



## Phebe Helen Bitner

November 29, 1930 - February 18, 2026

Phebe 'Helen' (Lewis) Bitner, 95, passed away peacefully on February 18th, 2026 near Lake City, Michigan.

She was born November 29th, 1930 to Minard Lewis and Ruby (Adams) Lewis in Freeport, Michigan, the youngest of 3 children.

From a very young age, she enjoyed singing and playing piano, and through the years, taught Sunday School classes, worked in churches, children's camps, and Vacation Bible Schools, taking leadership opportunities when offered, including co-pastoring a church in Lake Odessa, Michigan.

In 1947, Helen enrolled in Houghton College, New York, majoring in Bible and Christian Ed, and minoring in Greek. After graduating in 1951, she taught 6th grade in the public school system, then returned to Houghton College from 1964 until 1968 as a member of the faculty, helping to develop the Elementary Education program. In December 1972, she earned a doctorate in Early Child Education at Ohio State University, and went on to teach teachers at Indiana University in South Bend. During her time in South Bend, she housed and 'adopted' several college students from China.

One student, David Gu, later came back to Helen's home in South Bend with his 2 sons, Joshua, 5, and Daniel, 3, after David's wife, HuiShan, passed away in September of 1994. Helen has always been Mother and Grandmother to this family. Also, 'adopted' student, Shan Liu, along with her husband, Dhao, and their 2 children, Billy and namesake, Helen, affectionately claim her as Mother and Grandmother.

In 1980, Helen traveled to Hong Kong through OMS INTERNATIONAL for a brief time to teach English as a second language there. When China regained control of Hong Kong, she returned to South Bend. In 1996, she took a teaching position in Shanghai, China.

In 2006, at the age of 75, she married Robert 'Bob' Bitner, who had been a fellow classmate during her Houghton College years. He and his first wife and 4 children had been missionaries to Haiti. Bob and Helen lived in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania near Bob's family.

She is survived by many nieces and nephews, children of her sister, Elissa (Vernon) Paulson: Rachel (Don) Reed of Siloam Springs, Arkansas; Naomi (Paul) VanLiew of Phoenix, Arizona; Paul (Mary) Paulson of Interlochen, Michigan; Faith (Nariman) Sodeifi of Scottsdale, Arizona; Sharon Ream of Mesick, Michigan; Dan (Susan) Paulson of Cedar Valley, Michigan; Nichy Paulson of Cedar Springs, Michigan; Thom (Donna) Paulson of Traverse City, Michigan; Karen (Mike) Grogan of Cadillac, Michigan; and Hope Hunter of Albuquerque, New Mexico.

She is also survived by her South Bend adopted family, David Gu, Joshua (Soraya) Gu, Leila and Elian; and Daniel Lewis (Danielle) Gu, and their son Cameron Lewis Gu; Shan Liu (Di) Zhao, Billy, and Helen. Helen is also survived by Bob's four children: Rebecca (Joseph) Hartt, David (Catherine) Bitner, Paul (Karen) Bitner, Peter (Carolyn) Bitner, 12 grandchildren and 23 great-grandchildren, and a sister-in-law, Lois Tamkin. She was preceded in death by her brother, Meredith Lewis; sister, Elissa Paulson; brother-in-law Vernon Paulson; nephews, Philip Paulson, Jim Ream and Timothy Paulson; great-niece, Dana Ream; great-great niece, Brittany Greene; husband, Robert Bitner, and adopted daughter-in-law, HuiShan Gu.

A family memorial service will take place during a reunion gathering in June. Memorial tributes may be made to Jennings Community Church, 696 S. LaChance Road, Lake City, Michigan, 49651. An online guestbook is available at [www.petersonfh.com](http://www.petersonfh.com).



# Tribute Wall

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“*My Aunt Helen! When I was born, she was so proud of her new title at age seven. In my pre-teen years, I would spend several days with her in the summer. She would pick me up and we'd take off on an adventure, usually unknown, and get easily sidetracked when something looked interesting.*

*One summer I attended her church camp with her and helped her carry a twin bed from one cabin to another. In the process I turned my ankle on a protruding tree root as we lugged that bed across the campground, which cramped my style for the week, but Aunt Helen and I had a great time together when she wasn't in meetings, playing games, talking and laughing. She added a lot of fun to my young years.*

*She was a college professor in early childhood education. In her preparation for that role, she earned her PhD at Ohio State University for which she wrote a 400+ page dissertation that she asked me to type for her. As I was finishing it up at Thanksgiving time, she came to our home in South Dakota to spend the holiday with us and pick up her manuscript. It needed some finishing touches when she got there, and I didn't get it quite finished before it was time for her to get to the airport. I did complete the project in time to drive to the airport and give it to her before she boarded her flight!*

*My husband officiated at her wedding when she was 75! It was an occasion to behold. The ceremony was held in the Chinese church and presented in both English and Chinese, followed by a lavish reception at a Chinese restaurant. It is an unforgettable event.*

*Helen had a deep faith in God and spent her life serving Him in various ministries and even traveled to China to teach English as a second language for a few years. She had a heart for Chinese students who came to the university in Indiana where she taught and even housed some in her home during their college years, adding a couple of them to her family and ours.*

*With loving memories, her first niece, Rachel (Rae)*

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Rae Reed - March 09 at 03:46 PM