

Helen Clark McCurdy (1866-1962)

Helen Clark was born in Bloomington, Illinois on February 21, 1866 to James and Anna (Bacon) Clark. Hallie (as she was also referred to) was the second of three children born to the couple. Tragedy struck the family when Helen's mother, Anna, died of **consumption** (today called tuberculosis) on April 11, 1873, which was less than three months after Helen's sister, Grace, was born. Helen was just seven years old at the time of her mother's death. Two years following Anna's death, James married Adelaide Stevens in Trappe, Maryland. Adelaide as a widow and brought four children of her own to the marriage. By 1878, the **blended** family lived in a elegant home at 515 East Washington Street in Bloomington.

After her father's death in 1888, Helen continued to live with her stepmother and step-siblings at the family home on East Washington Street. She participated in a variety of activities including going to parties at neighbors' and friends' houses, traveling, and socializing with other young people of her social class. Helen also enjoyed playing the card game **euchre** and hosted several euchre parties at the family home.

Helen worked as a clerk at several dry good stores in downtown Bloomington. While she worked at Harry Woods' dry goods store (219 North Main Street), the owner of the store **dubbed** her an "expert glove fitter" in an 1887 *Pantagraph* advertisement announcing the receipt of a shipment of "Foster Improved Hooked Gloves." He stated that "Miss Clark" would "take pleasure" in fitting any pair of gloves of any quality the customer selected.

By 1897, Helen was working at Wilcox Brothers dry goods, millinery, and dressmaking store (located 105 West Jefferson Street in downtown Bloomington). She was in charge of the **millinery** (hat making) department and worked there until a short time before her marriage in 1905.

On November 9, 1905, Helen married Guy S. McCurdy. The couple made their home at 416 E. Grove Street and had no children. Guy, a native of Lexington, Illinois, was a well-known businessman, who went into business with his father who owned McCurdy Hardware Store (located at 110 West Front Street in downtown Bloomington).

After Helen's marriage to Guy, she became very active in the community, belonging to a variety of clubs and organizations. In particular, Helen was a very active member of the Woman's Club of Bloomington. Founded in 1897, the Bloomington Woman's Club was organized with the goal of making "it easier for the **sentiments** and **convictions** of the women to find expression," as well as increase the political influence of Bloomington's women. In 1910, the club began to engage in civic work by organizing a "**Civic Department**," which Helen was chair of by 1912.

As part of her work in the Civic Department for the club, Helen helped organize and lead a children's cleanup day on May 25, 1912. The women on the committee recognized the need to get the "children of today who are the lawmakers of tomorrow" involved. This newly formed Junior Civic League would teach children how to be responsible citizens and that it was their civic duty to care for their city, starting with helping keep the city clean. The Civic Department of the Woman's Club offered any child who participated a button with the inscription "To Beautify Bloomington" on it for collecting one bushel of rubbish and helping "Make Bloomington Shine."

It was recognized that the community's need was far greater than a simple civic department in the Woman's Club. So, in April 1913, under Helen's leadership, a community wide Civic League was formed. Membership was open to any club or organization in Bloomington and

Normal, and members were allowed two representatives to join the league. Initially, forty-five organizations representing a wide variety of clubs joined, with the task to “make Bloomington and Normal better cities in every way possible.”

One of the first actions the Civic League was the publication of a “civic **primer**” titled *City Ordinances You Ought to Know* in May 1913. Many believed that the failure to obey laws in the city was due to a lack of communication and information with regards to the laws and ordinances. So, the Woman’s Club and Civic League **compiled** important ordinances, wrote them in easy-to-understand terms, and published them in a booklet or “primer.” The ordinances selected spanned many topics including health, sanitation, streets and alleys, garbage, burning of leaves, protection of trees, birds and squirrels, misdemeanors, food laws, and more. Five thousand copies of the booklet were made and distributed for free to local homes. Teachers in Bloomington Public Schools were instructed to “give 10 minutes a week” to teach their students (in grades two and higher) about the city ordinances in the primer.

For years garbage collection in the city of Bloomington was always a topic of debate, particularly in the spring and summer as the snow melts and temperatures increased. Many **municipalities** struggled to keep up with garbage, ash, and **manure** accumulation and collection, much to the disappointment of residents. In 1910, thanks to the efforts of the Woman’s Club’s civic department, a city ordinance was amended making it a requirement to have a cover on your garbage receptacle, which went into effect on May 1, 1912.

