

## 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 as) was the second of three children born to the couple. Older brother James Howard was born in 1857 (and died at the age of eight in 1866, six months after Helen was born) and younger sister, Grace, was born in 1873.<sup>1</sup> At time of Helen's birth, the family home was located at the corner of Center and Grove Streets.<sup>2</sup>

For much of his life, James worked as a merchant in Bloomington, selling hides, furs, and wool. Over the years his business was in a variety of locations in downtown Bloomington but was located at 106 South Center Street the longest.<sup>3</sup>

Tragedy struck the family when Helen's mother, Anna, died of consumption (today known as tuberculosis) on April 11, 1873, less than three months after Helen's sister Grace was born.<sup>4</sup> Helen was just seven years old at the time of her mother's death. The funeral was held at the family residence, at the time, located at 502 S. Clayton Street. Services were conducted by the then president of Illinois State Normal University, Richard Edwards.<sup>5</sup>

Two years following Anna's death, Helen's father James married Adelaide Stevens in Trappe, Maryland. Adelaide was a widow and brought four children of her own to the marriage (Edith, George, Louis, and Emily).<sup>6</sup> By 1878, the blended family lived in a elegant home at 515 East Washington Street in Bloomington, where Helen spent all but three years living before her marriage to Guy McCurdy in 1905.<sup>7</sup>

James continued to work as a merchant until 1885 when the city directory listed his occupation as a travel agent.<sup>8</sup> In 1880, he also unsuccessfully ran for city council in Ward 1.<sup>9</sup> By 1886, he changed careers again and was appointed the assistant postmaster in Bloomington. He held that position until his unexpected death on September 11, 1888.<sup>10</sup>

Helen continued to live with her stepmother and stepsiblings at the family home on East Washington Street after her father's death.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> Helen also enjoyed playing the card game euchre and hosted several euchre parties at the family home.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Howard Clark," Find-a-Grave.com, Date Accessed August 8, 2022,

<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/69347072/howard-clark>; Burial card for James Howard Clark, Evergreen Memorial Cemetery; "Grace Clark in U.S. Social Security Death Index 1935-2014," AncestryLibrary.com, Date Accessed August 8, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> *1868 Bloomington-Normal City Directory*, 66.

<sup>3</sup> *Bloomington-Normal City Directories 1874-1875, 1875-1876, 1876-1877, 1878-1879, 1889-1881, 1882-1883, and 1884*.

<sup>4</sup> "Died—in this city on Friday," *The Daily Leader*, April 12, 1873.

<sup>5</sup> "The Funeral of Mrs. James Clark," *The Daily Leader*, April 14, 1873.

<sup>6</sup> "Death Lays Claim to Mrs. Adelaide E. Clark" *The Pantagraph*, November 6, 1920.

<sup>7</sup> *1878-1879 Bloomington-Normal City Directory*, 41; *1905 Bloomington-Normal City Directory*, 126.

<sup>8</sup> *1885 Bloomington-Normal City Directory*, 127.

<sup>9</sup> "Alderman," *The Pantagraph* April 16, 1880.

<sup>10</sup> "The Death of Mr. Clark," *The Pantagraph*, September 12, 1888.

<sup>11</sup> 1900 United States Federal Census

<sup>12</sup> "Tripping the Fantastic," *The Pantagraph*, January 5, 1884.

<sup>13</sup> "There was a small progressive euchre party," *The Pantagraph*, April 23, 1885.

Helen worked as a clerk at several dry good stores in downtown Bloomington. First, at Harry Woods' dry goods store (219 North Main Street).<sup>14</sup> Clearly Helen excelled at her job because her boss, Harry Woods, 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 the customer selected.<sup>15</sup>

On March 1, 1897, Helen began working at Wilcox Brothers, a dry goods, millinery, and dressmaking store (located 105 West Jefferson Street in downtown Bloomington). The *Pantagraph* announced her employment at the firm upon her return from Denver, Colorado, where she had been living for the past three years. She was put in charge of the millinery (hat making) department.<sup>16</sup> One of her responsibilities included traveling to New York City to make purchases of the latest styles to bring back and sell in the store.<sup>17</sup> Helen worked at Wilcox Brothers until a short time before her marriage in 1905.<sup>18</sup>

