

Melba

By Sue Hassenmiller

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Sometimes while doing research, you come across a person who's life just is so fascinating, you want to know more about that person, even if the person is not related to you. This happened to me last spring when I was helping Mary Tate-Phillips, one of our members, put together a memorial for her husband, Gary Phillips.

In researching Gary's family in rural southern Indiana, I came across Melba Phillips - a girl, born in Hazelton, Indiana in 1907, who lived on a farm with her parents and her three brothers. She graduated from high school at age 15 and received a bachelor's degree in math from Oakland City College of Indiana in 1926. Melba received a master's degree in physics from Battle Creek College of Michigan in 1928 and her doctorate in physics in 1933 from the University of California at Berkeley.

Melba was one of the first doctoral students of J. Robert Oppenheimer, who led the effort to build the first atomic bomb. In 1935, they published an explanation for the unexpected behavior of accelerated "heavy hydrogen" atoms, which became known as Oppenheimer-Phillips effect. She also worked for Einstein.

By 1957, Phillips was appointed associate director at Washington University of St. Louis, and in 1962 she joined the University of Chicago as a physics professor. Melba went on to become one of the leading physics educators of her time. Melba Phillips died at age 97 in Petersburg, Indiana in 2004.

Mary and I are still trying to connect her husband's Phillips family line with Melba's Phillips line which to date we have not been able to do.

This is the story of a remarkable woman. But the story I would like to know, but never will, is what existed in her world or in her to have her achieve so much in a world that was not setup for women. Did her father encourage her? Not telling her that math was only for boys? Was there a teacher that saw something special in Melba? If she showed her intelligence in school (probably a one-room school), did the other students not tease her? Or did she not care and continue to study. If only you had written your story, Melba!!!