

# Williams, Helen May (Stanton) (1868–1940)

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Helen Williams was a pioneering minister, Bible worker, teacher, and missionary in South Africa.

## Early Life (1868-1889)

Helen May Stanton was born on June 10, 1868, in Holt, Michigan, to Lewis (1835-1915) and Angeline (Stillman) Stanton (1834-1890).<sup>1</sup> Lewis, a farmer by trade, relocated to Michigan from Newark, New Jersey, with his family when he was a young boy and

similarly, Angeline's family moved to the region from Oberlin, Ohio, when she was six years old. The Stantons wed in 1856 and had five children; three girls and two boys, of which Helen was the third in order.<sup>2</sup> They were married for 34 years until Angeline's premature death, after which Lewis married Mary Crane.<sup>3</sup>

Lewis and Angeline joined the Seventh-day Adventist church when Helen was an infant.<sup>4</sup> Helen attended Battle Creek College where she took courses that helped her prepare for Bible work. In July 1887, after she finished her coursework, the Michigan Conference sent Helen to Grand Rapids and Saginaw to serve as a Bible worker for two years. At the end of her assignment, the General Conference, then under the leadership of G. I. Butler, sent Stanton to Indianapolis, Indiana for a year in the same line of work.<sup>5</sup>

In 1890, Helen Stanton moved to Montana to marry her fiancé, Eugene R. Williams. Born on September 16, 1867, in Utica, New York,<sup>6</sup> to John and Sarah Williams, Eugene was a young minister in the Michigan Conference



Helen May Stanton Williams

Photo courtesy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives.

who had recently been sent to work in the Montana mission field.<sup>7</sup> The marriage took place on August 31, 1890 in Livingston Park, Montana, with J. M. Watt as presiding minister.<sup>8</sup> The couple had four children: Irwin Rae Williams (1891-1941), Lewis Stanton Williams (1893-1970), Hugh Wethington Williams (1895-?),<sup>9</sup> and Eugene Warren Williams (1909-1974).<sup>10</sup>

## Ministry in Montana, Michigan and Illinois (1890-1907)

Not long after the couple got settled in Montana, Helen Williams had her first preaching experience at the request of her husband and his ministry partner, J.M Watt. The reactions to her effort were quite positive, which encouraged her to continue fostering her skill. The Williamses ministered in Montana for close to two years, but then returned to Michigan to care for Eugene's father, who was alone and gravely ill. He died a few months after their return.<sup>11</sup>

They continued ministerial work in the Michigan Conference, and in 1897 Eugene was called to pastor the Grand Rapids church. Due to the shortage of pastors in the conference, he became quite popular in officiating funerals and marriages, which led him to travel often. During his absences, Helen would take his place preaching and ministering to the congregation. On a week when she was scheduled to preach, the president of the Michigan Conference, J. D. Gowell, went to hear her, hiding in the back so she could not see him. He was so impressed that he paid her a visit a few days later and proposed that she hire someone to care for her children so she could spend more time in ministry. She enthusiastically agreed to the plan, and was soon granted a license to officially begin her ministry and was given a small salary.<sup>12</sup>

Reports of the annual Michigan Conference proceedings in the *Review* indicate that Helen Williams initially received a missionary license such as was typically given to Bible workers, teachers, and other conference-employed workers who were not ministers. Beginning in 1901, however, Mrs. E. R. Williams is listed among the ministerial licentiates of the Michigan Conference – the credential issued to ministers of the gospel not yet ordained.<sup>13</sup>

In 1902, the Williamses moved to Sault Sainte Marie where Eugene took responsibility as superintendent of the new Superior Mission, organized to coordinate the work in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Helen continued to engage in ministry with her ministerial license now issued by the Superior Mission, and then the Lake Union Conference (1905-1906). During these years the Williams family lived near the mission headquarters in Sault Saint Marie, a few miles from the Canadian border.<sup>14</sup>

After 13 years in Michigan, the Williamses were called to the Chicago, Illinois area in 1906. Eugene was assigned the West Side Church, and Helen a small congregation in Harvey. She conducted prayer meetings, did Bible readings two to three times per week, and started meetings on Sunday evenings—all of which kept her little church growing. Besides her habitual duties, Helen Williams was also scheduled to preach twice on Sabbath at

different churches, which gave her an opportunity to travel and speak at various places.<sup>15</sup>

## South Africa (1907-1914)

Toward the end of 1907, the Williams family took on the challenge of missionary service in South Africa, with initial assignment to work among the native people.<sup>16</sup> After a few months in the new field, though, Eugene was elected president of the Cape Colony Conference, with headquarters in Cape Town. He traveled throughout the territory, while Helen ministered locally, their responsibilities now including both European settlers and indigenous peoples.<sup>17</sup> Helen continued preaching, offering Bible studies, doing visitations, and distributing literature, with ongoing involvement in evangelistic efforts.<sup>18</sup> The three oldest Williams boys canvassed in various cities.<sup>19</sup> Everything seemed to go well for the family; they had adapted well to their new home and all were excited to be doing their part in the mission they were assigned.