On November 9, 1905, Helen married Guy S. McCurdy.<sup>19</sup> The couple made their home at 416 E. Grove Street and had no children.<sup>20</sup> It is likely that Helen and Guy met because they were in similar social circles and attended parties and events with mutual acquaintances (like a party held at the home of William Marmon on January 4, 1884).<sup>21</sup>

Guy, a native of Lexington, Illinois, was a well-known businessman. In his younger days, he operated a hardware store in Sioux City Iowa for a time, before moving back to Bloomington and going into business with his father who owned McCurdy Hardware Store (located at 110 West Front Street in downtown Bloomington).<sup>22</sup> Guy was married once before, to Nellie Burr, whom he married in 1891. Nellie died suddenly after a short illness in 1898, leaving Guy a widower with no children.<sup>23</sup>

After Helen's marriage to Guy, she became very active in the Bloomington community and belonged to a variety of clubs and organizations. Helen was an especially 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 increasing the political influence of Bloomington's women.<sup>24</sup> In 1910, the club engaged in civic work by organizing a "Civic Department," which Helen chaired by 1912.<sup>25</sup>

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 with helping to better the community. 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

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<sup>14</sup> 1887 *Bloomington-Normal City Directory*, 394; "Fragments," *The Pantagraph*, December 1, 1887.

<sup>15</sup> "Kid Gloves," *The Pantagraph*, March 19, 1887.

<sup>16</sup> "Will Return to this City," *The Pantagraph*, February 22, 1897.

<sup>17</sup> "Short Paragraphs," *The Pantagraph*, March 3, 1898.

<sup>18</sup> *Bloomington-Normal City Directories 1897, 1899, 1902, 1904, and 1905*.

<sup>19</sup> "Licensed to Wed," *The Pantagraph*, November 10, 1905.

<sup>20</sup> Mrs. Helen McCurdy" *The Pantagraph*, September 19, 1962.

<sup>21</sup> "Tripping the Fantastic," *The Pantagraph*, January 5, 1884.

<sup>22</sup> "Guy McCurdy," *The Pantagraph*, November 14, 1952, "Will Return Here," *The Pantagraph*, November 23, 1893.

<sup>23</sup> "A Sudden Summons," *The Pantagraph*, June 21, 1898.

<sup>24</sup> Mrs. Frank W. Disbrow, "Woman's Club of Bloomington," in *Home Town in the Corn Belt: A Source History of Bloomington, Illinois, 1900-1950 in Five Volumes vol. 5*, compiled by Clara Louise Kessler (Bloomington: 1950), 107.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 110; "Woman's Club Begins Year's Work," *The Pantagraph*, October 10, 1912.

keep the city clean.<sup>26</sup> 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."<sup>27</sup> Helen also worked with the superintendent of Bloomington schools to coordinate a photo contest for local children. The goal of the contest was to continue student engagement and interest in keeping Bloomington beautiful during the summer break from school. Students were to take pictures of beautiful places in Bloomington or places that could be made beautiful. Three winners from each school in Bloomington were chosen, and the winning photos were displayed at the schools in the fall during the new school year.<sup>28</sup>

Although the Civic Department of the Woman's Club worked diligently to address the beautification of Bloomington, the city's needs remained greater than the services the group could provide. To better address community needs, Helen led the formation of the community-wide Civic League in April 1913. The Civic League was part of a national organization (the National Municipal League founded in 1894), that worked to strengthen democracy through building healthy and prosperous communities.<sup>29</sup> 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."<sup>30</sup> Organizations, including the Woman's Club, that were members of the League included the YWCA, College Alumni Club, the Women's Christian Temperance Union (W.C.T.U.), the Day Nursery and Settlement Association, McLean County Medical Association, Amateur Musical Club, Four O' Clock History Club, Brokaw Hospital, History and Art Club, Normal Improvement League, Trades Assembly, and the Commercial Club to name a few.<sup>31</sup>

