

Helen Davis Stevenson (1869-1935)

Helen Louis Davis Stevenson was born in Normal on September 17, 1869. She was the daughter of William Osborne and Elizabeth Fell Davis. Her grandfather was Jesse W. Fell, an early pioneer to McLean County and founder of the town of Normal, Illinois (among his many accomplishments). William O. Davis (unrelated to the David Davis family) moved to Bloomington from Pennsylvania in August of 1858. Upon settling here, he taught school for a short time and farmed as well. After establishing himself in the community, he married Elizabeth B. Fell, the oldest daughter of Jesse Fell, on June 17, 1863. Besides Helen, William and Elizabeth had two other children: Hibbard and Jessie.¹ Because of William's marriage to Fell's daughter, in 1871 he became the publisher (and eventually the sole proprietor), of the prominent Republican newspaper, *The Pantagraph*, (which was founded by Fell), and continued in that capacity for 36 years.²

Helen was raised in a household where her father kept a watchful eye over his children, especially Helen. She and her father had a very close relationship. William encouraged Helen's self improvement by constantly correcting her grammar mistakes, making sure she maintained a proper diet (for example, by adding phosphorus from eggs and oysters to it) and planning her trips abroad down to the smallest detail. Her father was known to be meticulous in detail right down to how he kept his clothes drawers neat as a pin and his black laced shoes in even rows.³ William was also a bit of a hypochondriac. Later in life Helen observed similar traits in her future husband Lewis (although Lewis's tendencies as a hypochondriac would far surpass her father's). Helen attended public schools in Bloomington and Normal. She also attended Illinois State Normal University and later attended the University of Chicago for a short time.

Helen and her future husband, Lewis, met when they were young children. Lewis was the only son of Adlai E. Stevenson I and Letitia Green Stevenson. While the two of them never attended the same schools, they met most likely because they both came from very affluent and well respected families in town, were the same age, and probably liked to do some of the same activities such as card parties, dancing, picnics, ice skating, and tobogganing.⁴ Helen and Lewis became infatuated with each other. They would spend time on the porch, going for buggy rides, or taking walks down the shaded dirt roads of Bloomington-Normal. Several times they argued and separated but with only two blocks between their homes, they could hardly avoid each other very easily. Their romance became a long distance affair in 1885. Helen was sent to an eastern finishing school, Dean Academy in Franklin, Massachusetts and Lewis accompanied his father to Washington, D.C. when his father was appointed first assistant postmaster. They wrote letters to each other where Lewis complained about his health, uncertainties about life, and how much he missed her. In return, Helen (like her father had done to her) corrected his spelling and grammar which Lewis did not appreciate.⁵

In 1888 when Helen was about 20 years old she went on an eighteen month European excursion. She was pushed by her father to go out and see the world. William felt that it was

¹ *Historical Encyclopedia of Illinois and History of McLean County, Illustrated, Volume II.* (Chicago: Munsell Publishing Company, 1908) 999

² Jean Baker, *The Stevensons: The Biography of an American Family.* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1996), 185-189

³ Baker, *The Stevensons*, 185-189

⁴ Baker, *The Stevensons*, 186-187

⁵ Baker, *The Stevensons*, 187

imperative that his family explore the world “beyond their front porch.”⁶ Helen was accompanied on this trip by her aunt, Fanny Fell. Once again, Helen and Lewis carried on a long distance relationship. Lewis came to rely on Helen, who was very sympathetic, for reassurance of his status, health, and overall well-being.

As Lewis floated between several different career paths (which took him to other parts of the U.S.), Helen returned to Bloomington from her European trip.⁷ She passed the time by reading and taking courses at Illinois Wesleyan University in English Literature and Chemistry. She was also a member of the King’s Daughters, a social organization of young women, but did not find any joy in participating in this organization. She wrote in letters to Lewis that “Bloomington was growing more and more stupid everyday.”⁸ She suffered from “the boredom and trivial existences of young women awaiting their mandatory change in status to wife and mother.”⁹ No matter how hard her life seemed to herself, she continued to encourage Lewis and never compared his trials to her own. Helen worked to improve Lewis through lectures and reading lists in order to build a proper man as a mother might.

Unfortunately, after Helen returned from her second trip to Europe and shortly before their marriage, Lewis suffered what would be the first of several nervous breakdowns (known as brain collapses at that time) throughout his life. This so called disease he (and later Helen) suffered from was known as “Neurasthenia.” Neurasthenia was a psychological disorder characterized by chronic fatigue, weakness, loss of memory, and generalized aches and pains. This disorder was primarily found among members of the upper class.

