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Minnesota History Vignettes - Helen Sawyer

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The Tragic Story of Helen Sawyer

One of the sad legacies of Minnesota's early history was that of the Métis children during the fur trading era of the 18th and 19th centuries. It was a goal of the first Europeans to reach Minnesota to actually develop alliances and trade for the precious beaver pelts that were abundant in our lakes, rivers and streams. The high fashion in Europe at the time was felt hats and the beaver pelt produced the most sought after felt.

Alliances in the Native American community were built on a family relationship typically cemented by marriage to a tribal member. The trader would pay a negotiated price to a key family within the band in exchange for a bride after which he became for all practical purposes a member of that band. This would give the trader exclusive access to trade with his new family. Therefore, it was common for European fur traders to take what was known then as a country wife.

This practice clashed with European cultures and, depending on the morality of the particular trader, created a wide variety of responses. Some traders honored their marriage as a lifetime commitment. Because some tribes didn't view leaving this arrangement in the early stages prior to children a breach of the commercial arrangement, it was not uncommon for the trader to abandon the marriage. Sadly many of the brides were treated more like chattel. The resulting mixed blood children, known as Métis, were the ones who truly suffered as they were looked down by both of the cultures that produced them.

Helen, her Native American name Wahkiyee meaning “bird” in the Dakota language, was born to one of these commercial marriages in 1841. Her mother, Red Blanket Woman, was a member of a prominent Dakota clan along the Minnesota River near present-day Burnsville. Red Blanket Woman was given to the influential new American Fur Company agent to help cement the relationship with this giant conglomeration that was establishing its predominance in the area. This arrangement may have remained long forgotten except for the fact that the agent was Henry Hastings Sibley, the man destined to be the first governor of the State of Minnesota.

It's unclear whether Sibley tried to make the relationship last and where Helen was raised during her infancy. We do know that Red Blanket Woman had died before Henry would marry Sarah Steele in 1843. Sarah Sibley, who was from a prominent St. Anthony milling family, sadly was not willing to accept Helen into the family. Despite this, Henry was determined to not allow his first daughter to become one of the forgotten children.

This determination may be the result of his religious conversion during a revival on Mackinac Island in 1829 just before he headed to his new assignment at the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers. His early Christian walk was instructed under the tutelage of the Robert and Betsy Stuart and William and Amanda Ferry who had a deep compassion for the forgotten Métis children.

Therefore, Henry made arrangements with a carpenter’s family by the name of William and Martha Brown who were attached to a local mission in St. Paul. Henry paid the Browns for their cost of care for Helen and also provided for her schooling at a prestigious East Coast boarding school for 2 years. He would make frequent personal visits and was even known to have her ride in the ceremonial parade with him as governor. He carefully managed her government treaty annuity payments she received in order to assure that she had a nest egg into the future. He also made sure she was always referred to as Helen Sibley and never tried to hide the fact that she was his first daughter.

In November 1859, Helen married Dr. Sylvester J. Sawyer, a Yankee physician who briefly boarded with the Brown family. He was smitten with the dark-haired beauty. It was during Sibley's term as the first governor of Minnesota, yet he was proud to give away his daughter at a small ceremony at the Brown residence. The newlywed couple moved to Wisconsin to set up their practice where they reported back to family of a very happy marriage as they integrated into the local Methodist community.

Unfortunately, after less than a year of marriage Helen died while giving birth to a baby girl due to the fact that her body was wracked with scarlet fever during labor. Sadly only a few days later Henry Sibley's first grandchild, a girl, would also pass away. The loss struck both Dr. Sawyer and Gov. Sibley very hard. The governor wrote to a friend, “Poor Girl! Her dream of happiness here was a short one, but we have reason to hope that she has been transplanted to a better and purer state.” (1)

Certainly Gov. Sibley was not a perfect man with his evident mistakes, but no one could say he was not a man that would shrink from his responsibilities for his mistakes. Certainly we can never know all that happened over 150 years ago, but when faced with political and personal scorn he stepped up to do the honorable thing and not allow his daughter to be one of the forgotten. We could use more politicians these days that have that kind of honor.

To learn more about the life of Henry Hastings Sibley I would suggest Rhonda R Gilmore’s book *Henry Hastings Sibley, Divided Heart* 2004 Minnesota Historical Society Press.

(1) To learn more about the Métis of Minnesota I would suggest, *"Who was Jane Lamont? Anglo-Dakota daughters in early Minnesota”* Authored by Jane Lamm Carroll. Minnesota History Magazine, 2005 Volume 59, Issue 5, Pages: 184-196

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