At the initial organizing meeting for the League, held at Withers Public Library in Bloomington, Helen was elected secretary. A constitution was also adopted, with one of the primary goals of "municipal betterment," which included city beautification and sanitation, public safety, and creation of and maintenance of public amusements.<sup>32</sup> The Civic League did not exist to "propose or oppose or criticize the acts of the city council or other public bodies, but rather to assist them in any way possible."<sup>33</sup> When asked about how men, women, and children in Bloomington can make a positive impact on their community, Helen quoted the "Civic Creed" by Mary McDowell (an American social reformer), stating that "Our city does not ask us to die for her welfare; she asks us to live for her good."<sup>34</sup>

One of the first actions of the Civic League was the publication of a "civic primer" titled *City Ordinances You Ought to Know* in May 1913.<sup>35</sup> Many believed the failure to obey laws in the

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<sup>26</sup> "Has Been Worker For The Good Of The City," *The Pantagraph*, January 23, 1915.

<sup>27</sup> "Junior Civic League," *The Pantagraph*, May 20, 1912.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> "History," National Civic League, <https://www.nationalcivicleague.org/history/>, Date Accessed, September 6, 2022.

<sup>30</sup> Disbrow, "Woman's Club of Bloomington," *Home Town in the Corn Belt* compiled by Clara Kessler, Vol. 5, 107; "A Civic League for Local Work" *The Pantagraph*, April 8, 1913, 5.

<sup>31</sup> "Tells Meaning Of The Civic League," *The Pantagraph*, September 29, 1915.

<sup>32</sup> "Civic League Is Ready For Action," *The Pantagraph*, April 30, 1913.

<sup>33</sup> "Civic League is a Fact" *The Pantagraph*, April 19, 1913, 11.

<sup>34</sup> "Forget Politics And All Boost For Bloomington," *The Pantagraph*, November 9, 1912.

<sup>35</sup> Disbrow, "Woman's Club of Bloomington," *Home Town in the Corn Belt* compiled by Clara Kessler, Vol. 5, 110-111; "Japanese Day At The Woman's Club," *The Pantagraph*, May 8, 1913.

city was due to a lack of communication and information with regards to the laws and ordinances. Therefore, 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 selected ordinances spanned many topics including health, sanitation, streets and alleys, garbage, burning of leaves, protection of trees, birds and squirrels, misdemeanors, food laws, and more.<sup>36</sup> Five thousand copies of the booklet were made and distributed for free to local homes. Additionally, with the help of the Bloomington Board of Education, copies of the primer were placed in local public schools. On the guidance of Superintendent John K. Stapleton, teachers in Bloomington Public Schools were to "give 10 minutes a week" (preferably at the beginning of the school day on Mondays) to teach students in grades two and higher about the city ordinances in the primer.<sup>37</sup> According to Helen, "the children are being taught that the law must be enforced whether there is a blue coat after them or not, as this all goes toward the making of good law-abiding citizens."<sup>38</sup> By 1915, copies of the primer were also given to all local Catholic schools.<sup>39</sup>

For years garbage collection in the city of Bloomington was a topic of contention and 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 local 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.<sup>40</sup> That law went into effect May 1, 1912.<sup>41</sup>

City sanitation (in particular the garbage issue) was a topic that greatly concerned Helen, so much so that she visited it whenever she got a chance to address a group.<sup>42</sup> As the chair of the Civic Department for the Woman's Club, Helen 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 of 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.<sup>43</sup>

Helen's work with the Woman's Club did not focus solely on cleaning up the city. She worked on a variety of programs, events, and projects. In 1915 Helen oversaw planning fundraising events as the chair of the publicity committee.<sup>44</sup> She organized a benefit concert to raise money for Wayman African Methodist Episcopal Church. The event was held at the A.M.E. church on North Center Street on the evening of May 4, 1915, and included a poetry reading, a piano duet, singing, and a chicken supper with cake and ice cream for dessert.<sup>45</sup>

She was also responsible for promoting the club's "May Pageant," held on May 21 that same year. In the months leading up to the pageant, the *Pantagraph* billed the event as "the big

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<sup>36</sup> "Has Been Worker For The Good Of The City;" "Tells What Was Done," *The Pantagraph*, October 29, 1915.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> "Woman's Club In Review Of Active Year," *The Pantagraph*, May 13, 1915.

<sup>39</sup> "Woman's Club Meeting" *The Pantagraph*, March 11, 1915.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> "Women in Municipal Affairs" *The Pantagraph*, April 24, 1912

<sup>42</sup> "Washington School Club," *The Pantagraph*, October 15, 1914.