City **sanitation** (in particular the garbage issue) was a topic that greatly concerned Helen, so much so that she led an effort to address this issue by creating a map detailing every single garbage can in the entire city of Bloomington in March 1915. This “Spot Map” showed all the streets and alleys in the city with a dot marking where garbage cans for each home and business should be located, all 6,400 of them! It took several weeks to create the map, and once completed in May that year, it was a great aid in assessing costs of local garbage collection and was used by the city council as a guide for collecting garbage more **effectively**.

Because of her tireless efforts and work with the Civic League, and interest in bettering Bloomington, Helen decided to toss her hat (so to speak) into the realm of politics. In 1915, she ran to be elected as one of five commissioners in the newly adopted **commission** form of government for the City of Bloomington. She was the first woman to seek municipal office in the City’s history.

Out of a pool of 48 men, Helen was one of the ten candidates to make it through the primary and on to the general election. She received 1,013 votes from women, but only 470 votes from men, for a grand total of 1,483 votes. Helen’s success in the primary was due largely to the fact that women in Illinois had been granted limited voting rights by the landmark **Illinois Municipal Voting Act in 1913**. This act gave white women the right to vote for President of the United States and local offices.

In the days leading up to the election, advertisements in the *Pantagraph* encouraged women to help in the election campaign for Helen. Letters to the editor from citizens (mostly men) supporting her candidacy appeared in the *Pantagraph* too. Charles Miller stated that he had long been an advocate for women’s suffrage, and welcomes “the advent into our official life of Mrs. Helen Clark McCurdy,” feeling sure that she was the **caliber** and quality needed for the City of Bloomington.

Helen made a **commendable** showing in the general election, but it was not enough to win a seat on the city commission. She abandoned any further **ambitions** for public office and put her energies—which were **considerable**—into doing as much good for as many people as possible,

like being a active member of the McLean County chapter of the American Red Cross from 1915 through the 1930s.

In January 1919 Helen was chair of a group of women who set out to restructure the Health Department. Signatures were gathered by a group of women to have a **referendum** on the ballot that stated, "Shall the City of Bloomington employ a competent trained full-time health officer?" The women organizing the effort believed restructuring the health department was necessary because every time they have asked for action on any health issues, they were told that there were "no funds to make **provision** for the requests." They believed that "by replacing the present system of operating the health department can give more efficient service with no increase in taxes or city funds."

Helen continued her interests in sanitation and health into the 1920s by being a member of the **McLean County Tuberculosis Association** board and was elected president in 1928. In January 1908, a group of forward-thinking Bloomington residents organized what would become the privately funded, all-volunteer McLean County Anti-Tuberculosis Society (known later as the McLean County Tuberculosis Association). The goal of the group was to work towards the "**prevention** of and cure of tuberculosis in McLean County." Looking back, Helen's involvement in this cause is particularly meaningful due to her fact that her mother was one of the many that died from tuberculosis.

One of the most important services of the McLean County Tuberculosis Association was supporting county school nurses, who were on the frontlines of **preventative** healthcare in the community. When asked what the county school nurses do, Helen stated that in 1926, "more than 4,000 school children were examined. No fewer than 1,299 school children have been examined this year [1927]. Troubles with teeth, eyes and throats are discovered and advice is given. Whole lives of trouble and **misery** are prevented in many cases because troubles are found in the little people before they grow up and their troubles become worse..."

Helen did take breaks from her community work. She traveled overseas at last twice; in 1926 for a Mediterranean cruise, and in 1929 to visit Hawaii. In 1926 Helen was also featured in a *Pantagrah* article detailing the layout and organization of her kitchen at home, which maximized **convenience** and minimized effort. The article detailed planning and placement of all appliances and cookware, and noted that she did not have a servant and preferred to do cooking herself.

On September 19, 1962, after a long, active, and full life, Helen Clark McCurdy passed away at Brokaw Nursing Home after a lengthy illness. She was 96 years old at the time of her death. Her funeral was held at St. Matthew's Episcopal Church. Her surviving family members asked that "expressions of sympathy" could be made in the form of donations to the Jessamine Withers Home for elderly women or the Brokaw Hospital building fund. Her remains were **cremated**, and her ashes were interred at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery next to her husband's gravesite.