

I had not been long in Montana before Elder Watt commenced urging me to speak to the people. Both he and Mr. Williams were very much pleased with my first effort.

—Helen Williams, 1922



Urged to Preach

Helen Williams: 1868 to 1940

Licensed minister 1897 to 1914

Helen May Stanton arrested one's attention—a beautiful, golden-haired young woman who appeared never to lack self-assurance. She was born in 1868, the fourth child of a prosperous Michigan farmer. The family tree traced back to Secretary of State Stanton, who served under Abraham Lincoln.

From childhood Helen May showed a remarkable zest for living. This confident and intelligent girl went out to teach after graduating from high school at the age of 15.

At 17 the young teacher decided to further her education by attending Battle Creek College, located in her home state. She arrived for the 1885-86 school year to become part of a student body made up of 184 ladies and 220 gentlemen.

The Biblical course for Freshmen included English language, mathematics, Biblical lectures or missionary instruction, reading selections, and writing. Health care principles were central to the curriculum. Helen was preparing to share what she learned with people not familiar with the Bible teachings of her church.

Helen paid approximately 75 cents a week for tuition, 50 cents for room rent, and \$1.75 for the week's meals. For the entire school year textbook costs ranged from \$3 to \$7, laundry cost \$8.50, while fuel and oil ran about \$6.60 annually. Those amounts were as great a sacrifice to parents in 1885 as tuition is for parents today. However, Mr. and Mrs. Stanton were glad to make it possible for Helen to attend the Seventh-day Adventist college (*Eleventh Annual Catalogue*, Battle Creek College, 1885-86).

Helen helped to defray her expenses by working at Battle Creek Sanitarium, attending to guests who had come for rest and therapy. She often served meals to Ellen G. White, who stopped over at the sanitarium frequently. Helen grew to like Mrs. White very much.

An anecdote recalled with considerable relish by Helen's son Elder Hugh Williams concerns his mother and church leader Ellen White (*Taken from a taped conversation sent to the writer by Elder Hugh Williams and Dr. Earl Williams, son and grandson, respectively, of Helen Williams, July 1985; see Appendix A, 1.1*). Helen Stanton had purchased a gray silk dress that, in the mode of the time, had a miniature train; some of the church elders crit-

icized the dress, perhaps because it was fashionable. One day while wearing the gray dress, Helen entered Ellen White's room to deliver a meal. Mrs. White surprised Helen by requesting, "Turn around, honey, and let me see that dress." Holding her breath while waiting for whatever comment Mrs. White might make, Helen heard the words, "My, what lovely taste you have! That's a beautiful dress." After Helen made sure that the critical elders learned that Mrs. White approved her dress, she heard no more about it.

A flair for clothes and a naturally attractive appearance did not detract from Helen's dedication to God's service. Having deepened her commitment to share the gospel with the world, she finished her studies at Battle Creek and took employment in 1887 as a Bible worker for the Michigan Conference. Elder G.I. Butler, who issued the invitation to Miss Stanton, was president not only of the Michigan Conference but of the General Conference as well.

For two years Helen taught Biblical principles to people in Grand Rapids and Saginaw, preparing them for baptism, then the General Conference asked her to move to Indianapolis. While faithfully giving Bible studies, Helen managed also to take college classes in Indianapolis. We do not know specifically what she studied; her son said perhaps speech or elocution, in which she became very competent.

Besides work and studies, Helen had still another important interest in life. Eugene Williams, whom she had met at Battle Creek College and who now was a licensed minister in the Michigan Conference, showed a growing attraction toward the golden-haired Bible worker. Eugene was the only son of James Williams, an immigrant from Wales who had become prosperous in Michigan as a bridge contractor.

Eugene was one year older than Helen. Although the geographical distance between the two increased when Eugene was transferred to the Montana Mission, the emotional bond grew closer.

In August 1890 Eugene Williams and Helen May Stanton were united in marriage; afterward they went to Yellowstone National Park for their honeymoon. Helen then set up housekeeping with her new husband in Montana and worked alongside him in ministry.

Before Mrs. Williams had been in her new home long, the mission director, Elder Watt, urged her to hold evangelistic meetings. With delight she accepted the challenge. Both the mission president and her husband were pleased with the way Helen conducted her first effort (*Taken from a letter accompanying Sustentation Fund Application, by Helen Williams, 1922, General Conference Archives. This important document, letters, and tapes from the Williams family form the basis for facts and quotations not otherwise credited in this chapter*).

Why would a mission director in the early 1890s urge a young woman to hold meetings? First, Helen Williams was a person of unusual natural ability, an outstanding elocutionist at an early age. Giving readings was a form of community entertainment which she, in that era before television, had considerable experience in providing. Second, she had received professional training in Biblical principles and health ministry at Battle Creek College. Most importantly, add the guidance and blessing of the Holy



Helen May Stanton, lower left, one of a group of students at Battle Creek College during the 1885-86 school year. The serving trays were probably used to deliver meals to patients in the Battle Creek Sanitarium.

Photo courtesy of Dr. Earl R. Williams.