<sup>43</sup> "Woman's Club In review of Active Year."

<sup>44</sup> "For the Pageant," *The Pantagraph*, May 8, 1915.

<sup>45</sup> "Program benefit concert – Society women of the city promote affair for the African M. E. Church" *The Pantagraph*, May 4, 1915.

musical event of the season.”<sup>46</sup> The program was divided into three cycles; morning, afternoon, and evening, and during each cycle was a variety of musical performances and dances related to the respective theme. A 30-woman chorus consisting of members recruited from local choirs and Bloomington High School, was also featured, performing six numbers with an orchestra that evening.<sup>47</sup> A massive audience packed the downtown coliseum to see the pageant.<sup>48</sup>

In addition to serving on various committees for the Woman’s Club, she was also an officer in the club. Helen served as the first vice-president of the club in 1915.<sup>49</sup> And in 1919, she was elected president and served in that capacity until 1921.<sup>50</sup>

Due to 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.

In 1914 Bloomington citizens voted by referendum to change from an aldermanic form of government to a commission form. Under the aldermanic form, one mayor and a board of 14 men—two from each of the city’s seven wards—governed the city. The change to commission form elected the heads of five city departments: Mayor and Commissioner of Public Affairs, Commissioner of Public Health and Safety, Commissioner of Public Streets and Improvements, Commissioner of Accounts and Finances, and Commissioner of Public Property.<sup>51</sup> However, this experiment only last eight years, with citizens voting to return to the aldermanic form of government in 1922.<sup>52</sup>

The January 6, 1915 edition of the *Pantagraph* reported that “something of a sensation...” in the local political world had occurred: “...petitions were circulated for Mrs. Guy S. McCurdy as a candidate for commissioner in the city primaries.”<sup>53</sup> Helen was the first woman to seek municipal office in the City’s history.<sup>54</sup>

Fellow members of the Woman’s Club heartily endorsed Helen’s candidacy for commissioner. Her long record of public service (without pay), and her knowledge of the city’s health problems (which she had studied for the past four years) were used to prove that Helen was the right person for the job.<sup>55</sup> Despite a stellar record in city beautification, Helen’s ads seemed to focus on overcoming her biggest obstacle: her sex. At the time, running for public office as a woman, regardless of experience and qualifications, was unheard of. Many of her campaign ads asked voters to “Give Helen Clark McCurdy A Chance.”<sup>56</sup>

Her campaign platform was to have a clean city, a good police force, and to increase enforcement of local ordinances. One campaign advertisement stated “Men alone have not cleaned up the city. Women alone can not clean up the city. Men and women together can. Give

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<sup>46</sup> “Children Please At Woman’s Club,” *The Pantagraph*, May 6, 1915.

<sup>47</sup> “Expect Capacity House,” *The Pantagraph*, May 21, 1915.

<sup>48</sup> “May Pageant Draws An Immense Audience,” *The Pantagraph*, May 22, 1915.

<sup>49</sup> “Woman Enters The Political Lists,” *The Pantagraph*, January 6, 1917.

<sup>50</sup> Disbrow, “Woman’s Club of Bloomington,” *Home Town in the Corn Belt* compiled by Clara Kessler, Vol. 5, 110-118.

<sup>51</sup> Jacob Hasbrouck. *History of McLean County, Illinois, Volume 1*. (Indianapolis: Historical Publishing Company, 1924) 131.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> “Woman Enters The Political Lists;” “Has Been Worker For the Good Of The City.”

<sup>55</sup> “Has Been Worker For The Good Of The City.”

<sup>56</sup> “What Women Want” *The Pantagraph* March 29, 1915.