While Helen suffered from this condition as well, Lewis was particularly susceptible to this “disease” perhaps because he had no profession and no training to help him establish a respectable career.¹⁰ His family name was well known but not him himself. Both his father and future father-in-law tried to help get him a decent job but to no avail. His condition would not only affect him throughout his life, but would eventually bring Helen down as well. Both Helen and Lewis would be in and out of sanitariums throughout their lives. A sanitarium was not a place for mentally disturbed individuals rather, it was a sort of health spa for the preservation or recovery of health and the treatment of chronic diseases (like neurasthenia which both Helen and Lewis suffered from). Two years before their marriage, Lewis entered “Western Springs, a sanitarium for the scientific and sympathetic care of the sick and weary,” where he remained in seclusion for a time.¹¹

Finally, on November 21, 1893 Helen and Lewis were married in what may have been the largest and grandest wedding in Bloomington at that time. Their marriage merged the two most influential families in the region: “the Republican, Unitarian, Pennsylvanian-rooted” Davises with “the Democratic, Presbyterian, Kentucky-bred” Stevensons.¹² Nearly 1000 guests attended the wedding and it was held at the Second Presbyterian Church because of its ability to accommodate the huge number of guests in attendance. Pastors from each family’s church officiated at the wedding as well. Helen had six bridesmaids while Lewis had seven groomsmen and she wore an ivory white, satin dress with long puffed sleeves and a high neck. Some of the noted out of town guests who attended included Illinois Governor John P. Altgeld and his wife,

⁶ Baker, *The Stevensons*, 191

⁷ Baker *The Stevensons*, 189-195

⁸ Baker, *The Stevensons*, 195

⁹ Baker, *The Stevensons*, 195

¹⁰ Baker, *The Stevensons*, 191

¹¹ Baker, *The Stevensons*, 193

¹² Baker, *The Stevensons*, 195

Secretary of the Navy Hillary Herbert, and former Governor of Illinois Richard J. Oglesby and his wife. And because Lewis's father, Adlai, was Vice President of the United States at the time of their marriage, congratulations were sent to the bride and groom from President Grover Cleveland. The reception was held at the home of Helen's parents on Chestnut Street with hundreds of guest in attendance. Following their lavish wedding, Helen and Lewis left for a honeymoon in Southern France.¹³

During the first years of their marriage they lived in Washington, D.C. where Lewis was a private secretary for his father the Vice President. In the beginning, their marriage appeared to be a happy one. The happiness would not last and was mostly downhill from there. Two years after their wedding, Helen and Lewis separated. He left for an eighteen month trip to Japan citing the need for this trip was because he was "rundown and sought some rest."¹⁴ While he was traveling, he wrote to Helen that she was one of the causes of his troubles and the reason he needed this trip. He complained that their marriage "had been one of blissful happiness and sickening misery...petty fault findings, and bickering." He stated he would come back if she would leave the past behind and they could begin again.¹⁵ One can only imagine how Helen felt with the prospect of her marriage failing, thus her not living up to her new role and identity as a wife.

They eventually reconciled and spent the better part of a decade moving across the U.S. as Lewis tried many different business ventures, all of which were unsuccessful. He at one time worked for the Hearst Newspaper Company in Los Angeles, in the copper mines in New Mexico, and in oil in Colorado. Helen did not mind their "nomadic" lifestyle at first; in fact she even enjoyed it since her father had pushed her to travel when she was younger. However, this lifestyle took its toll on her and she would often write home about how lonely she was, how miserable and deplorable the conditions they sometimes lived in were, and how she was tired of their "vagabond" existence.¹⁶

While they were living in New Mexico, Helen came back to Bloomington for the birth of their first child, Elizabeth (nicknamed Buffie later by her little brother Adlai, who had a hard time saying her name). Elizabeth was born on July 16, 1897 at Helen's parents' home, which was far better than the "shanty" in New Mexico where she and Lewis lived at the time.¹⁷ They continued to move time and time again after Helen returned to New Mexico when Elizabeth was eight months old. Almost three years later while they were living in Los Angeles, California, Helen gave birth to their second child, Adlai Ewing Stevenson II (named after Lewis's grandfather) on February 5, 1900. In a letter to her father shortly after the birth of Adlai, she stated that "producing an heir to the House of Stevenson was the effort of my life and I tell Lewis that anymore that may be coming in the future, will be Davises."¹⁸ However, what should have been a joyous occasion was tainted with sadness because Helen's mother passed away two weeks before Adlai's birth.

