

Helen Ross Hall (1846-1923)

Helen Ross was born on September 15th, 1846 in the village of Kenagh, in County Longford, Ireland. She was the oldest of nine children born to John and Elizabeth Ross who were of English decent. Her grandfather, Arthur Dean, was an officer in the Black Horse Regiment of the English Army under Wellington in the Napoleonic Wars. She was also descended from men who fought for William the Orange of England. Helen's families were very proud of their English ancestry and were also members of the Episcopal Church.

Helen's father John was the head gardener at the Kingston Estate. His job was planning and planting the gardens with a variety of shrubs and trees. John was very proud of the beauty of the grounds he was charged with caring for. Because of his employment at the Estate, Helen's family did not suffer from the economic downfall that so many other Irish people experienced during the Great Potato Famine of 1845-1846.

Helen received an education from a local school when she was a young girl. After she completed her education at the age of fifteen, she became the assistant to the dining room servant in Mosstown House at the Kingston Estate where her father worked. She was responsible for carrying food trays from the kitchen to the dining room table during mealtimes. While she worked as a servant there, she was also given the responsibility of bringing meals to Miss Charlotte, the sister of Master Murray, the owner of the estate. Miss Charlotte was very ill and often too weak to leave her room for her meals. Helen recalled later in life that she would often be sent to Charlotte's room with meals or tea and would try to cheer her up with bits of gossip or news. Because of this, Charlotte became very fond of Helen and asked her brother to assign Helen as her Companion. Helen was sixteen at the time. Becoming a Companion meant that Helen no longer had to serve food or clean up in the dining room of the estate. As her Companion, Helen was given a room next to Charlotte. She would read to and talk with Charlotte and traveled with her to spas and clinics over the course of eight years.

At the age of 21, Helen met Samuel Hall (her future husband) for the first time. He courted Helen for two years before Helen finally brought him to meet Charlotte. This was a difficult time since Samuel and Helen wished to marry and move to the United States. In order to do this, Charlotte had to release Helen as her Companion. Though this troubled Charlotte greatly, she wished for Helen to be happy and released Helen from her service to marry Samuel. Helen and Samuel Hall were married on August 28th, 1868 in the parlor of the Ross home.

Immediately following the wedding, they departed on a ship headed to New York. During the voyage they stayed in very humble living conditions in steerage class for three weeks and five days. They ate at long tables and spent their free time chatting, singing, and dancing with other passengers.¹ Unfortunately at one stretch of their journey, a horrible storm hit the ship and it was thrown about for days. Many people were seasick and the boat was very unpleasant.

Once the boat reached the New York harbor, Samuel's aunt and uncle were awaiting them. His uncle found him a job in a rope-making factory and they stayed in immigrant apartment buildings near the factory. Their first home was a very small apartment with only two rooms: a kitchen/living room and one bedroom. They had to

¹ Glenda Riley, "From Ireland to Illinois: the Life of Helen Ross Hall," 166

share a bathroom with the other tenants. However, they made the most of it and were excited about their first home together.

They endured many hardships during their first year in the United States. The winters were severe in New York, being almost unbearable for Helen. During this time, Samuel lost his job at the rope making factor which would not be the only time he would struggle to keep a steady income. Shortly after this, Samuel found a job at a loading dock. While he was walking home from his first day at the loading dock, a few people leading a strike against the loading dock company attacked him leaving his coat torn and a bump on his head.² Unbeknownst to him, he had become a “scab” worker, or a worker that takes a striking worker’s job. Another incident which persuaded the couple to move took place when Helen found their landlady snooping around their trunk of linens that she had brought with them from Ireland. Helen asked what the landlady was doing. The landlady responded that she “was just looking to see if [they] had some nice things to pay [her] with in case [they did not] have rent money someday. You have nice things Dearie, better keep it locked.”³ At that point, Helen went to Samuel’s aunt for advice and she told the couple to move at once so they relocated to a one bedroom house.

After New Year of 1869, they received a letter from Helen’s uncle Davy Dean inviting them to move to McLean County, Illinois where he lived. He said that Samuel could find work with the “busy railroad shops in Bloomington.”⁴ On February 24th, 1869 the Halls left New York and boarded a train to Illinois. After a week long train ride, they finally arrived in Bloomington, Illinois. Their new home was a two-room apartment which Uncle Davy had rented for them in advance, knowing that Samuel would have income soon through the railroad. The next day, Samuel found a job in the wheel and axle department of the Chicago and Alton Railroad Shops repair division. Helen stayed at home becoming “fast friends” with Celia Dean as she taught Helen how to cook with the limited resources found in a small town on the prairie.⁵

Helen and Samuel had a very large family. They had fourteen children beginning with their first child born on January 30th, 1870 and their last child born on March 8th, 1895, when Helen was 45 years old. In total they had three boys and eleven girls: Elizabeth, Anna Jane, Charlie, Sarah, Carrie, Mary, Arthur, Cora, Helen, John, Eva, Charlotte, Maud Agnes, and Marguerite. Only one daughter, Helen, would not live to see adulthood. She died when she was sixteen years old of typhoid fever.

