

HARRIET HELENA SAXBY GERVAIS MCCULLOUGH -- brief biography -- July 2004,  
revised May 2018 (Compiled by her son-in-law, Robert W. Trezevant)

Harriet Helena Saxby, who was always called Helena, was born on Sept. 13, 1909, in Rockford, Illinois. Her father was Samuel Valentine Saxby, who had immigrated as a young man to the United States from Seven Oaks, Kent in England. Her mother was Jane Weyburn, the younger daughter of Lewis Augustus Weyburn and Harriet Helena Jilson Weyburn. These grandparents had moved to Rockford from New York state and settled in Rockford. Valentine and Jane Saxby were married in 1901 at the Christian Union Church in Rockford. Helena was their third child. Her older brothers were Lewis Weyburn Saxby and Robert Kerr Saxby, both also born in Rockford.

Jane's older sister, Blanche Weyburn, married Robert Kerr of Chicago, Illinois, in 1896. They bought a home at 113 S. Elmwood in Oak Park. Robert (Bert) and Blanche Kerr did not have children. When Helena's parents separated in 1909 (finally divorcing in 1912), her mother Jane moved to Oak Park with her three children to live with Bert and Blanche Kerr. In order to have a larger house, Bert Kerr traded his house at 113 S. Elmwood with his parents' home at 150 N. Elmwood. Helena was only two months old when she came to Oak Park in late 1909 and then moved to the N. Elmwood house in 1910. Her Weyburn grandparents moved from Rockford to Oak Park along with their daughter, living first in the Elmwood apartments on Lake St., just a few doors south of 150 N. Elmwood. When they were no longer able to live alone, they too moved into the Kerr house, where they lived until their deaths. The three Saxby children attended Beye School, and all three graduated from Oak Park-River Forest High School, Helena in 1927.

Bert Kerr, like his father was a lawyer, having done his undergraduate studies and law degree at Northwestern University in Evanston. He practiced law with his father.

Blanche Kerr had trained as an artist at the Art Institute in Chicago. Bert and Blanche Kerr were active in the social and cultural life of Oak Park. Their social group included the architects Frank Lloyd Wright and his wife Katherine and Charles White and his wife Alice. The Kerrs were members of the Unitarian and Universalist congregation of Oak Park during the time when Frank Lloyd Wright designed and built Unity Temple, which was dedicated in 1909, the year that Helena and her family arrived in Oak Park. The Kerrs were also founding members of the Lowell literary group in 1897, and Blanche Kerr was an early member of the Nineteenth Century Women's Club. She also was a founder of the Oak Park Art League in 1921. In addition, she volunteered at Jane Addams' Hull House, teaching occupational skills. She remained an active member at Unity Temple until her death in 1955. Bert Kerr was an early president of the River Forest Tennis Club. His career as a lawyer led him to represent oil American oil concerns in Mexico during and after the revolution which ended in 1917. For a short time Bert Kerr was the acting governor of Vera Cruz. Blanche Kerr spent much time living in Mexico, and she sent a Mexican couple to Oak Park to take care of her sister and the three children. Unfortunately for his extended family, Bert Kerr contracted typhoid and died in Mexico City in 1918.

The two sisters, Blanche Kerr and Jane Saxby, were left on their own to sustain a large home and three children. Jane, who had attended the University of Chicago to study music, worked with her sister to do interior decorating. She also worked in as a secretary in downtown Chicago. Blanche sold the lots on either side of 150 N. Elmwood in order to pay off its mortgage. And, to make ends meet they took in borders. One of those borders was Jane McCullough, the mother of Helena's second husband, Hiram McCullough. Hiram and Helena had dated in Oak Park while working after college,

and it was he who took Helena's wedding picture at home in 1935. Meanwhile, Helena's own mother had died suddenly just a month before Helena's high school graduation in 1927.

All along, she had been growing up with the proverbial boy next door, Paul Gervais. He had been born in Chicago in 1903, and in 1913 his parents built the family home at 160 N. Elmwood, at that time next door to 150. His parents were Wainwright Bacot Gervais and Katherine Leiby Gervais, both originating in Charleston, South Carolina. The Gervais family were faithful members of Grace Episcopal Church, with W.B. serving as chief warden. He and his wife gave the statue of the Madonna in the Children's Corner in thanksgiving for their son Paul's recovery from cranial surgery for osteomyelitis in 1927. Meanwhile, at the suggestion of Charles White, W.B. Gervais bought the large Victorian home at 201 Linden Ave. as investment property. White supervised its conversion into a two-flat. W.B. Gervais later sold 160 N. Elmwood and moved into the first floor at 201 Linden to accommodate his wife's impairment from a stroke. They died while living there, she in 1939 and he in 1948.

Their son Paul Trapier Gervais also attended Beye School and Oak Park-River Forest High School, class of 1920. His older sister, Katherine Gervais, was a contemporary in Oak Park of Ernest Hemingway. Paul Gervais graduated from Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, with a degree in engineering in 1924. He then spent a year studying literature and the humanities at Oxford University in England with his Oak Park friend Dick Hill. They were each pianists, and Hill later became the music librarian at the Library of Congress. Paul was a faithful member at Grace Church and like his father served as senior warden. Most of Paul's professional life was in his father's business, the Variety Fire Door Company in Chicago. He later became a management consultant

and died unexpectedly in 1963. The family used memorial contributions to donate a stained glass window at Grace Church in memory of W.B., Katherine, and Paul Gervais.

