Richard P. Nickelsen, 89, Lewisburg

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LEWISBURG — Richard P. Nickelsen, 89, of Lewisburg, passed away Sunday, Nov. 23, 2014, at Evangelical Community Hospital, Lewisburg.

He was born Oct. 1, 1925, in Lynbrook, N.Y., a son of the late Karl and Olga (Holm) Nickelsen. On Nov. 18, 1950, he married the former Helen “Cindy” Beardsley who survives. Together they celebrated 64 years of marriage.

Richard graduated from Malverne, New York high school in 1943, where he acquired his love and knowledge of music by participating in the marching band. He received his undergraduate degree from Dartmouth College and his master’s and Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins University.

Surviving in addition to his wife are his children, Abby Nickelsen, of North Potomac, Md., Bruce Nickelsen and wife, Maria Uria-Nickelsen, of Upton, Mass., and Jillian Nickelsen and husband, Chuck Jensen, of Durango, Colo.; one grandson, Lucas Jae Nickelsen; and two cousins, John and Mildred Nickelsen of northern California.

In addition to his parents, he was preceded in death by an uncle and aunt, Vagn and Magda Holm.

As a boy he became passionate about bird watching with a particular interest in the shore birds and those water birds that could be seen migrating off shore. With a cooperative father who would drop him off on the ocean-side beaches of Long Island, he would walk for hours to a pre-arranged pick-up spot. In general his primary interest was in the birds who summered in the Arctic and the birds of prey such as hawks and falcons. Because of his knowledge of birds, friends urged him to join the Boy Scouts. He eventually became an Eagle Scout.

Following graduation from high school in Lynbrook, New York, he matriculated at Dartmouth College in the summer of 1943. He joined the Army for the balance of World War II in the Fall of 1943. Upon graduation from college in 1949 he was able to start his Arctic adventures with a summer job when he and a friend sailed out of Boston Harbor on a government ice-breaker to Devon Island in the Canadian Arctic. They were paid a dollar a day to dismantle a tower, which they later learned was part of the DEW Line system. The next summer he was in Alaska with a high school buddy where they worked mostly as carpenters but also as waiters.

After three years of graduate school he was hired by the U.S. Geological Survey to work two summers in Alaska. As part of a 4-man team they spent three months mapping in the northern Alaska wilderness north of the Kuskokwim River. No cell phones.
After receiving his doctorate degree from Johns Hopkins University in 1953 he began his teaching career at Penn State in the Department of Mineral Industries. As the years passed he knew that he would be happier in a smaller liberal arts college where teaching undergraduates was considered most important. At the same time he would have the freedom to pursue his own research interests.

In the fall of 1959, he came to Bucknell with a mandate from the Dean, Karl Hartzall, to build a Geology Department. For a brief time he was the only geologist. But after he was joined by Jack Allen and Ed Cotter, the department became viable. It grew over the years to offer the full range of geologic fields and could pride itself on its majors, who went on to good jobs or prestigious graduate schools. He served as Department Chair for many years. During that time he received the Bucknell Lindback Award for Distinguished Teaching. He served in the Geology Department for 32 years.

In addition to his teaching duties he continued his research projects in the Appalachian Mountains where we live. This led eventually to six summers spent in the mountains of Norway. As part of that work he spent 15 continuous months there in 1965 and 1966. The NATO Fellowship that supported this work enabled him to have his whole family with him. In 1991, as he was nearing retirement, The Northeast and Southeast Section of the GSA honored him with a Symposium on Thrust-Belt Structure and Tectonics. After he retired, he worked closer to home mapping in southern Pennsylvania. Other jobs and research took him to the Dominican Republic, Wyoming, and Bryce Canyon. In 1994, he received the Career Contribution Award from the Structural Geology and Tectonics Division of the Geological Society of America of which he had been a lifelong member.

He was a founding member of the Susquehanna Valley Chorale and the Linn Conservancy. He enjoyed being on the board of the Union County Conservation District. He was always concerned about good care of the land. Because he had enjoyed the Dartmouth Outing Club, even taking on the presidency for a year, which he did not enjoy so much, he was a strong supporter of the effort to have an Outing Club at Bucknell. In 2012, he received the Great Egret Award from the National Audubon Society and Seven Mountains Audubon. The award was given, “...in recognition of his numerous contributions to Seven Mountains Audubon since its founding in 1974. Over our nearly 40 year span he has served as board member, program chair, and chapter president. For more than 20 years, Dick or “Nick” to many ---coordinated the Christmas Bird Count. He has led countless field trips throughout the region and was instrumental in laying out the heavily used Dales Ridge Trail” (along with its donor Margie Walker).

His family is planning to have a memorial service in the Unitarian tradition with a gathering afterwards. The date and place to be determined and announced separately. Flowers will be provided by the family. If anyone wishes to make a contribution in his memory Seven Mountains Audubon, the Bucknell Geology Marchand Fund in support of undergraduate research, or a charity of your own choosing would be appreciated.

Expressions of sympathy may be shared at www.cronrathgrenoblefuneralhome.com.

The family is being assisted by Cronrath-Grenoble Funeral Home, 106 S. Second St., Lewisburg.