On November 20, 1910, however, tragedy hit. Eugene was taking care of some tasks near Worcester and planned to visit Irwin and Lewis—who were canvassing in Malmesbury—before his next commitment. He was traveling by bicycle, when half way through his journey he collapsed and died instantly, apparently from a stroke. This shocked both those who had recently spent time with him, and those who were expecting him. Since the law required bodies to be buried the day after the death had occurred, Helen and her two youngest sons, who were too far away, were unable to attend the burial. In an attempt to alleviate some of the pain this caused the family, the Claremont church delayed the memorial service a few days so they could at least be present for that.<sup>20</sup>

The sudden loss of her husband filled Helen with grief and uncertainty; nonetheless, she decided to continue the work that she and her husband had started. She encouraged her sons to get back to their canvassing duties and studies, while she resumed ministry, serving congregations in Grahamstown, Adelaide, and King William's Town for the next four years. She also took care of her youngest son, Eugene, who was only eighteen months old at the time of his father's death.<sup>21</sup>

While she was very successful in her work and many people joined the church because of her efforts, Helen decided to return to the United States at the close of 1914. Her two oldest sons, upon completing their studies at Claremont Union College, had returned the previous year and Hugh, who had recently graduated, was getting ready to do the same—so she decided to move and be closer to them.<sup>22</sup>

## Teacher and Preceptress (1914-1921)

Back in the United States, Helen accepted an offer to teach Bible workers' training courses at Washington Missionary College (now Washington Adventist University), in Takoma Park, Maryland, and to pastor a small congregation. When Professor Heber H. Votaw, who taught pastoral training and evangelism courses at the

college, became ill, Helen stepped in, teaching his classes as well. Although she was an excellent teacher, when a replacement for Professor Votaw was hired five years later, she was relieved from teaching and asked to serve as preceptress (dean of women). The change proved difficult for Helen, unfortunately, and the constant demands and pressures of the job caused her to leave Washington Missionary College at the end of the 1919-1920 school year.<sup>23</sup>

While she was disappointed with her previous performance, she accepted a similar position in 1920 as preceptress, matron, and Bible teacher at the New England Sanitarium in Melrose, Massachusetts, hoping things would be better.<sup>24</sup> Once again, regrettably, it did not work out. After a year and a half of intense work and good intentions, Helen became physically and mentally exhausted and was no longer able to do the work.<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless, another invitation for similar work emerged, this time from Middletown Sanitarium and Hospital, in Middletown, New York. Helen was not only asked to work with students at the Sanitarium, but also to pastor the church connected to it and to manage the church school. Given her previous experiences, Helen carefully assessed the offer and, in view of what she considered the excessive amount of work expected and her own health difficulties, ended up declining it. By the end of 1921, she had moved to Michigan to stay with her oldest son, Irwin.<sup>26</sup>

## Back to Her Roots (1922-1930)

Back in Michigan and without the pressures of an unfitting job, Helen's health improved. Soon, however, she started to feel the financial burdens of being a single mother without a job and no apparent prospects. Thus, she decided to send youngest son, Eugene, to public school and find housekeeping work to support herself and her child. She also began the stressful process of applying to the denomination's sustentation fund, hoping to obtain some financial assistance while she looked for steady work.<sup>27</sup>

Fortunately, things soon improved for Helen and Eugene. Her son Hugh, now a minister, was looking for a Bible worker to assist him in an evangelistic effort in Indiana. When he asked his mother if she would be interested, she happily accepted. Working with her son and being back in her element gave Helen Williams the boost she needed to continue her ministry, and it was a time she remembered very fondly in years to come.<sup>28</sup>

In the summer of 1926, a new opportunity came Helen's way. She accepted an invitation to be the lead Bible worker for a district covering a large territory in the Upper Columbia Conference, based in Spokane, Washington. There, she trained Bible workers and others who wanted to be involved in evangelism and continued preaching and helping out at various churches in the area.<sup>29</sup> Although her health was not as strong as in her younger years, she enjoyed herself and, in the words of conference president E. F. Peterson, was "doing splendid work."<sup>30</sup>

## Final Years (1930-1940)

By the end of 1930, now in her early sixties, Helen looked toward retirement. She concluded her work in the Upper Columbia Conference in 1931 and moved to California to be close to a sister and her son Eugene, who at the time was attending medical school at Loma Linda University.<sup>31</sup>

During the next few years her health began to decline, and she reported in 1935 that this was causing her some serious financial struggles.<sup>32</sup> With Eugene having moved out of the state and all of her relatives now far away, Helen planned to move back to Michigan. Unfortunately this plan never matured as her health took a turn for the worst, and on December 23, 1940, she passed away suddenly in Los Angeles, California.<sup>33</sup> Her remains were transported to Lansing, Michigan, where funeral services were held at Estes-Leady funeral home with Taylor Bunch as presiding minister. She was interred in Glendale Cemetery, in Okemos, Michigan, near her parents' graves.<sup>34</sup>

## Legacy

Helen May Stanton Williams was one of the few women in her time to receive a ministerial license. She valiantly dealt with the struggles faced by women in a vocation dominated by men, while at the same time being a single parent to four energetic sons after becoming a widow at a young age. She dedicated her entire life to ministry, and no amount of tragedy or hardship was able to keep her from fulfilling her calling.

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