Throughout their lives in Bloomington, Samuel continued to struggle with keeping a steady income. On April 15th, 1870 the C & A Railroad laid Samuel off but he found summer work at the Phoenix Nursery Company. While his pay was less than what he had made at the C & A Shops, he was given all the fruit and berries he wanted which kept Helen busy canning and helped them stockpile food for the winter. Later that fall he got his old job back at the C & A Shops. This was not the first or the last time that Samuel would be laid off from the C & A Shops. Finally, when he was laid off again in 1886, Helen convinced him to apply for a job on the police force because this would fix their financial instability. He was recommended by their City Ward alderman and was appointed to the Bloomington Police Department. He worked twelve hours a day and his

² Glenda Riley, 166

³ Glenda Riley, 167

⁴ Margaret Conroy, “My Life- Helen Ross Hall,” 7

⁵ Glenda Riley, 169

top pay he received throughout his 29 years as a policeman was \$65.00 a month. He retired in 1915 and after that, he took up a job as a night watchman for the C & A Shops for eight years working ten hours a night.

Some of their financial burdens came from their constant need to expand their living conditions due to their constantly growing family. In 1871 they moved to an upstairs apartment containing three rooms which overlooked Franklin Avenue. After their third child, they began building a house on a lot located at 411 E. Emerson Street that measured 50 feet by 150 feet. Uncle Davy Dean and other neighborhood men would stop by regularly to help build the house. They finally were able to move into the house in July of 1872. Though this house only had three rooms, to them it was a mansion.⁶ After their seventh child, they made additions of two more rooms, a summer kitchen, and a cistern. In September of 1895, after they had had all fourteen children, they purchased a new house at 402 E. Beecher Street. It had a big kitchen and dining room along with four large bedrooms, a parlor, and a sitting room. Helen recalled their new home made them “feel like millionaires with such a big fine home with a cistern, fruit trees, a barn, chicken coop, fenced yard, a grape arbor, and a nice well.”⁷

Helen had many responsibilities as a housewife in Bloomington, Illinois. Her regular duties were cleaning, sewing, cooking, canning fruit from their garden, and caring for the children. They did not have running water at first so Helen had to pull water from the community well every day which gave her an opportunity to socialize with neighbors. She also had to learn to make her own bread because Bloomington did not have as many bakeries as she was used to when they had lived in Brooklyn, New York.

Helen also dealt with bouts of depression due to intense stress and homesickness. Besides missing her family, she also missed Miss Charlotte. During the Christmas of 1871, she received some very sad news from home that Miss Charlotte had passed away. Helen became even more homesick and wracked with grief upon receiving this news. However, in the late 1870's her depression lessened when members of her family began to move to Illinois from Ireland. First her younger brother Arthur and his wife immigrated to Bloomington. Then Helen's parents and her sisters, Mary and Elizabeth came over and finally, her brothers Fred James, John, Alexander, David, William, and Robert George also came to Illinois. Some of her family remained in Bloomington while others moved to other places such as Jacksonville, Illinois and St. Louis, MO.⁸

Helen stayed very close to her family even as her children grew to adulthood. Five of her daughters became school teachers, three were dressmakers, one went to nursing school for a while until she had to quit due to poor health, and one helped take care of the house for her parents. Four of their daughters married farmers, five married men who worked for the railroad, and one married a salesman. One daughter got married and later became a minister for the Unity Church.⁹ Most of Helen's daughters lived within a three block radius of Helen throughout their entire lives. They used to go to their mother for marriage advice. When they would come for help, Helen always responded in the same way by listening to them while they sipped some hot tea and gave

⁶ Glenda Riley, 171

⁷ Conroy, 15

⁸ Glenda Riley, 173

⁹ Wilda Jean McCrossin, *Helen Ross Hall and her Daughters*, 1

them the following advice: “You go home now, fix a nice supper, wash your face and put on a clean dress and never let the sun go down on your anger.”¹⁰

In March of 1923 at the age of 77 Samuel died of bronchial pneumonia and was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery. In his obituary, the *Daily Pantagraph* stated that “their married life was one of unusual happiness and for fifty-four years they have worked together through sunshine and shadow, their whole interest in life being to make each other happy.”¹¹ Helen passed away five years later on March 21st, 1928 at the age of 82. Six months before her death, she attended the funeral of her youngest daughter’s mother-in-law, who was buried in a lavender dress. Helen made a comment to her daughter that she would like to be laid to rest in a lavender dress as well.¹² Her daughter remembered this comment so Helen was laid to rest in a lavender dress next to her husband in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

By: Lisa Dretske, 2009

¹⁰ Wilda Jean McCrossin, 2

¹¹ “Samuel Hall is Called by Death”, *Daily Pantagraph*, March 5, 1923

¹² Wilda Jean McCrossin, 3