Helen Clark McCurdy a chance. Elect a woman commissioner.”<sup>57</sup> Another ad proclaimed that a vote for Helen would be a “boost for a bigger Bloomington by encouraging efficient government,” a “better Bloomington by producing law enforcement,” a “brighter Bloomington by securing a competent city housekeeper,” and a “Bloomington that every citizen can point with pride.”<sup>58</sup>

Letters to the editor published in the *Pantagraph* in favor of Helen came from prominent local men including architect Arthur Pillsbury, former Illinois Governor Joseph W. Fifer, labor leader and prohibitionist John Brown Lennon, physician Dr. C. M. Noble, attorney Robert E. Williams, Judge Wesley M. Owen, and many others. These men expressed unwavering support for Helen for the role of public health and safety commissioner, with many of them stating that there was no man or woman better qualified or suited for the position than Helen.<sup>59</sup>

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.<sup>60</sup> Helen’s success in the primary was due largely to the fact that white women in Illinois were granted limited voting rights by the landmark Illinois Municipal Voting Act in 1913. This act gave white women in Illinois the right to vote for President of the United States and local offices.<sup>61</sup> Illinois was the first state east of the Mississippi River to grant white women limited voting rights.

Helen continued to campaign hard leading up to the general election to hopefully become one of the five city commissioners. On March 11, 1915 less than a month before the election, Helen received an important boost to her campaign with an endorsement from Mrs. Ruth McCormick, a politician, activist, and publisher who was instrumental in passing the partial suffrage act in Illinois in 1913. McCormick was in Bloomington speaking at a women’s luncheon at the Women’s Exchange in downtown Bloomington. During her brief talk, McCormick stated that “the cause of women would be furthered by the election of Mrs. McCurdy” and that “every woman elected to office was a spoke in the wheels that were revolving toward universal suffrage.”<sup>62</sup>

In the days leading up to the election, advertisements in the *Pantagraph* encouraged women to help in the election campaign for Helen.<sup>63</sup> Additional letters to the editor from citizens supporting her candidacy appeared in the *Pantagraph* as well. Charles Miller stated that he had long been an advocate for women’s suffrage, and welcomed “the advent into our official life of Mrs. Helen Clark McCurdy,” feeling sure that she was of the caliber and quality needed for the City of Bloomington.<sup>64</sup> One supportive (albeit patriarchal and condescending) letter by Gus Edborg suggested that it was “courageous” and “appropriate” for McCurdy to seek the role of “city housekeeper,” and added that “no greater failure can be possible” than the men who have held the position so far.<sup>65</sup> It’s also worth noting that Edborg was a candidate for commissioner, but lost in the primary. On April 6, the day of the election, a letter of support from Edgar DeWitt Jones wrote that Helen had the “executive ability, practical experience in the business world”

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<sup>57</sup> “Give Helen Clark McCurdy A Chance,” *The Pantagraph*, March 30, 1915.

<sup>58</sup> “Boost For Bloomington,” *The Pantagraph*, April 3, 1915.

<sup>59</sup> “Urges Mrs. McCurdy’s Election,” *The Pantagraph*, March 29, 1915.

<sup>60</sup> “The Women Voted Heavily For Morgan,” *The Pantagraph*, February 27, 1915.

<sup>61</sup> “Suffrage Bill Signed,” *The Pantagraph*, June 26, 1913

<sup>62</sup> “Mrs. Medill McCormick Speaks To Women Here,” *The Pantagraph*, March 11, 1915.

<sup>63</sup> “Women, Attention,” *The Pantagraph*, March 20, 1915.

<sup>64</sup> “Urges Election of Mrs. McCurdy,” *The Pantagraph*, March 27, 1915.

<sup>65</sup> “Favors Mrs. McCurdy” *The Pantagraph*, March 31, 1915.

and the vision that made her deserving to be elected to the city commission. He urged the men of the city to unite in cooperation with the women of Bloomington to elect Helen to the commission.<sup>66</sup>

Helen made a commendable showing in the general election, but it was not enough to win a seat on the city commission. Helen received 1,421 votes from men and 1,960 votes from women, totaling 3,381. McCurdy came in seventh of eight candidates, and only the top five candidates were elected to commissioner positions. The winners of the election were assigned to the following positions: E.E. Jones as Mayor and Commissioner of Public Affairs, Alexander G. Erickson as Commissioner of Public Health and Safety, John F. Anderson as Commissioner of Public Streets and Improvements, Edward R. Morgan as Commissioner of Accounts and Finances, and R.L. Carlock as Commissioner of Public Property.<sup>67</sup>

After the election, the *Pantagraph* noted that Bloomington was better off because of her candidacy, writing, “It may be said without exaggeration that she and her friends conducted the cleanest and most intelligent campaign ever known in Bloomington and in so doing have set an example that future candidates, whether they be men or women, would do well to follow.”<sup>68</sup> It would be 28 years before another woman ventured onto the ballot. In 1943 *Pantagraph* society editor Helen Rorabach ran unsuccessfully for Bloomington City council. It would be another 26 years before a woman would run again, but this time successfully. On April 1, 1969, Margaret Chasson was the first woman elected to serve on the Bloomington City Council.<sup>69</sup>

Helen 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. She was heavily involved in a wide variety of community activities and organizations throughout the rest of her life.

