D. Jr., and a grandson, James S., and granddaughter, Katharine M., all of Yarmouth; and a brother, Earle F. Jr. of Gray.

Visiting hours will be held from 2 to 4 p.m. today at Wilson Funeral Home, Gray, where a funeral will be held at 1 p.m. Saturday. Burial will be at a later date.