To supplement the lack of an intimate and close relationship with her husband, (and because of the fact she was often alone with no close friends or family near her while Lewis was away on business) she threw herself into the lives of her children. Much like her father did to

¹³ "Stevenson-Davis," *The Pantagraph*, November 22, 1893

¹⁴ Baker, *The Stevensons*, 197

¹⁵ Baker, *The Stevensons*, 197

¹⁶ Baker, *The Stevensons*, 198-199

¹⁷ Baker, *The Stevensons*, 199]

¹⁸ Elizabeth Stevenson Ives, compiler. "Letter dated March 2, 1900 from Helen Stevenson to W.O. Stevenson," *The W.O. Davis Letters 1884-1910*. (Nov 1958)

her, she began to shape Buffie and Adlai's lives from health to habits. Her children became the center of her existence so much so that Lewis resented this relationship between mother and child. He wrote to her once that she was "completely dependent upon" their children so much so, that he felt that he was not much a part of her thoughts "when he longed to be closer to her."¹⁹

She also began to travel with her father and her children. Buffie and Laddie (Helen's nickname for Adlai) would miss months of school while they traveled across the country to New York, California in the winter, and sometimes to Florida. Because of this, Helen's children would develop a close bond with her father and began to call him "Daddy" and referred to Lewis as "Father."²⁰ This was caused by the fact that Lewis was absent during large portions of their childhood. In fact, Lewis missed Buffie's first four birthdays.

In 1906 Helen wished to finally settle down and find a permanent and stable home for her children. She came back to Bloomington and with an inheritance from her mother's estate and help from her father purchased a home located at 1316 East Washington Street. Not surprisingly, Lewis' name was left off the deed possibly because he was in Switzerland at the time but most likely because of the discord that existed between he and Helen.²¹ The house was built in 1899 and designed by well known Bloomington architect Arthur L. Pillsbury. The house was a square, clapboard, pitch-roofed structure with a prominent front gable and broad eaves. Helen had other ideas for her new home and almost immediately began updating the house with a more contemporary English Arts and Crafts look. She removed the porch across the living room. She also covered the clapboard siding with stucco.²² Helen would live out the rest of her life in her new home. The house remained the family residence until 1994 when Elizabeth "Buffie" Stevenson Ives died and bequeathed the house to the McLean County Historical Society.²³

With a stable setting, Helen had the ability to culture her children with books and music. The home became a place "for the children to learn manners, moral uprightness, responsibility, and the frugal restraint of a family that found conspicuous ornamentation a sign of decadence."²⁴ She finally found a place to call "home" and a place where she could raise her children that offered a peaceful and comfortable atmosphere.²⁵

Lewis returned to Bloomington from Germany in 1907, after yet another rest cure trip. However, he was never truly welcomed as a member of the Bloomington-Normal community because of his odd behavior. One of the unusual habits he had was sleeping with a pistol at his bedside. He would often wake up in the middle of the night and call out to "would be burglars" from the window of his bedroom on the second floor and patrol the house as well.²⁶ Lewis would not stay home long enough to disrupt the life of his wife and children for he was gone again on the campaign trail in 1908 when his father unsuccessfully ran for governor of Illinois.

Lewis eventually found work as a manager on his Aunt Julia Green Scott's farms in Iowa, Indiana and Illinois in 1910. His Aunt Julia even made him sign a formal agreement when he went to work for her as she knew full well about his checkered work history. For the next

¹⁹ Baker, in *The Stevensons*, 202

²⁰ Baker, in *The Stevensons*, 202

²¹ Baker, in *The Stevensons*, 202

²² Susan Hartzold, "Stevenson House Treasures" exhibit text, 2010

²³ Baker, in *The Stevensons*, 287

²⁴ Baker, *The Stevensons*, 204

²⁵ Baker, *The Stevensons*, 204

²⁶ Baker, *The Stevensons*, 204-205

twelve years, Lewis would leave Bloomington three times a year to oversee the planting, weeding, and harvest at his Aunt's farms.²⁷

As her husband worked on his Aunt Julia's farms, spent time in and out of sanitariums and health retreats, and indulged his political aspirations, Helen privately dealt with her own aggravated and sensitive nerves. She too spent time in different institutions especially after the death of her father in 1911 and the tragic death of Ruth Merwin in 1912. The death of her father, William O. Davis would profoundly affect the rest of her life and leave a lasting impression on Buffie and Adlai. While she was at Citizen Springs (another institution where she indulged in rest cures), she wrote to family members that she felt that she had a miserable life and there "was nothing holding [her] or the children" to Bloomington now that her father was dead.