Helen was active in the McLean County chapter of the American Red Cross from 1915 through the 1930s. The local chapter was founded in June 1915. The idea for a Red Cross chapter in Bloomington was conceived by Mrs. Jean McKinney, the president of the Bloomington Women’s Club. She presented this idea to the officers of the Civic League, which Helen was secretary at the time. The ideals of the League paralleled that of the American Red Cross which would provide the League with the fundamentals for community improvement. The creation of the local chapter was less than a year after World War I began and it was probably founded out of the concern that local citizens would need to be prepared should the U.S. enter war. It also was founded out of the desire to create a relief effort when local disasters occurred. In times of severe weather or other unfortunate tragedies, the Red Cross would be there to raise money and attend to medical needs. The idea for a local chapter was met with approval and a committee was named to take all the necessary steps to begin forming the organization. Members were recruited from all walks of life in the Bloomington-Normal community and once enough members were secured, the first meeting was held at Withers Public Library later that year to finalize the charter for the organization.<sup>70</sup>

Helen was a charter member of the McLean County chapter. During World War I, she led the Red Cross sewing room, where women could use sewing machines to make materials needed for

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<sup>66</sup> “For Mrs. McCurdy,” *The Pantagraph*, April 6, 1915.

<sup>67</sup> “Election Commission Totals” *The Pantagraph* April 7, 1915.

<sup>68</sup> “Editor’s Note,” *The Pantagraph*, April 12, 1915.

<sup>69</sup> Torii Moré, “Four women paved way to City Hall,” *The Pantagraph*, March 7, 2021.

<sup>70</sup> “Shows Power of United Efforts,” *The Pantagraph*, October 27, 1917

the war effort in 1917.<sup>71</sup> Helen was also chair of the hospital supply department, which had three definite lines of work—hospital garments, hospital supplies, and refugee garments. Sewing groups from all over the county were organized to meet at regular intervals to make the items in need.<sup>72</sup> Helen was also charged with overseeing the creation of masks for the contagious ward of the hospital, an important task as the nation was preparing for what would become known as the Influenza Pandemic of 1918-1919.<sup>73</sup> Under her leadership, the hospital supply department met their quota of 2,000 masks, 300 pads, 200 compresses, and 200 drains in July 1918.<sup>74</sup>

Even after the war officially ended, Helen recognized that their work in the sewing room was not finished. Refugees who were displaced by the war needed clothes, and Helen rallied the Bloomington community to sew and send clothing.<sup>75</sup> Later, in 1926, Helen oversaw the sewing unit of the Brokaw Service League at Brokaw Hospital. The Brokaw Service League made bandages, curtains, and mattress covers, among other things for use at the hospital.<sup>76</sup>

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?”<sup>77</sup> 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.”<sup>78</sup> 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.”<sup>79</sup>

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.<sup>80</sup> In January 1908, a group of progressive Bloomington residents gathered in Jonathan H. Rowell's law office to organize what would become the privately funded, all-volunteer McLean County Anti-Tuberculosis Society (known later as the McLean County Tuberculosis Association).<sup>81</sup> The goal of the group was to work towards the “prevention of and cure of tuberculosis in McLean County.”<sup>82</sup> 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.

Helen was also involved in several organizations that raised funds for local service organizations in the community. For two years, 1926 and 1927, Helen was the county chair of the annual fundraising campaign for the United Welfare Foundation. In the fall of 1926, a goal was set to raise \$40,000, which would then be distributed among many local social service

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<sup>71</sup> “Mrs. McCurdy in Chicago” *The Pantagraph*, December 11, 1917; “Red Cross Affairs,” *The Pantagraph*, December 5, 1917.