After high school Helena had attended Rockford College for two years, thanks to the generosity of Mrs. Ward Seabury for the first year and her father for the second year. She then returned to Oak Park and trained at the Moser School of Business in Chicago. She worked in the time payment department of Sears, Roebuck and Company and then in the real estate loan department at Oak Park Trust and Savings Bank. Her social and religious life centered on Unity Temple, where she was an active member of the congregation. Her cultural horizons were expanded with Paul Gervais. They shared season tickets to the Goodman Theater from its opening in 1927 and full season tickets to the Chicago Symphony Orchestra beginning in 1932. Helena kept the symphony seats and attended faithfully for the next seventy years. She and Paul were married at Unity Temple in 1935 at a ceremony officiated by two ministers, the Unitarian one from Unity Temple (her church) and the priest from Grace Episcopal (his church). She took confirmation classes at Grace Episcopal and remained an active member there since 1936. She served for many years on the Alter Guild and was involved with such groups as the Building Committee, Aging and Ageless Radicals, and Integrity. At the diocesan level she served on the board of the St. Mary's community. She and Paul lived in the Elmwood apartments after their marriage. In 1939 they moved into the first floor at 201 Linden to care for W.B. until his death. It was there she reared her own three children, Katherine, Paul, and John. Helena's aunt Blanche lived on the second floor until her death.

Having grown up in the Unitarian-Universalist congregation at Unity Temple, Helena maintained her ties there. After her husband's death in 1963 she worked as the parttime office assistant to its minister, Bob Rice. In that capacity she gave spontaneous tours of

the building to the many people who walked in and wondered about it. She used a script and a tape prepared by John Michaels. Meanwhile, her longtime friend Marion Rawls Herzog came to live with Helena at 201 Linden. Marion had been a librarian at the Burnham Architectural Library at the Art Institute, the founding librarian for United Airlines, and a librarian at the Oak Park Public Library. Marion's uncle Ralph Skillen had been on the congregations building committee for Unity Temple, and Marion became a founder of the Unity Temple Restoration Foundation in 1973. The two women traveled to Minnesota to visit Grant Manson, the author of *Frank Lloyd Wright to 1910* and return with his research materials for preservation in the Oak Park Public Library. In 1969 the two women hosted Lloyd Wright at 201 Linden during his visit to Oak Park for the Frank Lloyd Wright Festival. For that Festival Helena put together a public tour that included Unity Temple and three of the Wright-designed private homes. Tickets for the tour cost \$2.50 and 1,800 people attended. That tour became the prototype used by Helena's friend Elsie Jacobsen for creating the first fundraising housewalk for the Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio Foundation in 1975. As a friend and mentor to Dawn Follett Goshorn, Helena had taken the minutes for the first organizational meeting of what became the Foundation's board in 1973. The Foundation became official in 1974, and Helena was also a life member.

National and international travel were among Helena's favorite activities. Paul, Helena, and the three children took several extensive trips in the United States. In 1956 they made a seventy-day excursion throughout Europe. In 1962 Paul, Helena, and their friend Jan Duncan made a trip to England. After Paul's death in 1963 Helena went on a Caribbean cruise with her sister-in-law, Katherine Gervais Muzzy, and they later went twice to Jamaica. In 1964 she returned to Europe for six weeks with her son John, who was a college student at the time. Starting in 1965, she went on four international trips sponsored by the Asculapius Club of local doctors. These trips included the Orient,

South America, Spain/ Portugal/Morocco, and Sicily. In the early 1970s she and her friend Ruth McCarter spent four months on an opera and theater tour in Europe. And, in 1973 she took her grandson Lewis Gervais (her son Paul's oldest child) on a trip to the Holy Land and England.

Life changed dramatically for Helena in 1974. That year she married Hiram Groom McCullough, whom she had met when they were both employed at Sears. Hiram had grown up in Evanston, attended Culver Military Academ in Indiana, and graduated from Princeton in 1927. In 1935 he had been an usher at Helena and Paul's wedding at Unity Temple, and he took her wedding photograph of her at home at 150 N. Elmwood. Hiram later married and settled in Williamsport, PA, where he was in the lumber business. After his wife's death, Hiram and Helena were married in Oak Park at Grace Episcopal Church in January 1974. They lived for several years in Williamsport and then returned to Oak Park in 1980. During their eight years together they made three trips to Europe, a tour of the continent, a trip to France, and a trip to England. Hiram and Helena both enjoyed there combined and extended families. Hiram McCullough died in Oak Park in 1982. His memorial service was at Grace Episcopal Church, and he was buried at Gettysburg, PA.

After Hiram's death in 1982 Helena made one more trip to Europe, this time with her daughter Katherine. It was a three-week visit to England in 1985, which focused on Saxby family relatives with whom she had corresponded. Helena's father, Samuel Valentine Saxby, was the oldest child in a large family and was the only one to emigrate from England to America. Helena got to spend time with eight first cousins and two aunts whom she had never met. The trip proved to be the grand culmination to almost thirty years of international travel.

Helena was always active in community organizations. She and Paul were staunch Democrats long before being a Democrat was really socially acceptable in Oak Park. They joined the Lowell literary group in the 1940s and the River Forest Tennis Club in 1950. She and Hiram joined the Oak Park Country Club in 1973. Helena was a long-time member of the Nineteenth Century Women's Club. She served three two-year terms on its board. She was chair of both the music and social science committees, was the press person, and chair for one year of the scholarship committee. She also served on the board of the Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest and was program chair for one year. And in the midst of all her family, church, social, and cultural commitments she managed to play bridge at least once a week.

Helena Saxby Gervais McCullough and her extended family, because of Helena's deep roots and myriad activities in Oak Park, became subjects of a digital video ethnographic study of Oak Park done by former Oak Parker Dr. Jay Ruby, recently retired professor of visual anthropology at Temple University.

Helena Saxby Gervais McCullough died at home on Feb. 6, 2006. Her funeral service was at Grace Episcopal Church, and she was buried in the Weyburn family plot in Rockford's Greenwood Cemetery beside her aunt, her mother, and her first husband.