

A Moravian Woman Who Has Inspired Me: Helen K. Simmers

Helen Margretta Kinsey Simmers encapsulated in her life the essence of Moravian womanhood. Her parentage was a balance of ancient Moravian heritage and new Moravian outreach. Her mother was Mary Susannah Luckenbach, who carried several notable Moravian linages. Mary's great-great-great grandfather fled Zauchtental, Northern Moravia and settled at Herrnhut, Saxony in 1731. Her great-great grandfather married a girl from Bertholdsdorf in a wedding solemnized by Count Zinzendorf. David Heckewelder became a missionary of the Renewed Unitas Fratrum, serving in Europe and the Caribbean. He and his family traveled to North America on the Moravian ship *Irene* in 1754.

Mary's great-grandfather was a noted missionary on the colonial frontiers. Mary's husband, Calvin R. Kinsey, was a missionary to Delaware Indians in New Westfield, Kansas, where Helen was born on 28 November 1882. Helen's father was a second generation Swiss immigrant whose father was a charter member of Fry's Valley Moravian Church, Tuscarawas County, Ohio.

Helen grew up in Moravian parsonages in Kansas, Iowa, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Ohio. When it came time to wash the family grave stones in God's Acre in Bethlehem PA, there were plenty to scrub. Having an impeccable Moravian pedigree and being reared in the home of a Moravian minister did not necessarily mean that a person would have the desire or opportunity to carry on this Moravian heritage. But Helen had both.

In 1918, Helen married Christian Elmer Simmers at Gnadenhutten, Ohio in the Moravian church named in honor of her great-great-grandfather, John Heckewelder. Her groom was a Moravian, also a grandson of a charter member of Fry's Valley Moravian Church. Their married life was spent mostly in Tuscarawas County, Ohio. In 1947 they became charter members of Schoenbrunn Moravian Church, New Philadelphia, Ohio.

Helen had the outward signs of Moravian heritage, as well as the spiritual. A *Daily Texts* book was ready at hand on the breakfast table. Her birthday book was full of the names of relatives and friends. Her sugarcake recipe was the best ever and she made Christmas cookies with handcrafted tin cutters. Of course, the family hung an advent star and made a Christmas putz.

Helen always found ways to live her Christian commitment. When rheumatism in her hands kept her from quilting, she hosted the quiltings in her dining room. (And delighted a small granddaughter by giving her a lump of wax with which to play.) One friend remarked that she never left Helen's home without some gift. Helen radiated encouragement. She was a peacemaker and adept at quietly pouring oil on troubled waters.

Before her marriage, Helen taught school. Even when she left the classroom, she did not stop teaching. She gave her grandchildren books, taught them about family history and their Moravian heritage. In my younger years, she gave me *The Belfry That Moved* and "Tell Me a Story." Later, I was introduced to *Wilderness Christians*, *Charles Killbuck* and diaries of David Zeisberger. I took as my senior independent study project in college the topic "Moravian Missions in Ohio." As I did my research, I discovered that the library left by my grandmother was nearly as extensive on the topic as what the college library offered. When people ask me about the Moravian Church, I respond "How much time do you have?"

The 500th anniversary of the founding of the ancient Unitas Fratrum was a momentous event for Helen, as is reflected in her scrapbook collection "The Moravian Church." My scrapbooks include one for "A Christian Heritage Tour: In the Footsteps of Master Jan Hus and the Moravian Church" in 2007. I wished that my grandmother could have been with me, but in a

way she was.

And what would a Moravian heritage be without music? Helen's husband sang with the chorus in the 1961 Moravian Music Festival held in Tuscarawas County. Helen participated in other ways. Fifteen years later, I attended my first Festival and have been to nine more since. Each Festival has its own scrapbook of memories and music. I also participated in the first National Moravian Choir concert tour in 2010 (there's a scrapbook for that, too).

Important as my direct contacts with my grandmother were in transmitting a living Moravian heritage, she had earlier also influenced my mother. Thus I had her reinforcement as well as the practical means to grow in what my grandmother gave me.

I was baptized at Sharon Moravian Church in Tuscarawas County, Ohio, but was confirmed in the Presbyterian Church. As confirmation gift, my grandmother gave me the confirmation certificate of Mary Luckenbach who was confirmed 24 March 1872. This double heritage has been fruitful. I use the Moravian motto as a guide in my "reformed, always reforming" faith journey. When I taught a Sunday school series which I called "Means, Ends and Dead-Ends" the Moravian concept of essentials was important in clarifying the "Ends." The Presbyterian church I attend has a 26-pointed star in the sanctuary from the first Sunday in advent and a putz in the hall by the dining room.

Helen was born on a Moravian mission station. Missionaries and mission work, home and foreign, remained an integral part of her life. My mother served on the mission committee of our church for many years and now I have served on it for decades as well.

When she died over forty years ago, Helen Kinsey Simmers left a meager financial estate, but she also left a priceless heritage of Moravian Christian life.

Submitted by:

Karen J. Bunning
Newark, Ohio