<sup>72</sup> E.E. Pierson and J. L. Hasbrouk *McLean County, Illinois, in the World War 1917-1918* (Bloomington, IL: McLean County War Publishing Co., abt. 1920) 132.

<sup>73</sup> “At the Red Cross” *The Pantagraph*, July 2, 1918.

<sup>74</sup> “Red Cross Notes” *The Pantagraph*, July 3, 1918.

<sup>75</sup> “Mrs. McCurdy writes of new red cross plans” *The Pantagraph*, February 20, 1919.

<sup>76</sup> “Service league from Brokaw holds meeting” *The Pantagraph*, September 29, 1926.

<sup>77</sup> “To vote on new deal in health department” *The Pantagraph*, January 21, 1919.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>80</sup> “Tuberculosis board to meet at luncheon” *The Pantagraph*, February 3, 1928.

<sup>81</sup> Bill Kemp, “Christmas Seals crucial in fight against TB,” *The Pantagraph*, December 18, 2014.

<sup>82</sup> Dr. Vincent B. Marquis, “History of the Founding of Fairview Sanitarium,” *Home Town in the Corn Belt* compiled by Clara Kessler, Vol. 4, 104.

organizations.<sup>83</sup> In 1927, the funds raised were divided up between organizations such as the Day Nursery and Settlement Association (\$3,300); the Girls' Industrial Home for indigent and orphaned girls (\$2,000); the Jessamine Withers Home for older women (\$3,700); McLean County Home for Colored Children (\$3,000); the Baby Fold in Normal (\$3,000); McLean County Tuberculosis Association (\$3,500); the Salvation Army (\$8,000); and Victory Hall home for indigent and orphaned boys (\$4,000). When asked about the allocation of funding, Helen stated that "the budgets they are fundraising for are the least amounts the agencies need to exist, and that all solicitors and executive committee members for the United Welfare Campaign are unpaid volunteers."<sup>84</sup>

One of the most important services supported by the campaign was fundraising for the McLean County Tuberculosis Association. The association supported 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..."<sup>85</sup> In 1935 the United Welfare Foundation was absorbed by the Community Chest, which later became the United Way of McLean County and still exists today.

Helen spent many years serving on the board of the Jessamine Withers Home. The home was created after Sarah B. Withers, prominent resident and philanthropist, put in her will that her home at 305 West Locust Street be used as a home for aged women. After her death in 1897, many years were spent raising funds to realize her wish. In May 1914 enough money had finally been raised to open the home, and a board was elected (comprised entirely of ladies, per Sarah's will).<sup>86</sup> Helen was elected president in 1914 and continued to be president through the 1930s.<sup>87</sup> She served on the board of the home until the mid-1940s.<sup>88</sup>

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.<sup>89</sup> In 1926 Helen was also featured in a *Pantagraph* 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, preferring to do cooking herself.<sup>90</sup>

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 (according to her obituary, she was the oldest living member of). Her surviving family members asked that "expressions of sympathy" could be made in the form of donations to the Jessamine Withers Home 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.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> "Welfare Campaign To Start Monday: Hope to Raise Sum Of \$40,000," *The Pantagraph*, November 4, 1926.

<sup>84</sup> "Welfare Committee Out With Statement" *The Pantagraph*, November 13, 1927.

<sup>85</sup> "Welfare Campaign to Start Nov. 1; Seeks Funds for City's Institutions" *The Pantagraph*, October 23, 1927.

<sup>86</sup> Mrs. Clarence P. Broughton and Frances Rowell Johnson, "Jessamine Withers Home," *Home Town in the Corn Belt* compiled by Clara Kessler, Vol. 5, 202.

<sup>87</sup> "Withers home board elects" *The Pantagraph*, May 3, 1933.

<sup>88</sup> "Fried Chicken," *The Pantagraph*, July 12, 1944.

<sup>89</sup> "Local People to Make Tour of the Tropical Lands," *The Pantagraph*, January 4, 1926.

<sup>90</sup> "Novel ideas in small kitchen" *The Pantagraph*, November 6, 1926.

<sup>91</sup> Mrs. Helen McCurdy" *The Pantagraph*, September 19, 1962.

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