HELEN JANE WISER STEWART

At A Glance:

Born: April 16, 1854, Springfield, Illinois

Died: March 6, 1926, Las Vegas, Nevada

Maiden Name: Helen Jane Wiser

Race/Nationality/Ethnic Background: Caucasian (German/English)

Married: Archibald Stewart, April 6, 1873, Stockton, California
Frank Roger Stewart, July 23, 1903, Ventura, California

Children:
William James
Hiram Richard
Flora Eliza Jane "Tiza"
Evaline LaVega
Archibald Richard, Jr.

Helen J. Stewart
UNLV Special Collections
PH-00104, pho007156.

Primary City and County of Residence and Work:
Clark (Las Vegas); Lincoln (Las Vegas)

Major Fields of Work: Rancher, business woman, government (postmaster of "Los" Vegas Post Office, 1883-1903; elected to Clark County School Board, 1916), historian and author

Other Role Identities: Wife, mother

Widowed rancher became beloved 'First Lady of Las Vegas'

The murder of her husband forced Helen Stewart to take over the family farm and learn to operate it, while raising her five children. Later freed from the burden of ranching, she became active in several women's clubs in the Las Vegas community and encouraged women to write their stories. She also supported history and women's history organizations. Many details of her life as well as documentation of local Paiute culture were included in her daily journals.

Helen Jane Wiser was born on April 16, 1854, in Springfield, Illinois, to Hiram and Delia Gray Wiser in Springfield, Illinois. Leaving Illinois, the family settled first in Iowa. There, Delia cared for her children, Helen, Rachel and Aseneth, while Hiram prospected in the Rocky Mountains for two years. The twins, Henry and Flora, were born in Iowa. Hiram

moved the family west, ending up in Galt, California. He purchased a large two-story house which had been dismantled in the East. The pieces were shipped around the Horn and reconstructed in Galt.

Helen attended the public schools in Sacramento County and attended Hesperian College in Woodland, California, for at least one year.

On April 6, 1873, Helen married Archibald Stewart in Stockton, California. Although Archibald was born in Dublin, Ireland, he was of Scottish descent. As early as 1868, Stewart was operating a freighting business near Pioche, Lincoln County, Nevada. In addition to hauling ore from the Pioche mines to mills in Hamilton, he operated a wood ranch, contracting for the cutting of wood and selling it locally. In 1869, Stewart gave up his other business ventures to deal in cattle.

After the wedding Archibald moved Helen to Lincoln County, settling on a ranch at Pony Springs, a deserted area north of Pioche. It was here that Helen first made friends with the local Paiute women. Her first child, William James, was born there. Archibald then moved them to Pioche, where he continued to deal in cattle and also ran a butcher shop. There Helen gave birth to Hiram Richard and Flora Eliza Jane (known all her life as Tiza).

In 1879, Stewart, a successful businessman, loaned $5,000 in gold to Octavius D. Gass, taking the isolated Las Vegas Ranch as collateral. By 1881, Gass had defaulted on the loan, and Stewart foreclosed. In 1882, Archibald decided to move his family to the ranch in the Las Vegas Valley until he could sell it. Once again, the family was to live on a ranch in an isolated area.

Stewart profitably operated the ranch, selling beef, vegetables, fruit and wine to the miners to the mining camps in southern Nevada. The ranch also served as a way station for travelers. Another daughter, Evaline LaVega was born on the Las Vegas Ranch.

After Archibald was murdered at the nearby Kiel Ranch on July 13, 1884, Helen received a note from Conrad Kiel, the owner to “send a team and take Mr. Sturd away he is dead.” She described her reaction in her day book (journal), “I left my little children with Mr. Frazier and went as fast as a horse could carry me. The man that killed my husband ran as I approached as I got to the corner of the house I said “O where is he O where is he” and the Old Man Kiel and Hank Parrish said here he is and lifting a blanket showed me the lifeless form of my husband. I knelt down beside him took his hand placed my hand upon his heart and looked upon his face.” What she saw was not pretty and she described in her day book the numerous wounds which had inflicted upon Archibald.

That hot, July day changed Helen J. Stewart’s life forever. With no lumber available, Helen had the hired hands take the doors off the house to make a coffin. After reading the burial service from the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer over her husband’s grave, she stepped across the well-defined boundary between the gender roles of the 19th century.

She realized she either had to sell the Las Vegas Ranch or learn to operate it. From her day books it is evident that at the time of her husband’s death, she knew nothing about the business or operating the ranch. Helen, with four small children and pregnant with her fifth child, so successfully operated the ranch, that by 1890, she was the largest landowner in Lincoln County.

A trial was held in Pioche charging Conrad Kiel and Schyler Henry with the murder of Archibald Stewart. The third man, Hank Parrish, vanished the day of the murder and escaped. Helen was subpoenaed to testify. Helen, Kiel and Schyler were the only witnesses called. The case became the word of Helen J. Stewart against the two men. They were not indicted by the jury as there was no impartial eyewitness to the murder. This was a practice common at the time in Lincoln County.

After the trial ended on the advice of her attorney, Helen J. Stewart applied to the Lincoln County Board of Equalization for her widow's tax exemption. They granted her an exemption of $1,000, yet at the same meeting raised her taxes on the Las Vegas Ranch $1,000. Archibald, a very capable businessman had not been well liked in Pioche.

