

Helen Davis Stevenson (1869-1935)

Born into one of the most influential families in Bloomington and married into another, it would seem that Helen Davis Stevenson had led a life of social prominence and ease, but her complete story was far different. Helen was born on September 17, 1869, a daughter of William Osborne and Elizabeth Fell Davis. Her grandfather was Jesse Fell, founder of the town of Normal. Her father, William O. Davis, was publisher of *The Pantagraph*, Bloomington's most influential newspaper. She fell in love and married Lewis Stevenson, the only son of Adlai Stevenson I, the Vice President of the United States under President Grover Cleveland. It seems the most important families in Bloomington were represented in her family tree and her marriage a perfect match.

As a child, Helen Davis had a very close relationship with her father. He was a man known to be very meticulous about even the smallest details in his life, down to how his clothes were to be placed in his drawers and how his shoes were to be put in rows in his closet. He put the same detailed care into raising his daughter. He encouraged her self-improvement by constantly correcting grammatical mistakes in her letters, making sure she maintained a proper diet, and planning her trips abroad in great detail.

Helen met her future husband, Lewis Stevenson, while they were still children. The families were friends, and lived within two blocks of each other. The two of them would take long walks, sit and visit on their porches or go for buggy rides together. When either traveled or went away to school, they continued their relationship with letters. Helen followed her father's example, and corrected the grammar in Lewis's letters before returning them. Several times they argued and separated, but always they came together again.

Both Helen and Lewis suffered from a condition known at that time as Neurasthenia. It was characterized by chronic fatigue, weakness, loss of memory and generalized aches and pains. Interestingly, it was found mainly among members of the upper social class. Both Helen and Lewis would be in and out of sanitariums, or health spas, throughout their lives because of this condition.

When Helen and Lewis married on November 21, 1893, it was one of Bloomington's largest and grandest weddings ever. Nearly 1,000 guests attended the wedding held at Second Presbyterian Church. The couple honeymooned in Southern France and returned to live in Washington, D.C. where Lewis was a private secretary for his father, then Vice President. The first few years were happy ones, but soon illnesses and arguments led to stress and increasing separations. After leaving Washington, Lewis struggled to make a successful business connection. Eventually, he would become farm manager for his aunt's properties in Iowa, Indiana and Illinois. These jobs added to his frequent absences from home.

Helen and Lewis had two children, Elizabeth (later nicknamed Buffie by her younger brother) and Adlai. Perhaps because her husband was so often away and because of their worsening relationship, Helen threw herself into the lives of her children. Like her father before her, she devoted herself to the formation of their health and habits. Her total devotion to their children added to the resentment of her husband, Lewis.

In 1906, Helen bought a home at 1316 East Washington St. with money from her inheritance. She wanted to provide a permanent and stable home for their children, a place where they "could learn manners, moral uprightness, (and) responsibility." Lewis joined the family there in 1907 but his "peculiar" habits prevented him from ever becoming really accepted

in the community. He would do such things as sleep with a pistol under his pillow and wake at night to search the home for burglars.

With Lewis away most of the time, either for his work or seeking “rest cures,” Helen became overly controlling in her role as mother. Although she, too, spent time in different institutions seeking help for her “nerves,” her total focus was the children. She made sure they took fresh air naps, chewed their food 40 times, and took 400 deep breaths a day. Until the day she died, she continued to offer instructions to her children on how they should live their lives.

She couldn’t stand being away from Buffie and Adlai, saying they “will have a better time and...be safer if I am nearby.” When Adlai went to Princeton University in New Jersey, she rented a house one block from his dormitory so she could keep an eye on him.

As the years went by, Helen was away from home more and more frequently for treatment of her nerves. She even missed Buffie’s wedding in 1927 taking a rest cure. In spite of these absences, and her involvement with the children, Helen was also active in the community as was expected of someone of her social standing. She was a member of the Bloomington Women’s Club, the Unitarian Church and the Art Association. She was also the principal stockholder and director of *The Daily Pantagraph*.

Typical of the many separations of their marriage, Helen’s husband Lewis died and was buried while she was traveling in Constantinople with Buffie and her husband, Earnest. In the six years that followed, Helen spent large amounts of time in and out of institutions looking for better health and peace of mind. When not in treatment for her Neurasthenia, she stayed in an apartment she had rented in Chicago to be near Adlai and his family. On November 16, 1935, Helen died in a sanitarium in Milwaukee. She is buried next to Lewis in the Stevenson family plot in Evergreen Cemetery.

Discussion Question: There is an expression, “Money can’t buy happiness.” How would you apply this to Helen Davis Stevenson? What do you think were the cause or causes of Helen’s problems?

Bullets for Helen Davis Stevenson:

*Born in Normal, September of 1869, died November, 1935

*Grandfather Jesse Fell, founder of Normal, Father William O. Davis, publisher and owner of *The Pantagraph*

*Met husband Lewis as a child, married in 1893

*She and Lewis both suffered from Neurasthenia, a nervous disorder which affected mainly the upper class. They spent much of their lives seeking rest and cures.

*She has two children, Buffie (Elizabeth) and Adlai. Adlai will become twice governor of Illinois, two time Democratic candidate for president and ambassador to the U.N.

*Her marriage is not a happy one. She centers her life completely around her two children.