The accidental death of Ruth Merwin also had a tremendous impact on Helen and her family as well. Over the Christmas holiday in 1912, the Stevensons held a supper party for some of Buffie's friends. During the course of the evening when there was a lull in activity, Helen and Lewis indulged in a walk by themselves, leaving the children to be tended by other guests. Adlai and a neighbor boy, Robert Whittmer, were playing with one of his father's .22 caliber rifles. Assuming the gun was empty, Robert demonstrated to Adlai "the manual of arms" he had learned in military school. Adlai took the gun to mimic his friend. He took aim from the landing, squeezing the trigger just as Buffie's friend and cousin Ruth Merwin came into the hallway. The gun fired when Adlai had it aimed right at Ruth. Unbeknownst to them, an old bullet was lodged in the chamber of the gun and was jarred loose by the boys playing with it. Ruth fell to the floor dead with a bullet in her head.²⁸ This tragic accident impacted Helen who was still mourning the loss of her father and was overwhelmed emotionally with the burdens of life. Helen was determined to not let Adlai be blamed for this or to let the accident destroy his life. One week after the shooting, Adlai and his mother took to traveling with the hope that in time, this tragic event would be forgotten. The family eventually moved on from this incident as if it never happened.²⁹

With Lewis away most of their married life, (which Helen wrote once that things were worse when he was home) Helen became overly controlling in her role as mother. She became absorbed in child-raising advice books which provided information on how a mother is the parent responsible for raising the children and for properly teaching them on how to become adults. She set high standards for the well being and behavior of her children. Helen added her own neurotic tendencies to the scientific management of rearing children from napping in fresh air to walking slowly up and down stairs, chewing their food at least forty times each, and even making sure they took "four hundred breaths a day, lifting their arms and at the same time pulling in their diaphragm."³⁰ Until the day she died, she continued to offer instruction to her children on how they should best live their lives.

She also could not stand the thought of being away from her children and vowed that "whatever happens, I will not be separated from my children. If they go to camp, I will find somewhere nearby; if they go to school in the east, I will follow. We can't be separated... Elizabeth will have a better time and Adlai will be safer if I am nearby."³¹ When Adlai attended Princeton University in New Jersey, Helen rented a house from 1918-1920 only

²⁷ Baker, *The Stevensons*, 208-209

²⁸ Baker, *The Stevensons*, 229-230

²⁹ Baker, *The Stevensons*, 229-230

³⁰ Baker, *The Stevensons*, 214

³¹ Baker, *The Stevensons*, 214

one block away from his dormitory so she could keep an eye on him. However, as much as she doted on and cared for her children, she was still apart from them a great deal when she went away for more rest cures and treatments. She missed her daughter Elizabeth's wedding to Ernest Ives in Naples, Florida in 1927 while she was in Battle Creek, Michigan at yet another institution. She wrote in a letter to Adlai that "my whole married life centered on him and on Buffie...that no children had ever more devoted attention."³²

Although heavily involved with her children, Helen was also active in the community. She was a member of the Bloomington's Women's Club (which her mother in law was the first president). Founded in 1897, the purpose of the club was to promote the improvements of its members and the general welfare of the community. She was a lifelong member of the Unitarian Church and one of the principal stockholders and director of *The Daily Pantagraph* since the death of her father. She was also chairman of a committee of the Art Association. During her time on this committee, she was instrumental in the improvements made to Withers Park in restoring it's to its original purpose as a children's playground.³³

On March 26, 1929, Helen's husband Lewis suffered a heart attack while reading at the Bloomington Club. He lingered in critical condition for several days at Brokaw Hospital until his death on April 5. Helen had been traveling abroad with Buffie and her husband in Constantinople (where Ernest was the first secretary of the U.S. embassy there). Neither she nor Buffie attended the funeral leaving Adlai to make the arrangements.³⁴ Helen would also not arrive until several days after the funeral and burial. Not surprisingly, in his will Lewis only granted Helen the part of his estate that he was legally bound to. He also requested that Helen not be buried next to him in the Stevenson family plot, rather she be buried in her family's plot, (another sign of how truly unhappy their marriage was.)

Helen would live another six years after the death of Lewis. During those six years, Helen would be in and out of various institutions trying to improve her health and find some peace of mind. With Buffie in Europe, Helen would follow Adlai and his family. She rented a suite at Chicago's Churchill Hotel near Adlai's apartment when she was not seeking treatment for her neurasthenia. While in a sanitarium in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Helen became ill and passed away on November 16, 1935. Neither of her children was present when she passed away. With Buffie in Algeria and not able to attend the funeral, the arrangements were left up to Adlai and his wife Ellen. The funeral was a quiet affair at the Unitarian Church in Bloomington unlike the grandiose funeral of Lewis six years earlier. Against their father's wishes, Buffie and Adlai decided to bury their mother next to their father in the Stevenson family plot in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington.

By: Emily Swartz, 2010

³² Baker, *The Stevensons*, 215

³³ "Mrs Stevenson Dies Suddenly," *The Pantagraph*, November 17, 1935

³⁴ Baker, *The Stevensons*, 269