Helen J. Stewart remained firm in her belief that it was Parrish who instigated her husband's murder. In 1891 Hank Parrish was hanged in Ely, Nevada. Helen made a note of it in her day book, with the words underlined heavily twice.

When Archibald died, Helen was expecting her fifth child. Shortly before the birth of her child, Archibald, Jr. on January 25, 1885, Helen traveled to her parents' home in Galt, California for the birth. Her father, Hiram Wiser, took over operation of the Las Vegas Ranch during that time.

At Las Vegas Ranch, 1903. Left to right: Frank, William, Helen, Eva, Hiram, and Tiza.
Photo Credit: University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Special Collections, PH-00104.

Helen J. Stewart became extremely proficient as a rancher and a businesswoman. Realizing that someday the land in the Las Vegas Valley would become of value, she began buying land adjacent to her ranch. By 1890, she was the largest landowner in Lincoln County, which at that time included present-day Clark County.

She was appointed the first postmaster of Las Vegas in 1893. The name was spelled “Los Vegas” until 1903. The original spelling was intended to prevent confusion with Las Vegas, New Mexico.

She often told her children to be patient, and civilization would catch up with them. She spoke of “seeing the glint of the rails, the smoke of the trains, and homes and church spires in the grain fields on the hill.”

Although the ranch was operating successfully, Helen worried about her children’s education. No formal school seemed evident in the near future, so she persuaded James Ross Megarrigle to tutor the three youngest children. The two oldest boys had been working the ranch for several years and refused to be tutored. Megarrigle, a 20-year resident of Lincoln County, was a well-educated man with many talents. Helen enjoyed sharing her interest in many cultural areas with this Oxford-educated man. He died at the ranch and was buried next to her husband in the family cemetery plot which later gained the name, “Four Acres.” She then sent her three youngest children for a while to board in California so they could attend school. However, in July 1899, Archibald Jr. was killed when he fell from a horse and was buried in the “Four Acres.”

Although many rumors circulated that the valley would be bought by the railroads, it was not until 1902 that Helen sold the Las Vegas Ranch to the San Pedro, Los Angeles, and Salt Lake Railroad. She and her family went to Los Angeles to await the building of a new house. The original house, which had been part of the early Mormon settlement in 1855, was on land which now belonged to the railroad. One room of this building still stands in Las Vegas and serves as an interpretive center. Will, the oldest son, stayed behind to oversee the construction of the new house.

While in Los Angeles, Helen’s son, Hiram, died, leaving a wife and two children. His body was returned to the “Four Acres.” That summer in Los Angeles, Helen J. Stewart married her second husband, Frank Roger Stewart. He had worked on the ranch for her since 1886. She required him to sign a prenuptial agreement, ensuring that her money and belongings would go to her children.

After Archibald’s death, she used the name Helen J. Stewart, and she continued to do so after marrying Frank. In lists of women in the clubs in which she participated, she was always listed as Helen J. Stewart although the other women used their husband’s names.

As the new town of Las Vegas began to grow and become settled with people, Helen J. Stewart finally was able to enjoy being a part of the social, political and business life of the town, something she had sorely missed with the isolation of the ranch.

Helen remained in Las Vegas for the rest of her life, playing an active role in the community. She helped to found Christ Episcopal Church. She was a charter member of the Mesquite Club. She suggested the name for the club noting that if the club could do as much for their community as the mesquite bush did for her Paiute friends, it would be well named.

In 1916, she was the first woman elected to the Clark County School Board. She agreed to accept the position of clerk with the stipulation that the actual clerical work would be done by the principal of the high school. When the problem was submitted to the Nevada

Attorney General for a decision on the legality of the plan, his decision was favorable to her.

Helen J. Stewart served as a juror on the first trial in Clark County containing women jurors as well as being one of the first women jurors to participate in a murder trial.

Helen J. Stewart was considered an authority on the history of southern Nevada and wrote a portion of Sam Davis's *The History of Nevada*. With the help of her friend, Dr. Jeanne Wier, she organized a branch of the Nevada Historical Society in Las Vegas. Active in several women's clubs, Helen encouraged the women to record their stories and their history. In 1997 Helen J. Stewart was among the first to be inducted into the Nevada Women's History Project Roll of Honor.

Living on the isolated ranch for over 20 years, she became friends with the Paiute women in the area. They told her stories of their lives, the meaning of their work on baskets and how the baskets told the stories of their lives. Much of this she wrote in her journals. The Paiute women gave her baskets. Her collection of over 550 baskets was considered the finest in the state.

She was in the process of turning her work and the basket collection over to the State of Nevada when she died of cancer in Las Vegas on March 6, 1926. Her heirs sold the basket collection out of state to the Hardy House railroad chain.

The day of her funeral, all businesses closed for the day. People and flowers came from all over the West to pay tribute to this brave pioneer woman. She is buried beside Archibald, Sr., at Bunkers Eden Vale Memorial Park, Chapel of Eternal Peace, Celestial Colonnade, Las Vegas, Nevada.

Although she was a successful rancher, and businesswoman, her death certificate listed her occupation as historian. Perhaps the words of her friend, Delphine Squires, provide the best epitaph for Helen J. Stewart. "Her frail little body housed an indomitable will, a wonderful strength of purpose, and a courageous heart, and she faced death as she had faced the every day problems of life with sublime fortitude." In later years, Mrs. Squires gave her a well-merited title which can be claimed by no other person, "The First Lady of Las Vegas." She truly deserves that honor.

Biographical sketch by Carrie Townley Porter.

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