Spirit, and you find a woman called to the ministry. According to her son Hugh, Helen felt this call early and hoped that marrying a minister might help open doors for her to use her gifts in ministry (*From a transcribed tape of Hugh Williams' memories, sent to the author by Phyllis Vineyard, August 1989; see Appendix A, 1.1*).

While she was still a Bible worker, Helen Stanton had become a popular camp meeting speaker. Ministers were in short supply on the frontier; young Helen Williams was needed as an evangelist.

While Helen and Eugene Williams built their united lives around the ministry, family was also important to them. In 1891 their first son, Irwin, was born. Not long afterward the Williamses moved back to Michigan in order to be near Eugene's father, who was ill; he lived just a few months longer. A second baby boy, Lewis, arrived in 1893 in the midst of his parents' busy ministerial activity.

Two years later the Williamses were asked to move to a community called Bell's Corners near Elsie, Michigan, to hold evangelistic meetings. In this small town only one house was available to rent, a dwelling hardly suitable for a minister's family with two children and another expected soon. Fortunately, compassionate women of the community gave the house a good scrubbing; by loving care they made it ready for the young ministerial family. The third son, Hugh, was born there in 1895.

In 1897 the Williamses moved to Grand Rapids, where Eugene pastored the Adventist congregation in the city while supervising the construction of a church. Helen preached intermittently, gave Bible studies, and assisted otherwise in the ministry as much as she could while bringing up three little boys.

Elder Williams became quite popular as a "marrying parson" throughout the Michigan Conference, which had a limited pastoral staff in the 1890s. He might be called away from his post of duty to conduct a wedding or funeral on very short notice. At such times Mrs. Williams could be counted on to preach for the Sabbath worship service or any other meeting in the Grand Rapids Church. More and more frequently this occurred.

On one occasion when Helen Williams was to fill the pulpit, the conference president, Elder J.D. Gowell, decided to come hear her preach. He entered unnoticed after the service was well under way, sat in the back, and managed to slip out at the end of the sermon without Helen's even knowing that he had come.

A day or two later Elder Gowell visited the Williamses in their home. Helen and Eugene were surprised to learn that the conference president had heard her sermon the previous Sabbath. To their great relief, he had been pleased.

Elder Gowell recommended that the Williamses hire a competent person to help with the house work and to look after the little boys, in order to allow Helen to work more for the conference than she had been able to do with all her home responsibilities. Elder Gowell promised that he would arrange at the coming conference session for Mrs. Williams to receive at least enough income to pay for the household help.

Helen found a babysitter, Clara, on whom she could depend. The president was better than his word. At the time of the conference session, Mrs. Williams was issued a ministerial license and paid retroactively for all the previous year (*From Helen Williams, letter accompanying Sustentation Fund Application, 1922*). This appears to have occurred in 1897.

The usual adventures that occur in families with small children did not pass the Williamses by, as an incident related by Helen Williams' granddaughter shows (*From a tape recording made for the author by Phyllis Vineyard, July 22, 1985; see Appendix A, 1.2*). One day when Helen was baking bread, she found she needed yeast. Not being dressed to go out, she called three-year-old Hugh, folded his hand around two pennies, and asked him to go to the corner store for a package of yeast. He did as he was told. The man at the market took the pennies out of Hugh's hand and put in a cake of yeast.

Instead of turning the corner toward home, Hugh was daydreaming (he explained later) and just kept going. Not being able to find his house, he continued walking and walking. When at length he reached paved city streets, he began to cry because the hot pavement burned his feet.

A kind man noted Hugh's distress and helped him get back to the corner store. There the owner carefully laid the tired little boy down on bags of flour, where he immediately fell asleep, and called the police station.

The next thing that Hugh knew, he was being embraced by his parents, who were beaming because their missing little boy had been found. Hugh made up a little song about being lost and being found by Papa and Mama. Although the parents doubtless had misgivings about their skill in parenting just then, the three-year-old in that crisis celebrated the love in his home.

A family portrait from this period shows Eugene Williams, who was about 5' 6" in height, to be a handsome man with carefully groomed dark hair, mustache, and beard. Helen Williams, slightly shorter, was attractive with her blonde, wavy hair and blue eyes. All the boys were good looking, Irwin with dark hair and eyes like his father, Lewis with brown hair and hazel eyes, and little Hugh with blue eyes and curly golden locks.

Eugene Williams accepted a call to be superintendent of the North Michigan Mission; consequently, from Grand Rapids the Williamses moved north to Sault Sainte Marie. The journey was made by train. Father went first, to prepare the way. Later his wife and children came to join him. The children loved the long train ride to their new home, viewing the wild and beautiful country flying past the windows. The train was put on a ferry to cross the upper peninsula; this adventure provided a memory the children never forgot (*From Hugh Williams' taped memories, received August 1989*).

Imagine the boys' excitement when father met them with a sleigh drawn by a horse, Patsy, that now belonged to their family! In the sleigh father took his family to their new home in Dafter. They lived seven miles from Sault Sainte Marie and the Canadian border, surrounded by woods and breathtaking beauty.